



# CompassPoint Careers

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*Navigate Your Future*

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

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**Law**

## The Numbers You Need to Know

**19,000+**

Students enrolled in Law degrees UK  
*HESA 2024/25*

**£26,000**

Average graduate starting salary, law sector  
*Graduate-Jobs.com, Apr 2026*

**78%**

In relevant employment within 15 months  
*HESA Graduate Outcomes 2022/23*

**~6,000**

Training contract places available annually UK  
*The Law Society, 2025*

**£50,000+**

Newly qualified solicitor salary, City/Magic Circle  
*Legal Cheek, 2025*

**100:1**

Applicants per training contract at top firms  
*RollOnFriday, 2025*

## The Honest Market Picture

*What your university careers service probably did not tell you*

Law is one of the most competitive graduate professions in the UK. There are roughly 19,000 law students graduating each year and approximately 6,000 training contract places available. That means two thirds of law graduates do not secure a training contract in any given year. The route to qualification is long — a training contract alone takes two years after completing the LPC or SQE — and the financial cost of the postgraduate stage is significant. None of this should discourage you, but it should make you strategic.

The good news is that the legal market is wide. Magic Circle and US firms offer exceptional salaries but fierce competition. Regional and national firms hire at volume, offer quality work and often fund the SQE. The Bar remains a separate, highly competitive route requiring pupillage. In-house legal roles at large companies are growing. Many candidates who do not secure training contracts at top firms find excellent careers at mid-tier firms, local authorities, the NHS or in-house — and progress faster than they would have at a Magic Circle firm.

## Employment Outlook 2025 to 2029

- The Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) replaced the LPC as the standard qualification route from 2021. Most firms now fund SQE preparation rather than the LPC. Check each firm's funding policy before committing to a course.
- US law firms in London continue to expand aggressively. Kirkland and Ellis, Latham and Watkins, and Paul Weiss now offer NQ salaries exceeding £170,000. Competition for training contracts is extreme but the rewards are transformational.
- In-house legal departments are growing across all sectors, particularly in tech, financial services and healthcare. These roles often offer better work-life balance than private practice at comparable or better salaries.
- Legal technology is reshaping junior associate work. AI tools are automating document review and due diligence tasks. Graduates who understand how these tools work will be significantly more valuable.
- Pro bono and legal clinic experience is now expected on CVs for top-firm applications. The Chancery Lane Project, LawWorks and university legal clinics are all accessible routes.
- The Bar Council reports pupillage numbers have increased slightly, but competition remains intense. Around 460 pupillages are offered annually against thousands of applications.

*Sources: HESA Graduate Outcomes 2022/23; The Law Society Annual Statistics Report 2025; Legal Cheek Firms Most List 2025; Bar Council Pupillage Statistics 2024; Graduate-Jobs.com Apr 2026; RollOnFriday 2025*

## What Employers Actually Want in 2026

Skill	Why it matters	How to demonstrate it
Legal research and analysis	The core of every practice area — employers test this directly	Mooting; dissertation; vacation scheme work; legal clinic volunteering
Commercial awareness	City and regional firms expect candidates to understand their clients' businesses	Read the FT and Legal Week; reference real deals and cases in applications
Written communication	Drafting is fundamental to legal practice at every level	Strong academics; published articles; law society newsletter; pro bono work
Attention to detail	Errors in legal documents carry serious consequences; partners look for this	Cite examples of high-stakes accuracy from work experience or academia
Networking and client skills	Law is a relationship business; firms assess interpersonal ability from day one	Vacation schemes; law fairs; mentor relationships; open days at chambers
Resilience and commitment	The training route is long. Firms want evidence you understand what you're signing up for	Demonstrate sustained commitment over years, not a last-minute conversion to law

## Top Graduate Employers and Schemes

Magic Circle	Silver Circle and US	Regional and National	Bar and Chambers
Linklaters, Clifford Chance Freshfields, Allen and Overy Slaughter and May	Herbert Smith Freehills Hogan Lovells, Ashurst Latham and Watkins Kirkland and Ellis	Eversheds Sutherland DLA Piper, Pinsent Masons Irwin Mitchell, CMS Shoosmiths	Inner/Middle Temple Gray's Inn, Lincoln's Inn Crown Prosecution Service Government Legal Dept

## The Mistake Most Law Graduates Make

The most common mistake is applying to training contracts without any substantive legal work experience. Vacation schemes are not a nice-to-have — at Magic Circle and Silver Circle firms they are the primary hiring route. Most training contract offers go to vacation scheme candidates first. If you are in first or second year and have not applied for a vacation scheme, treat this as the most urgent action on your list.

The second mistake is writing generic cover letters. Law firms receive thousands of applications and partners read cover letters carefully. A letter that could have been sent to any firm will be rejected. You must demonstrate that you understand the firm's practice areas, client base and market position — and explain specifically why that firm, not just why law. This requires genuine research, not a paragraph copied from the firm's website.

## How to Stand Out in 2026

- Apply for first-year insight schemes and open days in October. These are the entry point to vacation schemes, which are the entry point to training contracts.
- Complete a vacation scheme before applying for a training contract at any City or regional firm. Direct training contract applications without one are at a significant disadvantage.
- Get pro bono experience. University legal clinics, LawWorks and the Free Representation Unit all provide real casework experience that sets you apart from candidates with only academic credentials.
- Know the SQE inside out before any interview. Understand the two stages, the costs involved and how your target firm funds and structures preparation.
- Build a network before you need it. Law Society events, firm open days and LinkedIn connections with associates and trainees all open doors that applications alone do not.
- If you do not secure a training contract immediately, consider a paralegal role at a firm you want to train at. Many firms convert strong paralegals directly.

## Application Timeline: When to Apply

<b>Year 1 — October</b>	First-year insight schemes and open days open at major firms. Apply immediately — these feed directly into vacation scheme invitations.
<b>Year 1 — November to January</b>	First-year insight scheme assessment days take place. Vacation scheme applications for penultimate-year students also open at many firms from November.
<b>Year 2 — October to January</b>	Main vacation scheme application window. Most Magic Circle and Silver Circle deadlines fall before Christmas. Apply as early as possible.
<b>Year 2 — March to July</b>	Vacation schemes take place. Training contract offers are typically made at the end of the scheme or shortly after.
<b>Final Year</b>	Direct training contract applications open for those without a vacation scheme offer. Regional and national firms also run rolling applications year-round.

CompassPoint Careers gives Law graduates the CV, LinkedIn profile and interview preparation to compete at the highest level. Book a free 15-minute discovery call.

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