

How to Have Happy Law Students and Lawyers

by Alexa Shabecoff

My staff has two major goals for the law school students we counsel: for them (1) to be happy in their work and (2) to embrace a career that incorporates an ongoing commitment to public service. Now a new empirical study and law review article, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success* by Lawrence S. Krieger and Kennon M. Sheldon (83 *George Washington Law Review* 554, 2015), demonstrates that intrinsic rewards including those that come from public interest work can, in fact, make for happier lawyers.

We know that not every law student wants to make public service their full-time vocation, and that not every student who wants to pursue a public interest career may be able to do so, even with loan repayment programs. Nevertheless, the study offers guidance that law school career counselors should take into account when advising students and that employers should consider in developing best practices for employee retention.

The study focused on practicing lawyers and their overall “life satisfaction” (as opposed to job/career satisfaction, which was the emphasis in the satisfaction factors examined in the *After the JD* study conducted by the NALP Foundation and the American Bar Foundation). The study showed that “the factors most emphasized in law school — grades, honors, and potential career income — have nil to modest bearing on lawyer well-being” (emphasis in the original). In fact, these “extrinsic” factors (grades, journal participation, and high earnings) had little to no correlation with high life satisfaction: class rank was only modestly associated with “subjective well-being,” and law journal participation had no effect whatsoever. Increasing income and decreasing debt had a small to modest relationship with lawyer well-being;

however, even though income was the extrinsic factor most closely associated with well-being, it was “less predictive than the internal factor with the weakest association with well-being” (emphasis in the original).

Using a widely accepted self-determination theory, the authors found that the following were most highly correlated with lawyer life satisfaction:

- Autonomy and authenticity
- Relatedness to others
- Feelings of competence
- Work chosen for internally motivated reasons (e.g., matched with work style, personal interests, and/or value system)
- Intrinsic values
- An “autonomy supportive” work environment (where managers provided understanding, freedom, and respect, as opposed to control)

Other important findings from the study included the following:

- Judges report the highest well-being, due to a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.
- Lawyers in the “service” attorney group — which included public defenders, criminal prosecutors, government lawyers, legal services providers, and in-house counsel for nonprofit organizations — were happier overall than lawyers in large law firms and in other prestigious/lucrative positions.

- “Service” lawyers were also happier than lawyers in categories “not typically associated with either very high earnings or primary public service,” including general practice, family law, and white collar criminal defense. (Sheldon and Krieger call this category “other.”)
- Junior partners in law firms were no happier than senior associates, despite increased pay and status.
- Pro bono hours correlated with greater well-being.
- Litigation practice had a small negative effect on well-being, but that effect was moderated among attorneys with “intrinsic motivation for the work.”
- Well-being did not vary with absolute hours worked; however, there was a strong correlation between an increase in billable hours and a decrease in life satisfaction
- Vacation and exercise, though lower in impact than the standard values highlighted above, equaled and sometimes exceeded the effect of increased income, decreased debt, law school ranking, grades, and journal participation on well-being.

In sum, the authors found that “money, status and other external markers of success” do not alone make for a happy life. Lawyers need “autonomy, integrity, close relationships, and interest and meaning” in their lives. The authors’ recommendations provide guidance that is geared toward law professors and employers but that could be equally useful for those of us who serve as career counselors.

Specifically, those of us in educational institutions should shift the emphasis in law school away from external measures of success, such as grades, prestige, and money. Instead, help students identify and nurture their personal internal motivations. As counselors, we should advise each student in a

way that brings out the student’s perspective. We should affirm for them that what works for their personality, needs, and values will be what makes them happy in the long run, not someone else’s idea of success. What feels intrinsically meaningful may vary from student to student and lawyer to lawyer and therefore can be difficult to uncover, but we should help students and lawyers do the hard work of identifying their internal drivers. We should also help law students retain a sense of self-determination and choice.

Career counselors should strive to promote a sense of competence among our law students as well. For example, when students confess that they feel as though they are not measuring up to some of the standards frequently used to judge law student success (e.g., grades or journal participation), I try to emphasize the ways in which they are uniquely accomplished (e.g., organizing skills, leadership, facility with client relationships, etc.).

Both schools and employers should foster a sense of relatedness/connection to others. Too often, law school feels like a competition for a limited pie (e.g., not just top grades but only premier public interest jobs or clerkships will do).

Law schools that send many students into the “other” category need to continue to figure out how to help these students feel greater satisfaction, perhaps through greater recognition of what they are accomplishing. In the end, many of these lawyers will help fill the justice gap. (For a discussion of this see <http://www.lawschoolcafe.org/thread/unhappy-lawyers-and-unmet-legal-needs/>.)

Employers should recognize that their lawyers may not mind working long hours if they experience autonomy, a sense of competence, and intrinsic rewards. For employers, this should mean thinking about how they structure work assignments and feedback to foster a sense of autonomy and competence, which may be at odds with measuring attorney success through the billable hour. They should also recognize that pro bono work may provide some of this intrinsic reward. For public sector and public interest employers, job

satisfaction can be increased “by educating [attorneys] about their relative well-being.”

As a result of changes in the market for legal services, much of our focus in recent years as career counselors has been on overall employment numbers. Employers, for their part, have concentrated on weathering the recession and responding to new market dynamics. But ensuring that lawyers can lead satisfied lives is in the interests of law schools and employers alike. Change brings with it an opportunity to shift our priorities, and the data in this study offer a solid foundation upon which to build practices more likely to result in happy law students and lawyers.

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