



Legal Supplier

Ryerson kicks off fourth year of Law Practice Program

By Kate Wallace, AdvocateDaily.com Contributor



[Ryerson University's Law Practice Program](#) (LPP) wasted no time putting its fourth cohort year participants to work, says Chris Bentley, managing director of the Toronto-based program.

“They hit the ground running,” Bentley, a former Ontario attorney general, who is also managing director of Ryerson Legal Innovation Zone, tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

“It's a complete departure from what they're used to, which is sitting in a large lecture hall, listening to somebody, and taking notes. It gets them out of their chairs and participating.”

It also gives the group of approximately 260 candidates an immediate taste of what the next eight months will be like in a dynamic, demanding program that prepares them for the reality of a career in law.

Founded four years ago, the LPP is an interactive and innovative option for licensing stream candidates for whom traditional articling may not be the best fit.

This year's group of candidates is split, as in earlier LPP groups, almost evenly between those who did their legal education in Canada and those who have studied — and even practised — abroad.

“The cohort reflects the province of Ontario,” Bentley says. Because they've been educated all over the world, there's a diversity in experiences.

“That's enriching,” Bentley says. “And, of course, there is a diversity of language, cultures, and perspectives.”

The program, which is more like work than school by design, is a vast departure from law school, simulating, in its first four months, the actual experience of working in law via a virtual firm. The second half of the program is a work placement.

Along with the remote, online work through the virtual law firm are three in-person weeks dispersed throughout the first half of the program. Candidates come together to do mock trials, compete in the Access to Justice Innovation Challenge, study intensive trial advocacy and dive into corporate counsel training.

This year, the LPP has heightened its emphasis on the business of law. Candidates have always had to create a business plan as though they would be setting up a private-practice firm following graduation.

“We've always had some of these elements, we're just taking it to a different level,” Bentley says.

Candidates will delve more deeply than ever into aspects of business such as marketing, technology and human resources.

“The other key piece is the money,” Bentley says. “Law school doesn't emphasize the business of law, so not everyone is financially literate. Do they know what an income statement and a balance sheet actually are? Can they do a cash flow statement? Can they figure out the cost of goods sold?”

Business and financial skills aren't just of use to those who will go into private practice.

“Figuring out what makes you money helps you structure your practice,” Bentley says. Even those who'll go on to roles as in-house counsel benefit from understanding how they contribute to their organization's bottom line.

“Success as a lawyer is about your substantive knowledge, it's about your ability to deliver the product, but it's also about your ability to survive financially, whether you're on your own or in an organization,” he says. “If you don't understand the money, how do you do that in an increasingly competitive legal world?”

Another change this year is an intensification of the LPP's Access to Justice Innovation Challenge, in which firms are tasked with devising faster, simpler, and cheaper legal solutions.

“This year, we’re greatly expanding the knowledge and support we’re providing to the candidates in terms of innovative approaches,” Bentley says, such as design thinking, data analytics, emerging technologies, and the [Lean](#) business model.

For the first time, firms will be asked to think beyond domestic issues, to tackle a legal problem anywhere in the world.

“It’s one of a number of ways of emphasizing the legal market they may be serving is not just Ontario,” Bentley says. “It’s important to think about how they deliver their expertise.”

The innovation challenge reflects the LPP’s emphasis on experimentation.

“It’s not like we’re publishing a leather-bound book, and we’re stuck with the same pages year after year,” Bentley says. “We’re prepared to change. We’re prepared to move with the market and meet the needs of our candidates.

“Most of all, we’re prepared to move with the needs of consumers, because at the end of the day, lawyers succeed when they serve the people they’re supposed to be serving: the consumer.”

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