Solicitor

Job description

Solicitors provide clients with legal advice and representation on all legal matters. Most work in private practice but commercial and industrial organisations also employ solicitors, as do the Civil Service and the public sector generally. The work of solicitors varies as widely as the community they serve and will normally depend on their employers.

Solicitors could accurately be described as general practitioners of the law. Their role is to provide a broad service to individuals, families, businesses, large companies, corporations and organisations and establishments of every nature. As consultants to their clients, they dispense legal advice and information; as executors and administrators, they process and implement legal procedures and transactions. The work is generally very varied. Some solicitors’ firms will specialise in a few areas, while other practices will deal with every conceivable legal issue.

Solicitors’ firms can range hugely in size, from one sole practitioner (rare) to very large international firms employing hundreds of legal practitioners. Larger firms are more likely to specialise, either in legal areas such as corporate mergers, acquisitions or tax, or in certain industry sectors such as IT, construction or banking. Smaller firms often work very much as the general practitioners, dealing with family members, small business owners, farmers, property owners and so on.

Starting out

Most newly qualified solicitors remain with the firms they trained with for their first year. The range of opportunities for young solicitors is widening, enabling them to make big career moves at an early stage.

Young solicitors can expect to work very hard. Long hours and the unrealistic expectations of clients are amongst the most frustrating aspects of working as a solicitor. The responsibilities of a role are the most important aspect for solicitors when they consider changing jobs.

Work activities

• Advising private clients on legal matters relating to various aspects of their personal and business lives
• Advising business clients on the detailed provisions of company, partnership, arbitration, insolvency, drafting, environmental, commercial, consumer, intellectual property and e-commerce law
• Initiating or defending proceedings in the courts or by reference to arbitration or settling such claims or disputes ‘out of court’
• Conveyancing: the buying and selling of property and the arranging of loans, the preparation of title deeds, leases and other legal documents
• Advising on and preparing wills, planning for tax where appropriate
• Administering and distributing funds and the settlement of tax liabilities.

Work conditions

Travel: possible regular travel to meet with clients or to attend court hearings though much will depend on the practice. Overseas travel is rare.

Working hours: can be long but normally Monday to Friday and not weekends unless self-employed.

Location: mainly in towns or cities throughout the country.

Opportunities for self-employment: commonly possible.

Typical employers

• Private practice and partnerships
• Commercial and industrial organisations
• Civil Service
• Chief State Solicitors Office
• Office of the Attorney General
In the Republic of Ireland, public sector employers include the Office of the Attorney General, which is made up of different offices: the Advisory Counsel, responsible for legal advice and consultation to all government departments and offices; the Office of Parliamentary Counsel to the Government, responsible for drafting legislation and statute law revision; and the Chief State Solicitors Office, where solicitors work who represent the Attorney and the State. The Office of the Director of Public Prosecution also employs a team of solicitors. Occasional opportunities also arise with the Law Reform Commission and the Courts Service. Qualified solicitors can also work with the Legal Aid Board, which has law centres all over Ireland providing civil legal aid and a refugee legal service.

In Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service employs approximately 165 solicitors as both Public Prosecutors and Senior Prosecutors, whose role it is to consider all files and cases submitted by the Police and government departments and decide and advise as to prosecution. Recruitment is via the local press and the Northern Ireland Civil Service Recruitment website. There are also opportunities for solicitors in the Attorney General’s Office, the Northern Ireland Courts Service and the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission. Other organisations such as the Human Rights Commission employ Legal Officers.

Employment opportunities in the private sector are far more plentiful. The choices range from large to medium city-based firms to small firms in rural towns. Larger firms with a strong corporate/commercial focus – mostly Dublin-based – employ large numbers of solicitors. There are also jobs available working as inhouse company solicitors, mainly for multinational corporations.

Specialisms
Big firms with their larger staff resources have specialised departments. Many factors such as globalisation, the continuing development of the EU and the information technology explosion have all led to an increased complexity of the law. This in turn means that more specialised legal knowledge is constantly required. All large firms engage extensively in work for corporate and commercial clients, and solicitors providing these services need to be fully attuned to the latest developments in the legal and business world.

Key specialisms include:
- Corporate and commercial law
- European Union and competition law
- Property law
- Family law
- Intellectual property law
- Employment law
- Criminal law
- Environmental law
- Public injury law.

Salaries
Salaries will vary depending on employer and/or size of practice.
Republic of Ireland: Newly qualified solicitors can earn around €40,000; however those in the Dublin region can earn up to €10,000 more. Partners in large firms can earn in excess of €100,000.
Northern Ireland: Newly qualified solicitors can earn £22,000–£26,000 while partners can earn up to £80,000.
Entry requirements and training

Republic of Ireland

There are four stages to qualifying as a solicitor:

- The Preliminary Examination
- The Final Examination – First Part
- The Training Contract (24 months in duration)
- The Professional Practice Courses (PPC I & PPC II)

Holders of Irish and UK accredited degrees, regardless of discipline, are exempt from the Preliminary Examination. The Final Examination – First Part (FE-1) is the entrance examination to the Law Society of Ireland. Applicants must secure a training contract before they can apply for a place on the PPC I. The Training Contract is 24 months in duration and commences 14 days after the final examination on the Professional Practice Course I (PPC I).

Specific degree subjects required

Entry to training is open to non-graduates and to graduates of all disciplines.

Other relevant degree subjects

Law
Legal studies

Postgraduate study

Specialist law postgraduate degrees both taught and by research in areas such as criminology, intellectual property and European law can be pursued.

Training

The in-office training period is the core of the training programme.

Skills and qualities

- Excellent written and oral communication skills
- Confidence and the ability to argue a case persuasively
- Thorough, methodical and patient approach to research
- Excellent analytical skills and the ability to absorb and interpret large quantities of often complex information and to use concise, plain English to explain this to clients
- Excellent memory
- Tact and discretion
- Excellent organisational skills to plan and prioritise cases
- Ability to work well under pressure.

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