



# TRANSITIONING TO LAW IN THE DIGITAL AGE THE GRADUATE PERSPECTIVE

Findings from the 2018 InfoTrack Legal Education and Technology Roundtable Series (Part 2)



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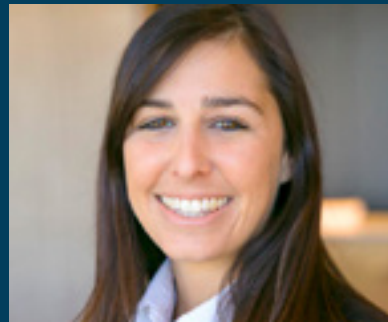
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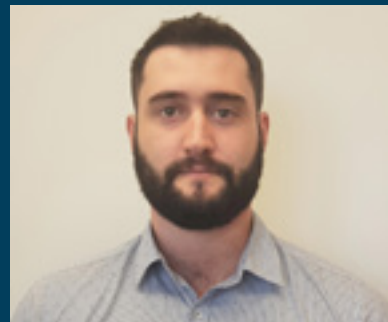
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## FOREWORD

Welcome to Part Two of InfoTrack's Legal Education Roundtable Series. You may recall, we met with senior academics, practising lawyers and legal HR directors in 2017 to explore whether the traditional law degree is helping or hindering our graduates prepare for law in the digital age.

The key take outs from that session were that high distinctions are not the holy grail for securing a job for graduates. Today, there is more focus on their broad experience and passions, and whether they are a good cultural fit for the organisation. Educators in firms and in-house are investing in technology and training their graduates on software and innovative skills but for the most part, the legal curriculum stays the same.

Earlier this year, InfoTrack hosted Part Two in the Education Leadership Series, a roundtable of legal students and recent graduates currently working, to explore their thoughts on issues raised in Part One of the series. In other words, did they feel their degrees had adequately prepared them for a successful career in a digital age.

As you will see in the discussion, while the traditional legal curriculum develops the analytical thinking and legal foundation graduates require, they feel they are not work ready at graduation. Employers are having to invest a lot in training around admin, search, technology and practice management. While that is not an issue for them, graduates feel like they start work already behind.

What is very interesting is that graduates do not see a single role of lawyer in their future. They believe they need to be what I'll call a 'lawyer-plus' – that is a lawyer and project manager, lawyer and data analyst, lawyer and marketer, lawyer and people manager. They want to move away from being a cost-centre to being a valuable stakeholder in the business and offer not just a legal opinion but a commercial solution to any query.

It is obvious that the role of the lawyer has changed significantly for graduates and that workplaces both in-house and in firms are adapting to that. What hasn't changed is the education system. It is apparent that we need greater collaboration between academia and the workplace. Educational providers, firms and in-house counsel need to work together to bridge the gap and enable our graduates to feel ready for a workplace that has changed.

This doesn't necessarily require a significant technological investment but perhaps involving more practical assignments in real-time situations or developing strong work experience opportunities from the very first year of study. As technology providers to the industry we are very happy to work with academia to see how we can play our part in developing tomorrow's lawyers.

- John Ahern, CEO, InfoTrack





## OVERVIEW

Last year, we hosted a roundtable of senior legal academics, practising lawyers and a legal human resource director to explore whether a traditional law degree is sufficient for tomorrow's lawyers. The results are detailed in the first eBook in our legal education and technology roundtable series "How to educate lawyers in the digital information age," available online [here](#).

Now we are back with legal students and graduates to understand their perspective and explore whether they feel they are prepared as graduates to tackle today's legal work and what they feel employers are looking for in them.

## 1. WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

**Our employers were not looking for High Distinctions but rather wanted a broad knowledge, cultural fit and a demonstrated passion outside of the area of law.**

The graduates have certainly seen this shift in the recruitment process. As little as three years ago, employers were looking for top-tier graduates with high marks, but recent interviews have all focused on cultural fit and getting a sense of the whole person.

The participants were all surprised that their degree marks made no difference, and in our roundtable of seven graduates, discussion of their degree results had not come up, even once, in any interview. As one participant explained:

*“My interviews were unnerving, as it was purely based on interpersonal skills and cultural fit, there were no questions about my law degree. I thought I had done badly as I hadn’t displayed my legal knowledge, but I think they assumed if you have the marks you are competent and they are more interested in getting to know you. They ask what you do at weekends, what are your hobbies? It’s not something you can prepare for.”*

Another added:

*“Ten years ago, questions used to be about experience, which is very difficult to demonstrate straight out of University but now it’s completely changed. It is all about you as a person. Firms and companies are interested in what you are enthusiastic about. It’s about seeing whether you can become enthusiastic and dedicated to a range of things, that you get excited about new and different things”.*

One of the participants shared that they now instruct their HR department not to cull anyone if they didn’t receive a High Distinction average. Practising lawyers want to meet everyone and make the hiring decision based on a whole view of the person as there may have been reasons they could not achieve top marks but are the best person for the role.

And what are the graduates looking for? Unanimously they are looking for firms that are adaptive to and interested in change.

## 2. THE DOUBLE DEGREE QUESTION

**Both our employers and graduates agree that having experience outside of law and showcasing extra knowledge that you can bring to the firm is equally as important as the degree.**

However, while employers felt that double degrees were not necessary and simply showing a passion for additional fields outside of law was enough, most students want to demonstrate diversity through double – and in some cases triple – degrees, often adding an extra year or two to their studies.

While the traditional Arts/Law degree still has currency in some Universities, the new degree that graduates feel is in most demand is Law/Technology.

The double/triple degree pressure is being driven by a new perception of the role a lawyer plays, particularly in-house.

An in-house participant explained:

*“A single degree is not competitive. To provide value and good service you need to do more than offer your legal opinion. Depending on what team you work in, you can offer alternate marketing strategies, ways to maximise outputs from a contract, ideas to fix broken processes, or create automation. It’s important to break the mould of being a cost centre and becoming a valued stakeholder in the business”.*

## 3. HOW TECHNOLOGY SAVVY DO DIGITAL AGE LAWYERS REALLY NEED TO BE?

**Employers wanted students to focus on their degree and academic learning first then look at additional training through their employers.** While all of the graduates enjoy learning about software and technology through their employers, they all feel they would have benefited more from having learned that at university with one participant describing legal tech services as “life changing”.

*“Software can take months to learn on the job and often you don’t have that time. We should already know efficiency and practice management. If we had exposure to these systems, it would mean we would be much better prepared to start working”.*

*“Just knowing there is technology available to fix a problem can be enough and we have no idea it exists until we start work. I think a lot of Universities just aren’t aware as the academics and lecturers don’t need to use these products in their every day, so if we had the options to do work experience or work closer with technology companies it would be a great benefit”.*



# THE HYBRID LAWYER OR DEDICATED SUPPORT?

Graduates are very aware of the crossroads that many firms and companies are at in deciding whether they hire someone specific to work for the legal team on automation and innovation projects or whether they start to train their lawyers in that way. Should they only hire lawyers with a lot of experience in legal technology or employ specific process managers or change agents to support the legal team?

And the graduates are certainly up for the challenge of a hybrid role, or to be more involved in creating the right solution.

*“University gives you eight weeks to do something, work is like ‘I need it tomorrow’. You need to be able to fix a problem yourself, you need to know how to deal with spanners in the works immediately or curveballs that come your way and not have to rely on the IT department or waste time”.*

And additionally:

*“It might not be that you are able to necessarily solve the tech problem but you should be able to identify that there is an issue and understand there is a way that this could be improved, even if you don’t know exactly how to execute it. That gives you the ability to partner with the tech people and work out a solution that benefits everyone”.*

In terms of how the role of the lawyer will change, there has been widespread industry discussion about lawyers learning to code and understand new tools like electronic contracts, however graduates are taking this one step further and feeling under pressure to bring something additional to the table whether through a double degree, or harnessing learnings from part-time work to add value, both in the role and at the recruitment stage.

*“While my company was primarily looking for cultural fit, I know now that customer experience was next on their list. As lawyers we need to know how to communicate. Interpersonal skills are so important. We need to know what’s misleading for the customer, what’s not. If we are working in a particular industry, how do our customers use our product? If we work in a tech industry, do we know how to use that tech ourselves?”*

The graduates all felt the need to create a hybrid or ‘lawyer-plus’ role for themselves.

## ITS NO LONGER JUST ABOUT THE LAW

The group agreed that the role of the lawyer as a stand-alone role will not exist in the future. They see their future in various roles of ‘lawyer-plus’ such as lawyer and data analysis specialist, lawyer and project manager, lawyer and people manager, even lawyer and marketer or lawyer and sales specialist to show real value.

As one explained:

*“If a lawyer at a company just gives their legal opinion, they’re not a good lawyer. You need to add commercial drivers to your legal opinion and offer a better solution that the business has”.*

This was felt by both in-house graduates and those in firms regarding their clients.

This is partly driven by a need to show value, moving away from a cost centre position, and partly by a lack of interest in the traditional legal career progression models such as working up to partnership. The graduates felt that a tenure of three to five years is now the most common in the industry and were attracted largely to non-traditional moves such as into business roles rather than stay primarily in the legal sector.

One participant commented:

*“You don’t have to work in straight law. You can pick your passion and be a lawyer in the industry you’re passionate about. Whether its banking and finance, real estate, sports, media, you can have a say in that industry and shape that industry if you want to be that involved”.*



## HAS ACADEMIA DROPPED THE BALL?

**Apart from one student who is in a very innovative university, the graduates felt that academia had not prepared them well for work with its focus on developing analytical thinking rather than on practical skills, and long deadlines and work presentation methods not resembling the workplace.**

While some find the traditional curriculum helpful, especially in new age industries where you need to go back to basics to understand how the law applies to it because the law isn't there yet, many felt that it was the traditional compulsory subjects that most required practical and technological intervention as that is where everyone is going to be exposed to it.

"While a law apps subject is great it may only be chosen by 30 students. So, to get technology taught across the board, you need to have a small practical element in compulsory subjects whether its having to present some data in your legal research essay or use some innovation or technology focus in presentations. Encouraging the use of team work through tech platforms. It needs to be built into assessments because that's when people will really apply it and care about it."

Certain universities in NSW have practical applications infused into all subjects with realistic timeframes that mirror real life. However, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

"University was very theoretical and I developed my legal thinking capabilities but not any practical skills. While my firm didn't expect me to have the practical skills, I think it would be great if some element was incorporated while studying. Even a section at the end of each subject, like some practical kind of skill or assessment or something that would prepare you little bit more and help you understand what you're in for when you leave, and actually help you decide what you want to practice".

One participant suggested building practical elements into traditional subjects:

"Whether it's facilitating the presentation of data in your legal research essay and you can be marked on how you present the data, or there is a presentation requirement that needs some sort of innovation or technology focus. For example, one University took a boring subject like constitutional law and one of the group assignments was to create a podcast and interview each other making the subject interactive. Part of the criteria was to see how interesting you could make constitutional law!"

Another participant noted a lecturer who would only spend the first 20 minutes talking about theory, and the rest of the class about the application of the theory when working in law firms and referring to particular cases.

"Now that I've started working I was so grateful as in my first week on the clerkship, I understood what my partner was talking about. It was really helpful."

It was felt by the majority of participants that the most valuable person in the university is still the law librarian because they know the technology and they know how to do everything. One participant noted that the legal services technology they have started using at their firm would have been 'life-changing' to know while studying.

"If I knew this existed back then, my life would be changed and I feel if we could start the process of learning these products earlier, not being a specialist of course, but just having exposure early to what is out there, we would be so much more prepared to start work."

However, another participant felt the focus on theoretical learning gives graduates the right tools in the digital legal age where lawyers are dealing with the unknown.

"I found the traditional learning really helpful, especially in the new age industries, especially being in technology. Because, when you're dealing with these new concepts, there is no law for them yet. You need to go back to your basics to understand how the law applies to it, because the law isn't there yet. So, it's really interesting, when looking at new technologies like Blockchain and you have to go back to those very basic fundamental pieces and apply it".

There was a general agreement that there needs to be a balance between what the workplace might teach better and what the university might teach better. Although workplaces are keen to teach their graduates with their own products and services, not all graduates will go to a law firm and receive this additional teaching.

## SO WHERE TO FROM HERE?

It seems that both employers and graduates have changed their perception of tomorrow's and indeed today's lawyer and are changing the way they work and train on-the-job around that. However, it seems that the education system isn't changing and with few exceptions, is sticking to its traditions. This is doing graduates a dis-service who feel they can't hit the ground running and have so much more to learn when they secure a job.

It does not require a multi-million-dollar investment, but perhaps academia can begin to work together with employers to ensure they are helping to create work-ready lawyers

### THE TECHNOLOGY GAP

Both the employers and graduates agree strongly that there is a technology gap as graduates enter the workforce. While employers are happy to train graduates themselves, graduates feel they could begin work better and even study better with more access to practice legal focused technology.

This is where technology providers can help bridge that gap between academia and the workplace by working closely with Universities and businesses to provide access and training to technology suitable for students and entry-level graduates.

Participants suggested law societies could host a technology skills day aimed at students, not as part of the degree, but to give students easy access to training.

### SOFT SKILLS VS TECHNOLOGY

Employers felt strongly that soft skills such as interpersonal skills and communication should not fall a victim to technology. The graduates seem very aware that soft skills are a key element in their success and are focused on how they communicate with their stakeholders using all the tools at their disposal.

### THE BUSINESS GAP

Graduates generally felt quite unprepared for the tight timeframes and differences in the 'real world' environment compared to academia. A close collaboration of academia and business to develop work experience and internship opportunities seems like a solution to this issue.

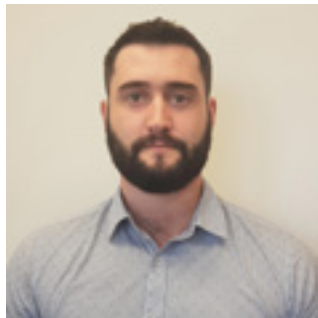


# FROM GRADUATES TO STUDENTS: SOME SAGE ADVICE



## SUNIL

Find a passion, figure out what you like to do, what you're interested in and make that your starting point for your legal career. It doesn't need to be within the law, it can be anything you want, and if you're passionate about it, you can make your career go in that direction. For example, if you're passionate about sports, talk about sports in your interview. Do things in the industry, and then find a job in law that allows you to work in sports.



## MARK

Take time off and go get real world experience before you jump straight into a job. Because it's going to help you in the long run with client relations if you're more personable, if you can chat with people, instead of just being a source of advice, advice, advice. Client relations is 50 to 60% of your job. Everyone can give advice, but whether or not the client wants to come and talk to you for advice is a different story.



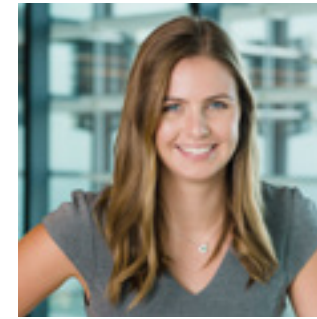
## ALEX

Do your research and don't just focus on a strictly legal industry. Do your research on a broad range of industries and get some real world experience. I think that that's invaluable to take to the workforce. I'd also say try to broaden your horizons beyond the traditional legal path and don't feel that you need to fit a certain mould because that's just not really what it's about these days.



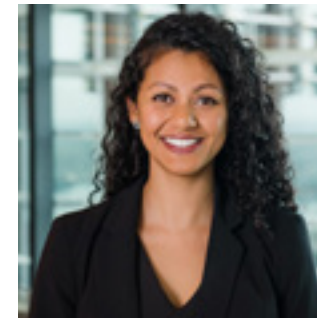
## MARIJA

Remember to build the sub-skills like networking because while we are busy for five or six years of studying plus extra-curriculars we will need the professional and support network from day one. If you know the right people you engage in different conversations that challenge your thinking and that build you professionally and personally. And because in our profession we have a lot of challenges like the glass ceiling, gender, sexual diversity, and mental health to worry about, you have to remember to look after yourself as well and build that support network around you.



## HANNAH

Engage with the industry early. Not in the sense of a paid placement or an internship but reading news articles and joining the young lawyer's society committees. At those meetings you have the opportunity to chat to young lawyers about current challenges they are facing at this stage of their career. Everyone at those events is so enthusiastic to talk to you about what's going on in the industry.



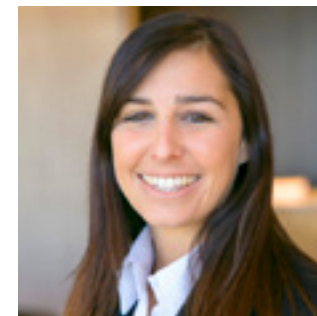
## NATALIE

Be open to seeking work experience independently and much earlier than your fourth year. Don't just focus on your assignments. And be open to everything out there, not just working in one area of law. You don't really know a job or sector in detail until you start working so have an open mindset and know you will learn a lot on the job



## ANNA

Put your hand up and say yes to opportunities, especially at the start. Whether it's the start of a job or of a degree, you can always pare things back if you end up with too much on your plate. But if you don't give that new thing a go, you'll never know if it's just what you're after. It might be the thing that most challenges and rewards you, or that makes you most excited about your day. So I'd be open to trying anything and everything out. You never know what you might discover...



## SIAN

I would say don't just aim for your clerkship, consider doing internships in different industries because it will definitely help to give you exposure to a range of industries and you might find something you really like or find something you don't like. And that work experience is invaluable to help you know what steps you want to take after graduation.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ The interview process has shifted to a more holistic one with a key focus on cultural fit.
- ✓ Multiple degrees and practical experience outside law are key differentiators, especially in-house as lawyers are increasingly expected to be a 'lawyer-plus' and contribute value to the business in ways beyond traditional legal advice.
- ✓ Graduates feel they would have benefited from more practical training before entering the workforce to have a better understanding of technology available and the day-to-day of practical legal work.
- ✓ Stronger partnerships between education providers, employers and tech providers are key to better preparing graduates for the new legal landscape.



## ABOUT INFOTRACK

InfoTrack is an award-winning Australian technology company that is helping legal professionals move into the digital age. We create intuitive tools for both professionals and consumers that enable you to find, analyse, organise and communicate information more efficiently and effectively. We build simple technology that makes your life easier.

If you have any comments or would like to be involved in a future round table, please get in touch.

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