

How to deal with an emotionally charged seat



As part of every training contract, a trainee solicitor must gain experience in a contentious area of law. Contentious legal work relates to an adversarial process, where there is a dispute between at least two parties and includes areas of law such as family, employment, commercial dispute resolution, property dispute resolution and specialist dispute resolution.

Currently, I am in the final month of my contentious seat in the family team at Cripps. When I tell people that I am currently in the family law team, they inevitably ask *'How can you deal with all that emotion? Isn't it just people arguing all the time?'*

With our new intake of trainees about to start their first seats, I thought I would speak to my fellow second year trainees and ask them what advice they would give to a trainee heading into a contentious seat.

This is what they said:

Frederick Pawlik – *'Avoid getting emotionally attached to the potential outcome, your client needs to understand (as much as you do) that they may not get the result you/they want.'*

Sandy Hills – *'I found the best way to deal with the emotion is to keep it church and state (especially when working from home) and try to see it from the client's side – they might be going through a really hard time after all. My top tip for contentious seats is your diary should be your best friend. Be sure to diarise every date and/or deadline from the court, the other side and client (along with your self-imposed ones of course).'*

Rachel Phillips – *'I'm currently in Employment, and I've enjoyed having a mix of both contentious and non-contentious work. It's a healthy balance between the two and means you aren't always working under the*



pressure of deadlines! Where cases are at tribunal, I think it's useful where possible to be organised and draft things well in advance so as not to stress yourself out getting close to deadlines. It's also useful to brush up on knowledge of the tribunal/court procedure to enhance your practical knowledge and know the route the case is going down. Employment issues can be emotionally charged, and it's important to keep in mind sensitive and personal considerations clients may have.'

And for my tip – *'It can be incredibly heart wrenching to see clients break down into tears or to see the pain on their face when they tell you about what they are going through. You need to build up an emotional resilience and this only comes with time. I have found speaking to the fee-earner with conduct of the case after the meeting or telephone call with the client helps me deal with any feelings I may have at that stage and allows me to move on to tackling the job in hand'.*

Whilst a contentious seat can be time pressured and emotionally challenging, they are usually the most factually interesting and rewarding seat a trainee solicitor can experience. For me, my contentious seat has enabled me to develop my communication and time management skills, and become more appreciative of the impact of our work on a client's outcome. Though I may be qualifying into a non-contentious area of law, the skills I have honed in my contentious seat will undeniably help me be a better lawyer.



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