

Japanese Works!

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Job title: Associate

Company and location: Baker & McKenzie LLP

Industry sector: legal services



Background: Worked on JET for 1 year as Coordinator for International Relations at Hiroshima City Hall before going to law school and then joining Baker & McKenzie as a trainee solicitor in September 2004. Qualified as a solicitor in September 2006.

1. What does your job involve?

As an international law firm Baker & McKenzie handles an extremely broad variety of commercial legal work all around the world and this is reflected in the type of work I am involved in. My job usually involves working on a broad variety of matters ranging from large corporate takeovers and complex litigation to providing clients with legal advice relating to the launch of new products and services. Being a member of Baker & McKenzie's Japan Practice Group, I also get involved in the firm's sponsorship of events such as the Japanese Speech Contest for University Students and the Sir Peter Parker Awards for Spoken Business Japanese.

2. How much Japanese do you use in your job?

In London, I mainly use Japanese in the context of business development and client care but while I was on secondment to our Tokyo office in 2006 I used both my written and oral Japanese skills everyday as most of the matters handled by the Tokyo office involve Japanese legal issues and a large amount of Japanese documentation.

3. What has been the highlight of your Japanese career to date?

Towards the end of my Tokyo secondment I was responsible for coordinating a substantial project that involved advising a high profile Japanese industry body with advice relating to complex financial regulatory issues under UK law. This matter was challenging and interesting because it necessitated not only advising the client (in both English and Japanese) on complex UK legal issues but also arranging for a delegation from the client to come to the UK and meet up with various industry representatives, lawyers and academics. I also had to accompany the delegation during their visit to the UK and to use my Japanese skills to assist them in understanding English legal concepts which often differed greatly from the Japanese legal concepts that they were familiar with. Although very challenging at times it was fascinating to have such a central role in a project of this nature and a great opportunity to use my Japanese skills.

4. How has past experience helped?

Working as a CIR on JET undoubtedly helped to deepen my understanding of how Japanese organisations operate and was a great opportunity to improve my oral and written Japanese skills as my role involved a lot of translation and organising events to promote international relations.

5. What do you enjoy most about your job?

As the law never stands still and is always changing to reflect the constantly evolving nature of international business there are always new issues to consider and developments to keep abreast of – it's a stimulating mix of academic study and offering practical advice to businesses involved in cutting edge developments and issues.

6. What advice would you give to students hoping to use Japanese in their careers?

First, look for opportunities to apply and develop your Japanese language skills in new and interesting ways so that you can maintain your motivation and develop your Japanese language skills to a very high level. When I was a foreign student in Japan during my university degree I worked as a volunteer tour guide for a Zen garden in Kyoto which involved giving tours of the garden to Japanese tourists in Japanese. Not only did this help to improve my spoken Japanese and improve my confidence it also gave me the opportunity to talk to a wide range of Japanese people and learn more about modern Japanese society which in itself was very interesting and gave me a lot of motivation to keep studying.

Second, use access to the Japanese media (the internet's a great tool as most Japanese newspapers can be accessed online for free) to read up on developments in modern Japanese society and try to identify what types of career opportunities are out there in areas which interest you. For instance, there have been a lot of reforms recently in relation to the provision of legal services in Japan which in turn has given rise to even more opportunities for foreign qualified lawyers to work in Japan.

Lastly, try to obtain independent qualifications such as the Japanese Language Proficiency Tests as these are recognised all around the world. Not only does studying for levels 4, 3, 2 and 1 of these tests focus your study and help you to improve your reading, writing and listening skills but they look good on your CV and should be familiar to any employer who operates in Japan or works with Japanese companies.

7. Any other comments?

If you are committed to using Japanese in your career then you need to make sure that you develop your language skills to a level that is useful to future employers. It is invaluable to gain experience of living and working in Japan and to have qualifications such as Level 1 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test as these are the sorts of things that employers will often look for when recruiting.