

Skills for the future of legal practice: an evolving framework for changing professional identities

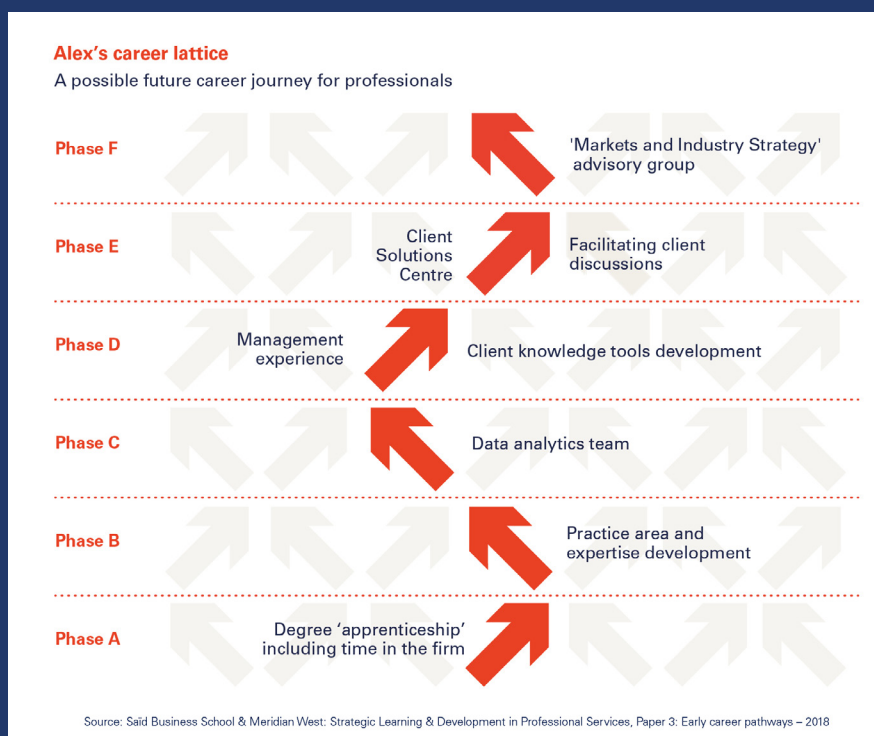


At Queen Mary University of London, our “**2030 Strategy**” (qmul.ac.uk/strategy-2030) challenges us to ensure that our people engage locally, nationally and internationally to create a better world, and that we open opportunity for our students by building the knowledge and skill-sets relevant to the challenges of today and tomorrow.

To support this ambition, one goal in the **Hub for Professional Practice** (qmul.ac.uk/hub-for-professional-practice) within the School of Law, is to support our students in building skill-sets which will make them ready for tomorrow’s world of legal practice – with two of the **Hub’s core values** (qmul.ac.uk/hub-for-professional-practice/our-values/) being to build skills in the next generation of legal practitioners which are “relevant”, by our Hub being “connected” with industry.

In working towards this goal, an important first question to ask is: what are the skill-sets of tomorrow’s legal world? A huge amount of research has been carried out on this topic, as legal practice, and legal sector jobs, change rapidly. Deregulation, leading to the appearance of new types of legal employers, the use of technology in legal service delivery, changing client demands, different ways of (hybrid) working, and the demands of the practitioners themselves seeking different types of careers, are all changing the landscape of legal practice.

These rapid changes lead to an important broader question too, which is the context of the skill-sets we seek to develop: what will the overall “identity” of legal professionals look like in the coming years? Based on some earlier research by our team (see the image below), if career paths are indeed beginning to resemble a “lattice” rather than being linear trajectories, our conclusion is that future legal practitioners will go through more (and more varied) career phases, a number of different jobs, and more marked changes to their professional identities throughout their working lives.



Source: N. Spencer & S. Newton, Early Career Pathways (Strategic Learning & Development in Professional Services. Paper 3, Saïd Business School & Meridian West, 2018).

In other words, at different times in their career, they may think of (and label) themselves as different types of professional (and not always use the word “legal” to describe that professional identity), experiencing roles and exploring paths which move across what we currently see as boundaries between different “disciplines” becoming, in effect, **“poly-technic” or “many-skilled” professionals** (www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/programmes/executive-education/custom-executive-education/poly-technic-professionals).

In order to support them on these more varied career journeys, we believe strongly that we need to look beyond the current dividing lines and boundaries of disciplines, helping them to regularly re-think not only what might still be

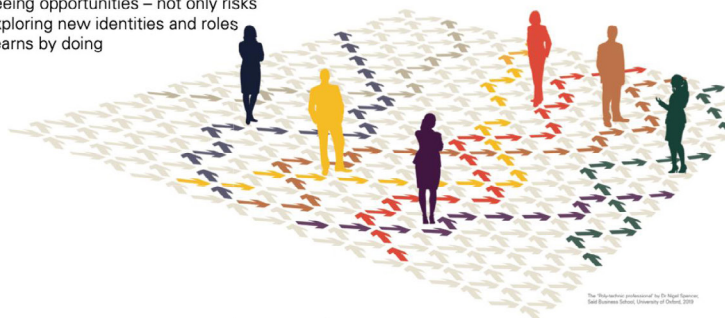
“core” skills in the future, but also what different skills and knowledge might best equip them to “branch off” from more traditional pathways and embark on the varied and exciting career routes which are emerging: pathways ranging from solicitors and barristers, to legal operations experts, technologists or knowledge consultants (to name but a few).

To put it differently, how can we best prepare the next generation to seize opportunities and take up jobs which currently do not exist, in a shifting, and increasingly multi-disciplinary landscape – striking a balance between the expertise which will give them strong foundations for career success, whilst also enabling the greatest career agility and options for them?

The “Poly-technic” or “Many-skilled” professional

Mind-set

- Curious – and continuous learners
- Embraces ambiguity and change
- Seeing opportunities – not only risks
- Exploring new identities and roles
- Learns by doing



Skill-sets

- Strategic, long-term thinking
- Acute commercial awareness
- Data aware – but not coders
- Helping clients manage change
- Predicting future industry trends
- Posing great questions – not ‘giving answers’
- Bringing diverse thought to complex challenges
- Building collaborative teams around client problems

Source: Nigel Spencer, Saïd Business School: Strategic Learning & Development in Professional Services – 2019

Scan to view
2030 Strategy



Scan to view **Hub for Professional Practice**



A contribution to this “evolving skills framework”

As a contribution to this forward thinking on practitioner identities and skill-sets, we have used our many years of experience, and consulted with colleagues at different types of legal employers (ranging from City firms to legal technology and knowledge businesses), to create a draft framework of future skills for law school students to consider as they move towards the world of work.

Given the speed of change in the sector, any such framework is always going to be “work in progress” but, we hope, it is a useful contribution for different stakeholders:

- For students: seeking to find their developmental pathway in a sector where “lawtech”, digital technology and ethics, and purpose-driven issues such as “Environmental, Social and Governance” (ESG) themes are increasingly impacting organisational structures, jobs and skills needs.
- For employers: to sense-check the competency frameworks they use (perhaps developed some years ago when career paths were less varied), acting as a useful discussion prompt to guide the development of the legal practitioners in their teams.

Above all, we hope that this thinking can offer some support across the sector at both an individual and organisational level to enable people to take advantage of the breadth of opportunities now available, developing varied and exciting career paths and futures for an increasingly diverse talent pool.

Hub for Professional Practice,
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London (qmul.ac.uk/hub-for-professional-practice)

Fractal Knowledge (fractal.legal)

Acknowledgements:

We would like to give thanks to all our colleagues and contacts across industry who kindly gave their time to offer feedback, and make suggestions and improvements, as we have been creating the current draft of this document.

Note:

We are publishing and making this framework available on a **permissive, open-source basis** (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permissive_software_license) so that anyone can copy, use (and edit or develop) these initial thoughts. Feedback and further contributions to the thinking are also greatly welcomed, and we would be delighted to discuss the suggestions made here.



Skills for the future of legal practice: an evolving framework for changing professional identities

Becoming... expert at delivering your legal knowledge

- Legal knowledge
- Research and analysis
- Communication skills

Becoming... innovators in a digital world

- Digital literacy and technology skills
- Entrepreneurial thinking
- Creativity and curiosity

Becoming... your best self

- Maximising your personal growth
- Self-management and organisation
- Resilience, grit and determination
- Collaboration and multi-disciplinary thinking

Becoming... an ethical “global citizen” with a client focus

- Commerciality within a “global context”
- Professionalism and ethics
- Delivering client excellence

Becoming... expert at delivering your legal knowledge

Legal Knowledge

Core Areas

- Demonstrates an enthusiasm to learn core, substantive legal knowledge.
- Makes an effort to identify one or more specialist legal areas which are of personal interest, and deepens their knowledge and understanding of those areas through wider reading or engagement in community, paid or voluntary projects.
- Actively seeks news and updates relevant to their legal specialist areas of interest – making a daily, habitual commitment to keeping up to date with topical issues.
- Regularly asks questions to understand the complexities of legal issues.
- Demonstrates an ability to know when to look something up, and when to ask.

Stretch Area

- Engages in considering the practical application of the law and the ways in which new policy or regulation could lead to systemic or sector-level improvements.

Research and Analysis

Core Areas

- Seeks to understand the intended purpose and use of the research requested, and asks appropriate questions to scope the task.
- Demonstrates an awareness of the main legal research resources (both in print and online), as well as industry and market-specific sources.
- Undertakes wider reading to develop ways of critically assessing the reliability and suitability of research sources.
- Demonstrates an ability to research issues thoroughly, getting to the core of complex issues.
- Clearly structures research findings as requested by the person briefing the task, highlighting key points.
- Shows an awareness of how existing Know-How can be re-employed to drive efficiencies, consistency and repeatability.

Stretch Area

- Understands structures for knowledge maintenance, storage and retrieval e.g. by reference to the **CILIP Professional Knowledge and Skills standard** (www.cilip.org.uk/page/PKSB).

Becoming... expert at delivering your legal knowledge (continued)

Communication Skills

Core Areas

- Always selects the best communication method (email, discussion), style and content for the specific audience and situation.
- Shows a commitment to improving their written, oral and other communication skills.
- Effective technical drafting skills, including attention to detail, to minimise errors.
- Develops the ability to write clearly and succinctly, and can simplify complex material for a non-legal audience.
- Shows the ability and willingness to re-read, self-critique and edit their own written work.

Stretch Areas

- Shows understanding of best practices and options for presenting written content in creative ways, maximising comprehension, effectiveness and accessibility.
- Takes active steps to understand cognitive differences and different requirements for communications.
- Seeks opportunities to experiment with tools for effective meetings and collaboration, including facilitation and virtual/hybrid meetings technology.
- Shows an ability to provide clear and effective training to others on areas of law, technology, or both.

Becoming ... innovators in a digital world

Digital Literacy and Technology Skills

Core Areas

- Possesses a good base knowledge of the types of software systems needed to work on projects.
- Shows an awareness of the opportunities to apply new technology to work projects.
- Keeps up to date with cyber threats and appropriate responses, including current guidance from the **Law Society** (www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/cybersecurity) and national strategies.
- Uses existing technology in creative ways to drive efficiencies or better ways of working.
- Demonstrates the ability to use social media to achieve project goals.
- Builds an understanding of data ethics, data law and governance at a suitable level to enable risk/issue-spotting on projects.
- Develops core knowledge of intellectual property rights (IPR) and is able to spot IPR issues when planning projects.
- Understands common risks to data and systems resulting from technology in order to share information safely and securely.
- Demonstrates an ability to understand numerical data, and potential issues with data (including the difference between correlation and causation) – including a basic level of numerical competence.
- Experiments with common types of data visualisation techniques.
- Works with data to draw out patterns and value for projects.

Stretch Areas

- Undertakes additional reading to deepen their knowledge of bias and risk in using data, including quantitative data and algorithms.
- Takes steps to understand common standards and frameworks which underlie technology in order to deepen their own understanding of how legal information is stored and shared within systems.
- Acquires detailed competence in one or more specific technologies through working on projects and gaining certifications.
- Shows an awareness of the roles and responsibilities needed to oversee and maintain digital systems beyond their launch.
- Understands how business processes can be transformed into digital systems.
- Understands concepts associated with **blockchain and smart legal contracts** (www.lawsociety.org.uk/topics/research/blockchain-legal-and-regulatory-guidance-second-edition, and their implications for legal practice).

Becoming ... innovators in a digital world (continued)

Entrepreneurial Thinking

Core Areas

- Shows an awareness of law as a business: the traditional and new commercial models for legal service delivery, including consultancy, software-as-a-service, alternative business structures, partnership models, and listed legal businesses.
- Understands how to create and maintain an impactful social media profile to build reputation.

Stretch Areas

- Develops an understanding of business development for law, including client management and ways to generate new sales opportunities and grow services.
- Proactively considers business growth opportunities and how to evaluate the ethical context of such opportunities.

Creativity and Curiosity

Core Areas

- Shows critical / lateral thinking to find different approaches to problems.
- Adopts a “solution” mind-set rather than simply spotting risks and problems.
- Understands and, where appropriate, puts into practice agile, “design thinking” approaches for problem-solving: to try, reflect, evolve the idea, and try again.
- Demonstrates curiosity and regularly asks open questions (“Who...?”, “What...?”, “How...?”).
- Shows the courage to challenge and express a different point of view.
- Considers all stakeholder groups and their needs when working on projects.
- Able to adapt processes and techniques to increase the accessibility of project outputs to different stakeholders.
- Demonstrates courage in the face of unfamiliarity and adversity, as well as a willingness to explore, apply and develop novel approaches and ideas (where applicable) in pursuit of continuous improvement and the discovery of new opportunities.

Stretch Areas

- Develops an understanding of how to encourage collaborative problem-solving in others, including change theory.
- Demonstrates competence in collaboration techniques and technologies (both real-world and when working with hybrid or virtual teams).
- Shows an ability to anticipate a project’s impact using a variety of techniques, including “outcomes thinking”.

Becoming ... your best self

Maximising your Personal Growth

Core Areas

- A lifelong learner with a growth mind-set, who reflects realistically on their development to date and identifies their next developmental goals.
- Always seeking out new or challenging project tasks, regularly stretching themselves out of their comfort zone.
- Proactively seeks opportunities to find their “voice” and self-expression.
- Always embraces opportunities to try different projects and tasks for the first time.
- Seeks, and offers, mentorship.
- Actively builds their own professional support networks.

Stretch Area

- Awareness of unconscious biases and how to manage these.

Self-Management and Organisation

Core Areas

- Demonstrates an ability to manage their diary and time effectively to commit the agreed hours to a project.
- Shows project management capability: prioritising, managing competing demands, and project stakeholders effectively.
- Proactively spots and manages project pressure points and finds strategies to plan around them.
- Demonstrates effective administration of project work including electronic organisation of project papers.
- Takes ownership of delegated tasks and delivers to agreed deadlines.
- Effective note-taking when being briefed and always clarifies the required output at the end (including the timeline for delivery).

Stretch Area

- Develops the skills to manage and delegate to others.

Becoming ... your best self (continued)

Resilience, Grit and Adaptability

Core Areas

- Demonstrates passion and enthusiasm for their work.
- Adapts to unforeseen circumstances and changes to project goals.
- Demonstrates 'grit': the perseverance and passion to achieve their long-term goals.
- Knows their limits and proactively manages self-care.
- Develops strategies to cope with sudden setbacks and frustrations.
- Shows a willingness, and the confidence, to admit to mistakes and to learn from them.
- Demonstrates the ability to juggle multiple project tasks at the same time.
- Is open to receiving, and giving, constructive feedback.
- In the work they choose to do, maintains a connection to their values to build resilience and an ongoing sense of purpose.

Stretch Areas

- Understands their own working preferences, strengths and limitations, and notices those of others.
- Proactively upskills themselves to participate in collaborative projects.
- Seeks deeper knowledge and techniques to look after their mental and physical health.

Collaboration and Multi-Disciplinary Thinking

Core Areas

- Works effectively and collaboratively with others, including in virtual and remote teams.
- Demonstrates emotional intelligence, adapting their communication style with all stakeholders.
- Regularly listens to viewpoints, and learns from skilled professionals in other disciplines.
- Acts with positive intent in all situations to build trusted team relationships.
- Understands the power of diversity, and welcomes different perspectives.
- Takes the time to pass on knowledge and to help other team members.

Stretch Areas

- Works effectively with stakeholders structured in different types of teams and in roles different from legal ones.
- Engages with their organisation to find healthy and sustainable ways of team working.
- Demonstrates an ability to deal with/ resolve team conflict.
- Seeks out knowledge, qualifications and certifications in different disciplines.

Becoming ... an ethical “Global Citizen” with a client focus

Commerciality within a “Global Context”

Core Areas

- A “Global Citizen”, showing an understanding of how their work contributes to the global “Environmental, Social, Governance” (ESG) agenda and the UN’s “Sustainable Development Goals”.
- Understands the impact of legal work in a commercial or business setting.
- Regularly reads business periodicals and commercial news.
- Builds their knowledge of the industry sector in which their legal analysis is used.
- Understands how the organisation they are working for derives income and manages costs.

Stretch Areas

- Understands the broader ESG implications for legal practice as a whole, and is an advocate for change.
- Shows curiosity and understanding about how specific organisations operate such as their structure, functions, vision and mission.

Professionalism and Ethics

Core Areas

- Presents themselves professionally in front of all stakeholders.
- Respects others’ time, and shows a commitment to presentation, tidiness and punctuality.
- Demonstrates an understanding of, and adherence to, the **SRA Principles** (www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/standards-regulations/principles) for **solicitors / Bar Core Duties** (www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/for-barristers/compliance-with-your-obligations/the-core-duties.html) and related guidance.
- Always carries out preparatory work to maximise their contribution.
- Demonstrates consistently a strong work ethic, with respect for self-care.
- Regularly spots, and engages in discussions about, ethical issues in projects.

Stretch Areas

- Understands regulatory and ethical frameworks (e.g. data privacy) critical for the future, data-led, digital world.
- Seeks additional accreditation in one or more ethics frameworks and skills in facilitating ethics discussions in an organisational context.
- Advocates for inclusive working practices.
- Understands potential common ethical challenges associated with different legal professional business models and work types.
- Understands how professional ethical standards impact the profession and wider society.

Becoming ... an ethical “Global Citizen” with a client focus (continued)

Professionalism and Ethics (continued)

Core Areas

- Shows integrity and understands the legal and ethical lines between “right” and “wrong”.
- Respects confidentiality at all times.
- Understands regulatory and ethical frameworks that organisations will operate within, in the future, data-led, and digital world.
- Is able to spot, and manages, conflicts of interest.
- Shows the courage to challenge and express a different point of view, even where it is not the view of the majority.
- Develops an active and considered understanding of their own personal values, and the values of others.

Delivering Client Excellence

Core Areas

- Listens to a client’s issues and perspectives, and shows curiosity about the client’s situation.
- Builds appropriate client relationships and proactively anticipates client needs.
- Shows empathy and care for clients, adopting appropriate behaviours.
- Wherever appropriate and possible, takes a collaborative, problem-solving approach with clients.
- Is actively responsive and communicative with clients, including around difficult topics such as costs and billing.
- Delivers to clients on time and within the time and cost budgets set.

Stretch Areas

- Understands and engages with emerging techniques and opportunities for collaboration with clients (using technology or otherwise).
- Gets involved in exploratory projects (e.g. hackathons and legal open source initiatives) to identify possible client-facing solutions.
- Seeks ways to deliver excellence for clients whilst also promoting care for responsible and appropriate ways of working, which may sometimes include managing (and challenging) client expectations.



