

5 Tips for Attorney Well-Being and Job Satisfaction: How to Achieve Bliss at the Legal Profession

I. Introduction

I admit that the phrase "happy lawyer" seems like an oxymoron and is likely to induce snickers and scoffs, but these words share one another's company more often than you might think. In my seven years of practicing law and five months as a legal recruiter, I am delighted to report that I've met more happy lawyers than wretched ones. What's the secret that these happy lawyers share? If you're not a happy lawyer now, can you become one? Based on my experiences and observations, I have a theory about the first and can provide recommendations for the second.

As a lawyer, there can be many challenges to finding professional contentment. Long hours, demanding clients, and a saturated job market can combine to make the legal profession an uncertain and unforgiving one. With the right attitude and approach, however, attorneys can find professional bliss.

First, lawyers must make the commitment to their own well-being. This involves setting boundaries, taking time away from the practice and engaging in activities that nurture the soul. It also means pursuing a practice that allows for a healthy work-life balance.

Second, attorneys should look for ways to create a positive work environment. This entails developing relationships with co-workers, appreciating the everyday successes, and participating in activities that build camaraderie. Additionally, it's important for lawyers to give themselves permission to make mistakes and learn from them.

Third, lawyers should strive to stay true to their passions. This involves doing work that brings purpose and joy, pursuing interests that enrich the soul, and staying connected to one's core values. Furthermore, it's important to prioritize activities that boost mental health, such as exercising, meditating, and taking time out to enjoy nature.

Finally, lawyers must take pride in their profession. This means understanding the impact their work can make on local, state, and national laws. It also involves embracing the positive aspects of the law and recognizing the valuable role attorneys can play in society.

In the end, finding professional bliss at the bar requires dedication, commitment, and a positive attitude. With the right attitude and approach, lawyers can make a conscious effort to create joyful and satisfying work experiences. By setting boundaries, relating to co-workers, staying true to their passions, and taking pride in their profession, lawyers can find fulfillment and happiness with their career.

Discovering Happiness in the Legal Profession

Many lawyers have found great success and contentment within their chosen profession, despite the long hours and time consuming workload. By following a few simple steps, it is possible for any practicing lawyer to achieve a greater level of satisfaction and joy in their work. Through setting reasonable goals, being mindful of work-life balance, and making a concerted effort to nurture relationships and find the right mentors, lawyers can experience a deeper level of fulfillment in their career.

Establishing Reasonable Goals

One key element of happiness within the legal profession is to set realistic, achievable goals. A lawyer should strive to meet their own individual goals and aspirations but should ensure that these are realistic and attainable. When setting goals, a lawyer should focus on the areas that they find to be the most challenging and rewarding. This can be a great way to get the maximum benefit from their experience and have an improved level of happiness in their work. Additionally, it can help to have a specific plan for how these goals

can be reached and the amount of time it will take to achieve them.

Maintaining a Healthy Work-Life Balance

It is essential for a lawyer to maintain a healthy work-life balance. This involves being mindful of the amount of time that is being spent at work and ensuring that there is time for rest and relaxation away from the office. When a lawyer is able to balance their time between their professional and personal obligations, their overall level of satisfaction and joy is likely to increase. This can be ensured through setting specific boundaries at work, taking regular vacations and breaks, and finding ways to relax outside of work.

Developing Professional Relationships

Another important aspect of achieving happiness at the bar is to develop meaningful relationships with fellow lawyers. This can include networking with other professionals, becoming involved in organizations and mentoring programs, and attending conferences and seminars on topics related to the legal profession. Through establishing meaningful connections with peers and mentors, a lawyer can more easily find the support they need and gain valuable insight into the legal field.

First, [what's the secret to being a happy lawyer?](#) *Like what you do and the people that you do it with.*

Having just returned to my desk from an earthquake evacuation (!) I am reminded for the thousandth time that life is far too precious and unpredictable to spend it in the company of miserable jerks or on tasks that you find meaningless and/or unrewarding.

- See [Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law](#) for more information.

Second, based on my time spent in the company of happy lawyers, and occasionally occupying that title myself, I've developed *a list of tips* that can either transition you into being a sunnier counselor or can help maintain an already contented mien (see Section VI, below).

II. Don't Let the Statistics Scare You

Granted, as a profession, lawyers suffer from higher rates of depression and alcoholism than non-lawyers. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Even Lawyers Get the Blues: Opening Up about Depression," Sue Shellenbarger reported that 19% of lawyers will suffer from depression at some point in their career, compared with 6.7% of the population as a whole, and that one in five lawyers has a drinking problem (twice the national average). Clearly then, maintaining a healthy quality of life in the face of [relentless billable hours](#) and high expectations by clients and colleagues to solve problems, win cases, and bring in business is a challenge. So much so that 70% of lawyers want to make a career change, and each year 19% of associates do.

But despite these grim statistics, and the 438,900 hits on Google for the search "[unhappy lawyers](#)," I firmly believe that becoming an attorney does not sentence one to a lifetime of deprivation, boredom, self-hatred, and sacrifice. Although tarnished through the years by hundreds of jokes and thousands of scandals, there remains something wonderful about a profession where one is paid to think, problem solve, and persuade. It's easy to forget this when cramming to re-work an argument for a 4 p.m. filing deadline, but when you consider that the majority of the world's population still makes a daily wage by manual labor, [being an attorney](#) is a pretty terrific gig.

- See [Why are so many lawyers unhappy?](#) for more information.

III. Definition of "Happiness" and Common Traits of Happy Lawyers

When I use the phrase "happy lawyers," I don't mean lawyers that are skipping down the hallways with sunshine shooting out of their ears and bluebirds trilling on their shoulders. Instead, I'm using it as *Merriam-*

Webster intends: "notably fitting, effective, or well adapted; enjoying or characterized by well-being and contentment." I would also add "satisfied."

To me, the lawyers to whom I would ascribe this definition of happy probably don't routinely dread coming in to work, have trouble sleeping, grind their teeth to sharp points at night, or make their secretaries cry, and do refrain from throwing three-hole punches at associates. Instead, they like their work, enjoy collaborating with others, have the time and inclination to mentor, maintain interests and hobbies outside of the office, and are pleasant to be around.

My happy lawyer definition aptly describes the majority of the attorneys that I've worked for over the last seven years. As a group, they shared many of the same characteristics, such as being noted leaders in their respective practice groups and having excellent reputations. They rarely complained about their lives and generally approached their tasks with enthusiasm. Not surprisingly, these lawyers all had successful practices. Here is a list of some of their common traits:

- Successful,
- Social,
- Effective,
- Creative,
- Fit,
- Charismatic,
- Interesting,
- Compassionate,
- Quick to laugh,
- Recognized as leaders in their fields,
- Trustworthy,
- Dependable, and
- Committed to their careers.

Okay, clearly I've had an inordinate amount of luck in terms of the people that I've worked for and been mentored by, but I don't think that my experiences are that unusual. I spent my first four years [practicing law as an Army JAG](#), and had the pleasure of working with some of the most dynamic, intelligent, hilarious, and dedicated attorneys that I've ever met. Even with deployments, budget cuts, demanding generals, and 6 a.m. formations followed by four-mile runs followed by a twelve hour work day, they were a happy, satisfied group of people.

Upon transitioning to civilian practice, I likewise encountered lawyers that I greatly respected and was impressed by and who appeared to like their jobs and their lives. Yes, I've met some cutthroat SOBs, but they have been the exception and not the rule. My point is that I know happy lawyers exist because I've worked with many of them. And it's from my proximity to those who were, and are, happy and successful that I've developed the tips in Section VI.

IV. All Law Firms and Practice Groups Were Not Created Equal

In the unhappy event that the company you keep does not exhibit the attributes listed above, take heart in the fact that law firms are as varied as the partners that lead them. If you are currently struggling in your career, it may be that your current firm, or practice group within your firm, doesn't fit your expectations or personality. It does not mean that you won't be able to find happiness as a lawyer; however, it may mean that you need to reconsider whom you're working with and what it is that you're working on.

I offer up my experiences and observations to encourage you that being happy and being a lawyer is not an either/or proposition. You can have both; it's really a question of you figuring out how you want to spend your professional time and the people with whom you want to spend it. I can't emphasize this enough. It's imperative to remain vigilant over your career and decide what you want it to be.

See [Why Your Ego Is Making You Unhappy Practicing Law and with Your Life](#) for more information.

V. Albert Camus' "Simple Harmony"

During my time practicing law and now [as a legal recruiter](#), I continue to notice that the happy lawyers most often act the same way outside of the office as they do within it. For example, one of the partners I used to work with frequently had the same laid back, intelligent manner in the office conference room as he did in front of a judge, or when we went to grab a beer across the street, or when taking a client out to dinner. He consistently approached his colleagues and daily tasks with energy and focus and was fun to be around. People would often stop by his office for a quick chat. This brings to mind a favorite quotation of mine by Albert Camus: "[But what is happiness except the simple harmony between a man and the life he leads?](#)"

That is, when one's internal traits, strengths, and interests align with one's professional tasks and pursuits, then there results a recognizable efficiency and accord. In the workplace, I've found that the [attorneys](#), like the one I describe above, who enjoy that "simple harmony" between their inner selves and their professional selves are generally happy, successful, and satisfied with their career choice.

The attorneys most likely to experience Camus' "simple harmony" are the ones who excel at what they do because they like it. Rather than looking at writing a brief as a bore, they are probably more inclined to approach the task with energy because they see it as a means to advance the arguments that they are looking forward to sharing.

Now, [if you don't like writing briefs but you are a commercial litigator at a large firm, then it will be difficult to achieve that "simple harmony" between your personal and professional selves because they are at odds with one another.](#) You are constantly being required to do something you don't like, and this affects your overall attitude towards your work and yourself. The important thing is to recognize what you like and don't like, where your strengths and weaknesses lie, and then try to match them up with your job requirements as much as possible.

That said, every job will require tasks that are neither your favorite nor play to your strong suit. Bear in mind that being a happy lawyer is as much about exploiting your strengths as it is about overcoming your weaknesses. The Elizabethans used to refer to Shakespeare's plays, riddles, mazes, and the like as "difficult pleasures." Reaching beyond your comfort zone is difficult, but when you succeed and master the task, such as writing a winning brief or closing a complex deal, the end result is a terrific rush of pleasure at your accomplishment and a job well done.

VI. Tips on How to Become a Happy Lawyer

- **Do What You Love, Or At Least Like!**

"Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful."

-Albert Schweitzer

Find out what you like to do and get as much of that work as you can. If what you like is not available to you in your current situation, then consider other ways to get it. Given the slowdown in the economy right now, many firms have ramped up their pro bono programs, affording excellent opportunities for associates to cut their teeth on a variety of different matters.

See the following articles for more information:

- [Love What You Do](#)
- [Love Your Work and the People Who Give It to You](#)
- [Parking Benefits and Falling in Love with Your Job](#)
- [You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)

- **Make Friends**

"One must be fond of people and trust them if one is not to make a mess of life."

-E.M. Forster

Law firms are social structures, and a key to successfully navigating through them is to make friends. Get to know the attorneys in the other practice groups as well as the colleagues that you work with on a daily basis. Not only will this make your time at the firm more pleasant and interesting, but it's a smart way to network, be on the inside track for vital information that could affect you (such as a merger or buy-out), and will make your bid for partner much more successful.

- **Make a Change**

"The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

-M. Scott Peck

One of the challenges lawyers face is figuring out what they like to do and where they want to be. If after a reasonable amount of time, you find that your particular practice area or firm is not a good fit, then be sure to proceed cautiously and explore all of your options before making a change. Never leave your firm until you have secured an offer at your next position.

That said, changing firms or practice areas can make an enormously positive impact on your life. I've experienced this myself and I see it in my work on a weekly basis. Before I became a recruiter, I thought that all law firms were the same. Not true. Law firms are incredibly varied; each one has its own unique personality. Keep in mind that if you are unhappy in [your current position](#), it could be that you're not in a good match and need to make a change.

See the following articles for more information:

- [How to Make Any Change You Want](#)
- [You Need to Condition Yourself to Make a Lasting Change](#)

- **Change Your Identity and Change Your Life**
- **Being New and Different, and Representing "Change"**
- **Why You Must Change and How to Overcome Resistance to Change**
- **Shake Your Money Maker**

"Just do it."

-Nike

Exercise is a critical component to happiness. Here's a link to the Mayo Clinic's website that succinctly lists the numerous benefits exercise has on your body and brain:

www.mayoclinic.com/health/exercise/HQ01676.

And here is a link to a brief article that describes why exercise is not an option, but a mandatory requirement for your health: blog.penelopetrunk.com/2007/06/05/regular-exercise-is-no-longer-optional.

- **Give**

"Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow."

-Thornton Wilder

A first-year's starting salary is \$160,000. Now, while the old adage holds true that money can't buy you happiness, giving some away certainly can. Further, many charity events provide numerous opportunities to forge professional bonds; getting involved is a sure-fire way to do something good for other people and also a smart career move.

- **Count Your Blessings**

"Let us rise up and be thankful, for if we didn't learn a lot today, at least we learned a little, and if we didn't learn a little, at least we didn't get sick, and if we got sick, at least we didn't die; so, let us all be thankful."

-Buddah

Exactly.