

Life as a graduate lawyer at Gilshenan &Luton

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As applications open for Gilshenan &Luton's 2027 Graduate Program, we spoke with two of our graduate lawyers, Maddison Jutila and Xanthe Swan, about the realities of starting a legal career in a specialist practice.

Working alongside experienced practitioners on criminal, regulatory and workplace matters, graduates at Gilshenan &Luton are exposed to a broad range of high-stakes and complex legal work, while receiving the mentoring, training and support needed to develop as confident practitioners.

Their reflections provide an insight into life as a graduate lawyer and the opportunities that come with practising in a specialist firm.

Tell us a little about your journey to law and what led you to a career in the legal profession.

Maddison:

I have always been interested in law, and pursuing a career in the legal profession felt like a natural path for me. During my final years of university, I worked in barristers' chambers, where I gained insight into the practical application of the law and working in the profession.

Through that experience, I developed a keen interest in criminal defence work and became aware of Gilshenan &Luton as a well-respected firm in criminal law.

Xanthe:

I chose to study law because of my foundational interests in people and politics. While at university, I gained exposure to the criminal justice system by working in court registries, and later at a service providing financial assistance to victims of violent offences.

After graduating, I was fortunate to work as an Associate to a District Court Judge, where I gained insight into the daily operation of the courtroom.

What attracted you to Gilshenan &Luton, and what made you want to start your legal career here?

Maddison:

Beyond Gilshenan &Luton's reputation and team of experienced practitioners, I was particularly attracted to the firm's graduate program because it focused on mentorship, education and practical experience.

Graduate programs are common in large commercial firms, but Gilshenan &Luton's program offered something quite different: the opportunity to join a small, specialised firm while still participating in a structured program that supports graduates through the early stages of their legal careers.

For graduates interested in criminal, regulatory or workplace law, that felt like a unique opportunity.

Xanthe:

A main draw for me was the range of areas the firm practises in. From my experience so far, I knew I wanted to practise in criminal law, but I was not sure I wanted to practise strictly in that area.

The opportunity to work in criminal law, while also being exposed to other areas, signalled to me that Gilshenan &Luton would be an excellent place to start.

Starting my career as part of a graduate cohort was also important. Having not worked in private practice before, I wanted to begin in an environment that invested in and supported junior lawyers. The structure of the graduate program, and the culture of the firm more broadly, has done exactly that.

What does a typical day look like?

One of the common themes in Maddison and Xanthe's responses is that graduate practice is varied. Court work, client contact, written work and discussions with colleagues can all form part of the same day.

Maddison:

A typical day generally involves a combination of appearing in court, attending client conferences, drafting written legal work and liaising with prosecutorial bodies.

That provides a dynamic working environment and allows me to develop my skills across various aspects of legal practice. Being involved in all stages of a matter, both in and out of court, has been particularly rewarding and has offered valuable learning experiences.

Xanthe:

With the variety of criminal practice, sometimes it feels like there is no such thing as a typical day.

Most of my mornings start in court appearing at mentions, whether that is in Brisbane City or at a regional courthouse. After that, I often have written work at my desk, such as submissions to the prosecution, letters to clients or briefs to counsel.

The afternoon may involve conferences with clients or counsel, before the day finishes with emails and discussions with colleagues about the status of files.

The variety of day-to-day work often means graduates develop practical skills and confidence quickly, particularly during their first year of practice. Looking back on your time in the program, what has surprised you most about life as a lawyer?

Xanthe:

The biggest surprise, and perhaps adjustment, has been the pace and variety of criminal practice.

With changing court dates, updates from the prosecution and changes in a client's daily life, matters are constantly developing and shifting. My ability to adapt and reprioritise has certainly been refined in my first year of practice.

Is there a particular matter, experience or type of work that has been especially memorable?

Graduate lawyers at Gilshenan &Luton are exposed to a broad range of matters, including criminal, regulatory, workplace and litigation work. Both Maddison and Xanthe identified early court experiences as particularly formative.

Maddison:

From the outset, I have been fortunate to work on a range of interesting matters. Early on, I was involved in a lengthy District Court trial, which was a standout experience.

Preparing for and appearing at my first Magistrates Court sentences were also particularly memorable and formative experiences.

Xanthe:

In my first few months at Gilshenan &Luton, I had the opportunity to instruct counsel at the hearing of an appeal against conviction and sentence in the Court of Appeal.

That was a particularly valuable opportunity to be exposed to high-level, rigorous legal work, to see a full Bench in action, and to witness senior and junior counsel first-hand.

The matter also stands out because the appeal was ultimately successful, which brought very welcome news for the client.

What skills have you developed most since joining the firm?

Both Maddison and Xanthe identified court work and client management as key areas of development. Their experiences reflect the practical nature of the firm's graduate program, where learning occurs through structured support as well as day-to-day involvement in matters.

Maddison:

Through the graduate program, I have been provided with the support and resources necessary to develop a broad range of legal skills.

Since joining Gilshenan &Luton, I have significantly improved my court work and client management skills.

Xanthe:

My advocacy and client management skills have developed significantly.

I was incredibly nervous before my first mention and remember wondering how I would ever get used to going to court and speaking in front of a magistrate or judge. With regular practice and guidance from colleagues, I now feel much more confident appearing in court and have been able to strengthen my advocacy skills.

Criminal proceedings are often emotionally charged, and clients can respond to that in very different ways. Since joining the firm, I have become much more attuned to the different ways of supporting clients and how best to adapt to their particular needs and concerns.

How have the lawyers and support team at Gilshenan &Luton influenced your development?

A recurring theme in Maddison and Xanthe's reflections is the importance of access to experienced practitioners, structured mentorship and an open-door culture.

While practical experience is central to the program, it is supported by a deliberate and structured approach to professional development. Graduate lawyers are paired with experienced mentors, participate in regular mentoring and development conversations, and receive ongoing guidance from directors and senior lawyers as they work on matters. Combined with regular internal training, collaborative file management and a genuine open-door culture, the program is designed to ensure junior lawyers are both challenged and supported as they develop their skills and confidence as practitioners.

Maddison:

The support and guidance I have received from the lawyers and support team has been instrumental to my growth and development as a lawyer.

The graduate program provides structured mentorship, and the firm's open-door culture means support is always available. I am grateful to be surrounded by a team who are willing to share their knowledge and are invested in my success.

I have also been fortunate to have the support of my fellow graduate lawyers, who are also navigating their first year of practice. Our shared experiences and mutual encouragement have been a highlight of the graduate program.

Xanthe:

The lawyers and support team have been invaluable to my learning and development.

My experience has been that practitioners, regardless of seniority, want to assist junior lawyers and regularly prioritise one-on-one time to provide guidance. As part of the graduate program, I have also had the benefit of a designated mentor, which has been incredibly useful at this early stage of my career.

There is very much an open-door policy within the firm. I have been encouraged to seek help, work collaboratively and discuss both specific files and broader legal skills and procedure.

What have you found most rewarding about working directly with clients?

For both Maddison and Xanthe, direct client contact has been one of the most important parts of graduate practice.

Maddison:

I have found becoming a trusted point of contact for clients to be a rewarding experience.

It has allowed me to be meaningfully involved in matters and to develop my client care and management skills.

Xanthe:

Working directly with clients and speaking with them personally is one of my favourite parts of the day.

That contact makes the work feel far more human than dealing only with a name in a court document. It helps me understand the real impact of a matter and is a reminder that careful, considered legal assistance can make a meaningful difference in someone's life.

What advice would you give to law students or recent graduates about to begin their legal careers?

Maddison:

Embrace opportunities to learn from practitioners who are willing to share their knowledge and provide mentorship.

Take the time to learn the correct way to do things early on. You will thank yourself later.

Xanthe:

My best advice would be to give things a try.

One of the strengths of a career in law, particularly as a junior lawyer, is the diversity of avenues available to you. If there is something that interests you, follow that, invest in it and seek guidance where you can.

What are you most looking forward to as you continue your careers at Gilshenan &Luton?

Maddison:

I am looking forward to continuing to take on new challenges and opportunities to grow my skills and experience.

Xanthe:

I know that throughout my career at Gilshenan &Luton, I will continue to be faced with new things for the first time, whether that is rotating through different areas of law in the graduate program, dealing with new charges, attending conferences or networking events, or appearing at particular hearings for the first time.

With the support and encouragement I have received so far, I am excited to continue seizing those opportunities and developing my skills.

A graduate program grounded in practical experience

Maddison and Xanthe’s reflections highlight the breadth of experience available to graduate lawyers at Gilshenan &Luton: court appearances, client contact, written advocacy, collaboration with counsel, exposure to complex matters and close guidance from experienced practitioners.

Maddison and Xanthe's experiences reflect the philosophy underpinning Gilshenan &Luton's graduate program: developing capable practitioners by providing meaningful responsibility, close supervision and early exposure to significant legal work. Graduates are not confined to observation roles. They work directly with clients, appear in court, contribute to complex matters and learn alongside experienced practitioners who are invested in their development.

For law students interested in criminal, regulatory and workplace law, the program offers an opportunity to build strong professional foundations within a specialist practice known for both the quality of its work and the support it provides its people.

Interested in applying?

Applications for Gilshenan &Luton's 2027 Graduate Program open on 10 August 2026, and close 21 August 2026. The program is a full-time, two-year experience designed to provide aspiring lawyers with practical, hands-on exposure to criminal, regulatory and workplace law, supported by structured mentoring, graduate training and close access to experienced practitioners.

As Maddison and Xanthe's experiences demonstrate, graduates are given meaningful responsibility from an early stage of their careers, with opportunities to work directly with clients, attend court, develop advocacy and drafting skills, and learn alongside experienced lawyers and barristers.

Prospective applicants should submit a CV, academic transcript and a brief cover letter outlining their interest in criminal, regulatory and/or workplace law. Applications and enquiries can be directed to hr@gnl.com.au.

Further information about the graduate program, the application process and the opportunities available at Gilshenan &Luton can be found at:

www.gnl.com.au/about/graduate-program/

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