

CLM’s Summer Clerk Programme: Where legal Careers Begin

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Every year Cooney Lees Morgan welcomes law students into our Summer Clerk Programme, offering the chance to step beyond the lecture theatre and into legal practice.

The programme is designed to bridge the gap between university study and the

realities of working in a commercial law firm, giving students a genuine insight into what their future legal career might look like.

Summer Clerks are embedded within our practice teams and paired with experienced mentors. From developing practical skills to observing how matters are managed day-to-day, students gain a clear understanding of professional expectations and the culture of our firm.

As this year’s clerks prepare to head back to their final year or two of study, they share their experiences of the programme and the lessons they will take back to university. Their reflections show why CLM’s Summer Clerkship is a valuable opportunity for students considering their next step, and why it’s a key part of our firm’s commitment to developing future talent.

Esme Thomas – studying conjoint Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Arts (International Relations) at Victoria University

What was your first impression of the firm when you started, and how did it compare to what you expected a law firm to be like?

The very first thing we did on our first day was be taken around the entire firm for introductions. Mitchell, another Summer Clerk, turned to me at one stage and said, surprised, “Everyone is so nice.” I’ve thought about that moment as the summer has gone on and how perfectly it sums up the experience working at Cooney’s. Above all else, they value the people and relationships, and that is reflected in every aspect of the work. As a Summer Clerk you expect to be the ‘bottom of the food chain’, but Cooneys made it very clear right from the get-go that we were valued members of a big team.

In what ways have senior lawyers or mentors supported you during your clerkship? Being a part of the PCT and Family team, I was spoiled with the senior lawyers and mentors in my corner. From the first day, people of all levels were asking what I was interested in and went out of their way to find work that would teach me new skills and broaden my horizons. I was very lucky to have the best buddy, Nellie, who guided me through the entire experience with kindness and honesty. I also have to

give a special mention to Greg, who gave me his Taylor Swift poster for my desk to make me feel at home.

What’s something you learned during your time at CLM that you didn’t realise you didn’t know before stepping into a firm?

The thing I learned the most was how a law firm worked. Just sitting at my desk, I was surrounded by legal assistants, senior lawyers (one who had been there for over 40 years!), and our team partners. Being in a completely open-plan office, every day was a master class. It opened my eyes to the diversity of work within one team, and the value of each individual. You learn so much from the work, but the real education was in the experience.

What do you think sets CLM apart from other law firms students might be considering?

Without a doubt, it is the personal connections and valued relationships you get working at Cooneys. You hear horror stories of a summer of running coffees or late hours, but the experience here could not be more different if it tried. There is a genuine interest in you as a person, your well-being, your development, and your education, as well as trust and respect that you don’t expect from an intern role. You are here to learn, and that is true to the experience you will get.

Lily Hodgson – studying conjoint Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Arts (psychology) at University of Auckland

What have you enjoyed most about day-to-day life at CLM, both in and out of the office?

I have just genuinely loved being part of the CLM team. It truly feels like one big family. Everyone has been incredibly welcoming, friendly, and consistently gone out of their way to include us in both work and social events. People are always happy to chat, offer advice, lend a hand, and make sure you feel fully supported throughout your time here. There really is never a silly question as everyone is always willing to help. It has been an incredible environment to learn and grow in.

Can you give an example of a project or task that really stretched you or made you feel part of the team?

I’ve been fortunate to work on some really engaging matters, and I’ve felt really involved in the client work I’ve contributed to, especially when I’ve had follow-on tasks for the same file. The work that stretched me the most was the more bespoke drafting. At the beginning, it was hard to feel confident because it wasn’t always clear whether I was on the right track. My buddy was incredibly supportive throughout and has played a huge role in building my confidence in this area. It’s also where I’ve seen the most personal growth. I now feel comfortable bringing this work forward and really value the feedback I receive, especially when changes are explained and talked through which they always are. Those tasks have often felt like a shared project between me and the author, which has made the learning experience even better.

How did the transition from university study to full-time work in a law firm feel, and what helped you adjust?

The hardest part of the transition was probably going straight from exams to moving back to Tauranga and starting full-time work just three days later, but at no point did I feel burnt out or unsupported. Everyone checked in about how exams went and even wished us well before we’d officially started. The team did a fantastic job of gently easing us into full-time work and giving us the space to find our feet. CLM is an incredibly compassionate and understanding workplace, and it honestly made the whole transition feel seamless.

How has this experience influenced what you’re looking for in your future legal career?

Working at CLM has really shown me how much a positive work environment matters. Being part of a team whose values align with your own, and who genuinely care about each other’s wellbeing and success makes an enormous difference. That sense of support was obvious from day one and has only become stronger throughout my time here.

I’ve built some great connections and feel incredibly fortunate to have had such meaningful exposure to the area of law I’ve been working in. That experience has

given me real confidence that I would enjoy pursuing this area in my future career. I’ve also loved being part of the Corporate & Commercial team for the entire programme and gaining such consistent, hands-on experience, something quite unique to the CLM Summer Clerk Programme, and something I really hope continues.

Mitchell Cole – studying Bachelor of Laws with Honours at University of Auckland

How would you describe the culture at CLM, and did anything about it surprise you?

The culture is fantastic. Even in my interview back in April, we were laughing with each other the whole time. It’s no different in the office, and it really lifts your mood. I look forward to going to work every day, and the people I’m there with are a massive part of that. When the environment feels positive and people enjoy being there, productivity and quality of work naturally increase because everyone is engaged and motivated. And everyone goes home at 5pm on the dot, which I certainly can’t complain about.

There was also a real lack of hierarchy. Everyone was willing to go out of their way to teach me something new or give advice on what I was working on, regardless of their role. Being able to learn from people with so much experience and knowledge was such a privilege. It really felt like they were genuinely invested in my development.

Has working at CLM opened your eyes to career opportunities you hadn’t previously considered?

Yes – absolutely, and in so many ways. Before this summer, I was intent on working in family law in Auckland, where I study. While my passion for family law hasn’t faded, I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my time in the Corporate & Commercial Team. I now see commercial work as a potentially very fulfilling career option. Some of my favourite moments this summer have been seeing the businesses I’ve helped grow and realising the tangible impact of my work.

Regional work is awesome. The quality of work is very high, but it doesn’t come

with the ultra-competitive and stressful corporate environment. I love that my commute is only 10 minutes, even in peak traffic. Everything I need is 15 minutes away at most, and there’s a real sense of community here that would be hard to find in a larger city.

How has the work you’ve done over summer complemented or changed how you approach your final year of study?

I’ve gained invaluable experience from this clerkship that will directly support my study. It will be incredible to be able to instantly recognise where course content fits into real-world situations and how it applies in practice. This summer has also taught me to slow down and use the time I’m given to really polish my final product. No doubt my academic transcript will be thanking me.

Some advice that I have received from so many people is to take the courses that I think I will enjoy, rather than thinking about how it would impact my career. I’ve also developed a massive appreciation for a three-monitor setup and a Herman Miller chair – I’ll definitely be making some upgrades to my university setup.

What advice would you give to law students thinking about applying for CLM’s Summer Clerk Programme?

Everybody should apply. I started this summer having spent a collective 10 hours in Tauranga in my life, and I knew nobody in the area. But I’ll be leaving having gained invaluable experience, great connections and some amazing friends.

My biggest advice is to just be yourself. Cooneys is genuinely interested in your quirks and the things that make you unique. They were incredibly welcoming of my jar of Nutella on my desk, my niche interests and my oddball sense of humour. They aren’t expecting you to know anything – they’ll teach you everything you need. You have nothing to lose by applying and everything to gain. So just go for it.

Poppy Wilson – studying conjoint Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Commerce (Finance) at University of Otago

What attracted you to CLM’s Summer Clerk Programme in the first place, and what made you choose it over other firms?

Growing up in the Bay, I always heard that it was the firm to be at, known for striking the ideal balance between high-calibre work and well-rounded, grounded people. That combination really stood out to me. The chance to spend time at the Mount during summer was also an ideal perk. On top of that, I’d heard great things about the clerk programme and was told it’s not only a valuable and genuinely enjoyable experience, but also a great opportunity to put the legal skills I’ve developed at university into practice.

How would you describe the culture at CLM, particularly working alongside people at very different stages of their careers?

The culture at CLM is one of genuine warmth, collaboration, and respect across all stages of people’s careers. Initially, I was surprised by how kind, approachable, and down-to-earth everyone was. Cooneys brings together exceptionally talented people who balance a good sense of humour with a strong work ethic and a clear commitment to delivering for their clients.

What stood out most was how I was treated as an equal, despite being a university student. My ideas were valued, and I was trusted with meaningful tasks and responsibilities. I was especially lucky with my team, as lawyers at a range of levels were incredibly generous with their time as they made a real effort to involve me in substantive work and were always willing to answer my many questions.

This created an environment that was welcoming, motivating, and genuinely enjoyable to come to each day. I learned a great deal from individuals with vast expertise across different areas. The insights they shared will be invaluable as I continue developing my skills and shaping my future career.

What sort of work have you been involved in during your clerkship, and what surprised you about the scale or complexity of it?

I’ve been involved in a wide range of work as part of the property law team. My tasks have included preparing wills, reviewing property documents such as title reports and LIMs, and assisting with matters ranging from large-scale developments

to standard conveyancing. I’ve also contributed written work, including articles and case summaries, and undertaken research to support clients involved in disputes.

Beyond day-to-day work, I collaborated with the other Summer Clerks on a presentation exploring law in the age of climate change. A particular highlight of my time here was attending my first courtroom trial, which offered a valuable insight into litigation in practice.

The work has varied widely in both scope and complexity, and what’s surprised me most is how different the practical application of property law is compared with what we studied at university. My highlight, work-wise, was anything client-facing; I found it incredibly rewarding to interact with clients and observe matters unfold in person.

Has this experience changed or clarified how you see your future career in law? If so, how?

Absolutely. Practising law has differed fundamentally from what I’ve learned at university. I’ve genuinely enjoyed my time in the property team, and the experience has sparked a growing interest in the area. Looking ahead, legal practice continues to excite me, and this experience has made me very optimistic about my future in the profession. I’ve loved coming to work each day, tackling complex and interesting tasks, and building connections with talented, like-minded individuals. This experience has motivated me to keep learning and developing so I can become a more confident and capable lawyer. It’s reinforced that this is the kind of work environment where I can grow, contribute meaningfully, and build a career I’m genuinely proud of and enjoy.

Amelise Phillips – CLM Legal Assistant also studying a Bachelor of Laws at Queensland University of Technology

You’ve been part of CLM as a full-time Legal Assistant while studying law. How would you describe the culture of the firm, and what is it like as a practical, hands-on learning environment?

The word that stands out the most to me when trying to describe the culture at Cooney Lees Morgan is supportive. I was previously working in a law firm in Australia when my partner and I moved to New Zealand, and with that experience in hand, I can confidently say that CLM stands above the rest in their supportive and collaborative environment. I was drawn to CLM because of their representations that they value their staff and clients as human beings first, and that is certainly the case. One of the firm’s values is whanau and that is a value I see reflected every day in the mentorship I receive and the camaraderie between my colleagues.

This support reaches beyond feeling like a valued member of the team and extends to enabling me to learn new skills, ask questions, and develop professionally. Though my usual position is as a Legal Assistant in the Property and Development team, this summer, I was lucky enough to be offered the opportunity to participate in the Summer Clerkship Programme as part of our Family Team. This experience gave me the opportunity to learn about a completely different area of law and learn just how varied the legal industry can be, which I have been extremely grateful for.

How does your role at CLM shape your law studies and vice versa?

Whilst I worked for law firms in Australia, CLM is definitely the largest firm I have worked in, which has given me exposure to a much broader range of legal issues and expertise. By working in a law firm while I’ve been studying, I have been able to give context to my studies which has added a layer of interest when I’ve seen issues raised in class that I’ve seen in practice. It has also given me the opportunity to explore which industry within law that I’d like to pursue, having been lucky enough to be exposed to property, family, and estate planning matters.

Can you share an example of work or a project you’ve been involved in during this Summer Clerkship that really stretched you beyond your normal Legal Assistant duties?

This summer I’ve had the opportunity to work far closer with clients than I usually would in my Legal Assistant role by joining my supervisors in client meetings. I have also experienced more “solicitor” work, drafting separation agreements, letters of advice, and contracting out agreements (pre-nups) and worked collaboratively with my supervisors to provide accurate and professional advice to our clients. The Summer Clerks also prepared a “summer project” where we researched and

prepared a presentation about law in the age of climate change and presented it to the CLM Partners. This was a great opportunity to develop my research skills and work collaboratively with young professionals in a similar position to myself and learn from the Partners.

Looking ahead, how has your experience working at CLM while completing your degree – and this Summer Clerk opportunity – influenced your career ambitions?

Working at CLM has significantly changed my perspective of the legal industry and my career goals. Prior to working here, I was feeling anxious about my career prospects working in an industry I had seen prioritise profit over people, and time at work over a healthy work-life balance. While at CLM, I have learned that a law firm can support and encourage ambition and hard work, whilst also valuing people. I have seen exceptional work and dedication from our reception staff, legal assistants, solicitors, and Partners who also are terrific people. This Summer Clerk opportunity has given me the opportunity to meet and work with even more like-individuals.

Working in the Family Team has also proven to me that there are many facets of the law that I find fascinating and would love to learn more about.

Thank you to Cooney Lees Morgan for this opportunity, I am very grateful!