

ICSA Member case studies



Bernadette Barber runs her own freelance company secretarial consultancy business, Chadwick Corporate Consulting Limited

What are the main responsibilities of your job?

My company offers company secretarial and governance services to organisations in the private, public and third sectors. I undertake one-off projects as well as performing ongoing roles for my clients. This can include advising on governance structures, servicing Board meetings or undertaking corporate changes for my clients. I contribute regularly to the Chartered Secretary magazine and am writing a book on corporate governance which is due to be published in 2010. I also have to ensure the smooth day-to-day running of my business.

What is a typical working day for you?

When I am not out at client meetings, I normally start the day by reviewing and prioritising my outstanding work, which could include preparing a board agenda or minutes, drafting documents to give effect to a change in share structure, preparing a quote or proposal for a client or completing my own company's admin such as its VAT return. During the day, I usually have various telephone or e-mail contacts with clients who would either like new work undertaken or want to discuss progress or options for an ongoing project. I also try to regularly set aside time to review how my business is going. I look at its finances, plan ahead and develop its marketing and strategy. Whenever possible, I take opportunities to keep up with my own personal development through attendance of training events as well as reading technical updates.

What skills and qualities are required for your role?

Apart from technical knowledge of the law and current best practice, it's important to be able to find solutions to problems which will fit well with the organisation you are advising. Text book knowledge is often not enough – you have to understand the business of the organisation you are working for and be able to apply your technical knowledge in a practical way. This is a skill developed with years' of experience – often I look back at a solution which worked well in a similar situation and adapt it to meet the needs of the issue I am currently dealing with. Time management and adaptability are also key. There is often a lot of juggling to be done – you start the day with a list of jobs but when something urgent crops up you need to be able to shift priorities to get the job done.

Which elements of your role do you most enjoy?

I enjoy the variety of working with different people and organisations. You never know what is going to land on your desk. When you work in-house, you often get an early warning of a new issue or project on the horizon, but working with external clients, keeping your ear to the ground for an early heads-up is not always possible. It keeps life interesting!

Which elements of your role do you least enjoy?

Marketing! I would prefer to avoid having to 'sell' myself – it's not my area of expertise and is a bit outside my comfort zone but is all part and parcel of running your own business.

How do you see your career developing?

At the moment I enjoy what I do very much but I do sometimes miss working as part of a large team so I wouldn't rule out returning to an in-house role at some point in the future if the right thing came along.

What is your educational/training background?

I graduated from Leeds University in 1991 with a BSc (Hons) in Mathematics and Physics. I qualified as a Chartered Secretary in 1994 and became a Fellow of the ICSA in 2005.

What other roles have you held prior to your current one?

Immediately prior to establishing my own business, I was company secretary of Royal London Asset Management, responsible for managing the company secretarial function for all companies within the Royal London Mutual Insurance Group. Before joining Royal London, I was deputy group secretary of Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance Group plc (now RSA). My early career was spent within the company secretarial departments of BAe Systems and Britvic. →

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How has your training helped you carry out your role?

Obtaining the ICSA qualification can only ever be a first stepping stone – I am a great believer in long-term continuing development. By this I don't just mean formal training but less formal methods too like learning on the job. One of the greatest learning tools which company secretaries have is their exposure to other support functions across an organisation and the opportunities to learn from those colleagues about other specialisms.

What made you decide to become a Chartered Secretary?

I was drawn to a graduate training scheme by nothing more than gut instinct. I have no regrets!

What do you think are the particular benefits of becoming a Chartered Secretary?

A Chartered Secretary has access to many different career paths because they develop wide-ranging and flexible skills.

Would you recommend the ICSA qualification to others?

Yes.

What advice would you offer to a graduate?

The career of a company secretary is almost unique in offering opportunities to get the most privileged bird's-eye view of an organisation, its leadership and strategy. Early in your career, it may feel like the role involves little more than admin and form-filling. However, there are always ways in which you can use even a basic or mundane task to help develop and hone your skills for the future, whether it's managing your time better, improving your report writing, paying greater attention to detail or simply absorbing knowledge by watching how others do things. That sort of approach will show you are keen to go that extra mile, demonstrate your ability and desire to acquire new skills and knowledge and, ultimately, fast-track you on your way to that bird's-eye view! ■