



Traditionally under-appreciated, legal executives could play a key role in the world of ABSs. Rachel Heading explains why it's time they got the recognition they deserve

## Best of both worlds

» After four years of part-time study and over five years' experience in criminal defence work, I qualified as a Fellow of the Institute of Legal Executives in May 2011. Fresh out of school after completing my A-levels and with a keen, but relatively naïve, interest in law, I decided that studying while working was the perfect way to get some hands-on experience and decide which area of law I wanted to practise in. It also showed me the relevance of my studies, which was particularly useful as a motivational boost when I was stuck on a dry topic! I was introduced to the Institute of Legal Executives (now known as the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives or CILEX) through a friend of a friend who had also qualified as a lawyer via this route.

I started working as an administrator for a criminal defence firm and then, after completing the level 3 diploma, I became a paralegal. I gained diverse experience, from white-collar crime, representing companies and professionals in cases featuring complex frauds and cartels, to a whole host of general crime matters, defending some of the most vulnerable people in our society. I have worked on high-profile, privately-funded matters as well as on high street legal aid cases, and in 2010 I qualified as an accredited police station legal representative.

Funnily enough, the firm that I started in, at just 19, was the firm that I returned to upon qualification. It was at Corker Binning that I developed a love for criminal litigation, and that passion has thankfully seen me through my darker days of last-minute revision. Corker Binning specialises in fraud, regulatory litigation and general criminal work. My work is often complex, challenging and engaging, and my day can involve court hearings and conferences or drafting letters and documents.

All of my employers (past and present) have been thoroughly supportive of my studies; some have funded my courses and exams and all have afforded me time for revision days and exams during the working day. The general attitude has been an appreciation of my commitment and determination to work a reasonably demanding full-time job, and then spend my own time studying for further exams.

### A third way

The CILEX route to becoming a lawyer is by no means a new concept. Until the 1950s qualifying as a solicitor was done purely by way of an apprenticeship, with no examinations. Between the 1950s and 1980s, there were two main routes to the solicitor qualification: Law Society examinations with either five-year

articles (with no degree) or two-year articles (accompanied by a law degree).

I am in a rare position among my peers, in that I am a 27-year-old qualified lawyer on a good salary with no debt. It is estimated that the full CILEX qualification costs approximately £7,000, and many employers are more than happy to contribute to this. This is in stark contrast to the £30,000 or so debt that many graduates have. Given the current economic climate, the introduction of university tuition fees and the lack of jobs for LPC graduates, this will become a more pressing issue for many.

Qualifying as a fellow is by no means the end of the road. Legal executive lawyers can now become partners in law firms, they can gain further rights of audience and practise as advocates, and they can even become judges (December 2010 saw the first CILEX member to be made a judge). Legal executive lawyers can also qualify as solicitors (with an exemption from those scarce training contracts).

It's not all plain sailing however. There is no doubt that CILEX is not yet fully accepted as being on a par with the traditional solicitor qualification. There is still a fair amount of prejudice and ignorance. Most of this can be found within the large city firms, and so, if this is where you want to work, you might have to fight that little bit harder for acceptance. Legal executive lawyers are found in 60 per cent of the top 200 law firms. However, City lawyers are more than seven times as likely to have been privately educated than the general population; this doesn't make for a terribly diverse pool of talent.

Thankfully this is only a relatively small pocket of the industry. June Venters QC is an example of a highly successful lawyer who studied with CILEX, and then went on to become the first female solicitor QC. Nick Clegg recently spoke at the Financial Services Lawyers Association and commented that the huge lack of diversity within the legal profession is a big problem and praised the CILEX route for the role it plays. Law serves a diverse sector of people and therefore lawyers need to better mirror those they are representing.

The future looks bright: Pinsent Masons and Irwin Mitchell are just two of a number of large firms that are using CILEX to start lawyer apprenticeship programmes. And, having received its Royal Charter status in January 2012, in the future chartered legal executive lawyers are surely set to receive the recognition they deserve.

Rachel Heading is a legal executive lawyer at Corker Binning «

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