

Inside legal practice

Illustrated employability guide | Foundations before advanced business development

Stop chasing clients. Become the lawyer they seek out.

As you graduate, you have learnt the law. Now build the commercial skills to earn your position.

Commercial readiness means understanding how the firm operates and helping it attract suitable clients, earn trust, deliver value and sustain relationships within professional duties. Students practise researching client needs, asking useful questions, explaining services, following up appropriately and showing commercial judgement. The foundations make these skills usable; business development and marketing remain central throughout.

This guide follows six connected foundations. The same fictional enquiry runs through the learning, so unfamiliar terms connect to practical decisions.

Firm	Duties	Money	Client	Service	Trust
------	--------	-------	--------	---------	-------

The final foundation connects responsible service to trust, business development and truthful employability evidence.

The client behind the client. Work often reaches a solicitor through someone else: the accountant, IFA, estate agent, borough solicitor or HR director who decides which solicitor the end client meets. Understanding what that referrer needs is part of commercial readiness.

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Rifat Sheikh co-founded a regulated London law firm and was its Head of Business Development & Marketing for 15 years. Over that period revenue grew 35%, client retention rose 40% and client satisfaction rose 30%. The programme draws on his work building referral relationships across the private, public and third sectors. He is also the founder of REACH LAW, AI governance infrastructure for UK regulated law firms.

Discrimination and unequal access can affect opportunities. Preparation and competence strengthen a candidate's position but do not guarantee recognition. Employers remain responsible for fair recruitment. The programme helps students understand options and demonstrate learning; it does not require prior law-firm experience or equate confidence with competence.

Educational material for England and Wales. The 40-minute introduction is a starting point; the full programme provides structured practice and feedback across the process. Neither attendance nor completion guarantees employment, professional competence or a legal outcome. The Future Lawyer is not SRA-accredited or endorsed and does not replace legal advice, qualification, firm procedures or professional supervision. Use fictional examples and describe them honestly as simulations.

! The lawyer's mindset

Why business development in law is different from selling in any other industry.

Other industries can chase customers freely. Solicitors work within strict rules that shape how lawyers win work.

Other industries can	Solicitors in England and Wales must	Source
Cold-call, door-knock or message potential customers	No unsolicited approaches to members of the public to advertise legal services, other than current or former clients	SRA Code of Conduct for Solicitors, paragraph 8.9
Promise results, guarantees or "best in London"	Publicity must be accurate and not misleading; outcomes can never be guaranteed	SRA Code, paragraph 8.8; SRA Principles 4 and 5
Pay commission to anyone who sends a customer	Referral arrangements and introducer interests must be disclosed to the client; referral fees are banned in personal injury	SRA Code, paragraphs 5.1 and 5.2; LASPO 2012, section 56
Publish client case studies and name customers	Clients' affairs stay confidential unless they consent	SRA Code, paragraph 6.3
Sell to anyone who is willing to pay	Check conflicts, identity and source of funds before acting, and decline where required	SRA Code 6.1, 6.2 and 8.1; Money Laundering Regs 2017
Keep prices private and negotiate each deal	Publish prices for specified services, such as residential conveyancing, probate and some immigration and employment work, plus the complaints procedure and the SRA digital badge	SRA Transparency Rules, in force since 6 December 2018
Reward staff on sales targets alone	The client's best interests and your independence come before any commercial target	SRA Principles 3 and 7
Let any trained employee advise customers	Reserved legal activities are limited to authorised persons, and juniors work under supervision	Legal Services Act 2007; SRA Code, paragraph 3.5

The Law Society represents solicitors and publishes practice notes and guidance. The SRA is the regulator: its Principles and Codes are the rules. Knowing the difference is part of commercial awareness.

RACK 'EM, STACK 'EM, PACK 'EM: THE VOLUME TRAP

Retail can pile it high and sell it cheap. Legal services that copy the model tend to push fee earners to process files rather than advise clients, depend on bought-in introductions and leave little room for supervision. The client becomes a unit, the referrer becomes a supplier and every relationship has to be rebuilt from scratch. That is the opposite of how trust, referrals and careers are built.

Build this	Not this
Relationship	Transaction
Specialist	Commodity
Adviser	Vendor
Long horizon	Monthly target
Earned trust	Bought-in leads

? Wisdom from outside the law

Ideas from outside the profession, applied to winning and keeping legal clients.

How experts win work without chasing it, and why people choose the adviser they trust, both point lawyers the same way: be sought out, not sold.

SPECIALISE

The first rule of winning work without chasing it is to specialise. Generalists compete on price; recognised specialists set their own terms.

For lawyers: A firm that does "all areas of law" is one of five names on a list. A solicitor known for one kind of problem is the first call.

REPLACE PRESENTATIONS WITH CONVERSATIONS

Experts win work through collaborative dialogue, not polished pitches.

For lawyers: Your first meeting with a referrer is a conversation about their clients, not a credentials presentation about your firm.

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU PRESCRIBE

An expert fully understands the problem before recommending a solution.

For lawyers: Establish the client, the legal issue and the objective before you quote, advise or promise anything. It is also what the SRA Code expects.

RETHINK WHAT IT MEANS TO SELL

Selling, done well, is inspiring, educating and reassuring, not persuading.

For lawyers: Lawyers cannot oversell anyway: publicity must be accurate and not misleading. Educating a referrer's clients is how you sell within the rules.

COSTLY SIGNALS

A signal is believed because it costs something to send, which is why a letter carries more weight than an email.

For lawyers: A free advice clinic every month, a personal call at the end of a matter or a handwritten thank-you tells a referrer more than any brochure.

REDUCE THE UNCERTAINTY

Making a journey faster is expensive; making the journey itself better is often cheaper and valued more. A progress bar does not speed a download; it makes the wait bearable.

For lawyers: A short update when nothing has changed does not move the matter on, but it removes the client's anxiety. Silence is what clients remember.

PEOPLE CHOOSE ON TRUST

People decide emotionally, then find reasons. Pure logic tends to lead every competitor to the same place.

For lawyers: Most clients cannot judge the quality of legal advice, even afterwards. They choose on trust, reputation and recommendation, so that is what you must earn.

EFFICIENCY IS NOT THE SAME AS EFFECTIVENESS

Replacing a receptionist with a kiosk saves money on paper but loses the welcome and the reassurance.

For lawyers: Automating every client contact, or handing it to AI, can cut cost and quietly destroy the relationship that brings the next instruction.

DO WHAT OTHERS ARE TOO RATIONAL TO DO

Look for what competitors are too rational to do, and do it.

For lawyers: Most firms close a file with an invoice. Calling the client personally to close the matter is rare, cheap and remembered.

1 Understand the firm

Before you can contribute, understand the workplace.

Enquiry

Checks

Agreed work

Delivery

Bill and payment

A law firm is an organisation delivering legal services. It has clients, costs, people and commercial pressures, alongside professional duties. Ordinary businesses also have legal obligations; regulated legal practice carries additional responsibilities.

IN PRACTICE

A new enquiry arrives while a trainee is busy. The receptionist records the caller's details and flags an urgent date. The trainee refers it to the appropriate supervisor. The finance team may later issue a bill. Each role matters; no single person should improvise the whole process.

Who should do what when an enquiry arrives, and who is responsible for supervising the work?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Draw an enquiry-to-payment map. Label reception or intake, supervisor, fee earner and finance. Mark where a junior must ask for help.

Employability evidence: An annotated map explaining roles and supervision.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Firms Code paragraphs 2.1 and 4.2 to 4.4: organisational systems, service, competence and supervision. Solicitors Code 3.5 addresses supervisory accountability.

You can: Ask how the firm works, clarify your role and raise uncertainty promptly.

You cannot: Assume your title or a completed workshop authorises you to accept instructions or advise independently.

INSIGHT

Efficiency is not effectiveness. A firm can process an enquiry quickly and still lose the client; the person who flags the urgent date and passes it to the right supervisor is the one who keeps it.

2 Know your responsibilities

A good commercial decision must also be a responsible one.

Request

Check role

Spot risk

Ask supervisor

Record decision

The Solicitors Regulation Authority is the regulator of solicitors and the law firms it authorises in England and Wales. Its rules are a starting point for understanding professional conduct. The Law Society represents solicitors; it is not the SRA.

IN PRACTICE

A family friend asks a student volunteering at a clinic to explain a neighbour's case. The student does not share details or offer an off-the-record view. They follow the clinic's confidentiality and supervision procedures.

Would winning this instruction justify acting outside your competence or disclosing a client's information?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Sort four fictional requests: proceed within authority, check with supervisor, do not disclose, or decline through the firm's process. Explain your reasons.

Employability evidence: A short decision log identifying the issue and the person to consult.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Principles 4 and 5 concern honesty and integrity. Solicitors Code 3.2 to 3.6 addresses competence and supervision; 6.1 to 6.5 addresses conflicts and confidentiality. Firms Code section 4 addresses service and competence.

You can: Use approved systems, check authority, seek supervision and acknowledge what you do not know.

You cannot: Share confidential information without a valid basis, invent expertise or assume a referral overrides conflict checks.

INSIGHT

Costly signals. Refusing to share a client's information with a valued referrer costs you something in the moment, which is exactly why it builds trust.

3 Understand the money

Time worked, fees billed and cash received are different things.

Work done

Time recorded

Bill agreed

Invoice issued

Cash received

Law firms need income to cover the cost of delivering services. Pricing models vary: hourly rates and fixed fees are examples. Workload, quality, budgeting and collections affect commercial performance. A junior's contribution includes accurate records and timely communication.

IN PRACTICE

Fictional exercise: 90 minutes of agreed work at £180 per hour gives £270 before VAT or disbursements. A £250 fixed fee would not automatically rise to £270 because more time was spent. Authority, scope and charging terms must be checked.

If a fee earner records eight hours, does the firm necessarily receive eight hours of fees?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Prepare an accurate time entry with the task, duration and matter reference. Explain what happens if the task exceeds the agreed budget. Compare an hourly and a fixed-fee example.

Employability evidence: A time entry and a short explanation of billing, payment and profit.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Statement of Solicitor Competence D1 to D3 covers managing work, records and business practice. Solicitors Code 8.7 addresses cost information. The Accounts Rules govern the handling of client money.

You can: Record work accurately, clarify charging instructions and flag budget pressure early.

You cannot: Inflate time, promise an unapproved fee or treat money held for a client as earned income.

INSIGHT

Experts do best when they price the value of the outcome, not the hours. Understanding time, fees and cash is the first step towards that conversation.

4 Identify the client and legal issue

Listen to the account. Establish the client. Investigate the legal issue.

Client and authority

Reported facts

Legal questions

Evidence gaps

Desired outcome

A dispute describes what has gone wrong. A legal issue asks which rights, obligations or remedies may arise from the facts. The client's desired outcome is a separate question. Before proposing work, establish whom the firm would represent and who may give instructions.

IN PRACTICE

An accountant introduces Priya, a director of a company owed £8,000. The customer alleges defective goods. The accountant is the client behind the client: the referrer whose trust brought the enquiry. Establish whether the company is the prospective client, Priya's authority, other parties and possible conflicts. Investigate contract terms, performance, evidence and deadlines, and ask whether preserving the trading relationship matters. Share nothing about the matter with the accountant without the client's consent.

What is the dispute, what legal issues need investigation, who is the client, and who else is involved?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Write a listening note: reported facts; parties and authority; possible legal issues; missing evidence; desired outcome; urgent dates; questions for supervision. Read your summary back and invite correction.

Employability evidence: An attendance note separating facts, legal issues, objectives and uncertainty.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Solicitors Code 3.1 concerns instructions and authority; 3.4 concerns client circumstances; 6.1 to 6.5 covers conflicts and confidentiality. Statement of Solicitor Competence B1 to B3 concerns facts, research and options.

You can: Listen, take accurate notes, identify possible issues and check your understanding with the client and supervisor.

You cannot: Treat a quarrel as a settled legal claim, assume the loudest person is the client, or guarantee a result.

INSIGHT

Diagnose before you prescribe. Identify the client, the legal issue and the objective before offering a view. The referrer who introduced Priya is the client behind the client.

5 Agree and deliver the work

Clear scope is part of good client service.

Scope

Costs

Understanding

Updates

Review

The client needs to understand the service, exclusions, costs, responsibilities, likely timescales and uncertainty. Check their understanding rather than relying on a signature. Delivery includes updates, supervision and early escalation when circumstances change.

IN PRACTICE

The fictional company wants its money back. The agreed first stage may cover reviewing documents and advising on options, with proceedings excluded. If the client says "So you will recover all £8,000", clarify the service and the uncertainty before proceeding.

Can the client explain what they are paying for, what is excluded and what happens next?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Draft a plain-language scope summary and an update with current position, next action, owner and date. Ask a peer to explain the scope back and record the correction you made.

Employability evidence: A scope summary, update and reflection on feedback.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Solicitors Code 8.6 and 8.7 cover understandable service and cost information; 8.2 to 8.5 cover complaints information and handling (the SRA consulted in 2025 and 2026 on changes to these paragraphs, so check the version in force). Code 3.2 addresses timely, competent service.

You can: Clarify scope, confirm understanding and use the firm's approved complaints process. Escalate delays and changed costs.

You cannot: Guarantee success, quietly expand the work or assume a signature alone establishes informed agreement.

INSIGHT

Reduce the uncertainty. Clients judge the wait, not just the work. A clear scope and regular updates make the same service feel twice as good.

6 Build trust and show your value

Relationships begin with concern for the client's needs.

Listen

Contribute

Follow through

Seek feedback

Show learning

Business development means developing opportunities for the firm to serve appropriate clients. Marketing helps people understand its services. Both depend on truthful communication, suitable expertise and professional boundaries. Referral relationships are built for the long term: a referrer is lending you their reputation, so treat every introduction with care rather than as a transaction.

IN PRACTICE

At an approved community volunteering placement, a student listens carefully, completes agreed tasks and follows supervision. They learn how people seek help without treating service users as leads. Later, they explain the learning honestly in an interview.

What useful contribution could you demonstrate today, and what feedback would make it stronger?

PRACTISE AND KEEP

Build a fictional client-development plan: client group, the client behind the client, legal need to research, useful first question, truthful service explanation, follow-up and review. Present one element and revise it after feedback. Prepare a short interview explanation of your own learning.

Employability evidence: A client-development plan, professional introduction and interview example.

REGULATORY CHECKPOINT

Solicitors Code 1.4 and 8.8 address misleading statements and publicity; 8.9 restricts unsolicited approaches to members of the public. Section 5 covers introductions and referrals. Principle 6 concerns equality, diversity and inclusion. Electronic marketing also requires separate data-protection and PECR checks.

You can: Learn through approved roles, ask thoughtful questions, describe your actual experience and use authorised communications.

You cannot: Claim fictional work as client experience, promise jobs, disclose matters to referrers without authority or assume professional networking is exempt from marketing rules.

INSIGHT

Rethink what it means to sell. Inspire, educate and reassure. Stop chasing clients; become the lawyer they seek out.

✓ Put the foundations together

Use the fictional invoice enquiry. Explain the firm's roles; identify professional risks; distinguish time, billing and cash; identify the actual client, the client behind the client and the legal issues; clarify scope and updates; then explain what you learned in an interview.

A CREDIBLE INTERVIEW EXAMPLE

"In a Future Lawyer simulation, I first focused on recovering the invoice. Feedback helped me separate the company's objective from the legal questions and the missing evidence. I revised my attendance note and identified what needed supervisor review."

Use your own actual learning, not this example as a claim about your experience.

OFFICIAL FURTHER READING

- o [SRA warning notice on misuse of AI](#)
- o Law Society guidance on AI in legal practice
- o [SRA Principles](#)
- o [SRA Code of Conduct for Solicitors, RELs, RFLs and RSLs](#)
- o [SRA Code of Conduct for Firms](#)
- o SRA Statement of Solicitor Competence
- o SRA Accounts Rules
- o [ICO guidance on business-to-business marketing](#)

Selected references checked 23 October 2026. Read the current official text and check applicability to the role, organisation and activity. These checkpoints are not a complete compliance manual.

In the AI era, being legally capable is the baseline. Commercial capability is the career.

CONTINUE THROUGH THE PROGRAMME

Ten weekly on-campus sessions: six taught modules and four build sessions. Record your skills each week; build an evidence portfolio through scenarios, group feedback and reflection. Enquire at rifat@thefuturelawyer.co.uk | 07572 382 995 | [linkedin.com/in/rifatsheikh](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rifatsheikh).

Rifat Sheikh co-founded a regulated London law firm and was its Head of Business Development & Marketing for 15 years. Over that period revenue grew 35%, client retention rose 40% and client satisfaction rose 30%. The programme draws on his work building referral relationships across the private, public and third sectors. He is also the founder of REACH LAW, AI governance infrastructure for UK law firms.

Educational material for England and Wales. The 40-minute introduction is a starting point; the full programme provides structured practice and feedback across the process. Neither attendance nor completion guarantees employment, professional competence or a legal outcome. The Future Lawyer is not SRA-accredited or endorsed and does not replace legal advice, qualification, firm procedures or professional supervision. Use fictional examples and describe them honestly as simulations.