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# Simulations give LPP candidates valuable experience: Alexandris

By Paul Russell, AdvocateDaily.com Contributor



By embracing innovative approaches and new methods of communications, Ryerson University's [Law Practice Program](#) (LPP) gives law school graduates the training they need to be successful, says program director [Gina Alexandris](#).

"As a pathway to licensing in Ontario, we're not focused on substantive law, but instead on the skills and competencies that allow new lawyers to hit the ground running," she tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

Alexandris says those key competencies are professionalism and ethics, research, analysis, communication (both oral and written), client management and practice management.

The first half of the eight-month program is a practical training component, with candidates running their own virtual law firm in seven files: civil, criminal, family, administrative (immigration), wills and estates, business and real estate, she says.

Legal experts in each of the areas help to create simulated files, so the LPP candidates can experience what a real lawyer would go through when preparing a case, Alexandris says. "However, we do tell our candidates that there's a little bit of make-believe because in order for them to experience specific file milestones we get from the client meeting to the trial in just four months, and we know that doesn't happen in real life," she says.

When setting up the program, Alexandris says organizers realized they needed to have real people act as clients, to give the candidates personal experience in client relationship management.

To facilitate that, Ryerson's [Interpersonal Skills Teaching Centre](#) (ISTC) was brought onboard. The ISTC works with various faculties across the university to create different workplace simulations, such as how to deal with a difficult boss or a challenging employee, she says.

"These are usually one-offs, but we explained to the ISTC that we wanted to have simulations that would stretch over a four-month period so that candidates can build relationships and develop their competencies in a real-life environment," Alexandris says.

The ISTC agreed and hired professional actors to play the part of clients while working with subject-matter experts on the background story for five of the seven files, she says.

"ISTC staff are trained in acting and playwriting, allowing them to give life to the client," Alexandris says.

She says the professional actors are told about their characters and the role they are to play with the candidates.

"For example, when they come in for their first client interview, we may want the character to be nervous, or to hold back information, as we want to see how the candidates will respond and manage the relationship," Alexandris says.

"Through their acting, they're generating a response from the candidates, which helps them develop client relationship management and communications skills," she says.

In the final week of the practical training component, Alexandris says the candidates take part in a mock trial, where they gain experience in examining and cross-examining witnesses, plus they learn firsthand what it is like to deal with opposing counsel.

She says feedback from people who have graduated from the program shows how valuable the interactive component of the course is.

One graduate wrote, "The actors were very 'real.' Some were relatively easy to interview, some were hard (e.g. evasive, emotional, etc.). Just like in real life."

"This is an opportunity to develop essential skills that can't be learned from books, and this is something that many articling students don't get much experience with," another one stated.

The mentors supervising the program participants are also impressed by the actors, Alexandris says, with one of them stating, "Allowing the candidates to work through (sometimes struggle) files and interact with 'real' clients permits them to learn in a safe environment."

Because the Law Society of Ontario (LSO) requires the LPP to reach out to people around the province, a large part of the program is online, she says.

"As part of our emphasis on innovation, most of our client meetings are done by web conference," Alexandris says.

That provides unique challenges for candidates, she says.

"Not only do they have to get used to meeting virtually with a client, but they have to be prepared to deal with the client's emotions and concerns, and get that across through a little square on the computer screen," Alexandris says.

This training is already proving helpful for graduates. She says one graduate told her the firm where he was hired changed the way they conducted some meetings, thanks to the skills he brought into the firm.

"That firm's clients now don't have to travel or take time off work for some meetings," Alexandris says, "thanks to the experience he picked up in our program."

Ryerson LPP works with the LSO and the legal community, including an alliance with the Ontario Bar Association.

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