

Episode 82: Summary

Episode name: The Road Not Taken: Navigating the Early Stages of Legal Practice

Guest(s): Aden Bates

What area(s) of law does this episode consider?

Career and personal development.

This is a special episode in the area of Professional Skills. We suggest that it's relevant for newly qualified practitioners in the first few years of practice, as well as law students planning on entering the profession.

Why is this topic relevant?

Choosing the right path through the legal profession can be difficult for many newly qualified practitioners and law students.

Although it often feels like every career-oriented decision you make is the be-all and end-all, it's not. In fact, testing the waters in a variety of types of practice can help you settle on where you want to be as you progress through your career journey.

What are the main points?

- Aden began working in a suburban firm, then moved to a boutique firm, then a Big Law firm, then a NewLaw startup and finally is currently working in-house.

In-house

- In an in-house role you meet with a variety of different stakeholders in the business who are interested in the outcome when receiving advice as opposed to the process of getting there.
- You also have to learn about practically every aspect of the business, rather than specialising in one specific area of law.
- In-house work often involves summarising lengthy advice provided by an external firm into three sentences for the business stakeholder to consume.
- When working in-house, develop your financial literacy as much as possible to more effectively communicate with business stakeholders.
- This could even involve getting a simple accounting textbook to gain a basic understanding of the concepts relevant to the business. This helps to feel more connected and associated with the business.
- The type of person that will thrive in an in-house role is someone who is able to be comfortable working in areas that they have limited knowledge about.
- This requires you to be quick to adapt and to research and make a call quickly and be comfortable with risk and speed.

Private practice - suburban and boutique

- In private practice at any level, senior associates and partners are concerned with the process used to get to the outcome of advice.

- Private practice, particularly in smaller firms like suburban and boutique firms, teaches you how to manage client expectations with a range of different clients.
- Boutique firms have a tendency to encourage you to spread across different kinds of work within a specialist area of practice. This encourages growth, but can also help you realise your limits and the areas you are not as confident in.
- One distinction between the two similarly sized private practice options is that a suburban firm will likely cover a broader range of legal matters. From family law and criminal law through to commercial and property and everything in between.
- A boutique will usually cover a wide range of matters within a specific niche such as insolvency.

Private practice - Big Law

- Big firms are structured to provide a huge array of legal work for clients. However, in many cases, for the practitioner it is siloed work which may not extend beyond a particular niche.
- This provides a somewhat unique opportunity in the legal industry for very deep, narrow learning that you may not experience in smaller firms.
- The brand of a big firm, and its continued integrity, is at the forefront of the operation - and this partially informs moves between practice areas.
- In traditional firms (small or large), billable hours are everything and the expectations in large law firms can be really high.
- As a junior practitioner working at a Big Law firm, you may feel conscious that you are charging for work that would have taken a more senior practitioner a shorter period of time to complete.
- As much as you can, leave that mentality behind. Take the opportunity to learn as deeply as possible - leave the billing concerns to others set up to manage them.
- With that said, if you have capacity make sure you put your hand up to assist.
- A large firm is likely best suited to someone who wants to become an expert in a particular niche.

Private practice - NewLaw

- In Aden's experience, NewLaw firms can be more surface level - where you work in many different areas but more commercially.
- An example of this is that while boutique or large firms encourage complex legal analysis, such deep advice is not as frequent in NewLaw firms.
- Working with startups can be difficult as they are often low on capital, despite being highly passionate about their product.

- When working at a NewLaw firm you may feel encouraged to work beyond the fixed fee budget to ensure the advice you give is adequate to your standards.
- In Aden's view, this is the flipside of not working to billables and neither approach feels right.
- NewLaw firms working with startups take a holistic view of the client when onboarding them, by looking at a surface level across the business.

Generally

- There is no specific role that sets someone up for success.
- There is no particular path to success.
- Make the best choice that you can in the circumstances.
- Aden believes it is critical for lawyers to build client interaction and management skills as early as possible.
- Research any firm that you want to work for and understand what they do and see if you align with it.
- Your job is not your identity. Even though it might feel like a big deal, don't be afraid to change as the consequences are minimal.

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