

# Recruitment in the Corporate Legal Industry Panel Discussion

**Abstract:** Recruitment within the legal information sector has been challenging in recent years, in both the UK and the US, with a market that has been heavily skewed in favour of applicants. Which is why the City Legal Information Group (CLIG) hosted a virtual conference in late February to look at the current state of the recruitment market, the best ways to hire the very best people, and also the methods individuals might employ to find work in the sector themselves. Here **Caroline Asbjornsen**, a researcher at Watson Farley & Williams LLP and a member of the CLIG committee, talks us through what turned out to be a fascinating discussion.

**Keywords:** information professionals; law librarians; law firms; recruitment; interviews; hybrid working; City Legal Information Group

## INTRODUCTION

The City Legal Information Group (CLIG) panel discussion, Recruitment in the Corporate Legal Industry, took place on 28 February 2023, and it was hosted on Zoom. The panel consisted of three experienced professionals covering both the UK and US corporate legal information sectors. The talk was chaired by CLIG Chair Jordan Murphy, Knowledge and Information Specialist at Penningtons Manches Cooper, with CLIG Membership Secretary Philip Cable as Co-Chair. The scope of the talk was broad and its aim was to cover the current state of the recruitment market, what managers hiring for their teams need to think about, as well as giving tips for individuals looking to find a job in the sector, or thinking about their next career move. Attendees were encouraged to submit questions in the Zoom chat throughout.

## CURRENT MARKET

Simon Burton is Director of CB Resourcing, a specialist recruiter in the information sector, and he was invited to give his expert insight into what the market is like for candidates and law firms at this time. His opinion is that candidates currently wield the power, in that there are more jobs than candidates. This situation was most notable last year, when everything had reopened after the pandemic, and CB Resourcing were busy and hired for a great deal of firms during 2022, Simon said. He also noted that we are still currently on that wave, but now getting towards the end of it. It is therefore expected that the market will slow down and stabilise a bit more in the coming year.

One outcome of it being a candidate's market is that salary levels have gone up. Simon said he was delighted to see this, as he noted that salary levels in the industry have been static for more than 10 years.

John DiGilio, Firmwide Director of Library Services at Sidley Austin LLP, based in Los Angeles, supplied a US perspective. He confirmed that the market in the US is similar and that his experience is that finding the right candidate can be tricky. He listed several challenges he was dealing with as a hiring manager, these being: recruitment agencies in the US have fled the legal industry, the workforce is ageing, and graduates are not coming into the legal industry in the same numbers as before.

John proceeded to dive into the graduate issue, specifically, and his view was that it is due to a combination of a lack of opportunities and awareness. Law firms are not hiring at entry level as they do not see themselves as having the capacity to bring graduates up to speed. John's experience is that information and library courses are not focusing on law librarianship, dedicated subjects on this are disappearing, and in general the opportunities in the legal industry are not expanded on by lecturers. This is resulting in graduates not being aware of this career path.

Simon backed this up, saying that the situation in the UK is similar to what John described for the US, when it comes to getting graduates into law firms. He added that CB Resourcing always make an effort to speak at information and library graduate events, and courses, about the opportunities in the sector. A participant in the chat raised the point that CILIP is bringing in an apprenticeship route to the profession and that this might bring in more candidates, however the panellists were not able to shed further light on this specifically (LIM will be focusing on this in future editions – Ed).

Jas Breslin, Research and Information Services Manager at Charles Russell Speechlys LLP, and *Legal Information Management* journal co-editor, was speaking as an experienced hiring manager in the UK market on what she found had been the biggest change post lockdown. She said this was undoubtedly flexible working,

and more specifically hybrid working. Candidates are now a lot more confident in asking for such arrangements and have expectations that flexible or hybrid working will be part of the package.

Simon added to the above by saying that CB Resourcing has seen firms with several offices across the UK in the past year giving candidates the option to have any office as their base, whereas previously this tended to be specified by the employer. This shift has also, in turn, driven up the salaries for jobs based outside London.

On the other hand, John has seen examples in the US of people who are willing to go down in salary in exchange for more flexibility. This is something that was not even thought of as an option in the pre-lockdown world.

## THE ROLE OF THE HIRING MANAGER

Following the discussion on the current market, Jordan moved to the next topic which was the role of managers of legal information and library teams, and followed this up with a timeline of a typical hiring process. She emphasised that, in practice, this is all about building a foundation for processes before recruitment even begins, in terms of developing a relationship with HR and other departments within your organisation, and keeping aware of market conditions.

Jas was the first speaker on this topic, and she started by saying that from her point of view hiring managers should have their eye on the market at all the times by keeping up with vacant roles to see who is recruiting where, for what roles, by reading the job adverts. Jas also talked about the strong relationship she has with her firm's HR team and how valuable this is. Amongst other things it gives the opportunity to talk to HR about recruitment for the firm regularly, and this can help set the right expectations.

John echoed all of this, and said he too reads all job descriptions for current vacancies to keep up with what skills are in demand and how competitors describe their roles. John shared that he also regularly reaches out to managers he knows in other firms to share experiences and learn from them.

When asked, Simon said the best advice he could give to hiring managers in order to be prepared for recruitment, even when it is not on the table, was networking. He said that to engage in CLIG, BIALL, CLSIG and other industry groups, taking part in events and being visible, is invaluable as a way of drawing in candidates. The other panellists were very much in agreement with this.

## THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The chair then moved on to ask about the start of the recruitment process itself. Jas said that, in general, you

could find yourself in one of two scenarios. The first being that you want to replace a team member who has moved on, while the second is setting up a whole new role in the team. Regarding the former, Jas encouraged exploring other options apart from replacing like for like; thinking carefully about whether the gap can be filled in another way. This could be either through promotion within the team or rethinking and reorganising tasks and processes. For example, you might find you already have the resources you need with the team, or within another part of the organisation.

If you are hiring for a whole new role, then this requires a business justification. Jas found that having statistics at your fingertips is key for this. For example, data on the number of queries the team is dealing with.

John added that while statistics on the number of queries is important, the time spent on them is essential, as this might have increased even if the number of enquiries has not, and this can be a strong argument to present.

Jas agreed, and re-emphasised the importance of having a strong relationship with HR, and how this makes it much easier to get approval for new roles and budgetary approval.

After the new role or the recruitment has been approved by the business, the next step is outlining the job description. All panellists agreed that the wording needs to be carefully considered. Jas mentioned that if HR have a job description for that role in the system already, you should always review it to check to see if it should be updated before putting it out on the market as it's likely it will need some tweaks.

A job description has to be interesting and enticing to candidates who are reading a number of them, and in addition John pointed out that candidates want to know about things like how the team is structured and where the role fits in the firm. Jas and John both agreed that just supplying a list of tasks is simply not enough, it also needs to be an honest description of the role.

Later on in the talk, Simon brought up a common pitfall for hiring managers, especially in the current market. A firm can easily lose a candidate's interest and excitement for a role if the process is longwinded and they are left waiting for feedback. The solution here is not to rush internal processes if that is outside your power, but set clear expectations and communicate well. Candidates are more likely to wait and stay engaged if they are told how many stages there are to the recruitment process and are given a clear timeline of when to expect feedback. Simon noted that response periods always feel longer for a candidate and honest communication should be a straightforward way to give a good impression of the firm.

## ONLINE INTERVIEWS

The Zoom chat box for questions was continually active during the talk and there were a couple of topics that

arose from this. The first was online interviews. Attendees asked whether firms were keeping online interviews, which became the standard during lockdown, or were returning to the in-person setting. The consensus among panellists and participants in the chat seemed to be that online interviews will not disappear. It is now quite common for first stage interviews to be held online while more firms now either prefer or insist that the second stage takes place in person.

John noted that you get a different impression of a person by being in the room with them as opposed to seeing them on screen, and therefore interviewing in-person certainly has value. At the same time, he spoke about the benefits of the first stage being online. One plus point for this he highlighted was that you can reach candidates who would not have found it worthwhile or practical to travel out for the interview. However, when they have had that initial online interview they might either consider relocating for the job, or at least become interested enough to travel to the second stage interview.

The second benefit of interviewing online is that it has made it easier to involve more internal people in the interview process – for example, those that are located in different offices. You then get the advantage of several people in the firm being able to evaluate the candidate and offer their view. Simon commented that this is an advantage from the candidate's point of view as well, as they get a more rounded view of the firm and feel that care is being put into the process of hiring them when several people are involved with it.

However, John also expressed a negative point that has arisen from online interviews. He has experienced situations in which a candidate has become too comfortable interviewing from their own home, and so they do not approach these interviews with the same respect and professionalism as they most likely would for in-person interviews.

For interviews in general, there was also a question raised from the chat of the practice of providing interview questions in advance for people who suffer with anxiety. Simon answered this, saying that more firms now take things like neurodivergence and anxiety into consideration when setting up interviews. There is more understanding and willingness to enable people do their best at an interview, he added, and for some this involves being able to think about the questions in advance, rather than speaking on the spot.

## COVER LETTERS

The other main topic that emerged from the chat was that of cover letters. A participant wanted to know if other hiring managers required or expected cover letters from candidates. This got several responses, mostly from participants saying that they really did appreciate cover letters. When this question was posed to the panellists, John said he too values receiving cover letters with an

application, the reason being it shows that the candidate has put in the extra work. For him, a cover letter can reveal how the candidate has read and interpreted the job description and give more insight into them than a CV is able to.

Simon, on the other hand, cautioned firms on having cover letters as a requirement. Especially in a market where candidates are in a strong position, as this might lead to the firm losing out because its competitors will not require them. A strong candidate with several options will most likely not spend their time on fine-tuning cover letters for five different, but similar, positions, when their CV alone is fast tracking them to interviews. He did add, though, that from a candidate's point of view if you want to write a cover letter it can only be to your advantage, and it is a good way to illustrate your interest in, and dedication to, a role.

## CANDIDATES AND SKILLS

Up until this point it had already been well established in the discussion that we are in a candidate's market. But this certainly does not mean that less is expected from applicants, and all the panellists agreed that even when the talent pool is small, firms will wait for as long as it takes for the right candidate to come along before they hire. It is, therefore, essential that candidates read and understand the job description thoroughly, and that they put in the time and effort to research the firm. As Jas pointed out, the role you are applying for will most likely include research, so this will be expected of you from the very start. Being properly prepared and keeping a professional attitude in interviews, whether these are online or in-person, is also essential.

Jordan invited the panellists to speak about what skills are currently in demand in the sector, this subject being both on the agenda while there were also questions about it in the chat. Simon referred to a skills report CB Resourcing conducted in collaboration with BIALL in 2018, and provided the link to where they still keep this on their website.<sup>1</sup> He also confirmed that CB Resourcing stays up to date on these developments today, and that things have changed since 2018.

It was also mentioned that in a disrupted market the core skills of legal research and general information management become key, and they are certainly as relevant as ever. Increasingly, as well, firms are looking for candidates who are digitally literate and capable of adapting to new databases quickly. Candidates who are good at learning new skills on the whole, and are willing to take on new tasks and projects, have a significant advantage.

Towards the very end of the talk the question of visa sponsorships came up. John and Simon were asked if they had seen examples of UK candidates being given work visas for the US. They both confirmed that this is rare, but they did know of instances where UK candidates were hired to cover US hours for US firms, while still working from the UK. John said US firms are now more

likely than before the pandemic to hire a candidate for a US role, but have them based in an overseas office, for example, in London. Simon added that CB Resourcing have experienced that visa sponsorships for the UK have increased.

## CONCLUSION

As a final remark, Jas reaffirmed the importance and value of networking, both for candidates and managers, as nothing beats having an awareness of what is going on in the sector as a whole. After all, you never know when your work situation might change.

In general, the talk highlighted where the market is at right now, at the beginning of 2023. Last year was a busy year for recruiters with more vacancies than candidates in the market, with this expected to even out soon as recruitment in general is slowing down. The expectations and opportunities around flexible, remote and hybrid

working are also in a unique state right now, as firms are starting to settle after the pandemic and the subsequent reopening of offices.

The different stages of the hiring process for hiring managers were discussed and panellists provided a great deal of insight – indeed, each topic had the potential to be the subject of a separate discussion in its own right.

Activity on the Zoom chat was high, and drew the discussion to focus on online interviews and cover letters, proving that these are topics that engage at the moment. It is clear that the time of online interviews being the only option has passed, but it has proven itself as having its advantages, especially in a working world now geared to more hybrid working. On the other hand, cover letters might soon be a thing of the past. Which just goes to show, both applicants and hiring managers need to keep on top of the changes in the recruitment world, and discussions like this go some way to make sure they are able to do so.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> CB Resourcing, 'Future Skill Requirements for Legal LIS Professionals 2018', <[www.cbresourcing.com/blog/view/34/future-skills-for-legal-lis-professionals.aspx](http://www.cbresourcing.com/blog/view/34/future-skills-for-legal-lis-professionals.aspx)> accessed 10 March 2023.

## Biography

**Caroline Asbjornsen** is a Researcher at Watson Farley & Williams. She has an MSc in Library and Information Studies from University of Strathclyde and prior to joining WFW in 2019 she spent one year at the European Medicines Agency and also a year at the Chartered Insurance Institute. Caroline has a BA and a MA in History from the University of Bergen, Norway.