

Portrait of a competent solicitor



A cheeky **Richard Barr** reminds solicitors to keep a spring in their step as the new training regime approaches



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All around me, fellow lawyers were talking loudly of their successes – of the judges they had wowed, the defendants they had bowed and the clients they had endowed (with fortunes). All I could offer as an achievement was a modest payment for a broken tooth.

The occasion was the annual rush to accumulate enough continuing professional development (CPD) points to keep us legal for another year. This will all change soon – when, instead, we will have to meet a proper standard of legal practice and of training and supervision. The changes are not with us yet. According to the SRA website they will not be implemented until November 2016, but I await with interest the statement from the SRA to be issued in the spring of 2015 which will indicate what a competent solicitor should look like.

In advance of the SRA guidelines, I venture a few suggestions. In order to provide balance, it will be necessary also to consider the characteristics of an incompetent solicitor.

An incompetent solicitor will: pay insufficient attention to personal hygiene; wear loud shirts bearing images of pitbull terriers and/or palm trees; will have shocking pink hair, have visible tattoos on face, neck and arm; have an excessive amount of ironwork dangling from mouth, both ears, and nostrils; wear trainers and odd socks; not wear a waistcoat when appearing before a county court judge; and will only eat junk food.

On the other hand, a competent solicitor will look the part: they will wear a suit with pinstripes so thick they will appear to have been drawn on in chalk (as indeed they will have been for legal aid solicitors who will not earn enough to enable them to buy expensive attire); will have a leather brief case with their initials monogrammed on it (or with someone else's if they picked up the wrong one from court); eat only wholesome food; and shower at least once a month.

Having condemned myself to the former category (I am still saving up for the ironwork and tattoos), let me resume my day out in London for my CPD points. The course was organised by the Association of Personal Injury

Lawyers (APIL) and was presented by veteran lecturer John McQuater. Besides terrifying me with all the things I did not know, he also mentioned the comedy sitcom *Is it Legal?* broadcast in the late 1990s.

On the basis that one always has to do what the teacher says, I ordered the complete set. If only one could be awarded CPD points for watching it, I am sure that most solicitors would painlessly comply.



Clients get in the way of work

Is it Legal? features a fictitious law firm Lotus, Spackman & Phelps and stars, among others, Imelda Staunton, the ferocious senior partner, Patrick Barlow, nervous downtrodden managing partner, Richard Lumsden, naive and drippy assistant solicitor and Kate Isitt, the smoulderingly attractive secretary who cannot spell.

It is a delicious, and startlingly realistic, spoof about a small solicitor's office. Much of it is refreshingly anarchic and politically incorrect. The only thing missing was that you barely ever saw a client – but maybe that makes for a perfect law firm.

Clients get in the way of work. What shines through is that Lotus, Spackman & Phelps was a fun place to work.

We are nearing the season of goodwill and office parties. These days, life is far too serious. Whether or not you look like a competent solicitor, my advice, as you approach the end of the year, is that you should all become a little silly. Start modestly with almost imperceptible tricks – a whoopee cushion here, a fake client there and build up gradually to the kind of caper that will either get you fired or ensure you are the hero of the firm.

There is a serious point here, for which I will award you one CPD minute: laughter and playing jokes are very good for you. It helps creativity and builds relationships. Anthropologist Isabel Behncke Izquierdo recently said on Radio 4: "Positive emotion literally opens your mind. Play is the chemistry of 'yes'. We like to contrast it to the physics of 'no'. The physics of 'no' is the state that you find very often, especially when confronting health and safety committees."

That's the message. If you must look like a competent solicitor, you should still strive to have fun. If, like me, you fall into the other category, enjoy it anyway and add *Is it Legal?* to your Christmas wish list. **SJ**

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