Where legal finance careers actually begin

Skills can be taught; confidence and individuality cannot. Becky Bradley at Balance Recruitment asks recruiters, hiring managers and finance leaders what really gets someone into legal finance, and what keeps them there.





Becky Bradley is a Senior Recruitment Consultant at Balance Recruitment, a boutique agency established in 2008 specialising exclusively in finance, accounting, finance systems and pricing recruitment within UK law firms.

Becky has over a decade of recruitment experience and works with firms across London and the wider UK on appointments ranging from junior legal cashier and billing roles through to finance director. She co-produces Balance's annual Legal Accounts Salary Survey with the ILFM, and writes regularly on the legal finance market.

www.balancerecruitment.com
https://www.linkedin.com/in/becky--bradley/

balance.

Ask a room of legal finance professionals how they ended up in the profession and you will get a handful of deliberate answers and a great many accidental ones.

Andrew Veale, now a CFO and Director, cut his A-levels short because college was not the right environment for him. He joined Morrisons Solicitors in Surrey as a post room assistant, and within a couple of months a trainee legal cashier role came up. A mentor taught him client and office account, billing, WIP and reconciliations, along with the lesson he has carried ever since: cash is king. "Sometimes the career you don't plan turns out to be the right one," he says.

Samantha Griffin, Professional Development Manager at the ILFM, left school in 2015 with her A-levels and went to university anyway, because it felt like the norm. She lasted a term. After a couple of retail jobs she saw a trainee legal cashier vacancy advertised in her local town and applied knowing, in her own words, absolutely nothing about legal finance. She started her ILFM Diploma in 2018 and became a Fellow in November 2025.

Others chose it on purpose, for example Caroline Allen-Monaghan, Director of Finance, made it her mission to get into a law firm because her mother trained legal secretaries and told her it was a great place to work. Similarly, Rachel Hogan FCCA, Finance Director, studied accounting and law and decided numbers won out over qualifying as a solicitor.

What is striking is that two of the most senior contributors here would think harder about university now.

"I'm not convinced it was essential to reaching where I am now," Rachel says. "With the calibre of apprenticeships and alternative routes into accountancy available today, I'd explore qualifying whilst working in a relevant role."

Caroline puts it more bluntly when asked what she would do differently, "I wouldn't have wasted a year at university," she says.

> *"That, to me, is what confidence really looks like. Not having all the answers, but knowing how to go and find them."*

The assessment problem

That variety of routes creates a real difficulty for employers.

"In the digital age, any trainee vacancy can attract a vast amount of interest, often from candidates with little or no relevant experience," says Neil Gibbs, a senior consultant at Balance Recruitment.

"Employers naturally need something tangible to assess and can veer towards graduates, believing they may be better equipped to absorb the knowledge and expectations of the role. That is not necessarily true."



Over twenty years, he has placed entry-level candidates with GCSEs, A-levels, degrees, and formal accounting qualifications. The recurring advantage has not always been the qualification often it has been some relevant office experience, particularly in finance, paid or voluntary.

Even one day a week gives a candidate workplace skills, something substantive to talk about at interview, and a realistic picture of what the job involves.

He also raises something firms rarely say out loud. A graduate may expect faster progression than an entry-level position can offer. An A-level or apprentice candidate can be trained from the outset and may stay longer, because their expectations are better aligned with the job in front of them.

What firms are actually looking for

Natasha Kirkby, In-House Recruiter at Richard Nelson LLP, looks for education and results alongside a willingness to learn. Nerves are natural and count against nobody. "You can train if they want to be taught," she says.

Attitude is her green flag and what she looks for during an interview process. Her red flag is a junior candidate who does not take it seriously when a recruiter gets in touch, which she says happens far too often at that level.

"Sometimes the career you don't plan turns out to be the right one."
Andrew Veale, CFO & Director

A Human Resources Manager at a US-headquartered international law firm, who wished to remain anonymous, wants professional services experience, a good work ethic, and a positive attitude. One question does most of the separating: what interests you about this particular position and joining our firm?

"This really highlights which candidates are serious about the role, if they have taken the time to review the job description and also researched the firm." Slouching and poor eye contact are her red flags. "They may not know all the answers at a junior level, but as long as they present themselves well, show passion, enthusiasm and are keen for development, this is a green flag for me."

Do apprenticeships count?

Honestly, it depends who you ask, and candidates deserve a straight answer on that rather than a comfortable one.

Natasha is clear in her response, saying yes, definitely. What is being built is commercial knowledge, and any work experience, retail or office, adds to a person's skill set.

The anonymous HR Manager is more diplomatic. It depends on the level of the role, I would still consider a degree the more extensive qualification.

Both positions exist in the market at the same time, which means the route could matter less than what you can evidence. Samantha's firm understood that early adding "My firm were avid supporters of the ILFM and really keen to put all their finance staff through the Diploma qualification. To them, having qualified staff was a no brainer. You expect the solicitors to be qualified, so why should it be any different to those in the team that actually handle the client money?"

Studying while you work

Samantha's route is more common than it looks, and current ILFM students describe the same arc. Joanna, a legal cashier, says that "doing the D1 qualification has definitely increased my confidence", and that it changed how she approaches queries day to day rather than simply adding theory. Olivia, a client account cashier, does not pretend it is easy. "It can be extremely difficult to manage study with full-time work and I found this was my largest battle. Not every firm will allow time out of work to study and this should be considered before committing." Jamie, five years into his ILFM qualifications, agrees that the evenings and weekends took more than he imagined, but is clear it was worth it. "I have learnt so much from doing the courses and I know that they have made me more knowledgeable at my job." Olivia's point is worth carrying into an interview, if a firm says it supports study, ask them exactly how.

The CV that does not sound like you

"AI is having a massive impact," Natasha says. "I can now see which ones have been formatted via AI and that is not a true reflection of their skills and attributes. It's having a negative impact when screening."

Her advice is short and simple. Your CV needs to be a reflection of you.

There is an irony in that, because the same technology is raising the floor on what juniors are expected to do once they are in.

"The real challenge for anyone entering the profession now is figuring out how to maximise their own value alongside, rather than in competition with, that technology," Rachel says.

Andrew remembers cheques paid in by hand, remittances off a dot matrix printer and reconciliations done by ticking off printed statements. "It sounds like I'm describing Victorian accounting, but it really wasn't that long ago." Learn the fundamentals, he says, then get genuinely good with the systems. "Don't just know which button to press, understand what that button is actually doing behind the scenes."

Caroline's summary of the shift is the sharpest of the all. When she started, she needed to turn up on time and do what she was asked. "Now we expect people to bring something to the team."

From compliance to confidence

That is fair, because the technical knowledge does arrive. Samantha was thrown in at the deep end and remembers wondering how she would ever learn it all. "It was surprising

Continued/... 24

Where legal finance careers actually begins

Becky Bradley, Balance Recruitment

23.../ continued

how quickly everything did start going in and sticking in my brain, the reasons why certain things are done that way or the different rules and regulations that need to be followed to protect client money."

What takes longer is the confidence to use it.

Steven Groombridge, Global Head of Revenue Control, would tell his first year self something in the same spirit. "Don't try to be what you think everyone else wants you to be. Yes, you need to do what you're told and do your job well, but be yourself, be authentic, and don't underestimate the value of building genuine relationships." He spent his early career focused on the technical side, which matters, but it is not what stays with people. "The technical skills will come with time. Your character, attitude and authenticity are what people buy into."

"You don't need to know everything straight away, and confidence comes with experience," Andrew says. When he was younger he put a great deal of pressure on himself, the advice he would tell his younger self is to ask more questions. "It's normally much better to ask the stupid question than spend three hours trying to reconcile something because you were too afraid to ask."

Rachel frames the same problem differently. "Hold self-reflection and self-criticism in careful balance. It's easy, early in a career, to mistake harshness towards yourself for high standards. The two aren't the same thing."

Caroline's version is simpler. What she wishes someone had told her in her first year was that everything would work out, and that she should stop worrying about her life and her future.

Steven sums progression up in three words: curiosity, ownership and presence. The people who move fastest ask questions, take responsibility, and are visible. "Technical ability might get you through the door, but relationships, communication and trust are often what open the next one. Knock on a door, pick up the phone, or say hello to random people in the lift."

For anyone worried they do not have the right background, Natasha's line is the one to take away. You can train on skill, but you cannot train on fit, or on someone wanting to learn. Or, as the anonymous HR Manager put it: go for that interview!

That is what I would say as well. The rules can be learned, and Samantha's experience suggests they can be learnt quicker than anyone expects. Confidence is the harder half, and it has never come from having all the answers. It comes from knowing how to go and find them.

Four things worth doing before you apply

- Have a real reason for choosing this path. Firms and hiring managers can tell a generic application from a genuine one.
- Practise your delivery, particularly if shyness is the problem.
- Treat a video interview like a room. Look at the camera rather than the screen, and remember that poor eye contact reads as disengagement whether you are sitting opposite someone or not.
- Take the easy wins. Open days and free online courses evidence genuine interest.
- Never ask, never get. Cold email smaller firms, and message hiring managers directly after you apply.

If you are early in your legal finance career, or you are a firm building a junior pathway, I would genuinely like to hear from you.



www.balancerecruitment.com
https://www.linkedin.com/in/becky--bradley/

Next generation qualifications: T Levels

T Levels are a new qualification for students aged 16 to 19 who've finished GCSEs. They are an alternative route to A Levels, BTec and apprenticeships, the idea being that young people gain the technical and practical skills needed to be an asset in the workplace. They combine classroom learning with a substantial industry placement. There are now 21 different subjects for T Level students to choose from. With everything from agriculture to craft and design and engineering to science. Each T Level is equivalent in size to 3 A levels and helps young people develop the knowledge, attitude and practical skills to thrive in the workplace over a 2-year programme of study.

Legal, Finance and Accounting

The Legal, Finance and Accounting skill area has 3 T Levels covering each of these sectors. Under the Legal Services course, students will develop an understanding of a broad range of issues relevant to the sector, including:

- the business environment
- careers within the legal profession
- regulation
- professionalism and ethics
- security and risk
- equality, diversity and inclusion requirements
- third party professional services
- the fundamentals of law
- the fundamentals of financial accounting
- an awareness of digital and emerging technology, digital transformation and digital tools
- data driven innovation, analytics and design thinking
- research skills
- project and change management approaches in legal contexts

They will also complete at least one module of Legal Assistant occupation-specific content:

- business, finance and employment
- crime, criminal justice and social welfare

To find out more and if you're interested in offering work placements, visit: https://employers.tlevels.gov.uk/hc/en-gb