

Solving Lawyer Career Dissatisfaction: How to Create a Culture That Makes Attorneys Happy

Summary: Career dissatisfaction among lawyers is a popular topic right now, and is causing many attorneys to leave the legal profession.

If you ask a lawyer if they are satisfied in their career, they may say no, but have a hard time verbalizing exactly why. This is because often the problem is easy to identify, but sometimes the individual lawyer is not sure just what is wrong. The work may be challenging, the position prestigious, the salary ample. What more could anyone want? Still, something is missing. Career dissatisfaction--and sometimes impaired job performance--is the result.

Career satisfaction is made up of many factors. Most of us want our work to be interesting--that's what makes it fun. We want to use skills not only at which we are proficient, but also that we enjoy using. Our work should serve our long-term goals and should meet certain basic psychological needs--such as structure, change, or dominance--of which we may not even be aware and that are different for each of us. And our work should meet, or at least not violate, our core work values.

Interests and skills are the most obvious components of career satisfaction: most of us could talk all day about what we are interested in, what we do well, and what we like doing. Ask us what our values are, and we have to think a lot harder. While our interests are held consciously, we incorporate values at a very young age, and they are essentially held unconsciously. They require a little digging to get at--and digging is work.

By values we mean those aspects of life that we have learned to hold dear. Most people have never thought about how crucial the connection is between our values and career satisfaction, but one reason values are so important is that they are relatively constant over time. It is true that some values may take center stage in passing, in response to the environment or to a temporary situation. For example, making a lot of money may seem very important even to the most altruistic person when he or she hasn't had any for a long time, but once the immediate financial crisis has passed, the value of making money resumes its normal, more modest place in that person's overall scheme of values. In general, however, certain core values remain crucial throughout our lives. The same cannot always be said for interests, which tend to wax and wane over time, or for skills, which may be acquired or improved or may erode. Satisfying your core values may not guarantee career satisfaction--there are too many other variables for that to be true--but failure to meet those values is a certain recipe for career dissatisfaction.

Although we all have lots of values and probably share many of them, it is important for individual satisfaction to define which ones are the most important and which ones are bottom-line, make-or-break for each of us.

As a legal recruiter working exclusively with lawyers, I have worked on values identification and clarification with hundreds of lawyers who felt that something was wrong with their careers that needed to be fixed. Although each attorney is unique, certain themes appear again and again.

ASSESSING VALUES

A variety of techniques can be used to assess values. Usually more than one should be employed to ensure an accurate and comprehensive individual portrait. A relatively fast and simple technique to get an initial overview of an attorney's values is called a card sort. The attorney is given a deck of about 50 cards, each printed with the name of a specific value, such as competition, security, or high earnings, followed by a brief definition. Although each card is distinct, some may be seen as related; for example, high earnings and profit, and gain.

The attorney is asked to sort the cards into columns headed

"Always Valued,"

"Often Valued,"

"Sometimes Valued,"

"Seldom Valued," and

"Never Valued."

The first difficulty arises when the attorney is told that only eight cards can be put in the "Always Valued" column. The most difficult part of the exercise occurs when attorneys are asked to rank the cards in each column in descending order of importance. This is where the digging starts. Which is more important, [being liked](#) or influencing people? High earnings or integrity? [The attorney is forced to make tough choices, in part because the eight-card limit in the "Always Valued" column means that he or she cannot have everything.](#) Finally, the attorney arrives at a sort that he or she is relatively comfortable with. The task is not finished yet, however.

Next the attorney is asked to look at the "Seldom Valued" and "Never Valued" columns. It is not unusual to find a variety of cards representing values associated--in the popular mind at least--with being a lawyer: work under pressure, influence others, make decisions, fast pace, status, power and authority, and competition are some frequently seen examples. Why? Perhaps because to a great extent these values are easily met in the practice of law, and therefore lawyers who hold them are less likely to seek the help of a [legal recruiter](#). In fact a lawyer who puts these values into the "Never Valued" or "Seldom Valued" [category will likely find the practice of law very stressful.](#)

Next I ask my attorney to look at the "Always Valued" and "Often Valued" columns. Do several of the cards seem to be about the same thing, or different aspects of the same theme?

The answer is invariably yes. So I tell the attorney to pull out the cards from these two columns and arrange them into subgroups according to the theme expressed. I do not make any suggestions: different people will see different themes, and what is important here is what the attorney sees. Usually the attorney will end up with from three to seven groups of cards, with anywhere from two to ten or so cards in each group. Sometimes there are a few "floaters"--cards that do not easily fit into any group but may still represent an important value.

After the attorney has grouped the cards according to theme, we try to come up with a word or short phrase to label each theme. We may use one of the card titles in the group as the theme, such as security, or we may try to find a term that seems to express the thrust of that particular group of cards, like growth. By the time we have finished this, we have a short list of value clusters for this person, culled from about 50 distinct values. A fair amount of reflection has gone into the process, and we may be confident that these clusters are the bottom line for this person: that is, if they are not met or are violated by work, this attorney will very likely suffer dissatisfaction.

Often I will ask the attorney to look at the list and jot down next to each entry a figure between 0 and 100 representing the percentage that that values group is met in his or her current situation. Anything below 50 indicates trouble. Most people have at least some idea of what their values are and which ones are not being met at work; nevertheless, many attorneys are surprised to see so graphically just where and by how much their careers are falling short.

If desired, future sessions will be spent continuing this process in other areas (such as interests and psychological needs) and developing strategies for remedial action.

COMMON CAUSES OF ATTORNEY DISSATISFACTION

In the course of counseling dissatisfied lawyers, I have found that certain themes and groups of unmet values appear time and again. Recognizing them can benefit not only individual lawyers, but managing partners and recruiters as well.

Recognition

This theme may come under different names, such as approval, credibility, or ego needs. From what attorneys tell me, this theme is not about adulation, fame, or even status as we usually think of the term. These lawyers want to be recognized as professionals, as people who do good work, by their friends, family, community, and, most important, peers and superiors in the legal community. Often attorneys will explain that they have included values like independence and public contact in this group because if they have the respect and recognition, they will get the independence and a chance to meet with attorneys and opposing counsel or co-counsel.

This theme appears in some form with nearly every lawyer with whom I have done this exercise. Law students as a rule are bright adults who have achieved good grades and honors and who wish to continue to achieve and be recognized for their achievements. Many lawyers have fairly vague reasons for having chosen the profession, but the fact that it enjoys a certain amount of social respect is mentioned frequently. And, in spite of the knocks it takes in the media, law is still perceived by many as a respected profession.

The recognition value tends to be more often unmet among younger lawyers, especially in large urban firms. Lawyers come [out of law school](#) with little knowledge of the nuts and bolts of law, and many receive little or no formal training on the job. The legal profession is not renowned for its use of positive feedback or even constructive criticism; most associates learn quickly that if nobody screams insults at them, they should assume that their work passed muster. [Modern legal economics come into play here as well](#). For more senior lawyers it was probably easier several years ago to recognize the efforts of a beginning lawyer, who may not have known any more than the associate of today, but who was not earning a first-year salary greater than most law professors. Scant comfort, though, for the hardworking achiever who has enjoyed nothing but success until the moment he or she stepped into that first real job, only to be told, expressly or implicitly, that he or she is an overpaid imbecile and will be treated accordingly.

Problem Resolution. This does not have to be so. Each lawyer, particularly those in supervisory capacities, can review individual behavior and implement changes where necessary. Associates can muster courage and try to open a dialogue with senior lawyers, asking for more explicit or frequent review of strengths and weaknesses. Or all lawyers can participate in regular, office-wide anonymous ratings of management style and training effectiveness. Policies should be amended to state that all employees shall be treated with respect, and training programs modified as necessary to allow for sufficient time to review thoroughly what the associate is doing right and wrong on each project. Regular training and development seminars might be instituted to provide more formal instruction for the associates and to teach management skills to the partners.

Competence

This value is related in some ways to the previous one and seems to be as widely held. One difference is that even senior attorneys seem to worry about this value not being met. Although the practice of law is changing in many ways, most lawyers still feel that law is a profession, not just a job or a business. Competence is the keystone of professionalism. The cost of incompetence--personal and professional--is widely known and is reinforced every time the malpractice insurance premium is paid.

Problem Resolution. The attack on this problem must be twofold: make sure that lawyers are competent and let them know that they are considered competent. Competence is a relative matter; most people just want to be reassured that they are at least as competent as they should be at that stage of their development. As with recognition, a combination of effective training and constructive communication can work wonders for a lawyer's sense of worth.

Lifestyle

It is no secret that the law, particularly private practice, can be a very demanding profession. More and more, however, the pace seems to be intensifying even for partners, in-house counsel, and government lawyers. Polls repeatedly show the lack of time to enjoy life to be the biggest single complaint among lawyers. Most lawyers expect to work some late nights and weekends, but even lawyers who love practicing law get to the point where they have too much of a good thing. It seems clear that for every driven, workaholic lawyer who charges ahead, there are many more who are wondering where it is going to stop.

Problem Resolution. There are legal jobs offering a more reasonable lifestyle, but usually at a cost--either financial or in terms of status, perks, and sometimes challenge. Some lawyers find independence in hanging out a shingle or moving to a firm (usually relatively small) where the importance of quality of life is recognized by all the members. Contract work, permanent associate arrangements, part-time work, and job sharing are slowly gaining a measure of acceptance. And, of course, some lawyers opt out of law altogether. The variety of responses reveals the scope of the problem. If the profession fails to recognize and address this issue, the inevitable result will be either dissatisfied (and therefore less productive) lawyers or more lawyers leaving the profession. Either way, a valuable resource will be wasted.

Creativity

This theme does not appear quite as often as those just discussed, but it is still one of the most common. It is about the lawyer's desire to put some of his or her personality into the work. Creative persons often find that law is largely a technical and form driven profession. One complaint, for example, looks very much like another, and usually there is no way to tell which lawyer drafted it if it is not signed. This cookie cutter approach obviously leaves little room for innovation or self-expression. This is important to many lawyers, who are uncomfortable feeling like faceless, interchangeable technicians. It is true that some lawyers find law to be a very creative endeavor, but the creativity involved is like solving a puzzle: finding a way around that statute of limitations defense, for example. For many others, this type of creativity is not what they had in mind.

Some obvious moves can be tried, of course. The writer can specialize in appeals, work in legal publishing, or write legal articles as a complement to practice. The would be performer may find that the courtroom offers a big enough stage for his or her desire for expression. Some find a transactional practice gives them the chance to come up with creative opportunities for achievement of business-related goals. Nevertheless, lawyers who are strongly driven to do something creative are among the most likely to leave law and try something else. It might be different if the practice of law left enough time and energy at the end of the day to pursue creative endeavors as avocations, but usually this is not the case. This may change as some of the more flexible, nontraditional forms of practice become more common.

Problem Resolution. An effort can be made to expose associates to the various types of practice and aspects of a particular practice, rather than pigeonholing them as soon as possible. Offering a chance to participate in strategy sessions, both for attorney and law office matters, can make a difference for some. Perhaps just being aware that a lawyer values creativity and trying to encourage it in whatever form is possible may be enough to satisfy this value for some lawyers.

Making a Contribution

Many persons are attracted to a career in law because it offers the chance to help make social change, protect the environment, and enforce the rights of the poor and underprivileged. In law school these persons learn that classes and clinics in these areas may be few, that there is little money and less status associated with such work, and that there are more interviewers for big firms than for social agencies. In short, many of these lawyers end up in more traditional law settings, far from the altruistic goals that first motivated them. They discover that in most firms pro bono programs don't exist, their "real" work does not leave enough time for them, or the pro bono cases are not in the areas they are interested in. Disenchantment sets in quickly.

Problem Resolution. It is possible to make a contribution as a lawyer, either to individuals or to society at large, but it is not easy. Many lawyers satisfy this value by practicing individual law, concentrating on estate planning, domestic relations, arbitration, labor, criminal defense, and employment discrimination. Others find work with government or nonprofit agencies fulfilling, in areas such as environmental protection, criminal prosecution, and municipal law. Notwithstanding the generally lower pay and less desirable working conditions, however, the competition for such jobs can be stiff, even as budget constraints reduce funding in many areas. Furthermore, many of the more high volume types of practice, such as most of the poverty law agencies, seem to quickly engender cynicism and burnout. Other areas are too adversarial for some, who did not go into law to butt heads day in and day out. For lawyers who hold this value cluster as a primary one, a move to social work, government or nonprofit administration, or a similar field might be envisioned.

The profession as a whole could go far in meeting these values among its members--and improve its image with the public at the same time--by instituting pro bono programs with real challenge and diversity and then following through on them. Nearly every good size firm has a pro bono policy, but many seem to be more image than substance. The debate in many jurisdictions over mandatory pro bono shows at least that there is work to be done and that there are many attorneys who would like to do more.

People

This value cluster is made up of such individual values as work with others, influence people, be liked, be respected, affiliation, public contact, and friendships. Lawyers with these values--and there are many--report that what is important to them is the quality of their relationships with others. [They want to work with people, not sit alone in the library for hours. It is important that they like and respect the people they work with and feel they are liked and respected in return.](#) They want contact with people and other attorneys. They usually prefer doing something or making things happen to writing and research. They derive great satisfaction from seeing how their work affects individuals. They are classic rainmakers, but often find themselves in positions where they do not get to meet with the client and don't even know who the client is.

Problem Resolution. Spending time in the back office does not come easily to lawyers with strong people values. The solution is simple: give them as much interaction with people as possible and try to establish a comfortable, friendly ambience in the office.

CONCLUSION

Some readers probably are now shaking their heads in bemusement or irritation, wondering what things are coming to. They belong to the "that's why they call it work" school of thought, the one that holds that work is by necessity more or less unpleasant and that is why you are paid money (sometimes lots of money) to do it. "If these malcontents can't stand the heat, let them get out of the kitchen." And increasingly, it seems, lawyers are leaving the "kitchen" of the law, or at least thinking about it. Very often the ones who are leaving are the ones who have the most to offer, the ones who in many ways epitomize what the practice of law is supposed to be about. There will be others to replace them in the short term, but the problem will not go away by itself,

and eventually it will be harder to attract and retain good people. No well-run business would allow this to happen. Will the legal profession?