
Working with Locums

With the launch of Locum Connect, we take a look at some practical advice for working with a locum (or as one) and some of the more colourful tales locums have to tell.

The Brief: What Do You Want From Your Locum?

An experienced locum lawyer explains how the value of a locum to a firm is directly related to the quality of the instructions they're given.

I know someone who works in IT. When I asked his advice, many years ago, about a job I had been offered, he asked me, "What is the brief?" I realized that I didn't really know what they wanted me to do. If it is holiday cover, the lawyer may have left enough dictation to keep his staff busy until his return. Are you to stop this flow of work and get your work typed? Are you to see clients? New clients? Are you to go to court, or instruct an agent?

Very often I find myself employed for 14 hours a week to cover the work of a full time lawyer who may do 40 or more hours work a week. Something has to give. However, firms don't want you to stay on and do more hours, as that will cost more money. On the other hand, things may get quiet if clients prefer to wait a few weeks and see their usual lawyer. Some firms favour a daily rate, so don't want you to have nothing to do. Others prefer an hourly rate, so they can send you home if there is nothing for you to do one day.

One lawyer (on planned maternity leave) left me a perfect list comprising the computer passwords, the names of the couriers, search firms, and sheriff officers used by the firm, together with leaflets showing how to work the digital dictation system and the phone system. This has only happened once.

Do you wish the locum to lock up? To know your alarm code? To sign letters? Have you told your clients their work will be handled by another lawyer? Have you told the staff that the stranger at the desk is a lawyer?

A kindly secretary once said that if I didn't know what I was doing, perhaps I could contact her boss (who was off on maternity leave), as she was a very skilful lawyer. I said I knew she was, as she had been a trainee of the firm in which I was then a partner.... The trouble is that, because you don't know where they keep their pencils, or how to work the photocopier (or even which of these large anonymous machines is the photocopier), everyone assumes you don't really know anything. Until, that is, you are the only lawyer on the premises, and then, suddenly, you become of value.

The moral of this tale is, if you are considering hiring a locum, prepare a brief. If you know what it is you want them to do, there is at least a chance that it might happen.

Working as a Locum? Expect the Unexpected.

An experienced locum lawyer recalls her first (very colourful) day working with one firm and advises that knowing in advance about the type of conditions in which you'll be working is vitally important.

I had never been locked in a bathroom with a man before. I suppose when I arrived at my new locum job, I should have been alerted by the fact that the lawyer greeting me at the door (of what had turned out to be a private house) was wearing his bedroom slippers.

Having been introduced to his secretary, he showed me around and insisted on following me into the bathroom to show me how the door lock worked. I wondered whether I could climb out the bathroom window, or whether the secretary would hear my screams for help? Then he unlocked the door. How exactly had I ended up in this situation? Well, it doesn't do to make a fuss, does it?

I was then shown to what I believe people in smart firms call my "work station". This was a table in a corner of the living room, lit by a standard lamp, with a fringed lampshade, which had no doubt been the height of fashion in the 1960s. (I had a flashback to the lampshades my aunt used to make). The table – which looked fairly tatty to me – was covered in newspapers, in order to protect it from damage. I therefore settled down to do conveyancing, unencumbered by a telephone, a computer or any of that modern fol-de-rol and aided only by a non-digital hand held dictation machine.

For reasons of confidentiality, I referred to this place of work as "The Planet Zog". I was keen that someone should know under which patio to dig, should I disappear in mysterious circumstances. My work on the Planet Zog was very part-time, and mercifully short. I have often wondered why I kept going back. I blame the Girl Guides for causing me to have a sense of duty.

After that, I used to ask if I could see where I would be working, before agreeing to take on a job. Of course, having arrived in the 21st Century, I naively assumed that central heating was a given. At the beginning of the present Millennium I had worked in an office where I had to kneel down with a match to light the gas fire (in the manner of Bob Cratchit) and later in an office where the ability to light a portable gas heater, was necessary to stave off hypothermia. I was therefore dismayed to arrive at a locum job to discover they had no central heating or indeed a hook or which to hang my snow laden coat.

Of course, as a locum, who has stepped into the breach following upon the often abrupt departure of a lawyer, one is surely met with almost unbridled joy? Here is an actual lawyer who can do legal work, go to court and speak to the clients who don't care that their lawyer has left/is at death's door or on maternity leave!

The reality is that one is transported back to the twilight world of junior lawyerdom. Secretaries vie with each other to ignore your dictation. If anyone knows the passwords to allow you to log on to your computer, they are certainly not going to tell you. Once I asked for the lawyer's diary, so that I could see what dates of entry were coming up. "He keeps it all in his head" I was told – unfortunately, he was abroad on holiday, and incommunicado.

As time moves on, we have to add in to the mix the range of time recording and case management systems (who knew there were so many?), rules about voice mail messages, e-mail (deleting an e-mail was a sin of some magnitude, apparently), as well as whether or not to leave the computer switched on.

The law, I hear you ask. Fortunately, that is the bit that doesn't change from firm to firm. Many firms are of course friendly and organized. These are the firms to which you return. Other firms who ask you back, may find that your diary is full.