

Why you should consider the Brussels secondment: Beer, chocolate and bureaucracy

When I studied at Queen's, I always did so with one goal on my mind: to work as a lawyer. Where precisely didn't matter, although I always thought it would be in Northern Ireland. To be honest, I don't really remember being shown many options when I was studying. The Law Society at Queen's, the student body, always did a good job of organising careers events for law students, but they tended to focus on large and prestigious London-based firms. Queen's annual careers fair usually showcased more options from the local market but again, the options were not so varied. I remember wandering by a stand advertising jobs in the EU – something which interested me at the time – but I was politely told that my lack of languages would preclude me from a career.

Anyway, enough nostalgia. My point is that, although law (and being a qualified lawyer) opens a lot of doors, it is not always clear where these are. Indeed, with the relatively hostile climate from graduates and newly qualified solicitors alike, it is worth considering other options – or at least, building up a skillset that sets you apart from your peers. For me, this is exactly what the secondment at the Law Societies' Joint Brussels Office offered.

I was almost halfway through my time at the IPLS when my master spotted the opportunity in the LSNI E-NFORMER. It had not been particularly well advertised at the IPLS and I was quite surprised (but secretly delighted) that almost none of my colleagues showed an interest. However, I understood why many of them did not give the advertisement a second look. Firstly, the EU often seems very far away from the daily tasks of a practitioner, and secondly, I imagine that many felt asking their master for a six month paid secondment could disadvantage them when it came to getting kept on, particularly if there were other trainee solicitors vying for a place at their firm.

As a former secondee, I can only encourage trainee solicitors (and their masters) to give the secondment opportunity a second look. As you will be aware, the Law Society in Northern Ireland has the role of representing and regulating the solicitors' profession in Northern Ireland. Indeed, many of you will get involved and forge strong links with the Law Society over the course of your career. As the Law Societies' Joint Brussels Office represents the solicitor's profession in the UK at the EU level, working in the Brussels office gives you an insight of the issues affecting solicitors and their clients at the EU and international level – from trade relations with the US (i.e. mutual recognition of qualifications), transparency of lobbying and the potential consequences of Brexit (which at the time seemed so unlikely!)

Working on these complex issues, particularly if you have no background in EU law (asides from those two modules in your first year of Queen's) is certainly challenging but ensures that you pick up a few useful skills (drafting, research, analysis and networking) along the way. The wonderful team at the Law Society will help get you up to speed and turn you into an expert in no time at all. One of the reasons that the secondment was so useful was the wide range of legal subjects you could work on and

the level of responsibility you were given to develop that work stream. I used the opportunity to learn as much as I could about the workings of the EU institutions and now have a job in a prestigious law firm advising clients on influencing the EU decision making process in Brussels. One of my fellow secondees developed his interest in taxation with regards to the EU's tax agenda and now works as a tax lawyer in England. Regardless of the background that you come from, you will develop useful skills and knowledge that will help you in your future career.

To the masters out there reading this – don't worry, the majority of trainees come back to their law firms and put those skills to good use. You should consider this opportunity as an investment, a chance for your trainee solicitor to hone their skills in a new environment and broaden their knowledge of the legal system.

I hope this brief article gives you an idea of what this secondment opportunity offers. And, in case you need any more convincing, I would like to remind you that Belgium is home to amazing beer, frites and chocolate. Jokes asides, the secondment was incredibly useful for my career and I will be forever grateful to my master for encouraging me to take it up.