

It firm college



Two years on, though, and the legal profession's fears have proved to be largely unfounded, with Sobering Essays admitting earlier this week that the legal graduate job application market hasn't turned out to be as lucrative as it had hoped. In 2009, Sobering Training Contracts (ETC) - as Sobering Essays' law graduate job application spin off is known - claimed to be assisting 75-100 law students a month on tasks ranging from model application form essays and cover letters, to a "chaperone" service that provided students with a "specialist" to escort them to their interviews.

But Sobering Essays' head of sales, John Foster, says "a commercial decision" has recently been taken to "focus less on the training contract and pupillage side of the business" -? despite this being the busiest time of year for graduate legal job applications and the junior lawyer graduate recruitment market facing a surge of candidates. So what went wrong? Foster is reluctant to elaborate on his basic explanation that the "pool of people wanting this type of assistance is relatively small", adding that the few inquiries ETC has had over the last few months have "tended to come from people using other services offered by Sobering Essays".

It's not easy to find someone who will admit to using ETC, and Foster refused my request to be put in touch with any clients on confidentiality grounds, but the suspicion among law students is that the prices charged aren't justified by the results. Catering Selenga, a paralegal at Attwood solicitors, sums up the low esteem that the ETC is held in by many recent law graduates when she describes some of its work as "hilarious".

This criticism is borne out by the bizarre nature of some of the model answers posted on the company's website. For example, Tot's customized answer for an Inns of Court scholarship interview, which costs between £1,000 and £2,000 depending on the level of seniority of the lawyer commissioned to author it and the length of time it "It may not be the best thing to say but all the Inns are beautiful and offer fairly similar services.

I wanted to go with whichever Inn I felt a greater attachment to and that was Lincoln Inn, primarily because I used to walk through New Square past Wild's each day on the way to university and was able to picture myself working in the gardens for which Lord Denning used to care from time to time in his later years, or drinking tea in the newly refurbished NCR!

Confusion about who exactly writes these model answers may also have acted as a turnoff to students. On one page of Tot's website the company states that it "uses a growing team of skilled and experienced Sobering-educated and Magic Circle-trained lawyers, trainees, pupils and top lawyers-to-be", alongside "a small number of other specialists such as HR personnel. But elsewhere on the site the company seems to suggest that it uses lawyers at less elite firms.

Doubts over the legal expertise of these "specialists" is compounded by the argument that a lawyer providing some of the services offered by ETC could risk reaching their professional conduct obligations (barristers, for example, must avoid conduct that would "diminish public confidence" in the profession or "bring the bar into disrepute").

But even if law's governing bodies were prepared to take a relaxed view about their members getting involved with ETC, it's still unclear why someone earning big money, and working long hours, at a top law firm or barristers' chambers would choose to spend their limited free time in pursuit of a few extra quid writing covering letters. Foster puts it down to "altruism". The biggest factor behind Tot's failure to make it big, though, may simply be the here volume of free information out there available to assist wannabe lawyers. Sites such as Legwarmers. Et and Lawyerly allow students to build up a very detailed picture of the profession just by spending a few hours in front of a computer.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that one area of Tot's business that has continued to perform relatively strongly is its one-to-one interview coaching - a service that free websites are not able to offer. ETC isn't the only player in the law interview coaching market. Over the last two years, Judicial Appointments Training Oat) has extended its services preparing senior ewers for judicial appointments and silk applications to assisting law students looking for their first jobs.

Co-founder Mark Eliding, a former barrister, says the company sees at least a dozen students a month, despite not advertising its trainee interview preparation services. As with ETC, Cat refused my request to be put in touch with a student who had used the service - which costs £150 per hour - on confidentiality grounds. There is, however, a favorable review of it posted by one customer on the "Pupilage and how to get it" blog run by barrister Simon Emerson

The danger for students using this kind of service is that they risk being penalized, asking graduate applicants to disclose if they have received outside assistance at any point of the application and interview process.

Neither Eliding nor Foster thinks this is fair. " The question arises as to what is outside assistance? " asks the former. " Is it outside assistance to receive some kind of advice from a friend or a family member who happens to have a connection to the legal profession? " It's a fair point. And with grey areas like these, I don't imagine companies which target student job hunters will disappear any time soon.