



**Ravenna**

**FINDING THE  
RIGHT LAWYER**

The Ravenna guide  
for growing businesses

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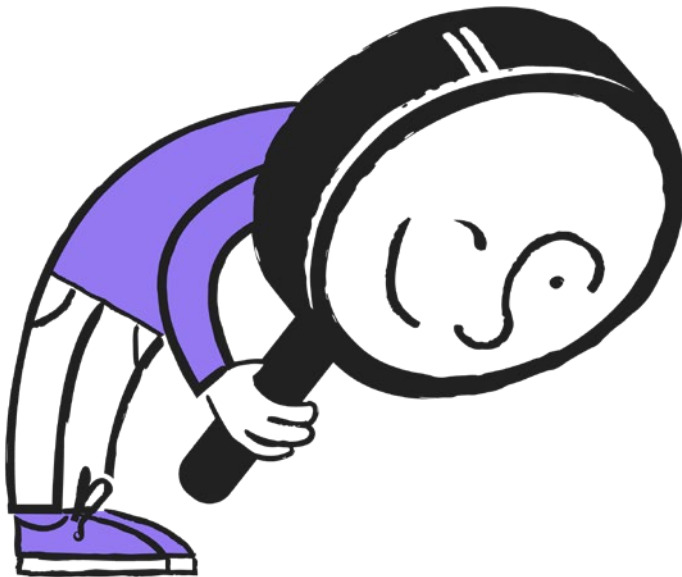
# “KNOW ANY GOOD LAWYERS?”

When your business outgrows downloaded templates and ad-hoc contracts, it's time to get the right legal advice.

There comes a point when every business needs legal advice beyond the basics. As your legal to-do list grows, you need a lawyer – and one with the right expertise. But short of knowing a solicitor who specialises in exactly the areas you need, it's hard to know where to start.

# HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT LAWYER

A quick Google search will often lead you to lists of lawyers on review sites, which are hard to check and unpick. Searching 'lawyers near me', is rarely the best place to start either, as the right firms won't necessarily be nearby. A smaller solicitors' firm on the high street is unlikely to have the expertise and the range of experience larger businesses need. At the other end of the scale, a firm with an address in the City of London could be big and global (with the fees to match). So somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum is a good place to start – but that's still a very big playing field, so then what?



# HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT LAWYER

## It pays to think ahead

Bear in mind that the issue you need help with now is unlikely to be a one-off. One query soon leads to another: so if, say, you're raising funding from friends and family, those transactions will need to be documented legally. And if that money is in return for a share of the business, you'll also need to review your shareholder agreement.

This knock-on effect is common, so whatever your immediate need, it's worth making sure the lawyer – and the firm – you choose can help you beyond it. In most cases, this means finding a 'full-service' law firm that can help you with a range of issues at different times.

## The exceptions: when it's not cost effective to hire a lawyer

If your issue is very small – chasing a debt, say, for several hundred pounds – then the small claims court might be the most cost-effective way to go.

There are also several DIY options on the internet, but

always weigh up the risks of going with a more templated answer which is designed to cover a wide range of businesses and not tailored to fit your circumstances. It's worth remembering that, even though you might be no more likely to make a mistake with a template than with a document prepared by a regulated lawyer, if a lawyer's mistake costs you money, you can ask for compensation.

## When you might need more specialist advice

Sometimes you'll need more specific expertise (which will narrow down the options for you). Some law firms, for example, specialise in trademarks and IP; others only deal with pensions law or corporate manslaughter. In these cases, it might be best to go directly to them rather than use a full-service law firm.

Similarly, if you're operating in markets beyond the UK and you need a firm with offices in, say, South Korea and Russia, or a lawyer who speaks Portuguese and Mandarin, your list of possible lawyers will be pretty short.



# NARROWING DOWN YOUR OPTIONS

So a ‘full-service’ firm will fit the bill for most growing businesses, but which one? There are hundreds to choose from and, at first glance, they can all seem broadly similar.

## Reading the rankings

The legal industry loves annual lists and rankings, and, for a growing business, the Top 200 law firms is a sensible starting point. But the two main directories, Chambers and The Legal 500, are not as straightforward or easy to interpret as they might first appear.

It’s easy enough to rule out the top ten firms that only deal with global corporations (so are unlikely to be interested in helping you sell your business for less than £50 million), but the further down the list you go, the more it helps to know a firm’s people, expertise and reputation. It should follow that a firm higher in the rankings is ‘better’ than one lower down the list, but in practice it’s far more nuanced than that.

# NARROWING DOWN YOUR OPTIONS

## What to look for

First, look for a firm's **expertise**: do they have corporate and commercial departments – and, within those, lawyers who work with smaller businesses – as well as employment law teams, and, if you need it, lawyers with experience in international business?

Beyond that, you also want to know they've got **the right experience** (both generally in helping growing businesses, as well as in your sector or line of business). If you're a construction business, for example, are their corporate teams used to the ins and outs of working in your industry?

Job done? Not quite... On paper, the 'experience x expertise' equation sounds like a sensible way to filter out firms who can't help, leaving you with a list of frontrunners. The truth is that most full-service firms say they're experts in areas like employment and have the right services listed on their websites to match the issues you're dealing with. But they're not always their main areas of expertise. So how do you know who's really got the right experience? With a

little digging and more detailed reading of the data, it might be possible to see what percentage of a firm's income actually comes from working on employment issues, for example, as well as what percentage comes from areas and issues you're likely to need in the future.

In short, it's possible to find the right firm through your own reading and research, but it will take time. Even then, it's still hard to do without some knowledge of firms' reputations, which usually comes from working in law for a while. It's one of the reasons why talking to one of our advisors or someone with knowledge of the UK's law firms can make a big difference to your search.

# MAKING THE CALL

## Talking to a lawyer for the first time

An initial chat with a lawyer (before you formally hire them), should work both ways: they want to find out how – and if – they can help; you want to get an idea of the process, fees and, most importantly, the fit for you and your business.

You'll obviously want to set out your legal issue and give the lawyer the lowdown on your business (be specific here – tell them about your future plans too). On top of that, here are some of the main things to think about so you get the information you need as quickly as possible.

### What have they done before?

Have they worked for businesses like yours in the past? Ask for examples of work they've done for businesses of a similar size and set-up to your own, as well as work they've done within your industry. Don't be swayed by blanket "yes" answers: if a lawyer understands your business, they should be able to share what you can learn from the work they've done with similar companies.

If you're calling about an employment issue, find out more about how the lawyer has helped not just with the legal side of things, but also what they've learned about implementing new legislation and putting it into practice (around flexible working, for example).

### Do they ask the right questions?

Finding the right lawyer isn't simply about ticking legal issues off your to-do list. It pays to think about your business's plans and priorities, too, because a good legal strategy can help your business grow and manage any potential risks up ahead. A good lawyer should both listen and ask questions that make you think. Lawyers for small businesses should have a broad commercial view on top of their own specialisms, balancing the detail of your business with the bigger picture. (A second opinion from someone who's run their own business and dealt with both legal issues and commercial objectives can also help you put the right plans in place.)



# MAKING THE CALL

## Who's doing the work?

It helps to find out the structure of the lawyer's team and how they work together, as well as how they work with other lawyers across the firm.

Instinctively, if you've got a pressing legal issue, you want the best lawyer you can get. Practically, though, you only want to pay for their expertise at the right times (i.e. for their legal mind, not their admin). For example, if you're leasing new premises, some of the more straightforward property searches and the like could be done by a junior member of the team, but you might need a more experienced lawyer to advise on and negotiate the terms. So don't be afraid to talk about the balance of work, who'll be doing it (and when), and how you'll be billed.

## Will the way they work fit around you?

It's also useful to find out who you'll be dealing with day to day and when – and how – your lawyer will communicate with you. If you're someone who's

often away from your desk, you might want a lawyer who arranges meetings over WhatsApp (it happens!), rather than a more formal 'speak to my PA' set-up. Think about how you work best and ask the lawyer how they'd work with you.

## How will it play out?

Ask the lawyer to set out how they think the legal issue will play out based on their experience, what's involved and the broad timings you can expect.

If, say, someone's suing you for unfair dismissal, you'd expect the lawyer to set out the ways in which they'll try to prevent the case getting to court, which is often a last resort. They should also be able to give you a broad idea of the timings involved and how to manage the case in your business (so it doesn't become a toxic issue with your other employees). A good lawyer will help you manage the legal problem and your business's reputation at the same time.

# FEES

## And what to expect

For any legal work, you want to make sure you're paying the right price, not the cheapest price. Most firms only publish their residential conveyancing rates, which don't help you as a business and are hard to unpick and compare. But you do have a right to know what you're paying, as well as what you're paying for.

There are several ways to cut it and no hard-and-fast rules:

### A fixed fee (when the work is properly specified)

When you can, this is most often the best way to go for you and the lawyer alike.

### An hourly rate

This isn't usually the best option unless, say, a lawyer can't be sure of the outcome, e.g. if it's a dispute with someone else. Hourly rates are also hard to compare because there's no common approach among law firms, or even within the same firm, and much will depend on who is actually doing your work.

### A mix of the two

A fixed fee for a set piece of work (e.g. reviewing another party's NDA), then an hourly rate if anything extra crops up (e.g. negotiating amends to that NDA) can work well.

It's also worth remembering you only want to pay for the top lawyer's fees when you really need them to be involved. Let more junior members of the team take care of some of the basics.

Generally, for a discrete piece of work (e.g. drafting a shareholder agreement), both you and the lawyer can set clear parameters and a fixed fee. It's also always worth asking if a firm offers special rates for small businesses, given that you may become a long-term client as your business grows. We're happy to give you guidance on fee structures and what you can expect.



# FEES

## Ask for an estimate

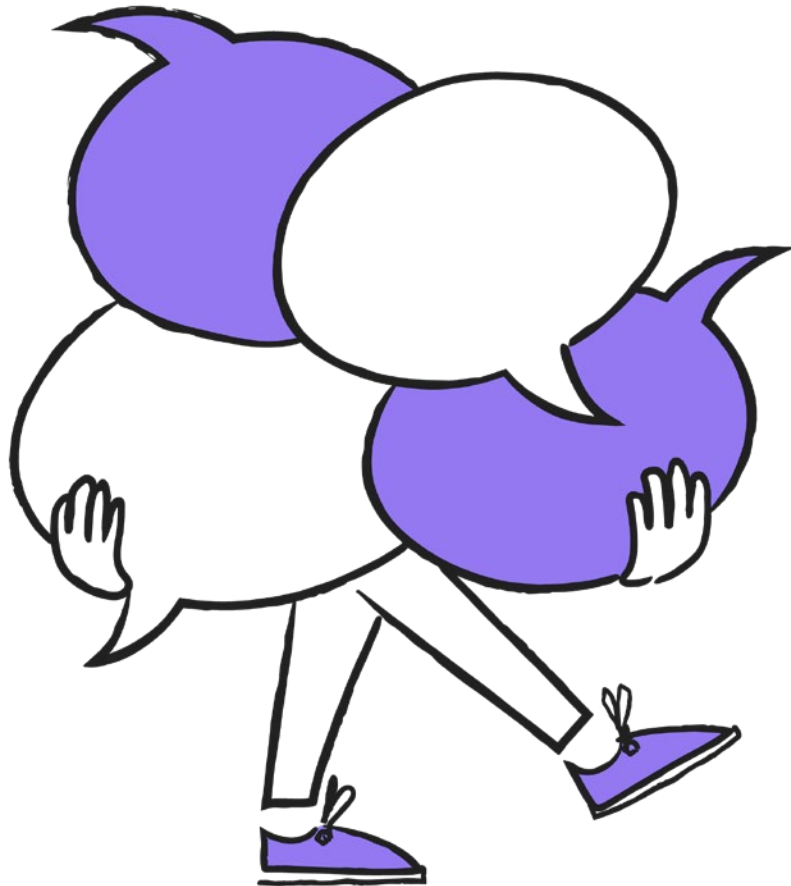
Lawyers have to give you an estimate in advance and you can ask them to come back to you if they think they're going to go over that estimate (preferably before that time comes so you can weigh up your options). Every lawyer should do this but, anecdotally, it doesn't always happen. Make sure you get a written estimate that clearly sets out what's involved, and what may take extra time and money.

## Does a retainer arrangement make sense?

Generally, retaining a law firm at a fixed monthly fee only makes sense for small businesses once they have over 50 employees and need more regular legal advice. If you find yourself picking up the phone to a lawyer more often, you have an ongoing legal problem, or you're raising a huge amount of capital, a retainer might be worth looking into as it helps to spread the cost and may ultimately mean you pay a lower fee.

# A SHORTCUT TO YOUR SHORTLIST

## Talk to us



We're a group of former corporate lawyers, CEOs, FDs, accountants and business advisors here to help you think about your different legal options. We'll help you choose the right person (and firm) for your legal issues, your business and your long-term plans, and we'll guide you through the sometimes mysterious ways of the legal system.

We'll also put your legal issues in context, keeping in mind your business's future plans and commercial goals. Some of our consultants have decades of legal experience, others have run their own successful businesses – and advised many others. This broader perspective means we can help with your immediate legal questions and help you put the right legal strategy in place for your business to grow and succeed.

[hello@ravenna.co.uk](mailto:hello@ravenna.co.uk)

# A SHORTCUT TO YOUR SHORTLIST

## Signs you'll need ongoing legal support

If you're looking for help with one of these issues, sooner or later you'll probably need to hire a full-service law firm:

Finance (funding, loans, long-term business partnerships)

Employment contracts and new policies  
(e.g. enhanced maternity leave)

Employment disputes  
(e.g. unfair dismissal, discrimination, health & safety)

Recovering money you're owed (late/unpaid invoices)

Drawing up contracts and business agreements (e.g. terms and conditions for your own business, as well as agreements with suppliers like software providers, and contracts, licensing and joint ventures)

Litigation, i.e. if someone is suing your business or you'd like advice on taking action against someone else (this is more likely to be a one-off, but something that needs expert advice and can lead to other issues you need to look at)

Premises and property contracts and agreements (and litigation – property litigation is its own specialist area of law)

Health & safety (some HR consultancies cover aspects of this, as do some business insurance policies, but you'll need specialist legal advice if you're being sued for a work-related injury, for example).

Data and GDPR (using customers' information, data protection, confidentiality, and cyber-security issues).