



## **HOW DO YOU BALANCE UNIVERSITY AND PART-TIME WORK, AND HOW CAN YOU TRANSFER SKILLS INTO THE LEGAL WORLD?**

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### **Introduction**

I worked in retail during my A-levels and I am still working in retail throughout the course of my degree as an LLB Law student. There is often an assumption from lecturers, students and work colleagues that there is no way to balance it all, or that it's not worthwhile, as your studies should be your only priority. However, in my experience it can definitely be worth having a part-time job during your studies, and not only for financial reasons. What you learn in a job is invaluable, as you gain real-world practical experience and transferable skills that make you more employable after graduation. In 2023 the HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey found that a majority of students (55%) are now working part-time.<sup>1</sup> This then raises the crucial question: how do you balance university studies and part-time work?

### **Working at Currys**

I started working for Currys<sup>2</sup> at Plymouth in 2019 as a Christmas temp, meaning I was there temporarily for the 'peak period' from Black Friday through to Christmas and New Year. During this time, I was taking my A-levels but found it hard to get a part-time job, as I only wanted to work at the weekends, so it did not disrupt my studies too much. When I was hired at Currys as a Christmas temp, I found working in retail very useful to gain experience working in a team and a chain of command, interacting with customers, and of course time management! All of this was very practical experience that I had never had before, but it was also very beneficial for the career that I intend to go into, becoming a solicitor.

For anyone who is thinking about trying to get a job during the holidays, my advice is: never be worried about applying for a job that is advertised as 'temporary staff or peak staff wanted,' as it's likely that employers will keep the staff on some other basis after this period ends.

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\* Isabelle is currently in the final year of her law degree

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/06/22/student-academic-experience-survey-2023/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.currys.co.uk/>

Normally for a student, temporary or peak work is very manageable, due to having time off around Christmas, Easter and summer, depending on assessment commitments. It's a great way of gaining some professional experience and life skills, whilst helping to fund your time at university.

## **Working for Shark Ninja**

Due to my Currys job only being temporary, I knew it would come to an end in January 2020, so I wanted to find a more permanent job for Saturdays and Sundays. While I was at Currys, I mainly worked in the MDA (Major Domestic Appliances) section selling items such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, fridge freezers and ovens, where I became familiar with the vacuum brand Shark. I knew how successful the company was, due to how many units we would sell over the weekend. It was competing strongly with Dyson<sup>3</sup> for the best seller position and was fast becoming a market leader.

Fortunately, I was then approached in January 2020 with a job offer from Shark Ninja<sup>4</sup> to be a Brand Expert. I wish I could offer some advice for the application and selection process, but I pretty much landed on my feet with the role I was offered. It just so happened that a Regional Sales Manager for Sony had a former colleague that went on to become a Regional Sales Manager for Shark Ninja. He knew from our previous conversations at Currys that I wanted a permanent weekend job, and very kindly informed his former colleague that I would be perfect for a job with Shark Ninja. I was told that I would be working in the same Currys store at Plymouth as a Brand Expert for Shark Ninja. I immediately accepted the proposition and soon after the job was confirmed. I was certainly lucky, but the main reason I was even mentioned for the job was because I always put myself out there. I'm never afraid to speak to senior managers, as you never know what opportunities may come from it. Thankfully it landed me a sales job just when I needed one.

My new Shark Ninja job entailed similar tasks to what I had been doing for Currys as a sales colleague. However, the perks were better for many reasons, one of which was being self-managed to a degree. This gave me more responsibility around timings, how I managed stock levels and how I sold the products. I do have managers and a higher chain of command that I still follow and can message or call if I need them. It's very simple in that I check in with the manager when I start my shift, I send reports throughout the day letting them know how

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dyson.co.uk/en>

<sup>4</sup> Shark Ninja is a global product design and technology company, with its headquarters based in the US

sales are doing, then at the end of the day I report how much has been sold, together with other relevant information. Another perk of the job, which makes a lovely change, is not being micromanaged. When I was working for Currys I would be timed precisely on all of my breaks, to the point that if I had one minute left of my lunch break, I would have a manager coming out asking for me. As much as I understood that being punctual is key in a business and that you should not overstay your lunch, it was hard work at times. I also get paid more by Shark Ninja than I did at Currys, with a decent bonus structure, much better commission, and regular opportunities to travel to their UK head offices in Leeds and London.

### **Transferrable skills**

In addition, I've gained more advanced transferable skills since I became part of the Shark Ninja team. The confidence it's given me when engaging with customers and understanding very quickly their needs and wants is so important. It's a crucial transferrable skill to have for any client-facing job that requires a high level of professionalism when dealing with any issues, which is why I find working in retail so much more than it just being a weekend job. I take all the benefits from it, as I know I'm always learning and gaining new skills.

### **How do I do it all?**

This is a question I get asked all the time, and to be honest I surprise myself sometimes. I specifically took a job that was solely for weekend work (Saturdays and Sundays), to ensure it would not interfere with my university studies during the week. That way I can have uninterrupted weekdays to prioritise lectures and tutorials, along with further reading and assessments. This works well for me as everything is time managed; I can still study hard during the week with no distractions and I have a job which brings in money for me, so I can do nice things with my friends and family. However, working around exam season can be stressful, as it tends to be the busiest time for retail as well. It can be hectic, but it's also rewarding. This is when time management is so important, because you can very easily become overwhelmed with deadlines and not enough study time. Having my work pattern suit my university timetable allows me to be well prepared for my exams or coursework deadlines. I cannot say I have always been perfect with my timings, but I've learned that the hard way. There are still times when I reflect and think I should be more productive and better with my time management. I'm still learning, but I never let it get so bad that I fall behind or it becomes too much of an issue. You still need to prioritise your studies, but don't forget that you can have a part-time job and enjoy your life while doing so.

## **Some of my experiences/opportunities with Shark Ninja**

A few months ago, I was asked if I would travel to Battersea in London, to host some training which focused on the Shark Ninja hair care range. This was a brilliant opportunity for me to go to Shark Ninja's head office. However, I was struck with a dilemma, as I had just started the first semester of my third year as a law student. I knew that usually in the first week back to university, the lecturers go through the module outlines and introduce the topics. Even though this is very important, and I would not condone missing any lectures, I'd been selected by the company from across the country as the best person for the job, so I didn't want to turn it down. And by the way, if for any reason you do have to miss a lecture, I'd always advise emailing the lecturer or module lead to explain the reasons for your absence.

After weighing up all the pros and cons, I travelled to London, where I was briefed about the day and told that I would be speaking to a room full of about 30 people, while demonstrating the products. Despite having some nerves, I welcomed this opportunity, as being a good public speaker is key in the legal profession. In fact, if you're able to hold yourself and speak clearly to a room full of strangers, it's a great skill to have for any profession. After hosting that training event, I understood how my Saturday and Sunday job really helped me shine. My managers and the top bosses who were present praised me for being clear and confident, and said that I did a great job.

Reflecting on that amazing experience in London, I can see that my skills have developed so much that my managers are now asking me to help host other events, including a celebrities and social media influencer event at Boots, as part of their Christmas promotion. The Boots event was attended by about 150 people and I was talking and demonstrating to all of them. I did the same for Shark Ninja at the Currys Live event too. I've had to turn down other work opportunities, as I cannot travel to London for work all the time. That's okay with Shark Ninja, as they understand I have university commitments. When I'm available however I'll always accept such opportunities, as I learn and benefit so much from them.

There have been times in sales and retail where I've felt a bit like a fraud, even though I've been fully trained in all areas that I work on. A lot of the time you're listening to the customer's wants and needs, and make suggestions based on that, but there are the odd customers that just need to be told what they're looking for! It can seem like you're blagging, but most of it comes down to fast understanding and intuition about the customer. Within sales you're always getting feedback from customers, colleagues or managers, which is generally really positive and eradicates any self-doubts. Although much of it's repetition, that is how you become good at a job. Most people will tell you in any industry or even for your studies that

repetition, especially when it relates to good habits or work practices, makes the task or job so much easier. Likewise, with public speaking, if you practise enough it becomes less scary, which means you develop confidence and start to feel a lot more at ease with it.

Sometimes when you're given full confidence by your superiors to do a certain job, I believe you should have a mindset of 'fake it till you make it,' and just run with it. One example is when my managers wanted me to go to an event and style some celebrities' hair, without much other information. I have a lot of experience with sales and customer service, but styling was one thing I had only ever done or practised on myself. I knew a lot about the Shark beauty hair care range and that I could handle myself in demonstration sessions, so I found myself thinking, I do know how to use the products, so let's just give it a go. Fortunately, it went very well, so I think in life and in work you should try and enjoy situations when they're out of your comfort zone, as you'll always learn from them and inevitably start succeeding from that experience. It demonstrates to employers that you're versatile and can handle a challenge, which is a great attribute to add to your skills.

## **Conclusion**

The best advice I can give is to always strive for success and never let certain opportunities pass, as they'll give you transferrable skills for whatever profession you end up working in. Take every opportunity for public speaking, demonstration and customer interaction, as this will be so important when it comes to interviews, new jobs or just gaining more confidence. Always push yourself and believe in yourself, no matter what. If sometimes you come across opportunities that you have to turn down for whatever reason, don't feel bad for prioritising your studies or other commitments. On the other hand, don't always worry about the consequences, as there will always be a lecture that you can catch up on, whereas you cannot always get back certain opportunities.