

Life as a Barrister in the ACT: Mythbusting and Hard Truths

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Admit it – you have thought about practising as a barrister in the ACT.

You may have also rejected the idea because of myths or misconceptions. There is probably a lot you don't know about life as a barrister, which might persuade you to embrace the idea.

I hope I can breakdown some of the issues which often cause consternation, bust a few myths, and shine a light on things you might not know.

It's a boys club – myth

The days of the Bar feeling like a male dominated profession are becoming a thing of the past. There are primarily two reasons for this: first the number of female barristers has increased and continues to rise; secondly, we are a force to be reckoned with.

The increasing number of female barristers in the ACT is not only encouraging but a reflection of the shifting dynamic. While the number may still appear small it has dramatically increased in recent years. The more women who join our ranks, the better the profession as a whole. It promotes versatility and challenges traditional thinking.

The Bar is more inclusive than ever. The composition and quality of female barristers has naturally engendered respect. The intelligence, energy and commitment (just to name a few attributes!) that female barristers demonstrate in their work has seen our male counterparts take notice and reduced any hasty dismissiveness. It is humbling and satisfying to see male barristers 'bounce ideas' around and 'play nice'. This is a testament to the talented crop of female barristers we have in Canberra. There is undoubtedly a collegiate atmosphere which will only prosper into the future. This has certainly been my experience. Robust and thought-provoking discussion between female and male barristers is highly valuable and a feature seen at the ACT Bar. It does not equate to exclusivity.

It's too hard with kids – myth

Being a barrister with family commitments can be both friend and enemy.

As the master of your own diary, you can work as much or as little as you like. The guilt-ridden conflict of missing an assembly or being the one with the last child in after-school care happens – it's not an uncommon feature of corporate life. Think of all the events you can accommodate. Sure, hearing dates might be fixed inconveniently on swimming carnival day, but you could also be waiting outside the classroom at 3pm for a surprise pick up because you are not in court or with clients. To a significant extent you can work when you want, so if picking up the kids and working until the early hours of the morning instead is your thing, that's fine!

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You don't have a boss. There is no one to answer to. You don't have to report your whereabouts to anyone. You are accountable to yourself and solicitors and clients and a strong work ethic speaks volumes regardless of when and where you are during the day.

Being a barrister is not a barrier to having a family or growing a family. You can have babies while practicing (Chief Magistrate Walker did and so did I). In 2018, Blackburn Chambers introduced a Parental Fee Relief Policy which aims to assist barristers to participate in family life and maintain their professional career. The Policy provides for leave to be taken for up to 12 months while retaining a room at readers' rates. This alleviates the financial burden and keeps a foot in the door.

I won't get enough work – myth

Canberra is the centre of the universe when it comes to the public service, locally and at the Commonwealth level. It is about more than that though with a variety of businesses, insurance companies and entities having a presence. It is a place where people will still be wronged or injured and require the services of a barrister. The pond is big enough.

A natural concern is earning money. You are only able to earn money if you get briefed. You may then only get paid several months after the completion of a matter. There is no regularity to your income and you still have bills to pay. They don't put that in the brochures.

Do not fear, be brave. Back yourself, rely on your experience, skills, and contacts and the work will come. It may be a slow burn, but be patient. Work will come from surprising places. Think of every appearance as an audition. You never know who is sitting in the back of the room witnessing your brilliance and it may just be where your next brief comes from.

It won't be fun – myth

After a life of 6 minute billable units, partners and boring letters of service, being a barrister is liberating. You get to focus on the bigger picture without the mundane tasks of war by correspondence, KPIs and supervision.

Isolation is a factor, but there is always someone around to chat to, a war story to be told and briefs on someone else's shelf to re-arrange. There is a lot of laughter around Blackburn Chambers (and the odd prank). We also maintain and actively promote social events which include partners and families who are also along for the ride.

Traditionally, barristers give the impression of being uptight, unfunny and incapable of smiling. That is not my experience. Generational change is another emerging feature in the ACT and with a younger crop of barristers comes vibrancy, a sense of humour and a dusting of unpredictability.

An exciting future is just an exam away!

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