

TRAINEE INSIGHTS SKILLS AND APPROACHES TO LEARNING

JULIA ROBINSON | PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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Julia Robinson

Kwasi Yeboah: Hi, my name is Kwasi Yeboah.

Emilio Fabrizi: Hello, my name is Emilio Fabrizi.

Kwasi Yeboah: Welcome to our *Trainee Insights* podcast series, home of discussions about life as a trainee or a junior lawyer at Ropes & Gray in London. The podcast is for anyone who has an interest in building a successful career at the firm’s London office. We’re delighted today to be joined by Julia Robinson.

Emilio Fabrizi: Julia is the senior manager for professional development and training here at the firm. She’s had a varied and interesting career, having started out as a corporate lawyer, then teaching law on the legal practice course before turning to private practice to support lawyers with their learning and development, from their training contracts through to partnership. Julia, it’s great to have you with us today. We hope you’re well and are having a great start to the new year.

Julia Robinson: I’m doing well. I’ve been looking forward to this conversation, so thanks for inviting me.

Kwasi Yeboah: It’s our pleasure, and we’re looking forward to hearing all of the insights you can share with us today, so thanks for joining us.

Emilio Fabrizi: For everyone listening, our intention for this episode is to get some insights into the skills required to become an effective lawyer, and how to learn effectively in

this role. This is the first episode in our mini-series on training and professional development, and it’s titled “Skills and Approaches to Learning.”

Kwasi Yeboah: Law is an evolving area, both in terms of the nature of the law itself, and the type of service required by clients. So, Julia, why is it important to develop a wide range of skills in this kind of environment?

Julia Robinson: It’s always important as a lawyer that you stay up to date on your area of practice, and the expectation is that you’re an excellent lawyer, technically, but that really is just the beginning. What makes a lawyer stand out really at any stage of their career, whether as a junior or later on, is what it’s like for people to work with them. It doesn’t matter how good you are, if you’re poor at delegation or time management, or for the later stage, presenting or leading a team—that is going to hold you back. So, the key is to develop that range of other skills and continue to have a learning mindset because that’s the way you future-proof yourself in terms of the changes that there will inevitably be within your firm, within your practice area, within the market, and as we’ve experienced with the pandemic, obviously the wider world.

Emilio Fabrizi: I think as a junior lawyer trainee, when you start off, there’s a lot to learn and you’re almost thrown into things, but I think that’s great to get that experience very early on because it will stay with you throughout your career, as you touched on. The idea that you qualify and that’s it just isn’t the case, and you are constantly learning and trying to develop skills to make you a better practitioner. So, in light of that, what key skills do junior lawyers require to thrive in the industry, and do you think those skills really change rapidly over the course of a legal career?

Julia Robinson: I think obviously as an NQ and as a trainee, you are focused on technical expertise, and that is completely understandable, but alongside that, you should start building your skills foundation, and I think there’s probably two main

buckets for that. One is how you manage yourself is key. So, your ability to prioritize, to keep people informed, to think ahead, basic project management—those are all really key as a junior. And then, on the communication front, this is an area where you can really let yourself down, no matter how good you are technically—or equally, you can actually have an out-sized impact positively if you get it right. So, how clear are your emails? Is the tone right? Do you speak up enough in meetings? As you get more senior, things like how well you delegate and motivate others. You're not going to be able to progress to that more senior work, and all the opportunities that that brings, until you master those skills.

Kwasi Yeboah: I think this whole idea of building the skills foundation is a key one. And that's why it's so useful to have someone like you at the firm, because you can, I suppose, get so caught up in the work and wanting to be the most technical lawyer out there that you lose sight of some of this stuff. But I think one of the things that you've spoken about previously, which seems to be at the core of having a good skills foundation, is this idea of having strong emotional intelligence. Why is that principle so important in particular?

Julia Robinson: I think there's two pieces there. I think the first part is actually just what you were saying about when you're a junior, there's just so many things that you're learning—and on that, I would always say, “little or nothing.” So, you're not trying to develop all skills at full pelt all the time—put your focus on different skills at different points so you actually can give it a bit of focus, and know that just a small amount of progress in each area over time will really add up. But coming back to your second point about emotional intelligence, I think the reason that I do highlight that is because I think it really is important in so many aspects of the role. It's very important in communicating with clients. It's very important with communicating to anyone that you manage or delegate to. Also with understanding what might be going on with the people who are delegating to you and managing you, and also with the support staff that you're going to be working with. So, it's something that if you develop it, it will be beneficial in lots of ways. To give an example, our office managing partner has great emotional intelligence, and that really came through in his communications to us in those early days of remote working. I'm sure I'm not the only one who had this real

sense of the closeness with the office, even though we were geographically far apart, and that's because he really tuned in and was very aware of what people were feeling and really was able to communicate with us with that in mind. It's also something, actually, that comes up in the firm's client feedback. When clients are asked to give feedback on their experience with the firm, they actually really enjoy working with our lawyers as people, and that's a very important differentiator for us because it's not a phrase that maybe would come up with all the law firms that they work with, so it's important in that way, as well.

Kwasi Yeboah: Julia, it's not surprising to me that that comes up in our internal feedback, that we do have this emotional intelligence, because I think that's something that we experience even at a junior level. During the pandemic, whenever people were giving us work, they'd be conscious of the fact that, for example, as a trainee, you might have not met everyone on your team, or you don't have that direct one-and-one contact, and so it was something that they constantly referenced and would always make sure and encourage you to feel free to reach out, pick up the phone and call people. So, that consciousness and awareness of how someone else you work with might be feeling is really something that comes through in our training as well. But you're obviously someone that knows a lot about skills and training, and so it's great to have someone like you spearheading the training program at Ropes & Gray in terms of skills. Can you tell us a bit more about Ropes & Gray London's training and professional development strategy in terms of facilitating junior lawyers' ability to develop the necessary skill set to thrive?

Julia Robinson: I think one of the things that we try and do is to stay really close to the junior lawyer experience. So, [we] have lots of conversations with you about what's going on and what you're experiencing, so that we can really respond quickly to changing needs. And also, that when we are delivering training, we think about different formats—we do one-to-one, small group, bigger webinars, so there's a real range of ways that people can work on particular skills. To give you an example, we were getting some feedback that as our office has been expanding, junior lawyers are saying that they wanted some extra training on delegation because as we were expanding, there's a bigger trainee intake, and that meant that they were getting opportunities to delegate

earlier in their careers. So, where previously we'd had some delegation training at a certain point, we were then bringing it forward so that more junior lawyers could have that training as well. And what we did was within a few weeks of hearing those kind of comments, we ran some workshops, so they had a chance to come together and to talk about delegation and to practice some skills. But also, we offer one-to-one development on delegation—I actually did a session this morning with an associate on this, and what's good about that way of training on something like delegation is we can really personalize it to talk about their experience with delegating, what they might find difficult, and then come up with an individual plan as to how they're going to develop that skill. So, that's work I really enjoy.

In terms of the wider program that we have throughout the year, what we emphasize is things that are interesting, such as new offerings. So, some topics that we've covered: Writing for publications (when our juniors are writing their path approach), sessions around how you build trust, sessions around how you collaborate most effectively, and something for the current time—how do you navigate networking in times when sometimes it's easier than others at the moment to meet people face-to-face. We went with experts on this, so there's a real emphasis on new, fresh, evidence-based approaches. The way I think about it is all of our lawyers are busy people, and if there's something that they find themselves—if they're in a bookshop or they're traveling, and they pick up a book or they listen to a podcast—on something that's skills-related, then that's a light bulb for me because if that's something that they want to work on outside of work, then really I want to make sure that training is available to them as part of our training program. So, I really listen out for the book that someone's got on their bedside table or the podcast that they're listening to, and hear what those themes are so that we can incorporate it into our training offering to really make the best use of their time.

Emilio Fabrizi: Touching on those points, I can say that from my experience through the training contract, it's definitely felt very personal, the training that I've received, with it specifically being tailored to the seat, and it's pertinent not only at that time, but even down to the minutiae of the timing of the training. Those training sessions when you're the trainee at the very start of your seat, the idea being that before we were

given that task, you at least have an idea and have had some experience. In terms of the demand, there are some training sessions which have been incredibly popular, which I've been part of, such as the fast ethics and reading training session that we hold. And if it is fully subscribed, it's always been nice to know that the firm will go out and reorganize that training again, or if you've missed this and you really want to make it, there will be other opportunities, so we definitely have that personal feeling here when it comes to our training and our development. For you, what are some of the highlights of our professional development training offering, and what can we expect moving forward for 2022?

Julia Robinson: Just to pick up on your last point about the flexibility of it, that's something I really pride myself on in terms of our team's responsiveness. I think it comes from the size of the office, so it is possible for us to add an extra session if it's over-subscribed, or bring in a new session at fairly short notice. It's just sometimes not so easy with extremely large cohorts, so that is a real positive. So, highlights for 2022—there is so much training. Last year, we had over 600 sessions in London—that's just in London. About 100 of those were trainees, and it is this mix of skills, technical practice group trainings and coaching. We just launched at the end of last year a new skills program for newly qualified, so that was a new thing that we introduced. Again, because we've got this larger NQ cohort now, and we'll also be introducing next year a new trainee training program as part of the transition to SQE.

But before we get to that, just to give you a sense of what's going on right now, there are a couple of topics that we're focusing on in these next few months, and those are presenting and coaching. We're doing this in multiple different ways. As an example, we've got one-to-one sessions available, both in-person and on Zoom, so one-to-one with an expert who then helps you to practice in the relevant medium. If you're going to be presenting in person, obviously you want the one-to-one sessions to be in person, but if you're going to be presenting on Zoom, it's actually quite helpful to be on Zoom to do that practice, so we've got the two options there. We've also got asynchronous resources like videos to watch and articles about presenting. And then, something I'm really looking forward to next month is we've got a live series of talks by an author, John-Paul Flintoff. He's going to be talking

to us more about impromptu lessons for when we're presenting, where you have to get up for a few minutes and say a few words (not going in with a PowerPoint), so that will be an interesting series, as well.

On the coaching front, these last couple of weeks, we've had some sessions on proactively managing your career, and this is really about self-coaching. This is in addition to the one-to-one coaching that we offer, but there is also a role that we can all play in coaching ourselves, and so, those sessions are about that. And then, in April, we'll be running a series on developing coaching skills for managing others. Again, this is aimed at associates, and it's helping them develop more nuanced skills to delegate things and managing others through coaching. So, hopefully, that gives the listeners an idea of the trainings that we provide.

Emilio Fabrizi: Yes, there's definitely plenty to offer, and a lot available. But I think what's nice is it's very evenly spread—it's not top-heavy, it's not bottom-heavy. At whatever stage you are in your career, there's suitable training and enough training for you. And for our listeners, it's amazing to know that come the time of qualification, there's an NQ skills program, but also how the firm is very adaptable. You touched on it earlier with the pandemic and working from home, when suddenly you start having to do your job and speaking with clients through other forms of media, which you aren't used to using, or having to present on Zoom, and

making that transition isn't necessarily easy, so being able to have training and develop your skills there is certainly very helpful and useful. It just adds another string to your bow in terms of how you're dealing and how you can better yourself as a lawyer, to not just be static and able to operate in, let's say, the traditional way, but you can go and engage with clients or other lawyers through the methods that we have become accustomed to, like Zoom.

On that note, we'd like to say thank you to our listeners. We hope you enjoyed this discussion today—it was something slightly different, and giving you an insight, I guess, to other aspects of the law firm and your professional development and what it means to be a lawyer. For more information about Ropes & Gray in London, including career opportunities, please visit www.ropesgrayrecruiting.com/UK. Please follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), both at @RopesGrayGrads, and feel free to get in touch with us via those social media handles if you have any questions or thoughts for future episodes. You can also subscribe to this series wherever you typically listen to podcasts, including on [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#).

Kwasi Yeboah: We hope you can join us on our next episode, where we'll be talking to other inspirational figures at Ropes & Gray, providing you with insights into the firm's culture and how you can succeed as a trainee or junior lawyer. And also, look out for episodes in our trainee miniseries. But in the meantime, take care, and thanks for listening.

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