

PSL FACT SHEET

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

Past:

- The role of the professional support lawyer was established over 15 years ago in order to utilise the skills of female fee earners looking for reduced hours due to family commitments. Primarily precedent based, the roles were usually part-time and regarded more as an interim measure rather than a recognised career alternative.

Present:

- An amazing transformation has taken place over the last ten years with most City and large regional firms developing a positive and proactive approach to professional support lawyers and the importance of their function within the firm.
- Support work is now a career in its own right and is proving extremely popular with lawyers making a positive decision to move away from fee-earning yet remain within the legal world.
- It is no longer an exclusively female dominated profession and although it is certainly common to work flexible hours, many PSLs now work full-time and are committed to a permanent career in the area.
- Some firms are now putting more emphasis on the business development aspect of their PSL roles, changing the stereotype of the “backroom” PSL.
- Although traditionally used by the larger UK firms, there is an increasing trend for US firms with established UK practices to look for experienced PSL’s for greenfield support roles.
- PSLs are now the norm in larger regional firms, rather than the exception and medium sized City and niche firms are beginning to develop a PSL/Knowledge Management (KM) function.

Future:

- Partnership is no longer impossible for talented, high profile PSLs within certain progressive firms in the City and this should become more widespread as the role develops further over the years.
- Opportunities are beginning to arise within the larger City firms for experienced PSLs to move laterally into specialist senior positions e.g. support strategy, information dissemination, learning and development, training and IT projects.

COMMON QUESTIONS

The PSL Role – what does it involve?

Firms do not always provide job specifications on each PSL vacancy, although as the PSL function has become more established, there is an increasing trend towards a clear PSL role. Sometimes it is possible to tailor a role to suit the candidate's interests or experience but there are always certain key elements to the PSL function that may be covered by one PSL or broken down in to different elements and covered by a team. These generally include:

- **Know how, Precedents and Standard Forms:** Drafting, managing and disseminating documents, setting up or dealing with online document systems.
- **Research:** Analysing new law and practice, researching points of law or directing fee earners to appropriate sources.
- **Training:** Organising internal lectures or seminars to trainees, solicitors groups or firm wide. Dealing with external training, building up relationships with speakers etc.
- **Marketing and Business Development:** Producing newsletters for clients, assisting on beauty parades, arranging client seminars or events.
- **Information Technology:** Working on IT specific projects eg setting up internet deal rooms, creating/updating web sites, developing the firm's infobank and intranet.
- **Fee Earner Enquiries:** Answering queries relating to the maintained information and new and complex areas of the law.

What is the current market like for PSLs?

- This varies enormously depending on the practice area. New PSL roles are constantly evolving and appearing in areas such as projects, insolvency, energy and infrastructure. In the last year, most practice areas have been in demand, particularly for corporate and banking groups (such as in capital markets and securitisation).

What salary could I expect?

- Many firms do not have hard and fast rules on salary packages even for those moving directly from fee earning into support work. However, as a general rule of thumb, salaries based on the equivalent fee earning salary less 10% still applies at the lower levels of PQE (up to about 4-5 PQE).
- In a drive to introduce more of a career structure for PSLs within a firm, there is a now a move towards a 3-tier structure consisting of a PSL, a senior PSL and a Consultant / Of Counsel level. This latter role is for extremely experienced PSLs who manage a team, have client responsibilities or handle extremely technical work. These consultant support lawyers can command salaries up to £110K, however, most other City firms have not yet introduced this system and so the usual salary range for PSLs in a large City firm is in the £75K – £105K range. Those handling a small amount of client work in addition to support work will often receive an uplift on their PSL salaries.

- US firms are increasingly looking for PSLs and salaries vary according to the firm. US firms that have an established presence in the UK tend to pay up to £125K for senior candidates but we have also seen some US firms offer salaries well below normal market rate for PSLs.
- We are also getting instructions from medium sized City firms for greenfield site positions where salaries range from £65K – £80K depending on the practice area and PQE. On the whole it is very rare for an experienced PSL to be paid in the £60Ks.
- Bonuses: These vary from firm to firm. If given, the bonus could be based just on firm related profits with or without a performance related bonus on top. As this latter bonus cannot be based on chargeable hours, performance criteria are usually defined at the beginning of the year and then if these are met, a bonus is awarded. The size of the bonus is a moveable feast as it depends on the firm's profits that year.

Can I work regular hours or work from home?

- Part or full time hours are usually on offer, although anything less than 3 days a week can be hard to find. A greenfield site will normally require full time hours at least in the first instance. Even with full time roles, the hours are generally fixed and/or predictable and you will notice a big change from the pressures of fee-earning.
- Firms can often be flexible on PSLs working from home for part of the working week, although a minimum of two days a week in the office is usually required, and three generally preferred.

What experience do I need?

- As an indication of the high profile nature of these positions, firms will require candidates to have a background equivalent to that of their fee earners, so good academics and experience are pre-requisites.
- Subject to this, firms are not dissuaded by short career breaks or moves away from fee earning. Consequently lawyers who moved into lecturing or marketing are often of interest.
- As far as the level of experience goes, it is usual for firms to look for at least 3 years' PQE, although they can be flexible on this for the right person. There is no upper limit and partners looking for a life-style or career change are generally of interest.
- Previous PSL experience is not always required unless the role is to set up a support function within the firm or is the senior PSL in a team.

What if I'm currently working in-house?

- This does not exclude you from applying for PSL roles however the longer you have been away from private practice, the harder it can be. Many roles in-house involve outsourcing the technical work to private practice. In this case, it can be perceived that you do not have the current technical drafting ability required for precedents and practice notes. That being said, in areas such as commercial, IT and some areas of banking law, in-house experience can be very relevant and desirable.

Could I return to fee earning after working as a PSL?

- Providing you have kept up with the legal developments in your practice area and have good academics and a strong fee-earning background, it is normally possible to make the move back into fee-earning work. Obviously, the longer you have been a PSL, the harder it is.

What career path could I have?

Professional support is now an established career. As you become more senior, the kinds of options currently available to you are:

- Partnership – several high profile firms in the City have partners who are PSLs. This is likely to open up even further in the future.
- Greenfield Site – setting up a support function firmwide in a smaller City or US firm. This would enable more involvement in strategic planning, an area in which many senior PSLs are interested.
- Knowledge Management – firms are increasingly interested in recruiting specialists to develop centralised knowledge systems.
- Departmental Head of PSL (sometimes called Senior PSL) – an experienced PSL heads up a team of PSLs within the relevant practice area
- Head of Knowledge Management – these roles are hotly fought over given the increasing number of excellent senior PSLs in the market. Due to the level of competition for these positions, it is generally necessary to have some management experience as a Senior PSL or Partner, combined with some previous experience in a strategic or central role. Salaries for these roles range from £100K-£150K.

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