

How to Ensure Career Satisfaction and Happiness as an Attorney

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

If you believe what you read in the popular and legal press, career satisfaction is woefully lacking for most attorneys. I encounter a lot of this dissatisfaction in my own coaching and recruiting practice, I also speak to many lawyers who don't like what they do.

This column features three of these attorneys and discusses why they have a high level of career satisfaction. They attempt to demonstrate that the press has the story all wrong. There certainly are a lot of [unhappy lawyers](#) in the world. Rather, I want readers to know that it is possible to enjoy [your work as a lawyer](#) and that it is possible to make choices that [do not](#).

Work-Life Balance at a Tech Boutique

Five years ago, Sarah Richmond became a corporate partner at the law firm Gesmer Updegrove. Today, she represents a range of corporate clients; but her [main focus is technology businesses and startup companies](#). In a typical work week, Sarah will be in the office between 45 and 55 hours. Her standard workday is nine to six, and she will stay considerably later in the days leading up to a corporate closing.

Sarah spends the majority of her nonworking hours with her children (ages 2 and 4), and while there are things that she had to cut back on since becoming a parent (e.g., exercise, socializing with friends, travel and nonprofit volunteering), she is very happy with her job and her current work/life balance.

There are a number of factors that Sarah considers important in maintaining her balance. The starting point is that she has a job that she finds stimulating and intellectually challenging.

Beyond that, a key factor for her is having a great husband who supports her career. While their roles as parents vary depending upon how busy each one of them is at work, overall Sarah and her husband divide their parenting responsibilities 50/50.

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Having a live-in nanny who they really like and living 25 minutes from work are also key factors in allowing Sarah to maintain a full-time schedule and still feel like she can be the kind of parent she wants to be.

About a year ago, Sarah formed a working mothers lunch group. Once a month, she meets in downtown Boston with other professional women to discuss their common experiences as working parents. The group is another support mechanism Sarah has in place to support her balancing act. It is a place where women can share ideas with each other.

There are a number of things Sarah likes about her job. [She has good clients who are doing interesting things and working with good people.](#)

In addition, Gesmer Updegrove is a firm that demonstrates commitment to lawyers having personal lives. Many colleagues have left large firms because they wanted to be in an environment that supported both high-quality work and work-life balance. It is not uncommon for lawyers to leave work early to attend a child's soccer game or take a child to a doctor's appointment.

The firm also has a culture of pitching in. Partners and associates will help each other when workloads become overwhelming.

Sarah recognizes that it is impossible to "have it all." At this stage in her life, she has had to let go of some of her other interests. But having meaningful work and a good work environment are worth the tradeoff for her.

Furthermore, work provides her with some of the psychological rewards she might get from non-professional activities she has had to drop. She knows that she will return to some of her outside interests when her children are older. But having a job that she really likes provides Sarah a nice balance to the intensive, but rewarding demands of parenthood.

In-house at a Medical Device Manufacturer

For the past five-and-a-half years, Emmy Hessler has worked as a [corporate lawyer](#) for Boston Scientific Corp. There, she serves as senior corporate counsel to the corporation and reports to the assistant general counsel. Her principal responsibility is to provide legal support for one division of the company. In this role, she supports a variety of the domestic legal needs of her division, aside from labor and employment issues and intellectual property.

On a typical day, Emmy arrives in the office at 7:30 a.m. and works until 6:30 p.m. Sometimes in the evening she reads journals or review marketing materials for the company, but she does not generally work on weekends.

While face time is not a requirement in the law department (the general attitude is that "we are all adults"), Emmy maintains a clear separation between work and her private life and generally reserves the workday for business-related matters.

Emmy likes being a corporate lawyer. Since joining Boston Scientific, her level of career satisfaction has been consistently high. She enjoys facilitating transactions and finds the work intellectually challenging. She has great colleagues and likes being surrounded by professionals who are motivated to do great work.

She also enjoys the fact that she can see things differently than senior management. She likes the challenge of identifying risks and then managing those risks while meeting business objectives.

Emmy is not always happy about managing some of the litigation that her clients have to deal with (she would rather be helping the business to move forward than cleaning up messy conflict). But fundamentally, this job works for Emmy because she likes being a corporate lawyer.

When asked about her large-firm experience, she doesn't launch into a list of criticisms. She enjoyed [practicing corporate law](#) in a firm setting as well.

[For her, the big downside to large-firm practice was the inability to control her schedule. With a more predictable schedule, Emmy would feel very differently about large-firm practice.](#)

Making Changes from Within

Less than a year ago, Ben Smith (not his real name), was eager to make [a lateral move](#). There had been several layoffs at his firm and morale in the litigation department was very low. Compounding this, Ben did not feel like he was having the chance to develop as a [litigator](#). He was not getting the experience he wanted and although he liked the subject matter of the cases he was assigned to, he decided it was time to explore his options.

Over a period of several months, Ben went on a series of interviews and even secured a job [offer from](#) another law firm. He spoke with friends who were working at smaller firms and gained the perspective of what life might be like as an associate at another firm.

At the same time, things began to change at his own firm. First, the layoffs stopped and the department became busier. As a result, Ben began to get more interesting assignments and was given a lot more responsibility. He had the chance to take depositions, draft motions, work more closely with clients, and, in general, do more interesting and challenging work.

At the same time, Ben became the coordinator for a certain type of pro bono work that the firm was handling. In the end, Ben was now responsible for assigning pro bono work to other associates in the department.

Ben had always had an interest in teaching and when he suddenly had the opportunity to teach trial practice at a law school, he asked his employer for permission. The firm was very supportive. Ben is now very happy in his role as a litigation associate at a large Boston firm.

There are a number of reasons why Ben's level of satisfaction has increased so much. By interviewing at other firms, Ben gained some perspective. By taking on additional responsibilities both inside and outside the firm, Ben has had the opportunity to pursue some of his other professional interests.

The growth of litigation work in the department has been a big help as well, though Ben did actively position himself for this work by maintaining good relationships with the partners he liked.

Conclusions

There are a number of factors in place that help these lawyers maintain a high level of career satisfaction. Intrinsic factors like what they do.

Beyond this, each works in an environment that supports either work/life balance or encourages attorneys to pursue their professional interests beyond the actual practice. In addition, all three like their clients and their colleagues.

If these stories do not describe your own situation, then maybe it is time to find out why. Is it the environment you work in? The clients you serve? The lack of systems in place to help you juggle your multiple responsibilities? The unpredictable nature of the work?

Or is the actual area of practice not intrinsically interesting to you?

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

By taking the time to check your own pulse, you can uncover the root source of your dissatisfaction and take steps toward the necessary change.

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