

Commercial Awareness in the Law Library: a New Role for Academic Law Librarians?

Abstract: In this article, which expands on a lightning talk that was delivered at the BIALL Conference 2023, **Lauren Cummings** discusses how she developed and delivered a commercial awareness workshop to third-year students at Goldsmiths, University of London. She then reflects on how employability training relates to information skills and how developing these skills can help students from less advantaged backgrounds achieve their career goals. Lauren also discusses how employability work might fit into the role of the academic law librarian.

Keywords: education and training; employment; soft skills; information literacy; legal profession

At the BIALL conference in Belfast in June 2023, I delivered a lightning talk in which I discussed a commercial awareness workshop that I delivered to law students at Goldsmiths, University of London. This article will expand on that talk. First, I will detail the background to and content of the workshop and how it was developed to address Goldsmiths students' goals, before discussing the relationship between information skills training and employability. Prior to delivering the workshop I had been slightly anxious that it was somehow outside the remit of my role, a notion that was quickly dispelled when I realised how key information skills are when developing commercial awareness as a student, and I hope to demonstrate that this is an area where academic law librarians are well placed to help our students achieve their goals.

In a legal context, 'commercial awareness' essentially means understanding the wider context that a law firm is operating in and how it functions as a business. A 2022 research study found that it is a core skill that employers look for in aspiring solicitors,¹ and many large law firms explicitly mention it as a desirable attribute in their recruitment material.² Competition for work in the legal sector is high: the number of students graduating from a first law degree in England and Wales is continuing to increase, and more than a quarter graduated with first-class honours in 2021.³ In this environment, developing commercial awareness may help students stand out when applying for work.

BACKGROUND

The idea for the session at Goldsmiths came after I attended a LexisNexis webinar on the role of the law school in developing students' employability. I passed my

notes to the library rep (the member of academic staff I liaise with most) for the law department, who expressed interest in organising a commercial awareness session for her third-year students as part of a commercial law module. It seemed some students were finding it difficult to navigate the process of applying for work in the legal sector and were unsure what was expected of them. The library rep was particularly interested in any insight I could bring from my time working at a US law firm in the City, considering it especially relevant for students applying for training contracts.

At this point, it is useful to give some context on the law department at Goldsmiths. The department is relatively new: it was set up in 2018 and took its first LLB cohort in September 2019. The department has tried to take an innovative approach to teaching law: there is a variety of learning opportunities, including workshops, trial observations and summer schools, and several law and policy clinics, which are also open to students from other departments. Portfolio- and reflective journal-based assessments have been introduced to recognise students' different learning styles. Dimitrios Giannouloupoulos, the head of department, describes its ethos as being rooted in values of social justice, human rights and fairness,⁴ and it has aimed to attract students from working-class backgrounds in keeping with Goldsmiths' history (the institution's first students largely came from the "industrial and working classes").⁵

This approach seems to be paying off. The department earned outstanding results in the 2022 National Student Survey, including being ranked the joint-best law department in the UK for "intellectually stimulating" LLB teaching, with a 100% satisfaction rate, and the top law school in London for academic support. Moreover, the department was ranked first in the UK for student

satisfaction in the Complete University Guide 2024.⁶ It feels like a success story so far, and one that values the library's role in making it happen.

Reflecting the department's different approach to teaching law, its students often look for roles other than becoming a solicitor or barrister. One student who I met for a reference appointment told me that he'd like to work for the UN, while others have expressed interests in human rights and medical negligence issues. Although the commercial awareness session was being delivered to students who chose an optional commercial law module, I wanted the session to reflect this variety of goals and possible graduate destinations and demonstrate that commercial awareness is not only useful in the world of corporate law.

SESSION STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

I began the session by introducing the concept of commercial awareness. I asked the students what they thought it meant and then shared some definitions from online legal careers pages.⁷ As a group, we discussed the idea of 'getting the bigger picture': how does the law interact with politics, wider trends in business and commerce, and with societal problems? What is happening in the world, and how might that affect your law firm's business or those of your clients? What is your firm trying to achieve, what are your clients trying to achieve, and what do they need from you to do so?

I pointed out that commercial awareness doesn't just apply to commercial law. Every organisation will face external factors that influence how it works and what its clients will need. A charity or NGO may deal with different stakeholders to a commercial law firm or large business, but it would still be affected by funding pressures and geopolitical or technological developments, albeit in different ways.

I encouraged the students to think about transferable skills that they had developed during their studies and through any volunteering, work experience, part-time jobs or life experiences. Having been a first-generation student, I remember the uneasy feeling that many of my peers had a much better idea of how to navigate university or job applications than I did. I wanted to remind the students that everyone starts somewhere, and to give legitimacy to their experiences as part of what would make them unique and valuable to employers. A student who had worked in retail may have developed negotiation skills and an ability to spot a sales opportunity; these could be applied to business development and client relationship management at a law firm. An international student's studies in London may have helped them to develop intercultural awareness and an understanding of how to communicate across cultural differences.

Next, I asked the students what tools they use to keep up with current events. I introduced some of the resources we have at the library that they might not have

been aware of, such as our *Financial Times* subscription and Box of Broadcasts for documentaries, as well as how to set up news alerts on our databases. We also discussed the benefits of networking, attending careers fairs and events, and developing a LinkedIn presence.

I also included a YouTube video by a current City trainee solicitor in which she talked about how she approached developing her commercial awareness.⁸ I hoped that they would be able to better connect with tips from someone closer to their age and background, and someone who had already successfully been through the training contract recruitment process. I also wanted to legitimise social media as a place to find tips and information on the application process; there is a wealth of valuable content available from people who have 'been there, done that', presenting the process in an accessible way.

We rounded off the session with a group activity. The students were split into three groups and I gave each a scenario of somewhere they might be applying to work. They had to find a news story that might affect that organisation and then talk about how they would follow that story's development. They then came back to share their findings with the class. The students worked well together and generated some interesting discussion.

The scenarios in [Figure 1](#) illustrate how I tried to tailor this session to Goldsmiths' students and their possible career ambitions. I wanted to demonstrate that commercial awareness skills and principles are relevant across the spectrum of legal work. In the case of the housing charity, I wanted to encourage students to think about how social and political issues could affect their clients. What does the cost of living crisis mean for housing? How might the charity's income stream be affected by pressure on public and household finances? In theory, by developing their general commercial awareness skills, students would be able to apply them to whichever career path and type of employer they wish.

The students engaged fully with the session and there was a lot of discussion throughout. I intentionally kept the session structure fairly loose to encourage this. I found that the session also allowed an opportunity for the students to give feedback on the library in a more informal environment. They took the opportunity to ask for in-person database skills training, as they felt they needed to improve in this area and that they had not engaged fully with the online training necessitated by the pandemic, and as a result further training was arranged for the spring term. We are also planning to repeat the commercial awareness session, as well as an adapted version open to students from all departments who want to improve their employability-related information skills.

LIBRARIANS, COMMERCIAL AWARENESS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Employability and commercial awareness may not immediately feel like something a librarian would be involved

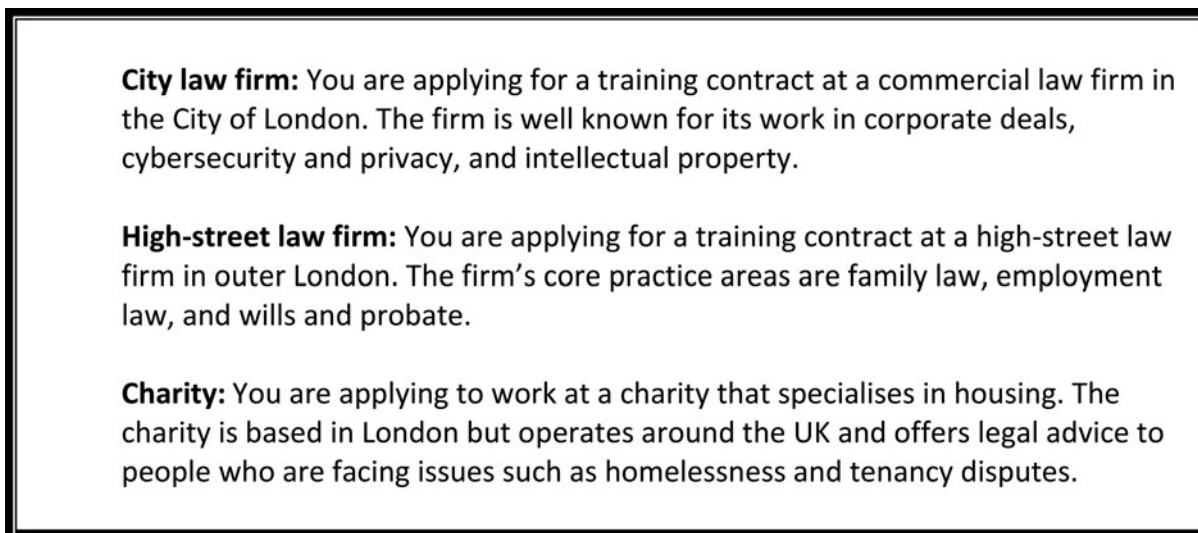


Figure 1: Examples of group study scenarios

in. We aren't necessarily connected to the world of work in the way that some academics or guest lecturers are. But commercial awareness is really about information literacy:

- What information do you need to understand your potential employer?
- Where can you find it?
- What information tools would you use to keep up with current affairs?
- How would you analyse and interpret information to understand its meaning for you and your clients?

All of this makes commercial awareness more of a natural fit for librarians than I had initially thought; information is at the core of our roles and is what the library can offer students. The session was a good opportunity to promote some of the resources we have available, such as the FT accounts, and it encouraged students to apply some of the information skills they were learning in their degrees. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate that although the university library might not feel immediately relevant or connected to the world of work, the tools we make available and the information skills we teach can be very useful in the job search and beyond.

Librarians at several institutions have recognised the connection between employability and information literacy skills, incorporating careers-related information and skills training into their programmes or web resources. SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) has produced an employability toolkit including a literature review and case studies;^{9,10} it also commissioned a report mapping the relationship between employers' expectations and information literacy skills.¹¹ A web search for 'university library employability' yields several employability LibGuides that signpost library resources and digital tools, while commercial awareness

workshops have been run by librarians at institutions including the University of Sheffield and the University of the West of England.^{12,13}

Law schools themselves have made efforts to develop students' employability in their curriculums, often in the form of pro bono law clinics,¹⁴ as they "strive to ensure their students' skill-set meet ever-shifting employer expectations".¹⁵ Great value is placed on employment as a graduate outcome: it is used by the Office for Students and the Department of Education as a performance measure for higher education institutions, including as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework.¹⁶ While there is a debate to be had about the use of these measures and how strongly employment is valued by regulators and government compared with other elements of higher education, students will almost certainly have to seek employment on completing their studies, and in the current political and financial climate it is in institutions' interests to help them do so.

Moreover, students may not be motivated or well equipped to develop employability skills on their own. In a study of law students' attitudes towards commercial awareness, McConnell found that many students did not start to deliberately develop their commercial awareness until later in their degrees; this may negatively affect their chances of securing employment at top firms, which often target second-year students.¹⁷ With such importance placed on employability and developing the relevant skills, getting involved with employability-related information skills training could be a valuable way for librarians to build relationships with academics and students and to raise the profile of the library within their institutions.

LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELD

Employability work, especially in law, is an opportunity for librarians to help students succeed and improve the

diversity of an elitist legal sector. According to data from the Solicitors Regulatory Authority, the largest law firms have the greatest proportion of lawyers who were privately educated and from a professional socioeconomic background. Although diversity of race, class, disability and gender is growing in the sector, it is happening slowly.¹⁸ The role played by social class in the legal sector was recognised by a panellist at the LexisNexis employability event that inspired our session, Al-Karim Makhani, a legaltech executive. Reflecting on the role of the law school in developing students' employability, Makhani said there was "no better way to level the playing field than via education".¹⁹

Students from privileged backgrounds may benefit from family connections and cultural capital to develop the relevant skills without the help of their tutors; working-class students without access to the same capital or connections, however, could certainly benefit from an explicit focus on employability during their studies. It can be difficult to know what to expect at a corporate interview – or, indeed, what is expected of *you* – when

nobody from your family or social circle has worked in such an environment. McConnell emphasised the particular importance of integrating commercial awareness into the curriculum in post-92 universities "that have traditionally attracted students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and where students already have more challenges in securing employment in such firms".²⁰ If we want to serve our students, especially those from working-class backgrounds, it is important to help them develop these skills during their degrees.

This is an area where librarians can use our skills and backgrounds to help students achieve their goals. It promotes what the library has to offer and shows what librarians can bring to institutions. I would encourage any law librarian interested in developing employability sessions to speak to your department, as the session was seen as helpful and valuable, and was rewarding to develop and run. By showing students how to develop their commercial awareness and the importance of information skills in doing so, we can help them on the path to success, however that may look.

Endnotes

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Biography

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