Whitcombe Ashby Family Law LLP

My job as the firm's Virtual Legal Assistant, working from Port Harcourt

Nkiruka Esther Onyiri, October 2026. The firm and the people in it are made up.

The firm

Whitcombe Ashby is a small family law firm in Peckham, South East London, in a first-floor office near Peckham Rye station. It only does private family work: divorce, money after a separation, arrangements for children, and pre-nups. More and more of it crosses borders, like a marriage that took place in Lagos, or a parent who wants to move the children abroad.

There are eight of us (two partners, an associate solicitor, a trainee, a paralegal, an office manager, a part-time cashier and me) and about 260 open files.

The clients pay privately, because the firm has no legal aid contract. They are nurses and NHS staff, small business owners, landlords and professionals from Southwark, Lewisham, Croydon and Kent. A lot of them come from
Nigerian, other African and Caribbean families, with a house,

Who I work for

Mostly Helena Whitcombe, the managing partner and head of the family team, admitted in 2008. She is in court on Monday and Wednesday mornings and afterwards she sends a voice note, not an email. She reads email twice a day, at 8:30 and 4:30, and she wants a one-paragraph summary on top of any long chain before she opens it. She likes to see documents the day before they are due, and Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are for file reviews.

What drives her mad: chasing clients for Form E documents, bundles with no index, being asked "where are we on this?" when nobody has a summary, diary clashes with hearings, and time that nobody wrote down.

I should be clear about one thing. I'm a Nigerian-qualified lawyer and I'm preparing for SQE1, but in this firm I'm an assistant. I don't advise clients and I don't conduct litigation.

a pension or relatives abroad. First stages are a fixed fee and Helena stays responsible and signs every statement of truth. contested work is charged by the hour.

The tools

The firm runs on LEAP for files, documents, time recording and accounts. Clio, Osprey or Actionstep would do much the same job. For the courts, divorce and financial remedy applications go through MyHMCTS, and the fees are paid through a Payment by Account. Children applications depend on the court, so Helena tells me how to file those. CE-File isn't used for family work, so I won't touch it. For research I use Practical Law, the Family Procedure Rules and the gov.uk and HMCTS guidance. Everything else is Microsoft 365 through the firm's secure desktop, plus a client portal and e-signature. The cashier looks after client money under the SRA Accounts Rules, so I only record time and draft bills.

What I actually do, out of the eleven responsibilities

#	Responsibility	Does it apply?	In this firm
1	**Legal document preparation**	Yes	I fill in Forms A and E, the D81 and draft consent orders from what's in LEAP and the client questionnaire. Helena checks everything. I never sign anything.
2	**Case file management**	Yes	Every client has one tidy file: chronology, document index, exhibit list, and court bundles built to Practice Direction 27A.
3	**Legal research assistant**	Some	I look things up in Practical Law, the rules and gov.uk, and give Helena the source and what I'm unsure about. It's a note for her, not advice for the client.
4	**Scheduling and calendar management**	Yes	Hearings, FDR appointments, mediation and client calls, all in UK time and kept clear of Helena's court days.
5	**Client communication**	Some	Updates and document requests from templates Helena has approved. Anything about advice, money or safety goes straight to her.
6	**Email management**	Yes	I sort the family inbox and Helena's, file emails to the right matter and send her a daily summary.
7	**Client intake and onboarding**	Yes	Enquiry log, conflict-check details, client care pack, ID and anti-money-laundering documents, e-signature. Helena decides whether to take the case.
8	**Billing and timekeeping**	Some	I draft time entries and bills for her to approve. I don't touch client money.
9	**E-filing and electronic document management**	With supervision	I get MyHMCTS submissions and bundles ready. Helena or the associate presses submit unless she tells me otherwise. This is the part I'm least sure about.
10	**External communication**	Yes	Court offices, the other side's support staff, mediators, barristers' clerks and valuers: dates, documents and logistics. I don't negotiate.
11	**Teamwork flow management**	Yes	A handover note every day, a task tracker in LEAP, and the Tuesday and Thursday filereview lists.

What doesn't apply here: legal aid reporting (the firm has no legal aid contract), CE-File, client account, advocacy and giving advice.

A day, hour by hour (UK time)

I work UK hours all year round. In Port Harcourt that's 10:00 to 18:00 while the UK is on GMT (from 25 October) and 09:00 to 17:00 while it's on BST.

9–10	**Inbox and morning note**	I log in to the firm's secure desktop and open LEAP and the family inbox. There are about 40 emails. I sort them into "do today", "for Helena" and "for the file", and save the attachments to the right matters. Then I send Helena six lines: hearings today, deadlines this week, new enquiries, anything urgent.
10–11	**Intake and onboarding**	Two new web enquiries today, a divorce and a child arrangements dispute. I log both in LEAP, take the names for the conflict check, book 20-minute call-backs in Helena's diary and send the client care pack with the ID request. Then I chase Mrs K again for twelve months of bank statements for her Form E. It's the third time I've asked.
11–12	**Document preparation**	I fill in a draft Form E for Mrs K from her questionnaire and the statements she has sent, and make a list of what's still missing (the pension valuation). Then I draft the D81 and consent order for Mr P from the terms he and his wife agreed. Both go to Helena marked "ready for review".
12–1	**Research**	Helena wants to know whether a MIAM is needed before a C100 application and what the exemptions are. I check Practical Law, the Family Procedure Rules and gov.uk, and write her half a page with my sources and a line saying what I'm not sure about.
1–2	**Lunch**	Away from the screen. Helena's voice note from the morning hearing usually arrives around 1:15.
2–3	**After the hearing**	I turn her voice note into an attendance note in LEAP and put the next hearing and the deadlines from the directions in the diary. Then I email the court office to confirm the FDR listing, ask the other side's solicitor's assistant for a date to swap documents, and send the bundle to counsel's clerk.
3–4	**E-filing and bundles**	I put the consent order package together for MyHMCTS: the draft order, the D81 and the fee by PBA. I stage it for Helena to look over and submit. After that I index, number and bookmark a hearing bundle to PD27A.
4–5	**Clients, time and handover**	I send five client updates from the approved templates and move Mr P's mediation so it doesn't clash with Helena's court day. If a client writes that she's frightened for her safety, I don't answer her myself. I phone Helena straight away, as the firm's safeguarding protocol says. Then I turn the day's diary and notes into draft time entries for Helena to approve, flag anything unrecorded, and write the handover note: what's done, what's waiting, and my questions.

What I don't know yet

Writing this showed me how much I'd be guessing about England and Wales. Four things in particular:

- **Who is allowed to file.** I don't know whether support staff can submit on MyHMCTS under a solicitor's account, or where the rules on conducting litigation stop an assistant. I'd ask Helena, and read the SRA and Legal Services Act guidance, before I went near a live filing.
- **Working from Nigeria.** I'd be looking at UK client files from abroad. As far as I know Nigeria has no UK adequacy decision, so the firm would need safeguards for the transfer, and I'd only work inside its secure desktop with nothing saved on my own laptop. I'd want to read the ICO guidance before saying more than that.
- **Family procedure day to day.** I know the rules from reading, not from using them: which form goes with which application, how local courts list hearings, and how PD12J (domestic abuse) changes the way a file is handled.
- **The terms.** How a remote contractor is hired, paid and insured, and whether the firm's professional indemnity cover reaches work done abroad.