COLLAS CRILL

Legal life: past, present and future

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Paul Nettleship, head of Collas Crill's Property team in Guernsey, reflects on changes to the legal profession since he qualified, his current role and the potential impact of AI on legal services.

How has the legal profession changed since you started?

I joined what was Collas Day in 2002, nine years before the firm's merger with Crill Canavan in Jersey. I started life in corporate law. Back then, the Guernsey Bar consisted of fewer than 100 Advocates, which I recall at the time was significant increase from the previous decade or so. Now the Bar numbers around 250.

As well as a growth in the number of lawyers, practice areas have become more specialised. Many years ago an Advocate would be a jack of all trades, similar to a GP. People would go to their family advocate for help with conveyancing, wills, matrimonial matters, setting up a company or trust, and even criminal law. Over the years, as the Channel Islands and their various industries have matured, the legal sector has specialised in order to meet growing demands and increasingly nuanced areas of the law.

What do you love about your job?

I work with fantastic clients and head up a great team. We deal with all aspects of real property from everyday conveyancing to acquisitions, disposals, financing and letting of the island's most prestigious commercial buildings, such as the development at Guernsey's Admiral Park. We recently hired a senior planning consultant, who joined us from the States of Guernsey Planning Service, and advises on both Guernsey and Jersey planning matters. Our team has been ranked in the top tier of industry directories for well over 15 years, which is all credit to their collective hard work and expertise.

Another source of great pride is our trainee offering. Collas Crill was an early adopter of the SQE route to qualification which we run alongside the traditional training contract. I take immense pleasure in seeing our trainees develop and it is great to see so many of them qualify as Advocates. Many also progress through to partnership with us over the years, as I did before them.

Collas Crill is a firm that never stands still, and we are always seeking our next challenge. When I began my career, we were a single-jurisdiction firm of around 30 employees and six partners. We have grown significantly since then, today working across five jurisdictions with 260 employees, and 40 partners. Our ability to adapt and evolve makes for a stimulating and rewarding culture.

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What do you think the future holds for the legal sector, especially with the changing pace of technology?

I bore many friends and colleagues with my interest in technology and the recent advent of generative AI. I believe it will revolutionise so many industries in ways we cannot yet fully appreciate.

The legal profession will, of course, be one of them. We have recently issued internal guidance on the use of software like ChatGPT within our firm, a tool which has the potential to drive significant efficiencies , but one which must be used with great care. Drafting is one use which could lead to cost savings for clients, although there will still be the need for human intervention to check and approve.

Will AI replace lawyers? Not in the near future, in my opinion. But use of technology will undoubtedly continue to create efficiencies that can be harnessed to provide a better service for our clients.

Words of advice for those embarking on a career in law?

Trainees come to us with strong academic knowledge, but putting this into practice is not always easy. Lawyers have to anticipate risk and mitigate it. We deal with real people and real situations, and much of what we do is problem solving. So be prepared to learn and keep an open mind. Clear and concise communication is also important. And above all, a positive attitude is key.

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