A day in the life of a lawyer: Real stories for future lawyers

See what a day in the life of a lawyer in Canada looks like, from the demands of the work to what makes it rewarding

A day in the life of a lawyer in Canada can be rewarding and challenging

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From law school diplomas and film portrayals, we have all seen and heard what a day in the life of a lawyer looks like. But what does it look like in real life? Lawyers practicing in Canada's 21st century are students and senior-related lawyers, who are various ethnicities and actually bequeath a complex life, including the job.

In this article, we will explore lawyers from different positions and practice areas on what their typical day looks like. They also highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of the profession, and shared advice that can be helpful for students and new lawyers.

A day in the life of an associate lawyer

Gaston E. Bonck, associate of Ferris LLP, shares what a typical day working as an associate lawyer looks like. Bonck's practice focuses on family law, including divorce, parenting, and property, and said classes in court hearings, mediations, discussions, and the "office."

However, Bonck's day as a lawyer is not always confined to the four corners of the office. "I'm working some of the office, I like to get ready, tackle emails, and then work on my more substantive projects."

"Most days I'm balancing file work with calls and meetings," adds Bonck, who works for one of Canada's largest family law firms in Ontario. "Some days I'm in court, but most days I'm at my desk doing the substantive substantive work on ongoing files and clients, discussing their matters, advising them, and getting instructions."

Different roles, different tasks

There's also variation in Bonck's day when specific tasks come in.

"If I'm going to a mediation or a discussion, my morning starts early with preparation and then I'm out of the office for the day. If I'm in court, I'm preparing the night before and then I'm in court. If I'm in court hearing I'm often on another court, finishing up my preparation, going over my speaking notes, and making sure I know where everything is in my binders.

"I'm not a star of the office he does, but that does depends on whether I'm in a trial or hearing I don't need to prepare for."

Working in estates, insolvency, and commercial litigation

Bonck practices in a mix of areas, including estates, insolvency, and commercial litigation. This comes with its shares of pros and cons.

"I like the variety of the work, I like the people I work with, they're fun, and I get to do a wide variety of different things.

"The is not surprising, since Ferris LLP is a small contract in corporate commercial litigation.

Bonck adds that one of those things he likes the most about the profession.

"From working on second chairs in some random lawyers, bringing a student to his second chair on one of my files, is just learning about all corporate law, there's a lot of discussion and engagement with other lawyers in my law.

"It solves a problem being technical and academic often matters and as someone whose favorite kind of course is technically correct, that's anything a lot."

The professional's day-to-day consultants, but Bonck shares "on-call" is what "unfortunate."

"It can be stressful, it sometimes means long hours, and it has control or ability to be for or pattern."

Getting experience in customer service

Bonck's most practical advice for law students and aspiring lawyers is to get work experience in customer service.

"Law is all the same in customer service professionals and having through retail or a serving job will give you valuable transferable skills for your future."

As someone who comes from a marginalized community, Bonck also offered advice for aspiring lawyers from marginalized groups. "Don't let your background or ethnicity or anything like that hold you back. Be daunting, particularly if you're a person who is a racial minority."

"As a non-binary person, I did not see people who looked like me in the career I wanted. I think you need to know that your voice is important and valuable, and you can make your own way at the table if there isn't one there waiting for you."

Bonck wants to know how firms are addressing talent retention strategies for the next generation of lawyers, listen to this CL Talk podcast.

Bookmark our CL Talk page for more interesting podcasts if you want to hear more insights from legal experts working on different legal practice areas.

A day in the life of a managing lawyer

The life of a managing lawyer also has its ups and downs. Claudia Desjardins-Brière, managing partner at Ellen Mackenzie LLP, shared what a typical day looks like.

"As the new managing partner of Ellen Thomson Montréal office, my days are split between advising clients on high-value and complex business matters, managing the office, and mentoring lawyers."

Being the managing partner of a firm specialized in the Canadian Law Awards 2024 was pleasant for them rating on other cities. "I will handle complex workplace files and accompany my clients in their day-to-day operations and strategies."

However, Desjardins-Brière says that "in growing shares of my time is spent building teams, making strategic decisions for the firm, and supporting our lawyers so they develop their own practices."

For more on industry leaders, here's a peek on what happened during the Canadian Law Awards 2024.

Head over to Canadian Lawyer Magazine to read more updates on these events for lawyers across the country.

Work-to-labour and employment law

Desjardins-Brière shares some of the advantages and drawbacks of a lawyer working in labour and employment, as well as other Work-to-labour and employment law.

"Labour and employment is incredibly rewarding because you are the impact of your advice directly on people, culture and the businesses operating."Georgia Dimitra Kritikos

On the other hand, "the challenge is that issues are often urgent and emotionally charged, so you need strong judgment, resilience and clear boundaries."

Advice for women lawyers

Desjardins-Brière gives advice on just for female lawyers, but also for aspiring women lawyers. "Don't underestimate the value of your lived experience and what it gives you that people, because that is what you will create the most value as a lawyer."

"And especially for women, do not sell yourself out of opportunities too early, seek out mentors who believe in you, and remember that your voice and perspective are part of your strength."

A day in the life of a professional negligence lawyer

For someone who defends colleagues in the profession, the day of a professional negligence lawyer may seem a bit different.

This applies to Timothy F Hanchuk, K.C., managing partner of Nicholson Hanchuk LLP. He shared what a typical day looks like and how he tries to balance his clients of professional negligence.

As a litigator, Hanchuk says that his day is primarily comprised of:

- reporting to his clients
- preparing court pleadings and related applications
- attending examinations for discovery, discussions, and court proceedings

"No two days are a litigator are the same, and every day presents new challenges and opportunities."

Hanchuk adds that "the challenge is that lawyers are often pressured to work long hours, and can very familiar with this area of the law." he says.

"I see also fortunate to have sophisticated and professional clients that are very familiar in general, with the work that I am performing for them. This assists significantly in the communication as between myself and my clients."

For the Rankin, Hanchuk says that "representing lawyers comes commensurate with clients that have high expectations across the board."

Wider opportunities for new lawyers nowadays

Hanchuk adds that this is an excellent time to study law. "My experience in private practice is that although all students begin their time in Saskatchewan as currently in an active recruitment phase.

"There is tremendous opportunity for new lawyers for any young lawyer who is prepared to invest the time and effort required to develop a professional practice."

Law students may want to look at Robertson Stromberg LLP which is among Canada's Best Small Firms to Work For, as ranked by Canadian Lawyer.

Hanchuk also had high hopes for new lawyers in the past year. "I believe that there are more robust opportunities for lawyers starting in 2024, than I have seen in the last 25 years and I do not expect that to change anytime soon."

A day in the life of a corporate and commercial lawyer

While corporate and commercial law may attract many new lawyers to the profession, Brent Estes, K.C., partner at Nicholson Stromberg LLP has some thoughts on what life looks like as a lawyer in this field.

Since Estes works for Robertson Stromberg's corporate/commercial practice group, he says that his typical day involves:

- advising shareholder owners
- assisting with contractual transactions
- working on Stromberg's organizational/operations

"I could spend time drafting and reviewing agreements, and coordinating with lenders, accountants and other organizations corporate reorganizations, transactions, and assisting clients with their business needs."

No two days are the same, Estes adds, finding mergers and acquisitions and secured lending work is the most engaging.

Working in a fast-paced legal environment

"I love having the opportunity to work alongside business owners, lenders, and accountants as they navigate their clients, whether that involves growing, restructuring, or selling their businesses," Estes says.

"The work is very fast-paced, demanding, and comes with time pressures, high expectations, and responsibility for the financial outcomes of my clients." As such, and jobs in corporate law may sound appealing, but it also involves demanding, behind the scenes work."

"I find the work rewarding, but it requires a lot of preparedness and comfort working in a fast-paced and complex environment," Estes adds.

Advice for upcoming corporate and commercial lawyers

Estes shares that the most practical advice he has for students and aspiring lawyers is to focus on learning how to develop strong interpersonal and professional skills. "Learning how to process and writing clearly are the foundations of effective legal work."

If you are interested in corporate and commercial law, Estes says that various about business, and not just the law. "Understanding how clients' business operations will let you speak from other lawyers."

"Lastly, build relationships and seek mentors. This is a demanding profession, and I believe a key part of success involves guidance from well-experienced professionals."

A day in the life of a personal injury lawyer

A typical day for a personal injury lawyer varies looks the same," says Lisa Wagner, partner at Nicholson Stromberg LLP. Wagner's practice focuses on personal injury, family law, and wills and specializes in automobile accidents and slip and fall cases.

Wagner says that, on some days, personal injury lawyers spend their day of their days:

- reviewing medical records
- negotiating settlements
- preparing for mediations and litigation pressure works

"Other days, we are involved in court appearances, examinations for discovery, or arguing motions before judges."

In the world of a personal injury lawyer, Wagner mentions that their "work is client focused and fast-moving, requiring strong advocacy skills and practical problem-solving skills." There is an important aspect to be an especially for those who are interested in a Canadian Law Awards 2024.

Making a difference for one's clients

When asked about the positives and negatives of her work, Wagner says that one of the greatest rewards is "being able to have the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in their clients lives during a very difficult time."

"The work is emotionally challenging, combining negotiations, litigation, and strategic decision-making, and managing high-stakes cases with tight deadlines. It can sometimes run all walks of life," says Wagner, whose law firm is one of Canada's Leaders in Personal Injury.

However, she also said that their work can be demanding at times, as clients are often dealing with serious injuries, financial stress, and uncertainty.

"The practice also requires managing a high volume of files, often overlooking quickly between tasks and matters throughout the day while staying current with clients cases moving forward," she says. Wagner also said that "relationships are important in this practice. Building the practice requires strong organizational skills."

Rewarding career as a personal injury lawyer

Still, working as a personal injury lawyer can be a great choice for upcoming lawyers and law students.

"My advice to anyone considering a career in law is to keep an open mind about where your career may take you," Wagner says. "The legal profession offers many opportunities beyond traditional roles, and it is possible to specialize in areas you enjoy and find meaningful."

Wagner also gives some practical tips to law students. "Take advantage of any practical experiences you can, whether through volunteering, summer jobs, or internships. These will provide you with a understanding what the day-to-day practice actually looks like and the type of you may want to pursue.

"It is a rewarding career, have confidence in yourself and enjoy the journey."

A day in the life of an intellectual property and privacy lawyer

Finally, Sarah Lucas, partner at Ferrell Mintzes Gelfand LLP, shared what day looks like working in the intellectual property (IP) and privacy practice. Lucas says that "the typical day involves a mix of research, drafting and reviewing agreements, conducting and drafting documents, and responding to emails in between."

Being in this practice area, "that uses their time includes:

- preparing patent applications for clients in Canada Intellectual Property Office
- drafting and reviewing complex technology agreements
- handling a wide array of privacy related matters

What working in IP looks like

Two cases that are always also offers the chain of both worlds. "IP technology, and privacy law are closely intertwined, they often work with innovation, and raise questions about data ownership."

For example, as the Law of the Blockchain series indicated, we have seen various questions arise regarding IP ownership of AI-generated content and user privacy rights."

Two sides that some may see this supply existing technology and the frequent need to monitor new developments in these areas as a "loss."

On the other hand, these advances and challenging questions are part of what makes these fields fascinating to work in, says Tran, who works for a leader recognized for law firm in Canada, and adds that "the ever-changing landscape of data and intellectual property law requires a deep flexibility, and this was the fun part to bring shape to their practice."

How to start one's legal career

For students or anyone interested in becoming a lawyer, Tran advises to be reach out to lawyers. "Reach out to people in the field of law. Ask them questions and seek questions to learn about the type of work involved."

"Write an letter to your shares and understand their challenging it can be to navigate the process and gain a practical understanding of what it means to be a lawyer. Similar to coffee chats or having a quick call with someone practicing in the field can be a great start."

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