



What are Vacation Schemes?

For any budding commercial lawyer, vacation schemes are likely to be the final steppingstone before you obtain the holy grail that is a training contract.

Today, we will cover:

- The application Process
- What to expect at the scheme?
- How to tackle the scheme?

The application process for vacation schemes varies from firm to firm, but it is worth looking at the process quite generally and perhaps talk about some pointers which are a bit more specific to vacation scheme applications.

The Application Process

There are broadly 3 stages for vacation scheme applications. Guidance for the application process can be found in BSC's other content and from our mentors, but the following is an outline.

The first stage is the online application form. This form itself is often very different from firm to firm but there are some common features. The standard ones are talking about work experience and then grades. These two aspects are not something specific to the vac scheme process so I will not go into detail here, but I will talk about the sort of "essay" questions most firms include in their application form.

These questions again vary, but firms often want to find out your firstly, your motivation for a career in commercial law. Secondly, they want to find out what soft skills you have. Thirdly, they want to know that you are commercially aware. I have not outlined these demands in any particular order as you need to be able to show all of these things throughout the application form, and in fact the whole process.

The second stage of the application process is likely to be an online test such as the Watson Glaser Test and, in some cases, it is a blended assessment which would include situational judgement questions. Tests like the Watson Glaser primarily just require practice, and this can be found online.

The third stage is the assessment centre or interview is something that we tackle in much greater depth in our firm specific as well as general assessment centre advice. For now it is important to know that most firms conduct two interviews. One will be a competency type interview, requiring you to explain motivation and demonstrate what skills you will bring to the firm. The other will likely be a case study interview.

What to expect at the scheme?

Vacation schemes vary in length but most last one or two weeks with some firms offering longer schemes. These schemes are essentially law internships where you will sit one or two departments in the firm but the notable difference being that you are being assessed throughout the scheme. The department you sit in is where you will spend the majority of your time. You will meet others in the department, do real work that trainees would generally be involved in and will be assessed by your trainer (essentially the main person who you sit with) throughout.

Further to your seat, you will have talks and social events throughout the scheme. These talks may be about unique aspects of the firm but will also be about things like diversity, technology in the legal sector and other current issues. Lastly you will also have some skills sessions which can be on a variety of things. Some firms offer sessions on personal brand building, others on presentation skills and these sorts of activities are with your vacation scheme peers in teams. Another trend in vacation schemes is that you will have a group task to work on throughout the scheme – likely in the form of a presentation.

How to tackle the scheme?

When it comes to dos and don'ts on a vacation scheme, you must think about what the vacation scheme can do for you. The vacation scheme is an opportunity to see the place where you could be working (very hard and for long hours). To find out whether a firm is the place for you, you need to engage fully with the scheme. This will not only benefit you in your decision-making process but will also come across very positively to graduate recruitment who will be making the decision whether to offer you a training contract.

Be proactive. Show your hunger to learn about the firm, about the work, and for success. Do this by looking for work, getting in touch with various departments at the firm (not just the one you've been assigned to).

Do more than the bare minimum. Whether it be a group task, or an individual task commit to it fully, and show your enthusiasm for the work.

Ask questions. Throughout the scheme there will be numerous times where you can ask questions to grow your understanding. Capitalise on this not only to improve your own knowledge, but also demonstrate genuine interest in the firm/work.

Listen and learn. Though talking and being outgoing can help show interest, remember that you are surrounded by experts in the field that you want to break into. Demonstrate that you are engaging with the experts at the firm, as well as learning from your peers.

Be punctual. This goes without saying but we're going to say it once more – do not be late.

An example that helps demonstrate some of the essential characteristics that firms look for:

Imagine a trainee in your department has given you work which you completed in a couple of hours and the trainee hasn't come back to check on you and you have run out of work. Go and find the trainee to let them know you are done and ask whether you can have feedback at a time that you are available. If they are busy at the time, put the work to the side and ask your trainer. But what if your trainer is also busy or does not have any work for you. Find someone else in your department, ask them for work or perhaps just see if you can have a chat with them until your trainer is less busy and can give you some work.