A Guide to Assessment Centres and Commercial Awareness (Law)

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This guide aims to give you an overview of Assessment Centres and Commercial Awareness specific to Law; and information on additional support the SMF can provide. The below advice is compiled from information provided by law graduate recruitment teams, legal professionals, as well as advice from SMF students and alumni.

Assessment Centres

What are Assessment Centres?

Like many graduate employers, many commercial law firms use assessment centres as a final stage (or penultimate stage) before recruiting candidates for their early careers opportunities. These are sometimes referred to as selection days or interview days by some firms, but usually all follow the same format or have the same purpose. Whether you’re applying for a first year programme or training contract, assessment centres are the most common recruitment selection method used when applying for large graduate law employers.

Types of Assessment Centre?

All About Law has an extensive breakdown of the types of activities you might be expected to take part in at law assessment centres. Before attending your assessment centre you can research the type of assessment centre the organisation will use on their website. If the organisation is one of our employer partners you can also refer to the SMF application...
guidance document for the relevant firm here. Common features of law assessment centres are:

- **Interviews**

Interviews can either be competency, behavioural or situation-based. Depending on the interview type, they are usually conducted either by someone from the graduate recruitment team, a senior associate or a Partner. They can also be in the format of a one-to-one interview, group or panel interview.

- **Case study**

It is highly likely that you will receive some form of case study to work with during a law assessment centre, whether as a group or individually. Case studies are likely to be legal and one that assimilates a case you might work on as a trainee solicitor, however some firms may offer alternative case studies for non-law students. Here, it is important you demonstrate your commercial awareness and logical thinking.

- **Written or legal task**

You may be given a timed task to complete during your assessment centre. This can range from a document-checking or written activity such as proof-reading a contract or writing a letter to a client. These tasks usually assess a specific set of core skills including attention to detail, spelling and grammar, and written communication.

- **Group exercises**

You may be put into groups to complete a task – such as a case study, negotiation activity or legal problem, and is likely to involve a group presentation or interview at the end.

- **Presentation**

Presentations are your opportunity to showcase your communication skills. Following a case study or group exercise, you may be asked to deliver a presentation on your findings or a general topic. You should remember to speak clearly, logically and with structure.

- **Networking lunch**

During the assessment centre you may take part in a networking lunch with employees at the firm. Firms usually assess your people skills and personality. Whether this part of the assessment centre is assessed or not, if there is any lunch or break opportunity during the assessment centre, you should take every opportunity to be friendly and interact with other people, including other candidates.
Typical Questions/Activities

The list of questions and activities have been compiled from current and previous SMF students who have taken part in law assessment centres and information from the website of law firms.

Advice

“One of the best pieces of advice I received was enjoy the day and smile. These two things really do make a difference and you find yourself comfortable in a stressful situation. The partners and senior associates aren’t there to trip you up, they just want to test the extent of your knowledge. You aren’t expected to know everything.”

Activities

- Interview with Senior Associates/Partners
- Interview with HR
- Written Task
- Individual Presentation

Client case study

“I had to read the materials given within 45 minutes. If there’s a contract, pay close attention to the contracts and answer the questions given.”

“I had around 30 minutes to go through 10 pages of information. I needed to prepare for the questions provided in the case study. This can be really difficult as they can include graphs, letters and background information. The interviewer can ask you random questions on the case study instead of the ones you prepared.”

Presentation

“During the presentation, if the partner throws you off with a difficult question or even the structure of your presentation, keep composed. Talk them through your thinking step by step, and try not to sit their quietly thinking.”

Interviews

“Competency: have examples in your head of situations and answer the question directly. Talk them through everything. Know how training is structured at the firm, what interaction you have had with the firm and why you would like to join the firm. (If you can read the firm’s business report, it gives you a good feel for the firm and the direction it is going in).”

“Scenario based: this can be anything, key to this is pen and paper. Keep track of the problems, and ask questions if you need to. See if you can find a logical solution to the problems posed and the wider ramifications of the outcome or solution.”
“They can also ask about topics that you have mentioned in your application form. Make sure you have multiple examples for each skill, for example they can ask for more than two situations where you demonstrated leadership.”

Questions

- Why law?
- What part of commercial law do you find interesting?
- Why this firm?
- What do you do outside of university and work?
- How do you tackle challenging and mundane tasks?
- What differences did you notice between the different firms you have worked at/applied to?
- What are the bad things about multi-jurisdictional deals?
- Is there anything else you want to add which you think would be a skill useful for a trainee solicitor which you have not already said?
- Given the shift towards technology, how do you think this will affect the retail sector?
- Tell me about a time where you had conflicted priorities and you dealt with that?
- What are some of the challenges to being a trainee lawyer?
- Was there a time you had to persuade someone in a team to do something else? If so what was the result?

General tips

- Be confident and make eye contact
- If you are a law student you are expected to have some knowledge of law so do revise that before your assessment centre
- Make sure you dress appropriately
- Always ask questions at the end of the interview
- Do prepare for basic competency questions especially ‘why them?’ as they are looking to see if you genuinely want to work there
- Be yourself!

Skills Assessed

This will vary depending on the firm, but broadly include:

- Ability to work under pressure
- Analytical skills
- Attention to detail
- Commercial awareness
Communication skills
Interpersonal/People skills
Leadership
Logical thinking
Negotiation
Problem-solving/Creativity skills
Research
Resilience
Team work
Time management

Ensure you research what main competencies and skills the firm you are undertaking your assessment centre at will assess you on, and how you can demonstrate this. Take a look at the websites below for further information:

- https://www.thelawyerportal.com/blog/law-skills-develop/
- https://www.allaboutlaw.co.uk/stage/becoming-a-lawyer/7-qualities-every-good-lawyer-should-have
- https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/law-sector/7-skills-for-a-successful-law-career

Top Tips and Resources

Please refer to the ‘Assessment centres’ section of the SMF Recruitment Guide: Online Test, Interviews and Assessment Centres.

If you have an assessment centre at one of our partner employers, please also refer to the assessment centre section on the SMF application guidance document.

Useful links:

- https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/careers/resources/employment-sectors/articles/legal-case-studies-and-written-exercises

Remember, if you’re invited to interview or assessment centre:
✓ Let the SMF know immediately by emailing undergraduates@socialmobility.org.uk so we can help!
✓ One of the SMF team will call you to answer any questions you might have
✓ Be matched to a buddy from the employer or industry to do a mock interview or assessment centre element

Good luck in your applications and don’t forget to keep the SMF updated on your progress!
Commercial Awareness

Commercial awareness is an important asset to have as a prospective candidate applying to commercial and corporate law firms. Commercial awareness is how law firms set you apart from other good candidates who often also have good grades and work experience. It is therefore important that you are able to demonstrate your commercial awareness throughout the application process and particularly at the assessment centre stage.

What is Commercial Awareness?

Commercial awareness, also sometimes known as ‘industry awareness’ or ‘business awareness’, is the ability to know how changes in the business environment (and industry) affects the firm (and the industry), including clients, competitors and regulatory bodies. An important part of being commercially aware is understanding key business issues and risks within a social, political and economic framework, having the ability to form logical opinions on these issues and being able to use a ‘commercial lens’ on any given situation.

The most important thing to remember is that having commercial awareness is not about how much content you can recite from the news, but how you apply knowledge and form opinions based on what you know about the business environment.

Law firms consider commercial awareness important, not only because it means you will perform well on the job, but because you have an understanding of how and why the firm exists and works with its clients. Ultimately, to service commercial clients you have to have commercial awareness, otherwise you won’t deliver the job and make money.

Commercial Awareness at an Assessment Centre

Ahead of an assessment centre you should ensure you have researched the firm, its practice areas, its clients and previous deals.

Consider the questions and points below:

- How does the client make money?
- How do law firms make money?

Commercial awareness is NOT something that can be learned by only reading a broadsheet newspaper or watching the news ahead of your assessment centre; it is a skill that needs to be developed and should be practised continually.

For example, keeping up to date with the latest developments on Brexit might be useful, but only shows your interests and knowledge – something anyone can have – not commercial awareness. In an interview you won’t be tested only on a commercial topic, but the effect it has on the business. For instance, an interviewer might ask:

“What was today’s headline in the business section of a paper, and what effect might this have on our clients?”
If the headline was: “Brexit: constitutional chaos after third vote on deal blocked”, you might approach this question by thinking about:

- What does the headline mean?
- What are its implications to society, the business environment and politics?
- What types of clients does the firm work with and in which locations?
- How might the implications of the headline affect the firm’s clients and its operating industry?

Legal Risk

Understanding legal risk is an important aspect of being able to demonstrate your commercial awareness as it shows your ability to provide sound legal advice to clients on transactions and cases.

PESTLE (political, economic, social, technological, legal and external) and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is a useful method to analyse the market an organisation is operating in and the impact that a change can have on that organisation.

How to Develop Commercial Awareness?

- Have a genuine business interest! Keep up to date on your own commercial interest and begin formulating ideas about its implications. Discuss it with friends and family!
- Practise commercial awareness when reading and watching the news such as The Economist, BBC News, The Independent, Reuters, Bloomberg. For subscription only news outlets, check if your university offer free subscriptions to papers such as the FT and The Telegraph!
- Complete commercial awareness quizzes online, including The Student Lawyer’s Monthly Quiz.
- Attend workshops! Search the SMF event portal, Eventbrite, your university career site and other general law-focused events.
- You can also register for law related newsletters and sign up to Google Alerts for a commercial law related topic. (Maybe give an example?)
- Keep an eye on markets!
- We strongly recommend you look through Law Careers Net commercial awareness resources here: https://www.lawcareers.net/commercial-awareness. They include tips, articles, videos and case studies.

In addition to the information above, it is also useful to have an understanding of key economic and finance concepts, so you can answer questions such as:

- What was the interest rate this morning?
• What effect might a rise in the price of oil have?
• What is the difference between debt and equity finance?

Other useful links:

• https://bis.lexisnexis.co.uk/blog/categories/governance-risk-and-compliance/the-importance-of-pestel-for-businesses
• https://www.allaboutlaw.co.uk/law-careers/commercial-awareness
• https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300944-commercial-awareness-its-how-the-industry-fits-together
• https://www.skillsyouneed.com/general/commercial-awareness.html
• https://www.coursera.org/learn/global-business-environment