

*Harry Clark*

A short report on the views  
and feelings of students,  
trainees and other  
aspiring/practicing junior  
lawyers toward the  
profession, job security and  
more in light of COVID-19

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# COVID-19 JUNIOR LAWYERS SURVEY

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

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# FOREWORD

In the space of just a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on day-to-day life. As a result of measures rightly taken to preserve public health and limit the impact of the virus, there have been significant economic, educational and practical disruptions (and many others) that have affected nearly every individual in the UK and across the world.

The purpose of this survey is to encapsulate the opinions, views, thoughts and perspectives of a small fraction of these people toward some of the parties and institutions that will play a part in their future. Namely, this report is based on a survey conducted of both aspiring and currently-practicing junior lawyers - clerks, paralegals, trainees, students, interns and more. It is critical that this group have their opinions, anxieties and recommendations heard regarding their immediate future during this time - most notably with regard to education, job security, institutional governance and more. Whilst the survey was intended to encapsulate such feelings strictly within the legal profession, it is likely that the thoughts and views expressed in this report extend to students, graduates and junior members of many other careers, industries and professions as well.

The survey was completed by over 400 individuals in this category over the space of a 2-week period. This report aims to summarise the key findings of the survey and to offer insight into some, if any, of the trends that resulted. You can find a link to view the full, unedited survey findings at the end of this report.

# METHODOLOGY

Before diving straight into analysis, it is important to outline how the survey was formulated, distributed and designed in order to provide some context.

As previously stated, the survey was open for responses for a 2-week period via an openly-shareable Google Forms link. The survey was promoted extensively across social media and collected a total of 433 individual, anonymous responses. The survey aimed to compare the results between three key identifiable groups:

- Those currently practicing in the profession in some capacity (at a junior level)
- Those who have secured a position to start in future - *paralegals, trainees, clerks etc.*
- Those who are yet to secure a position/opportunity and are actively searching/applying for one

Questions were designed to cover topics such as job security, education, training, institutional governance and professional development within the legal industry. '1' indicates a 'Strongly Disagree' stance and vice-versa. Answers were then reviewed to remove spam and incomplete responses and consolidated into a spreadsheet.

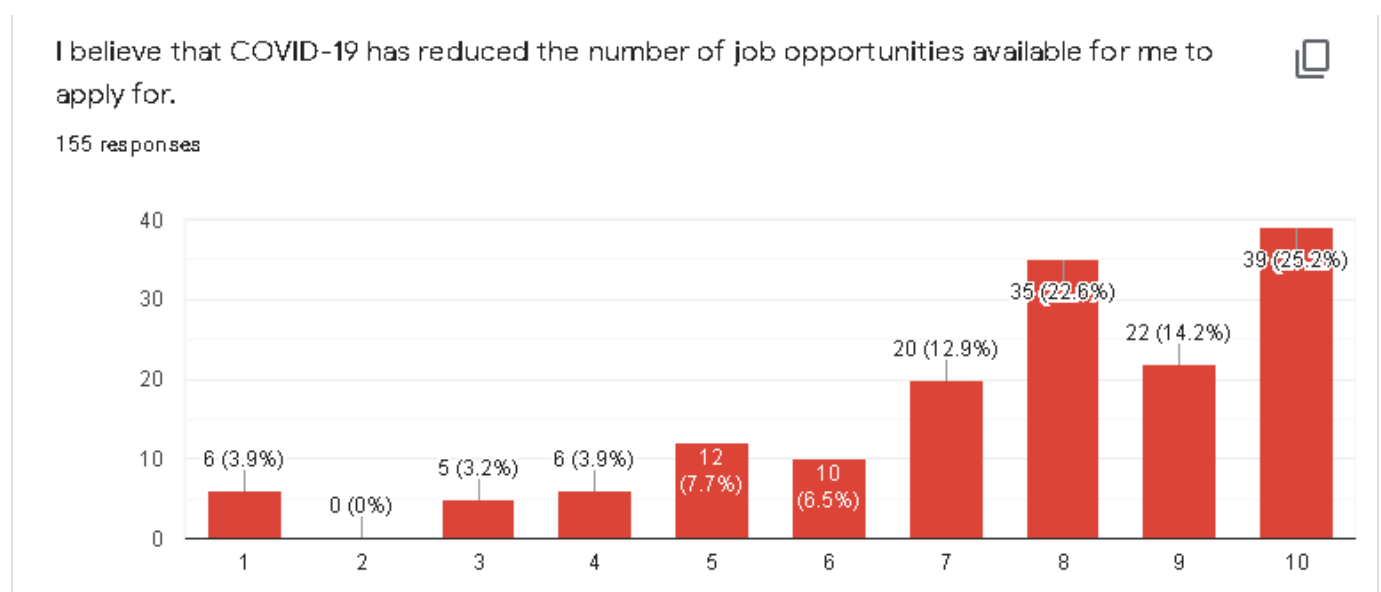
Finally, answers were collated, grouped and then reviewed in order to generate this report. It's analysis is in line with actions taken until the middle of April. Given the fast-moving nature of current events, certain aspects may already be out-of-date. This report only aims to summarise the opinions given by respondents and makes no claim to be a representation of current markets or other realities outside the remit of its questions. You can find the full, unedited spreadsheet of the survey's responses at the end of this report.

# SEARCHING FOR OPPORTUNITIES

Respondents to this category are currently searching for some form of opportunity within the legal profession- most commonly a predominantly entry-level (graduate) position such as a Training Contract or Vacation Scheme. This group represented 35% of the submissions generated from this survey, with a vast majority of them still currently studying in some capacity (LLB, non-law degree, LPC etc.).

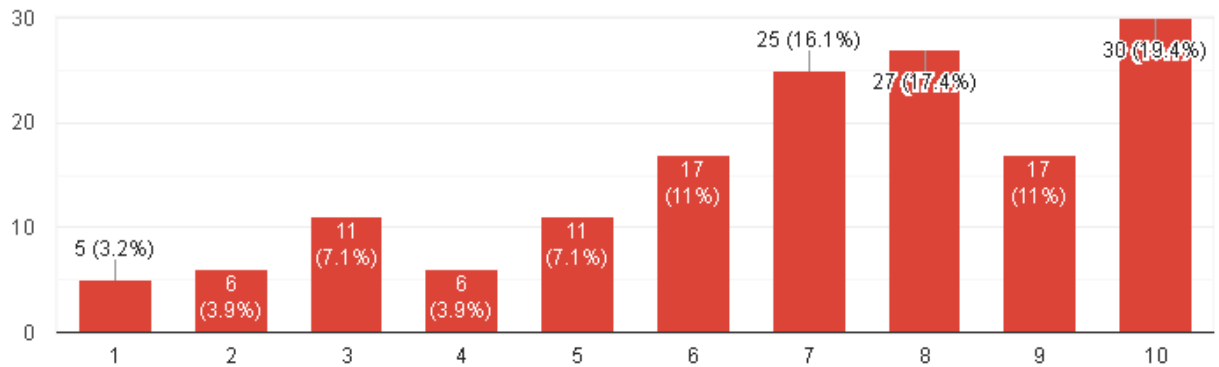
## Key Concerns

It is clear that the primary concerns of this group lie in their ability to actively apply for and secure a long-term position within the field of law. The vast majority believe that COVID-19 has reduced the number of opportunities available and affected their ability to do so in a 'normal' manner that they may have done previously:



I believe that COVID-19 has restricted my ability to sell myself to recruiters - e.g. reliance on video or telephone interviews over assessment centres or in-person interviews.

155 responses

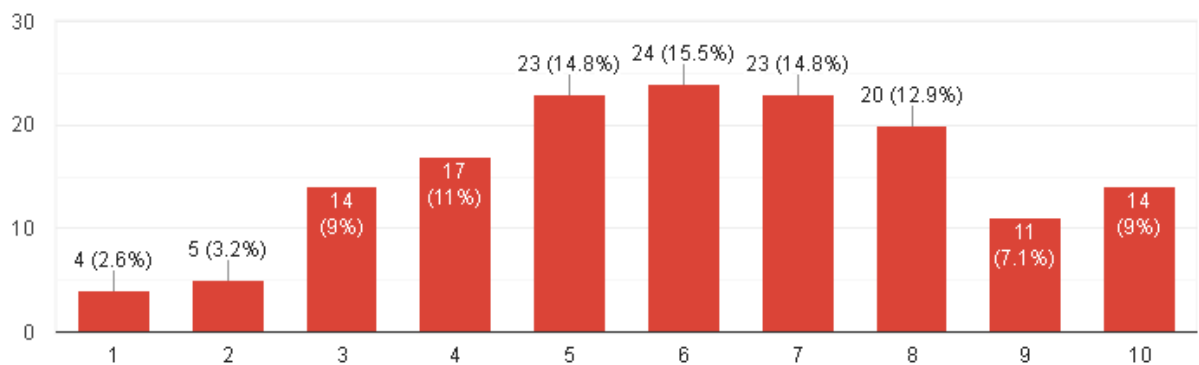


It's also interesting to note that - perhaps due to a lack of alternative, or lack of clarity as to how job search opportunities may adapt - there is less of a majority in those that have significantly adapted their approach to searches:

I have changed my approach to applications as a result of COVID-19.



155 responses

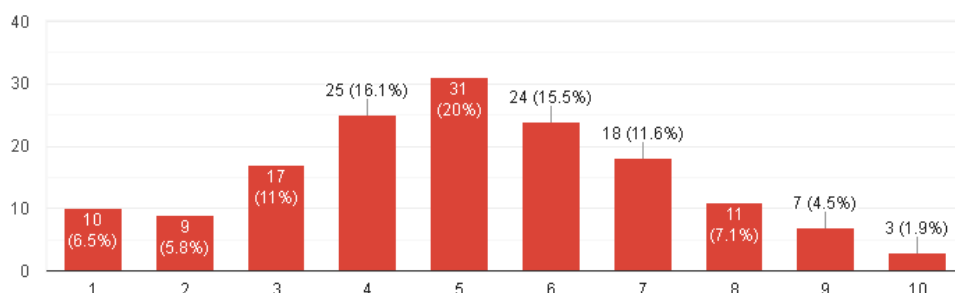


Or (as of mid-April, when the survey was closed) satisfaction in how recruitment efforts have been adapted:

I am satisfied with how recruiters have made accommodations to their recruitment process in light of COVID-19.



155 responses

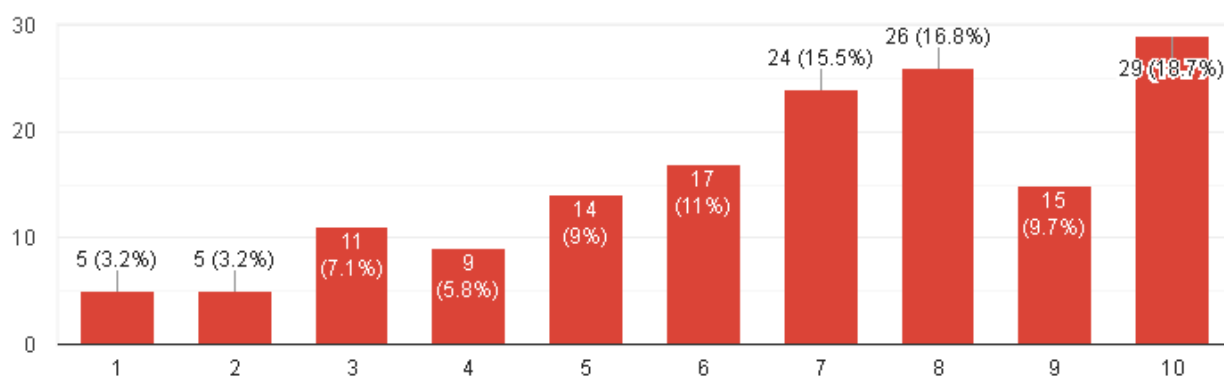


As for the potential long-term effects of how this graduating class will be viewed for their career in its entirety - such as meeting career 'milestones' within certain timeframes - there's again a majority view of concern:

I believe that the disruptions caused by COVID-19 will disrupt when I hit career milestones, therefore making me look comparatively 'worse' to similar individuals a few years ahead of me in their career path.



155 responses



# SECURED AN OPPORTUNITY

Respondents to this category have secured some form of future or conditional work such as a Training Contract or Pupillage. Predominantly, this group has a number of similar characteristics with the prior group of those that are searching, such as currently completing a degree, law school or other form of education. This group of respondents made just over a quarter of those surveyed, at 26%.

## **Key Concerns**

Primary concerns relate to security of whatever opportunity they have secured. Lots of firms, practices and chambers are taking differing approaches to the running of recruitment/internship processes such as Vacation Schemes - some being made virtual, others being abandoned in favour of a direct offer/remuneration - or the commencement of employment/formal training via a pupillage or Training Contract.

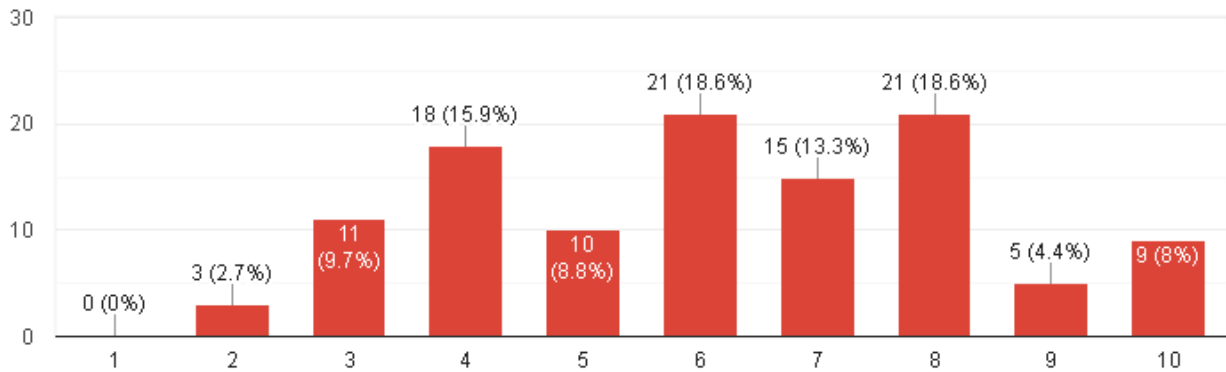


Firstly, it's interesting to note how this group perceives COVID-caused job losses in the industry with more mixed opinion:

I believe that COVID-19 will cause significant job losses in the legal industry.



113 responses

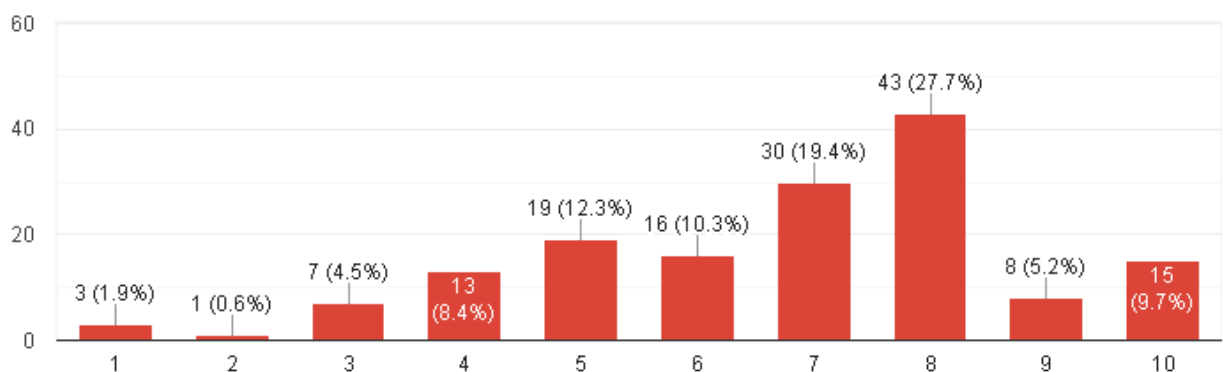


In comparison to those who are still searching:

I believe that COVID-19 will cause significant job losses in the legal industry.



155 responses

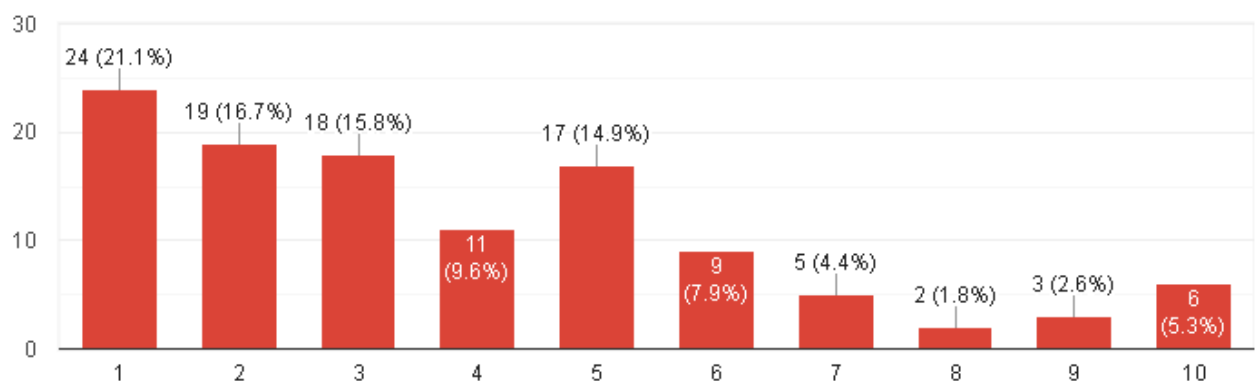


Whilst most agree that their opportunity won't be 'lost' entirely:

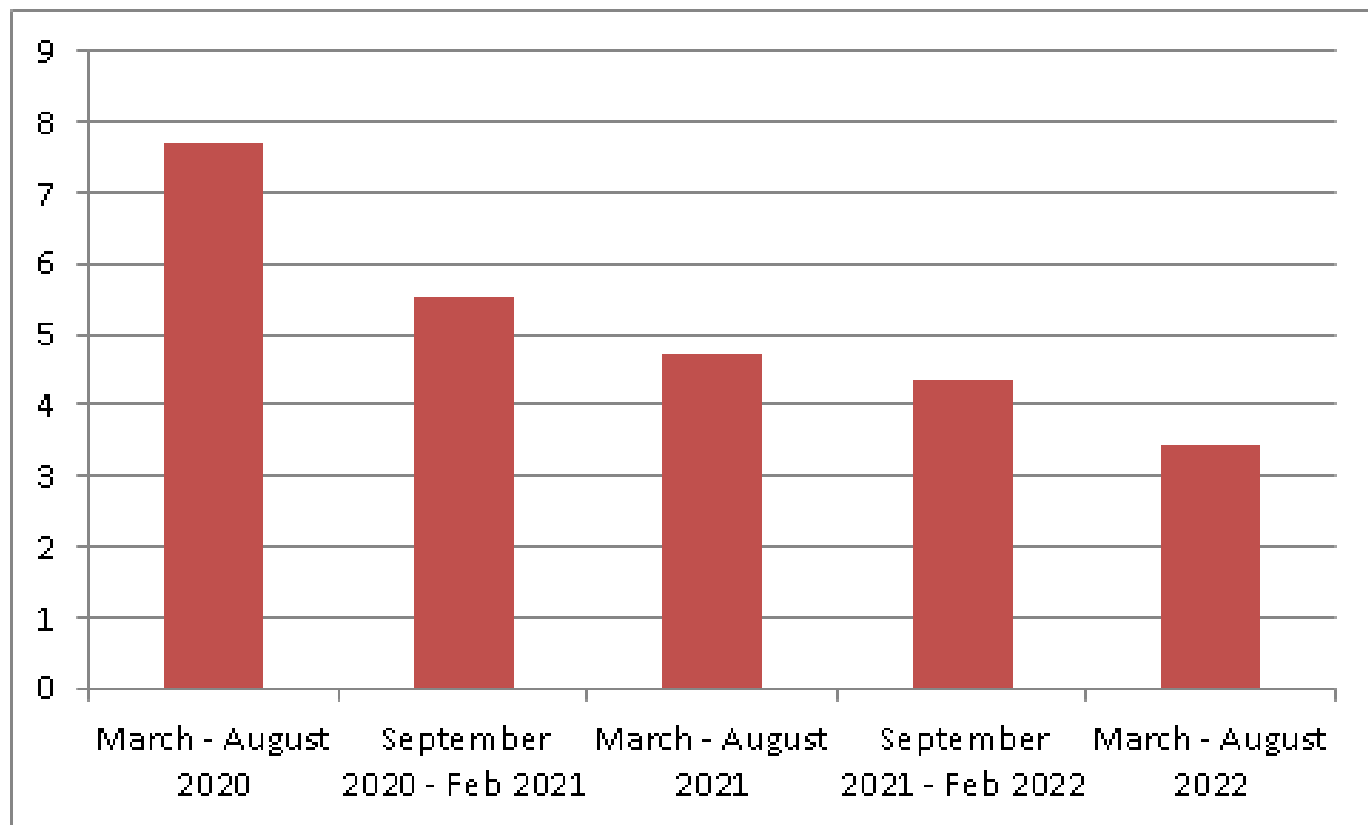
I believe COVID-19 will cause my opportunity to be rescinded or cancelled entirely.



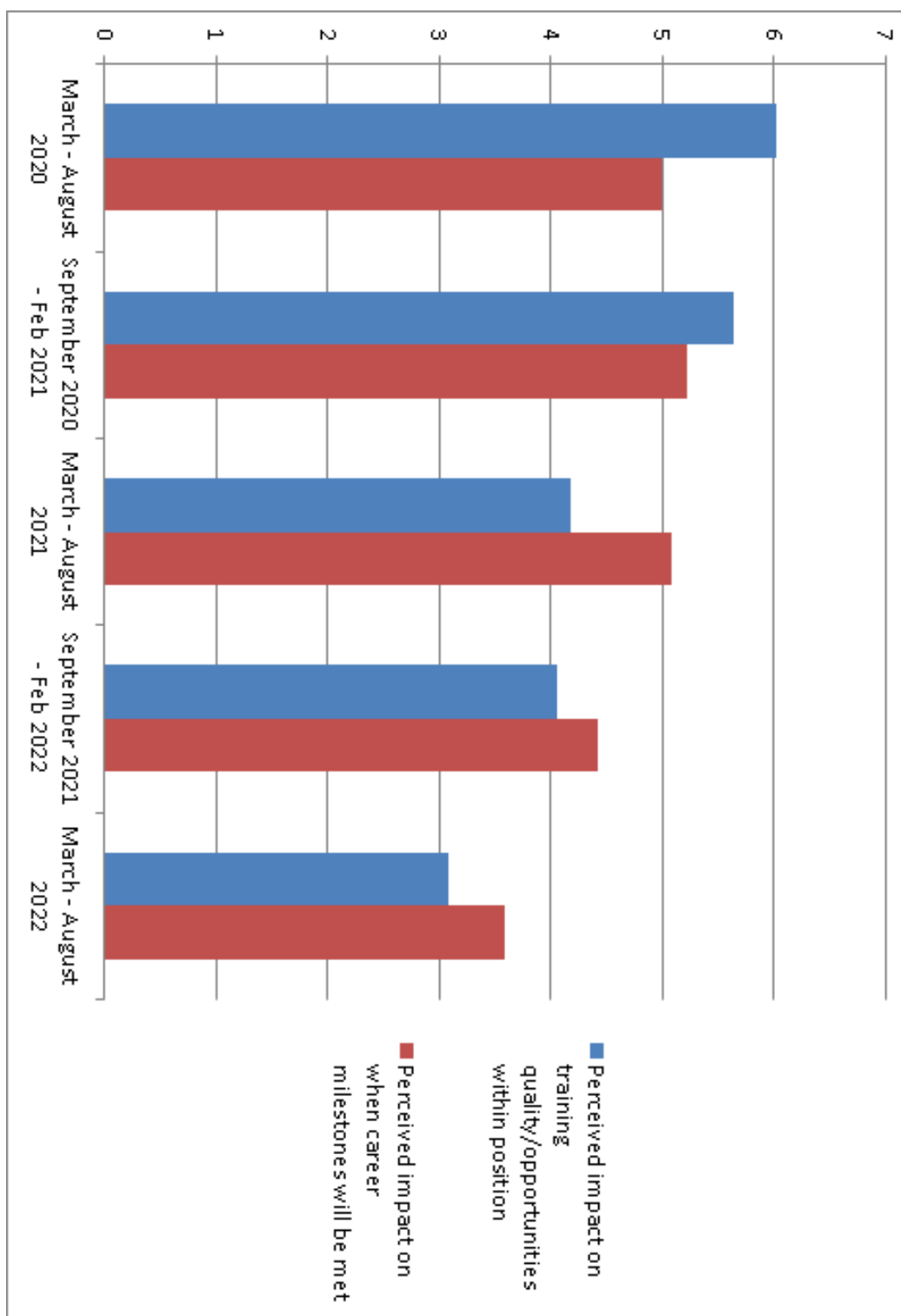
114 responses



It is also interesting (and perhaps predictable) to note that the more 'immediate' the opportunity, the more individuals are concerned about its postponement, with a significant drop for those meant to be beginning towards the tail of this year/the beginning of the next:



Finally, with regard to long-term career aspirations and potential disruptions, there is again another trend where those with more immediate opportunities line up perceive that the **quality of said opportunity** (or notable options/pursuits whilst doing them, such as secondments or client placements) and **the timing of reaching career milestones** will be impacted:



# PRACTICING LAWYERS

This final group for analysis constitutes lawyers who are practicing in some capacity, primarily in junior-level roles such as Trainee Solicitors, Clerks, Paralegals or other graduate-level positions. Respondents in this category constituted around 29% of all surveyed individuals.

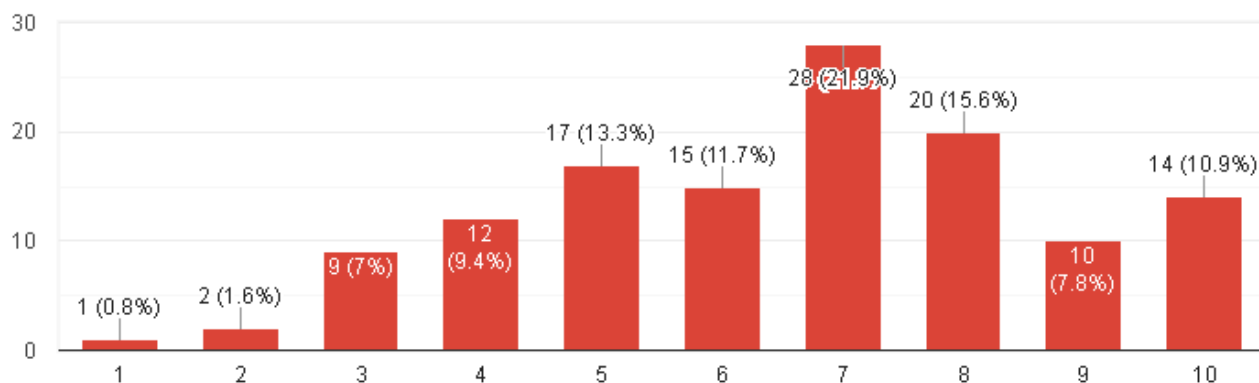
## **Key Concerns**

Given the mixed approach to furloughing, layoffs, pay and hiring cuts/freezes, performance reviews and bonuses, primary areas of concern for this group relate to job security, working from home and the legal job market more generally.

Regarding job security, many junior lawyers are not only concerned about potential job losses in the industry, but in particular a slight sentiment that such losses will take place at their level of seniority:

**I believe that COVID-19 will cause significant job losses in the legal industry.**

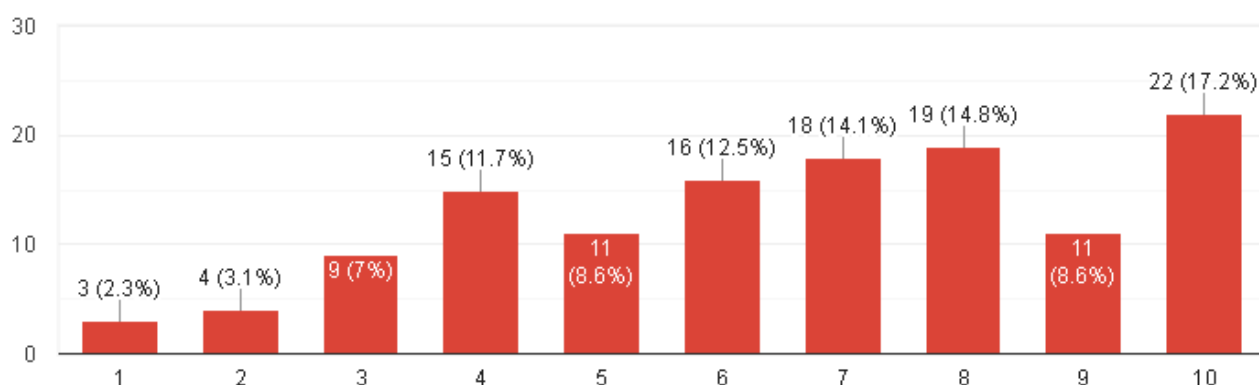
128 responses



**I believe that COVID-19 will cause significant job losses at my level of seniority.**



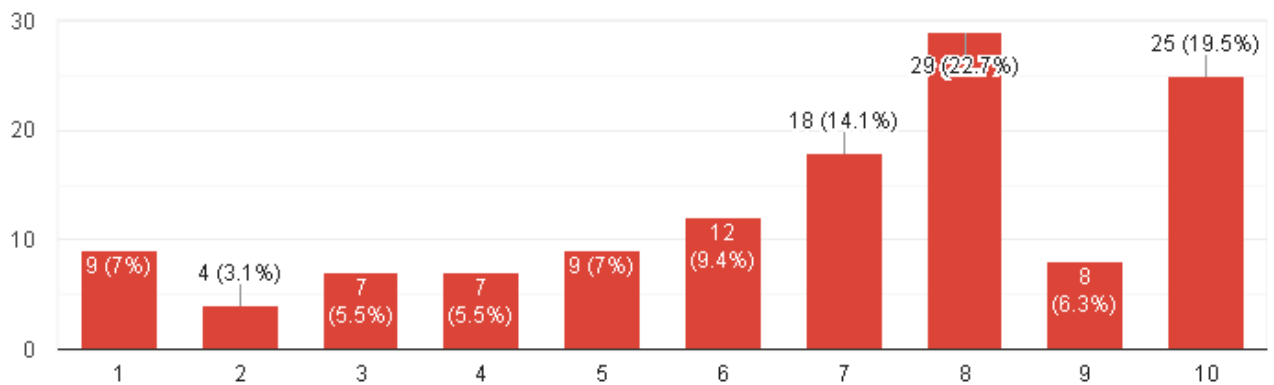
128 responses



In addition, there are clear concerns about both being able to explore outside opportunities that may be available in the market generally, as well as how secure their current position is with their current employer (given the mixed approaches being taken in the market currently):

I believe that COVID-19 will make it difficult for me to explore other opportunities outside my current role.

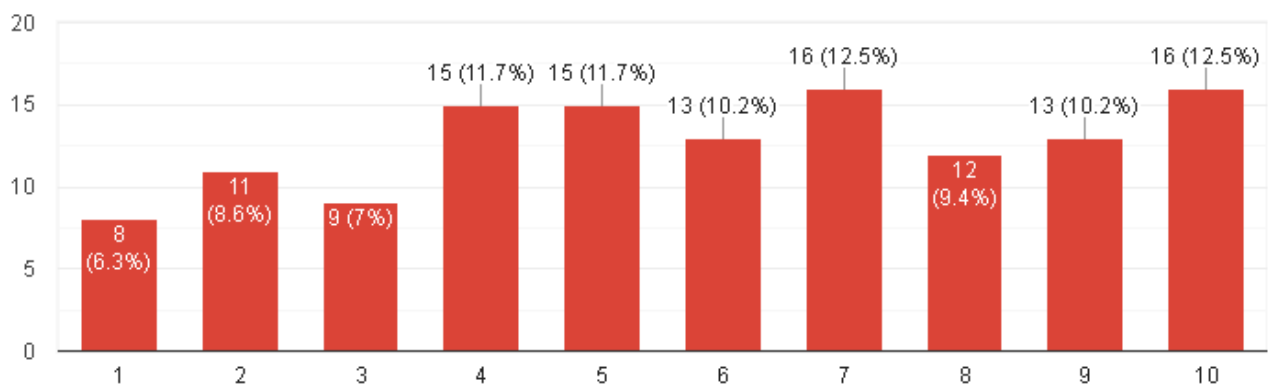
128 responses



I believe that my employer is being open, clear and supportive about my current job security and/or responsibilities in light of COVID-19.



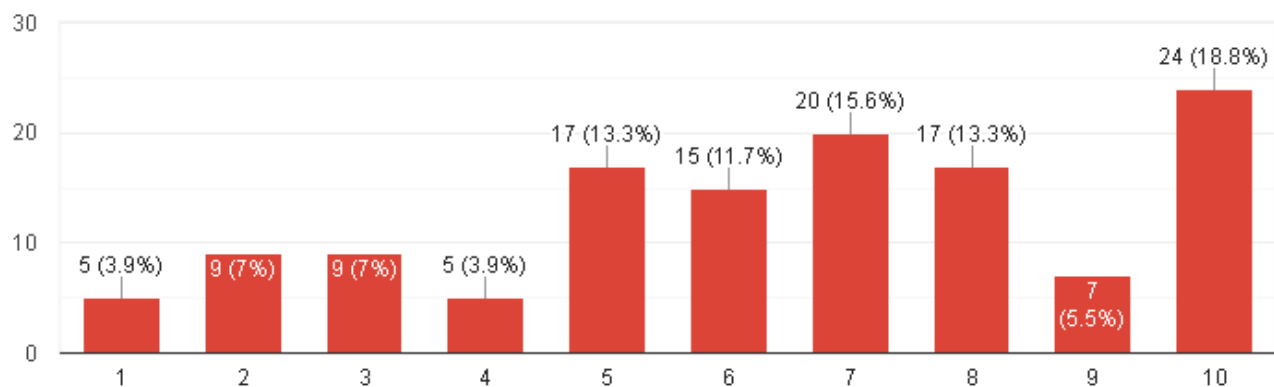
128 responses



Finally, regarding working from home, whilst levels of enjoyment from working from home have fluctuated (it's coping from home in a pandemic, if anything else) - there is overwhelming support amongst junior lawyers for it to be more of an *option* from their employers in future:

### I have enjoyed working from home.

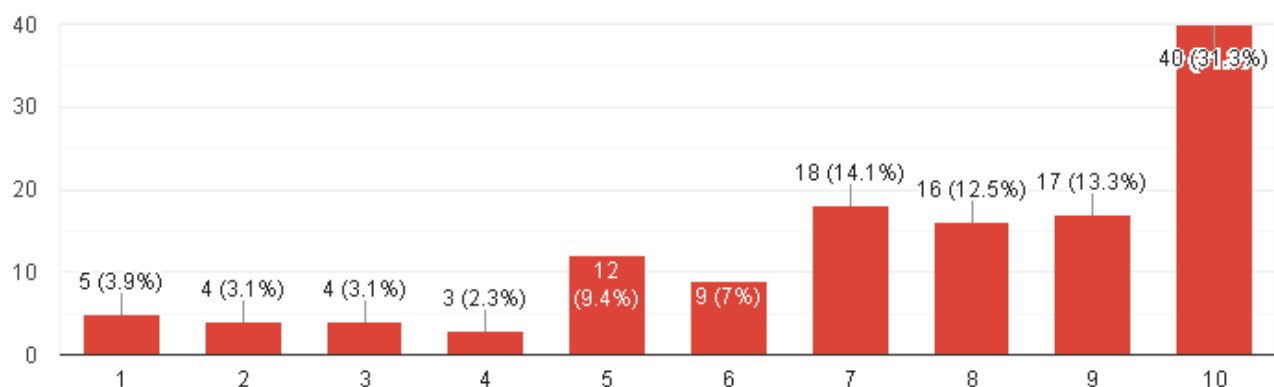
128 responses



### I want remote working to be a greater part of my role/be more available to me in future.



128 responses



# QUOTES AND THOUGHTS

This final section of the report aims to collate the written thoughts of each group into a short summary. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked two questions:

**Which parties - recruiters, regulators, educational institutions etc. - have failed to account for the views of junior lawyers at this time? What is it they have failed to account for?**

And:

**Do you have any other comments in relation to the topics covered by this survey?**

Below is a key summary of each of these, sorted into the three groups outlined throughout this report.



## **Searching for Opportunities**

Out of those who decided to leave criticisms/suggestions, a lot have been levied towards educational institutions and regulators regarding the transition period to online teaching and assessment formats. Many students feel left out of the decision-making process and were asked "to wait for unknown long periods of time without much reassurance on the situation".

In addition, students from low-income households believe their voices have not been heard regarding the practicality of do-at-home assessments - that not every student has "their own study space" or access to resources such as webcams and microphones for e-proctored assessments. and lack of resources.

A lot of these concerns are also concentrated around the final grading that students will end up with if they are still studying. Some feel that the transition to online learning has pressured them "to do even more themselves" and that there is not a cohesive approach to adjusted examinations across each university, spurring fears that students who have no-detriment or average-grade policies in place will "potentially come away with better degrees, whilst other universities...expect students to sit exams as normal (online) in these current conditions, and may be disadvantaged".

Finally, regarding examinations, several concerns have been raised regarding timing. With so many different time-pressures for when students will potentially be starting or searching for opportunities - some as soon as August/September - there is a mixed appreciation across the board whenever a decision has been made to either 'speed-up' or otherwise find quick alternatives to planned examination dates. For example:

"No consideration has been given to those students who do not hold training contracts and are paying for the course out of their own pockets. The course that they decided to pay for, was not an online self study course, and those who started in January are facing doing the whole of the LPC online." Further remarks on online teaching are concerned about quality, including "the expectation that "business as usual" applies now that we've moved to online learning. It couldn't be further from business as usual!". Going back to points made regarding students who are self-funding, concerns have been raised regarding how "Universities [are] charging fees for the full academic year despite limited contact hours/ missed content."

Despite the above, one suggestion called for an embrace of technology to not only try and solve the examination issue, but how to secure experience as well:

"I think this may be a good time to consider alternative ways of getting legal experience and to have employers and law schools think of new activities that could allow aspiring lawyers to gain even some slight exposure to the legal world. There do not seem to be enough firms that do webinars or live streams with questions from law students, and I think this could be something worth looking into.

At the moment, we have plenty of technology to allow us to do such activities in order to keep our legal community together but not all of them seem to be explored fully. Perhaps we should use this opportunity to look more into what we (as a legal community) can do to ensure there are opportunities available for gaining experience (even remotely)."

Finally, as a result of the above disruptions and changes, several students have noted the increase in anxiety and stress that has

been caused by the entire situation - especially during exam/graduation season:

"Law degrees, especially post-graduate ones, are intensive and challenging. They demand a lot of hard work and dedication from both students and tutors, so it seems that a lot of the problems around cancelling/ postponing final exams caused a lot of anxiety for fellow students."

This has been further compounded by the perceived effect COVID-19 is having on disruptions to usual levels/formats of recruitment:

"Not knowing if [internships/vacation schemes] are going ahead creates stress for students who do not know whether they are still going to be considered or need to more actively apply for jobs."

"I secured several work placements for Summer 2020, all of which have been cancelled entirely due to the pandemic. I feel extremely disheartened because as a student from a disadvantaged background, attaining work experience was the only other thing that could enhance my CV and ensure I am in a better position when I go on to apply for training contracts this summer. Now I will go into applying for training contracts with zero legal work experience, not for lack of trying, but because they have all been cancelled. I feel as if recruiters will not take this into account when looking at training contract applications in the future, that this entire cohorts legal opportunities have been cut short and we don't have the required amount of work experience most employers expect when training contract applications come around."

"As everything is on a standstill and no one having any experience in such matter, I think everyone is just waiting to see what the outcome will be before answering."

"When this all kicked off I was interviewing with five firms. Now, nothing. It's a terrible time to be unemployed."

"instead of postponing Vacation Schemes they have given them a 3 day virtual internship...it's a shame for students who have worked so hard in obtaining VC's there."

**Note:** the excerpts taken above have been taken with the consent of respondents and are those which are primarily critical/offer feedback or a solution to problems they have identified. Several other respondents (albeit a much smaller percentage) conversely state that they feel supported and/or appreciate the fact that no-one has a concrete idea as to what is going to happen next in the current scenario.

## **Secured an Opportunity**

Many of the criticisms levied by those searching for opportunities has been echoed by those who have secured them to some degree:

"there hasn't been enough guidance from recruiters regarding assessment centres and how/if they will be held remotely, cancelled or delayed."

"I have secured a training contract for 2021, but I have no idea if this will still go ahead, especially if the firm has to make job losses."

"There should be clear leadership from an institution, as the University of Law has shown by deciding early on a new exam format and keeping students informed of updates."

"The SRA's initial stance of not allowing LPC exams to be taken online was very inflexible, given how much everything and everyone else in the world is having to adapt at the moment. They have eventually had to concede, but it would have saved students weeks of additional anxiety and uncertainty...if they had adopted this position from the outset."

"There has been a lack of information shared with us, thus not allowing my voice or questions to be easily answered"

"Tried to make us go to an exam at the Excel centre two weeks ago and only cancelled it at 9 o'clock the day before!"

"Only the rich with adequate home environments to revise and take exams in, are able to succeed. I feel completely betrayed and disenfranchised."

"[There has been] additional uncertainty regarding exams by showing a disunited front and sending out conflicting communications on assessment methods and timing. This may also have to do with the lack of flexibility shown by the Solicitors Regulation Authority."

"To ask BPTC students with pupillage offers to postpone pupillage or to undertake exams during pupillage is to ask them to sacrifice their mental health and, possibly, their performance both in exams and during pupillage – as balancing both may well present itself as impossible, especially considering the steep learning curve of a first six pupil."

"For many, the results they achieve at this time will not reflect their true abilities. This is where Regulators and Education Institutions should recognized the inherent challenges faced by students and junior lawyers."

"I have children...logging on to live sessions is going to be difficult."

In addition to the above, concerns have also been raised with regards to job security and the impact on careers long-term:

"I do not think it will necessarily cause significant job loss but more so prevent job creation going forward, firms may stop or decrease intern and trainee hiring in the future rather than laying off current staff. I think is largely because the companies for the most part are starting in a better place than in 2008 times. I do think it will impact TC hiring."

"It is a worry that firms are making up their approach as they go along."

"It is not what they have failed to account for now as much as what they may fail to account for in the future. Saying this, it will be those who take advantage of this time that will stand out to recruiters."

"There's a legal world beyond City firms - the economic slump is also noticeable in small firms and in-house teams who have cancelled salary reviews, promotions and recruitment processes, and would have recruited or promoted trainees ad-hoc rather than 2 years in advance."

"No one has accounted for the views of junior lawyers. But no one knows what is going to happen so I don't believe it is a massive failure as of yet."

"In 5/10 years time...we will look worse compared to peers."

## **Practicing Lawyers**

Several concerns have been raised regarding the formalities of training at home, if not furloughed, and how it will contribute towards regulatory requirements:

"Being in the first three months of my training contract is very stressful. It was always referred to as my probation period. I was there only three weeks until I was sent home and I haven't been told if my job is even safe or not."

"There has been little guidance in relation to if trainee solicitors are furloughed and how this may affect our training contracts. I received vague guidance from the SRA especially saying the decision was that of our training principal but this may not be reasonable if furloughed for an extended period of time."

"The SRA could say a little more about training contracts...what happens if you aren't being supervised adequately. Do we have time added at the end? Can we use other training to 'fill in' the time? Who knows!"

"I also note that Scottish Traineeships will now last longer than 2 years if the trainee is furloughed as the traineeship has to be continuous."



As well as some thoughts on working from home generally:

"I think my firm could do with having a policy about working from home to allow for adaptations for family situations and it would be better to have more frequent firm wide communication. The uncertainty is definitely there. I have also noticed many people starting earlier or later than usual and think it is much harder to have boundaries between work and home life. That said it is nice to be able to work from home sometimes and hopefully we will be able to do this more in the future (but not always!)"

"I think now that firms have seen how easy it is to allow more flexible working, they'll start to embrace it. This will be good for the profession!"

"Law firms who do not have modern IT systems should now start investing in things so business can try to continue as usual. This will revolutionise attitudes by employees of law firms in terms of flexible working and working from home options."

"Where is the compassion to those with children and are trying to home school and juggle studies etc. No acknowledgement of this has been made."

# CONCLUSION AND LINKS

This report has aimed to reflect the views and thoughts of both aspiring and practicing junior members of the profession. It's clear that the current time period is filled with more questions than answers as to how to move forward. It is my hope that the views, thoughts, suggestions, concerns and opinions summarised by this report can be part of that answer-generating process to most effectively move forward.

If you'd like to view the spreadsheet containing survey findings in full, you can do so at the link below:

**<https://tinyurl.com/junior-law-survey>**

Please feel free to freely distribute this report and its findings with appropriate attribution.

If you have any further questions or comments, you can get in touch with or find out more about the creator of this report at the following:

LinkedIn - <https://www.linkedin.com/in/harryclarklaw/>

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