

What to Do If You Have Career Anxiety About Practicing Law

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Career anxiety—and how you react to it—can define your legal career. Some types of career anxiety are fixable, while others aren't. Understanding the causes of career anxiety, knowing how to protect yourself, and avoiding common mistakes can help keep you on the right path.

Career Anxiety and Attorneys

There are two primary causes of anxiety related to practicing law.

The first cause can be environmental. [If you have environmental career anxiety, you may not like the people you are working with](#), the type of legal environment you are working in (law firm, in-house, government, etc.), the city you are in (big vs. small, conservative vs. liberal, etc.), or the culture of your law practice. If you work in a law firm, you may not like the hours, your practice area, your salary, the amount of work available, the travel or lack of travel involved, the client contact or lack of client contact, the amount of business you need to become and stay partner, and more.

The good news about most environmental issues that attorneys face is that they are 100% fixable. As long as you are open to understanding exactly what works and does not work for you, the anxiety you feel should be fixable. Many attorneys fix their anxiety about practicing law by [merely changing the environment in which they practice](#) it.

[Most attorneys believe that the anxiety they feel around practicing law is environmental](#). The law firm attorney who thinks they do not like their hours seeks out an in-house position or a boutique lifestyle law firm that offers a less stressful lifestyle. The law firm attorney who does not like the people in their firm, or is unhappy with their review, looks for a position with another law firm. [The attorney who is unhappy](#) with their salary at a small law firm tries to get a job with a major law firm to improve their pay.

When Career Anxiety Goes Deeper

The second cause of career anxiety can be something far different--perhaps a persistent feeling that your soul's energy is being misdirected towards something that does not enrich it. The type of career anxiety that affects your soul is a constant feeling that you have some talent, drive, or ambition that is [not being satisfied by practicing law](#). It is a feeling that what you are doing takes away from your energy rather than enriching it. If your soul is feeling neglected by practicing law--if it is taking energy from you and not enriching you--then you do not want to spend the rest of your life in this position. If you spend your days thinking about something other than practicing law, then something is wrong. If nagging thoughts are the source of your anxiety, then the odds are you [should be doing something else other than practicing law](#).

If you can see yourself in another position enjoying the practice of law, it is a different story. For example, the litigator stuck behind a desk who dreams of arguing in court is the sort of person who should be practicing law. Their anxiety is due to not being challenged enough. But a person who is practicing law and spends most of the day thinking about creating art should probably not be practicing law. The entrepreneur who thinks about starting a business all the time should not be practicing law--unless they want to make that their

business. The odds are that if you are thinking and dreaming about doing something other than practicing law most of the time, then that profession is what you should be doing. **Your natural motivation and desire will likely make you far more successful in another career than if you are competing with attorneys naturally driven to practice law.**

Attorneys who should be practicing law will tell you that they "enjoy the work" but may complain about the environment. If someone is complaining about the environment but still enjoys the work, they should be practicing law.

Choose Wisely If You Seek Help

Recently I was talking to a neighbor, and a man drove up and parked across the street from me in one of the most tricked-out pickup trucks I have ever seen. It was jacked up and far too tall to make it into a parking garage. The truck had logos for a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center all over it.

I immediately told the man that I loved his truck--and I was joking because I really did not. The truck was over the top and seemed completely unnecessary for a rehab center.

He came up to me, and we started talking. He was excited about his truck and wanted to talk about it and how successful he was.

The man was covered in tattoos and told me he had several businesses in his life. However, his most recent--a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center--was a literal goldmine. He said he had 100 beds and was charging people \$70,000+ a month for his services that were on a "whole different level." He proceeded to tell me about massages, steam rooms, and a bunch of other amenities that did not sound like they had much to do with helping people recover from drug and alcohol addiction--but what do I know.

Over the next 15 minutes, the man proceeded to tell me how rich he had become from starting a rehab center not too long ago. He told me he lived in a house worth \$25 million and seemed to take great pride in sharing his success with me. Aside from saunas, massages, equine therapy, and so forth, none of what he talked about with me had anything to do with the treatment he was providing to patients. The man was not a doctor and had not even graduated from college. And yet here he was, more successful and with a more successful business than probably 99.5% of the doctors in the world.

People who need help and advice and are in serious trouble rely on this man's facility, which--as far as I could tell--had no business helping them whatsoever other than having some nice facilities to put them into. I will admit the man was an extraordinary marketer; however, marketing is not the same as having the expertise to be truly good at something. There is probably a lot of noise in the drug and alcohol rehabilitation world, and this man's ability to craft an attractive-looking product that is heard above the noise was likely a large cause of his success.

I was recently talking with someone who told me that she was taking a class with a psychology professor who was teaching the last class of his career before he retired. He became very serious and said that one of the most serious decisions that people make in their lives is who they choose as a therapist. When someone goes to see a therapist, they are at a very vulnerable period in their lives and may cry, tell the person their deepest secrets, and share their most intimate fears. The therapist themselves may also have their own agenda and thoughts about the world. For example, the therapist may be very liberal, very conservative, sexist, racist, or have all sorts of other human issues. The therapist will bring all these feelings into how they deal with their patients, influence their patients, the faces they make to their patients, their tone of voice, and more. Gradually, over time, the therapist may mold the patient in one way or another--and it may not be the right way for the patient. A bad therapist can do a ton of damage to someone.

In our lives, we often seek help from people who have no business giving us advice--whether it be the drug and alcohol counselor, therapist, or even legal recruiter.

If you have anxiety about your legal career, the odds are that in your search for answers you will run into all sorts of people who have no business giving you advice--non-lawyers, failing lawyers, friends, family, and others.

If you go to a career counselor, that may be even worse. Most career counselors for lawyers are not even lawyers--and if they are, they likely were not very successful.

Given how serious your legal career is, the career counseling business for attorneys is one of the most amateur, backward, and medieval industries out there. No wonder most attorneys have huge amounts of career anxiety when it comes to their careers.

There are [very few people out there thinking seriously about the careers of attorneys](#), the causes of their issues, and what can be done to help them. Instead, unhappy attorneys often wind up talking to legal recruiters whose only goal is a commission and steering them into another law firm. They focus on changing the environment when it may have nothing to do with the cause of the attorney's anxiety or other issues related to their career.

When an attorney, law student, or other person is seeking help for their legal career, they need advice and direction. They likely do not need to take a job that compensates a legal recruiter and puts them right back into the same situation they were in before--which does them absolutely no good.

I did not set out to become a legal recruiter. I quit a position in a large law firm because I was extremely unhappy working in a large law firm and had enough business that I felt I could make more money on my own without a commute, without the politics, and with more control over my time. I also had no one to give me direction about whether or not it was even worth sticking with my law career. Neither of my parents were

attorneys, and the only thing I saw around me was my friends in the law firm leaving. However, quitting the practice of law to start a solo practice with only three years of experience--which is all I had--was insane.

Most people judge their jobs by the beginnings of them. Being an attorney with more than seven or eight years of experience, lots of clients and controlling cases, and a partnership in a law firm is much different than being an associate in a law firm. Powerful partners inside of law firms with business control their own destiny, are sought out by clients, and get a much different sense of accomplishment and respect than associates who take orders and do grunt work. What the career of an attorney looks like starting out is not necessarily what it will look like when you have more experience and clients. Many of the better jobs out there are not fun at all when they start--and no one should leave the practice of law so soon unless they are called by something else.

My Story

What really drove me was something else: It was a belief that I was being held back from success in a law firm. It was a belief that there was more potential out there. This was not the only source of my anxiety--but it was my main one. I saw so many things going on around me (businesses being started, businesses succeeding, people excited about their careers outside of the law, buildings being constructed by big businesses, and more) that I knew I had to do something different.

If what I am about to tell you upsets you, then you might be in the same situation I was in as well. One day I was sitting in my office, and I was given a client to work with who had a dispute with someone and wanted to write a letter to a competitor that had upset him with some remark in their advertising--a completely inconsequential dispute. This client was in his late 30s and had gone over to China to some trade show, saw a toy he thought looked interesting, and over the course of the next few years, imported boatloads of them to the United States and made over \$30 million in less than 18 months. The man did not design the toy manufacture the toy--or anything else. All he did was manage to get some people to distribute it for him in the U.S. after making a deal with the manufacturer to give them a percentage of the sales if they agreed to make him the only distributor in the U.S. That was more money than most attorneys in my law firm back then could expect to make in a lifetime.

There are people like this creating various businesses and succeeding on a huge scale that make it look easy--this guy, the guy with the rehab center--they are all over. If you have a talent for something greater than marketing rehab centers or selling toys, and the idea gets you excited--it might be a more rewarding task for you financially than sitting behind a desk practicing law.

I was challenged intellectually by the law firm; however, I did not see the trade-off (a steady paycheck) being balanced by any corresponding security I would receive in the law firm--because there was none. I saw partners, associates, and others losing their jobs constantly and most of the time, the reasons seemed arbitrary to me. I felt it was riskier to stay in the law firm than to [leave without a position somewhere else](#). I also felt more excited about unleashing my drive on a new venture that would lead to something bigger for me.

Keep in mind that I was making a decision about what to do with my career without [the benefit of career counseling or information from someone else](#). I had no one to help me make decisions other than myself. I spoke with my family about my unhappiness, and they could not offer much advice. They did not understand the issues or trade-offs my decisions involved.

Several days after I gave my two week notice, the managing partner of the firm came into my office, closed the door, and said "If you quit your job here, other law firms will think you were fired and you will likely never work in a large law firm again. You should talk to legal recruiters and find something else out there that you

like. This may not be the right environment for you."

That was the first piece of real career advice I had ever received--and it was good advice. If you are unhappy, speak with a career counselor or someone who can provide you with solutions to your anxiety before making your decision.

Good Help Is Hard to Find

What I found when I started speaking with legal recruiters was astonishing. Most of them were not lawyers--and if they were, [very few had the level of experience to understand where I was coming from](#). Instead of providing information and career counseling, they only had job openings and they could submit me to other law firms. But instead of having all of the openings, most of them had just a few each. Instead of being able to expose me to boutique law firms and firms of all sizes, most only had openings at the largest law firms. Instead of being able to sell me and my experience intelligently, most only had the ability to send my resume to other law firms via emails and faxes filled with typos. Very few of the legal recruiters worked in offices and most often, when you could actually reach them, they were on cell phones.

It was the most unprofessional industry I could imagine.

This was upsetting. I had worked so hard to become an attorney. I had applied myself in high school to go to a good college, applied myself in college to go to a good law school, applied myself in law school to get into a good law firm. In fact, I had worked extremely hard to get where I was and did not understand how I could reach this point and need career advice and have no one good available to help me.

What made the industry even more shocking to me was that the legal recruiters I spoke to seemed to be making a very good living. One of the recruiters I spoke to had been ranked the best recruiter in the United States, and when she communicated with me, her correspondence was littered with typos. I often spent days waiting to hear back from her after I contacted her. When I did speak with her, she was often shopping, and I would reach her on her mobile phone while she was doing something like trying on a dress or shopping for an expensive house.

The recruiters all seemed to be in the business not because they had an innate interest in the subject matter of counseling attorneys on their careers, but because they wanted to make commissions. I very quickly figured out that being a legal recruiter back then was very similar to being a real estate agent--it required no education, more flash than substance, and was all about the commission.

I had already felt anxiety while I was practicing law--now I started feeling anxiety that there was no one who could provide me with advice about the best direction for my career. I also started thinking about what was wrong with the legal employment industry and how serious the issues facing attorneys really were.

From my perspective, the state of the legal employment industry was just the spark I needed to get motivated to do something else. I saw everything that was going on and how messed up the market was, and I knew that I could do things differently and better. This industry was being run by people who, for the most part, did not care about what was happening to attorneys and others in the legal market. Quite simply, the legal market needed to change. This need gave me the desire to step in and fix an obvious gap in the legal market. Any time you see people without obvious talent or passion for something doing very well in the industry--it is a sign that it is probably a good idea for others with more passion, skill, and interest in the subject matter to enter the industry as well. It ended up being the right decision for me.

Mistakes to Avoid

For most people, their careers are one of the most important things in their lives that are under their control--next to their love lives and perhaps their health. And yet, when it comes to most people's careers and love lives, they fail to seek out and get meaningful advice before they do things and act instinctively with disastrous consequences. The mistakes most people make with their careers and love lives are:

Not getting very good advice before they act.

When I quit my position without another one lined up, I had no idea that I never would be able to work in a large law firm again. This was a mistake.

I should have sought advice first, so someone could have advised me of this--I should not have learned it from the head of my law firm after I had already resigned. Instead, my decision was instinctual.

Many people get married, meet their life partners, and get divorced based on instinct--and nothing more. But instinct does not always serve people well and may lead to much more unhappiness than it should.

Before you make any major decisions about your career or your love life, the most important thing you can possibly do is to get good advice. Many people take the first job that comes along, marry the first person who comes along, and make other disastrous decisions with their careers and love lives without any guidance.

Before making any decisions that will have long-term consequences for your career, you need to learn everything you can to eliminate the potential anxiety associated with the prospect of making a bad decision.

This website and our extensive library of articles make it easy to find information and advice to help with your career decisions. Get started by searching for the topics that apply to you. Then review and study these resources to make sure that you are making the most informed decision possible.

Not getting enough exposure to different people and environments before they act.

In your love life, this means you should not necessarily marry the first person you meet. This will almost always be a recipe for disaster, because there is no way to know if all your needs (and vice versa) can ever be met. You should expose yourself to a variety of different people to understand what you truly need and what sort of person you are likely to be the most compatible with. You should be with someone who brings out the best in you and vice versa.

In your legal career, you should expose yourself to many different types of people and environments as well. You may find that you are better suited to working in a law firm in a different city, or a different-sized law firm, or a law firm with different values than where you are right now. It might also mean working for the government, in-house, having your own law firm, or something similar.

Many attorneys make rash decisions with their legal careers that end up hurting them in the long run because they do not expose themselves to different legal environments that would benefit and bring out the best in them. They assume that they dislike not just their law firm but all law firms, and then look for in-house positions. They assume they do not like the practice of law and want to leave the practice of law completely--when they simply may not have been exposed to the right environment yet.

If you make drastic decisions about your career or love life without being exposed to the right environment and people first, you may act on instinct that takes you in the wrong direction with catastrophic results.

Not understanding themselves well enough.

People make huge mistakes in their careers and love lives when they do not truly understand themselves. Understanding yourself means not only taking the time to seek advice from others, but also understanding why you do the things you do and essentially taking a therapeutic approach to your life and career.

When it comes to love, people do things for some of the stupidest reasons. Some people get married because they think they will never find anyone else. Other people never commit because they are afraid that if they do, they will end up like their parents, or someone will see the person they really are. Other people get divorced because they think they can find someone better, but they never do. Many of these horrendous decisions could be avoided completely if people sought professional help to understand their motivations and actions--in most cases, this includes therapy.

While it may sound odd to say, you would probably serve yourself and your long-term career better by getting therapy to understand your motivations and actions than you would by seeing a typical career counselor or most legal recruiters. Many people do things in their careers that are deeply rooted and more psychological in nature than anything else. People move between jobs every time they start to feel criticized, put themselves in jobs that are beneath them to avoid criticism, allow themselves to be abused at work, prioritize their work over their families to such an extent that they get divorced repeatedly, have substance abuse and other health problems because they do not like themselves, and more.

Many attorneys--especially those in the legal environments with the highest-possible level of stress--could benefit from getting therapy and taking the time to be introspective and understand why they are act the way they do. In extreme cases, it could save their lives.

Far too many people are incredibly unhappy in their love lives and careers when they do not have to be. You may not believe you deserve to be loved and stay in a relationship where someone treats you badly for your entire life--and be miserable as a consequence. You may not believe that you deserve to work in a job that makes you excited to go to work each day, so you stay in a job that you do not enjoy for your entire career. This does not have to happen--but it all starts with understanding yourself.

Conclusions

Career anxiety does not have to mean the end of your legal career. By identifying the sources and reasons for your anxiety, seeking credible advice, and understanding yourself, you will be better prepared to make the choices that bring you happiness in your career and your life.