

Student Life #5: Structure of Articling Year

In this section, we discuss how the articling year is structured. We have found that, because students are often so focused on finding a firm in which to article, they do not always have a good sense of what actually happens during this year. We hope this brief discussion provides you with an indication of what you can expect when you commence articles.

If you require more detailed information, you should look at the “Licensing and Membership” section of the Law Society of British Columbia’s website at www.lawsociety.bc.ca.

How long must I article?

With the exception of those students who clerk with the courts (see below), all students must article for nearly one year. The article is broken into two periods: (a) approximately nine months of “apprenticing” with a lawyer, law firm, company, or government agency, and (b) ten weeks at the Professional Legal Training Course (“PLTC”).

When do I start articling?

There is no specific time at which students must start articling. The start date is usually determined by the law firm in conjunction with the student. Students will often determine their start date based upon when they can take PLTC. Most law firms try to be flexible about articling start dates. At Alexander Holburn, we do our best to accommodate a student’s preference.

What is PLTC?

PLTC is the Law Society’s bar admission course. Successful completion of the course is a requirement for law school

graduates seeking call and admission to the bar in British Columbia. PLTC is intended to help students reach the entry-level competence necessary to practice law in BC.

PLTC is taught in a series of components focused on eight legal areas: commercial, company, estates, real estate, family, civil, criminal procedure, and creditor’s remedies. Professional responsibility and practice management issues are also addressed within the discussion of these topics. There are four marked assignments during the PLTC session, assessing advocacy, writing, drafting, and interviewing, respectively. In addition, there is a criminal law cross-examination exercise and a mock civil trial; students receive feedback on these two exercises although they are not evaluated. At the end of the ten weeks, PLTC concludes with two examinations, each three hours long.

When can I take PLTC?

The Law Society of British Columbia offers three PLTC sessions per year, commencing in February, May, and September. Sessions have limited seating, so students might not always get their first choice of session; admission to the various PLTC sessions is at the discretion of the Law Society. The May session is generally the most popular, and thus tends to fill up quickly.

Does it matter which PLTC session I take?

We are often asked by students whether there is an advantage to taking PLTC at a certain time – i.e. whether it is better to take the May session than the September or February sessions. While there are many different opinions on this issue, our

view is that there is no one correct answer. The best timing for PLTC will depend upon a student's personal objectives, namely whether they want to start work immediately after law school or take some time off first. It may also depend upon the timing of the hire back/evaluation process of a particular law firm.

The only recommendation we would make with respect to the timing of PLTC is to take the course at the beginning or end of your time "in office". In other words, do not interrupt your work experience by taking PLTC in the middle of the nine months. It breaks the continuity of your learning experience and makes it difficult for you to work on some matters from start to finish. It also means that you may not have as much time to make an impression upon your firm, as you will commence PLTC just when you have started to develop important connections in the workplace.

What happens when I start at a law firm?

At Alexander Holburn we have an extensive orientation for our summer and articling students, to ensure that they have a smooth transition into legal practice.

Our orientation begins by introducing our students to all of our lawyers and their respective practice areas. Our hope is that our students will immediately know that our lawyers are approachable and feel comfortable seeking out work in their primary areas of interest. Students then receive extensive training on our firm practices and policies, technology systems, library, office equipment, and accounting procedures. They are also given a tour of the courthouse and encouraged to spend some time watching civil chambers.

Our goal is that, by the end of the first week, our students will be informed members of our team who are ready to dive into legal practice.

What can I expect to do when I am in a law firm?

The type of work that students perform during their articles can run the gamut of legal practice. The only requirements are set out by the Law Society in its "Articling Skills and Practice Checklist". These requirements include practical experience in: ethics; practice management; "lawyering" skills, including research, writing, drafting, advocacy, negotiation, interviewing, and problem solving; and three substantive practice areas. Because these requirements are quite general, articling students should try to find out as much as they can about a firm before accepting an articling position, to ensure that they get the most from their articling experience.

At Alexander Holburn, the nature of our practice permits us to offer articulated students with a high quality, broadly-based legal experience, as well as exposure to specialized areas. We do not have a centralized work distribution system; rather, our students liaise with our lawyers directly. We believe that this affords our students with more flexibility to seek out the type of work in which they have an interest. Our articling students are placed in a rotational system, to ensure that they work with lawyers in our litigation and business law practices. However, we recognize that our students may have a special interest in one or more practice areas and we do everything possible to assist them to obtain experience in those areas.

Can I expect feedback/evaluations when I article?

This will depend on the firm. At Alexander Holburn, we have two formal evaluations during the nine month period that students spend in the office, the first after four months, the second after seven months (when we let students know about hiring decisions). Our formal evaluations seek feedback from all of the lawyers with whom the student has worked, and our Director of Associates and Students meets with the student to discuss the results. We also encourage our lawyers to provide students with feedback throughout the articling process, to ensure that it is both a working and learning experience.

Other than PLTC, is there any formal training I can receive when articling?

As far as “in-house” training goes, this will again depend on the firm. At Alexander Holburn, we have our Ascend™ Training Program, one of the most comprehensive in-house training programs of law firms in the country. Ascend™ includes over 100 sessions annually in law, technology, and business-related topics. Although our students are welcome to attend almost all of the firm’s Ascend™ sessions, we also have a “student bootcamp” series of seminars and additional bi-weekly lunch seminars specifically for students, on substantive, procedural, and practical legal issues.

In addition, the CBA and other organizations offer courses on various legal topics throughout the year, which are open to both lawyers and students alike. At Alexander Holburn, we happily pay the cost to have our students to attend two of these courses of their choosing during the articling period.

Is there a mentorship program when I article?

The Law Society requires that each articling student be assigned a “principal”,

a senior lawyer who oversees their progress during their articles. In most firms, this person will play a mentorship role with the student.

In addition to the principal, at Alexander Holburn we have established a mentorship “network” for all of our students. Each student is assigned an “advisor”, a junior lawyer who plays a direct mentorship role with a student. We also have a Director of Associates and Students and a Student Committee, so that our students have several lawyers they can turn to for support during their articles.

Is there a special articling pattern for law clerks?

The regular nine-month articling term can be reduced by the completion of a clerkship with a superior court in Canada. A student who has completed a clerkship of not less than eight months can request a reduction in the nine-month articling period by an amount of time equal to one-half of time served as a law clerk, to a maximum of five months.

In practice, this means that most law clerks only have to article in a firm for four months, plus the ten weeks at PLTC.

At Alexander Holburn, we believe clerking is a valuable experience. We encourage students to apply for a clerkship if they are so interested. Although our students who have clerked only have to article in the office for four months, we still guarantee them employment for the full period. Once called to the bar, they can continue their articling rotations in the same manner as if still a student, although they are paid as a first year associate.