

Book Review

New Guide Addresses Career Choices Before, During, and After Law School

Review by Sandra Philipps

Should You Really Be a Lawyer? The Guide to Smart Career Choices Before, During & After Law School, by Deborah Schneider, JD, and Gary Belsky.

“If only I had known.” “I don’t know what I want to do.” “I just want a job.” “I hate being a lawyer.” What if there was a guide to help those making these plaintive statements? Now, there is. *Should You Really Be a Lawyer? The Guide to Smart Career Choices Before, During & After Law School* has value for prospective applicants, current law students, and lawyers considering a change.

Readers will be interested in learning about the backgrounds of the authors. Both attended law school. Belsky chose to leave law school and became an award-winning journalist, while Schneider graduated and built a career in the field of career development. They thread their thoughts and experiences throughout the book.

The authors draw upon their backgrounds and research into the field of decision-making psychology called behavioral economics. “Behavioral economics brings together the disciplines of psychology and economics to study how people form judgments and make decisions.” The authors use this information to construct a guide for making informed career and life choices. Too often, people use shortcuts and soft assumptions, psychological traps that can impede good decision making. Schneider and Belsky refer to these traps as “Choice Challenges” — describing their effect on choices and then presenting ways to ad-

dress the challenges and make more appropriate decisions.

In Part I, *Should You Really Go to Law School?*, the authors describe a Choice Challenge they call “Follow the Herd” as a tendency to be influenced by those around us. Thus, if a lot of students are applying to law school, that is the thing to do. Everybody is doing it. In the grand scheme of things, this is not a good reason to go to law school. Career counselors frequently see students who do not know why they came to law school and have no idea about what they want to do.

Prospective law students would do well to take the Schneider/Belsky LSAT before taking the required LSAT:

- **L is for Law School** — What is it all about?
- **S is for Self-Assessment** — Is law right for you?
- **A is for Attorneys** — What do they do and where do they work?
- **T is for Try It Out** — Get some practice before getting into practice.

Why? “If you enter law school confident of your decision to be there and with a clear action plan for your legal education, you’ll be better able to withstand various pressures, to think for yourself and to pursue course-work and jobs that most interest you,” advise the authors.

In Part II, *Should You Really Stay in Law School?*, the authors again use Choice Chal-

lenges and Decision Assessments as means to determine whether to stay or go. At some point in law school, almost all students face this question. The first step is to evaluate the causes contributing to current dissatisfaction with law school. Through the exercises involved, those who choose to stay will be able to use the information to make informed career choices. Those who choose to leave will have learned what to consider when pursuing another career path.

A Choice Challenge addressed in this section is the “Information Cascade.” The Information Cascade suggests the ways decisions are affected by information and news. For example, news reports that say the economy is bad may cause someone to stay in law school to wait out the downturn. In reality, avoiding the economy is not a good reason to stay in law school.

For those who choose to stay in law school, Chapter 11, *So You’ve Decided to Stick it Out*, is particularly good advice. Focus on your own job search, not those of fellow students, counsel the authors. Instead of asking, “Are there any more law firms coming to interview here?” students should be asking “What are the most effective strategies I can use to find a job I’ll like?”

In the final section, *Should You Really Practice Law?*, Schneider and Belsky encourage the reader to look for the roots of dissatisfaction and suggest ways to find a more satisfying position, either in or outside the traditional practice of law. One of the Choice Challenges discussed here is the “Sunk Cost Fallacy” — a tendency to resist wasting money and time already expended, both in school and in a career to date. This Choice Challenge can lead to decisions about the future that are made primarily to justify the past. Realistically, the education and skills one develops can be used in many settings. The focus needs to be on future happiness, not on what was spent in the past.

As in the first two sections, the authors recommend “a systematic approach to identifying, exploring, and evaluating legal, law-related, and non-legal jobs.” For those who have not done a

self-assessment, conducted informational interviews, or explored career options and work environments, now is the time to take the steps to find a career that would be satisfying. Look at a career as a series of stepping stones.

Because the book is split into three parts, some content is repetitive. For those who read one section as needed, this is not a problem. However, as I read the book all the way through, I was struck by the fact I had read these very words before in Section 1 and Section 2.

As the authors state, “People who are happiest in their careers tend to be those who make honest choices about what they like and dislike.” It is recommended that prospective students, current students, and practicing lawyers use the Decision Assessments, Self-Assessments, and other tools in the book to make well-informed choices that can lead to a satisfying career.

Should You Really Be a Lawyer? is now available from NALP at a cost of \$21 each for members (\$23 for nonmembers) plus shipping and handling. Order through the online bookstore at www.nalp.org, or by calling NALP.

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