



Too many lawyers are dissatisfied with their careers because they misunderstand the nature of fulfilling work. This booklet offers practical applications of the principles in The Hidden Sources of Law School Stress¹ to guide you to a job you will really like.

Straight Talk About Your Career Choices

Avoiding the Mistakes that Create Unhappy and Unprofessional Lawyers

Most law students begin to focus on career questions early in law school. My purpose here is to help you find the kind of work and work place that will provide you with genuine career satisfaction. We will explore questions that students ask regularly and that may already be on your mind: Is it better to work for a large firm, a small firm, or a public agency? How do you factor in your personal and family life? How strongly should you weigh differences in salary or benefits? How do you know what to emphasize in choosing your career area, or when applying for a specific position?

I will outline ways to evaluate both your overall career direction and specific job choices that may be available. The suggestions incorporate a personal focus on your individual needs and preferences, coupled with a method for objectively scoring possibilities. I also pose two key questions — relating to Tuesday and Saturday mornings — to help you sort through the “what” and the “where” of the work you choose. The ideas here apply to virtually everyone, and should serve you well both now and later in your career.² After describing the key considerations for your job search, I explain the phenomenon of burnout, how quickly it can happen, and how the principles in this booklet protect you. I conclude by recounting the contrasting career selection processes of two of our students, to illustrate the application of these principles.

** All Rights Reserved by the Author.*



Principles to Guide Your Career Direction and Job Choice

Almost everything about your career involves a major life decision. There are many positive factors to look for when choosing your work. Approach your decisions with patience, because if these factors are ignored the result is likely to be an unhappy, or even depressed, lawyer. The most important factors include: (1) *enjoyment, interest, and meaning from the work*; (2) *conduciveness to a full “outside” life, including personal, family, social, and play time (geographical location is an aspect of this one)*; (3) *shared values and community feeling at the work place*; (4) *financial potential*; and (5) *quality of mentoring you will receive*. The first three factors are likely to be the most crucial, as the examples later will demonstrate.

1. Enjoyment, interest, and meaning

Modern research supports two obvious (but often ignored) concepts. First, in order to be happy in your work you will need to enjoy the “doing” of it on a day-to-day basis. Second, the work needs to be meaningful to you — it should support values that are central to who you are and what you want to achieve with your life. These are two of the most thoroughly established intrinsic human factors that relate to career choice.³

In clarifying what kind of work and work setting will provide you with enjoyment and meaning, use your experiencing function (your senses) to supplement your thinking and inquiring about jobs. This is important because your actual experiences (not just what you think) will largely determine your career satisfaction. As a start, if you are not clear about the kind of work you want to do (or to perform a “check” on a decision you have made), imagine a typical Tuesday morning in the near future, just as you are waking up. You drift



out of sleep and realize, “Tuesday morning, I need to go to work,” and a picture of yourself in the work place goes through your mind. What kind of work, in what kind of environment, seems attractive to you? Do not think about it. Look at the picture in your mind and get a sense of what makes you WANT to get out of bed, what makes you feel good to be going to that office to do that particular work. What does the picture tell you about the “what” and the “where” of your real work interests?

It is relatively easy to then test/confirm your thinking about jobs through a variety of more direct personal experiences. Obtain contact information from your alumni office, or through networking, for lawyers working in settings and areas of practice that may interest you. Call them and ask for a little time to come in, see the kind of work they do, and get a sense of how it feels to be in this kind of practice. Be clear that this is a request for a visit just to help you get a sense of this area of practice, not a request for a job interview, so that lawyers will welcome you to their offices without feeling pressure to interview or hire you. In addition, if you are thinking about litigation, visit courtrooms to watch processes that would be part of the jobs you envision. And of course, direct experiences handling cases, whether volunteering, clerking, or doing clinical programs through your school, will give you a very concrete sense of the kind of work and work environment that really fit you.

2 Conduciveness to a balance of personal, family, social and play time

Quality of life outside the office is a huge consideration that many law students and lawyers downplay in order to pursue their other goals. Remember the truth about all work and no play creating a dreary life experience. And remember that people have a core need for close, connected relation-



ships. Such relationships, like the other components of your life, will not thrive without time and attention.

At this point we can usefully consider the Saturday morning question. This time, imagine that you've begun your job and have chosen one that will give you substantial time off on weekends. You are waking up at your leisure on Saturday morning, and your mind drifts to the realization: "It's Saturday, I have some open time to spend as I like." Now what picture comes to mind as you imagine enjoying your weekend? What do you see yourself doing, and where? Do you picture hiking, reading, gardening, dancing, playing a sport . . .? Are you in a big city, a small town, at the beach, in a library, at museums, going to clubs, in the woods, out on a boat . . .? Do you have special interests or needs, such as a specific religious community, or a unique educational or recreational opportunity? This process should clarify where you will be happy (or not). For the time outside work that will round out your life, these considerations about climate, geography, city or country, or other factors that relate to your preferences will be very important. If you have a life partner, have him or her do the same exercise and then compare notes.

3 Financial considerations

Money and comforts are great, and it is the rare person indeed who would not be delighted with a large pay raise and a new car. On the other hand, a key message of scientific research on human needs and values is that income as your primary motivator is likely to produce frustration rather than satisfaction over time.⁴ Keep it in perspective. There are many factors to consider, and almost everyone early in his or her career will need to compromise on some of them. Assuming that you will not be offered the perfect job (requiring no compromises) right out of the gate, remember the scientific research: sacrificing some pay (if that is one of the alternatives) is likely to have less negative impact on your



happiness and life satisfaction than many of the other factors discussed here.

I mention this because pay and benefits are very concrete matters, and can be overemphasized at the expense of other factors that are less obvious but of equal or greater importance. It is also easy to focus too much on another concrete reality — your school loan obligations. I discussed school loans at length in Hidden Sources, and remind you here that all of these financial considerations, while unquestionably important, should not dominate your career decisions. The title of perhaps the leading scientific study in this area, *A Dark Side of the American Dream*,⁵ should alert you, and the example of the second student below illustrates the point.

4. Values, motivation, and social support at the work place

The dominant values, motivations, and the level of community in an office or organization will impact job satisfaction greatly. If you have read Hidden Sources, you understand the importance of emphasizing intrinsic rather than extrinsic values for a sense of well being. In a nutshell, research shows consistently that personal, interpersonal, and community values produce more life satisfaction than external rewards such as recognition, luxuries, or affluence.⁶ This does not mean, however, that you can generalize about the merits of work in law firms, corporations, public agencies or nonprofits. It is true that many books and law review articles mention the income orientation of modern law practice. However, one size does not fit all, and every work place is unique. Some large firms require high hourly commitments, but not all do. At the same time, some smaller firms, public agencies or legal aid offices may have similar hourly expectations, whether imposed as formal requirements or not. Regardless of the type of office setting, if your supervisors are working 60-70 hours a week and having little personal or family life, they will probably expect you to do the same. And



what if you open your own law office? Self employed lawyers also experience a wide range of satisfaction and balance, depending on their own values, motivation, and clarity of priorities.⁷

You need to learn as much as possible about all prospective employers. What are their priorities? Ask them about work expectations (hours and output) as well as salaries, expected raises, and promotions. If the answers aren't clear, be cautious. Be aware: As you explore and make inquiries you are uncovering the values and motivation of your prospective employers. Are they primarily intrinsic or extrinsic? Is the firm, agency, or institutional culture all about winning or earning money, or is there a strong emphasis on serving, maintaining clear ethical limits, building a reputation for integrity, or improving the community?

Informal meetings and formal interviews are good opportunities to find out how well the organizational values and motives mesh with your own. Don't just tell employers what you think they want to hear. In order to find a good fit, you will need to be honest with them about the most important things — the kind of work that you will find interesting and satisfying, your financial needs/expectations, your ethical and moral priorities in work, and your level of commitment to a personal life beyond work.

Within any practice environment, the quality of mentoring and collaboration will also be critical to your satisfaction and professional development. I mean here the relationships with your immediate supervisor and others who are in a position to see, evaluate, and contribute to your work. Will you have an encouraging and readily available mentor, or more of a critic? Will that person give you autonomy, within reason, to make decisions about your cases, or will it be a “just follow orders” environment? Will you be engaged with clients and other lawyers or partitioned off in the library, essentially doing law clerking and backup work?



In addition, the overall tenor of the workplace and the attitudes of the people in it will be important to your ongoing satisfaction. Look for an office where most of the people share your primary values, and where the level of morale, camaraderie, and mutual support is high — where there is a real sense of community that will fit you. Such an environment will provide you maximum support for your work and will help satisfy the universal need to relax, recharge, and relate meaningfully to others. In a sense, each office has a collective personality that is consistent across time, and factors such as quality of supervision, dominant values that are shared (or not), level of support and community all contribute in key ways. You are likely to sense that overall personality if you have spent some time and energy processing an opportunity; do not ignore your instincts or underestimate the importance of an office environment that suits you.⁸ The section on burnout below further emphasizes this point.

The answers to all of these questions will strongly impact your life and career satisfaction. Keep your eyes open and be alert to get the real story about the working environment. Supplement your discussions with the people doing the hiring by contacting others who do not have a direct interest in influencing your decision. Ask the important questions to a variety of present and former employees. Do not overlook secretaries and other support people; they can offer a wealth of relatively objective information about what they have seen at the workplace. Overall, be as thorough as possible so you can make an accurate assessment.

Understanding and Avoiding Burnout

Burnout can develop very early in your career – well within the first year if circumstances are conducive.⁹ Many lawyers are experiencing this or related problems;¹⁰ you obviously do not want to be a candidate. As we will see, if the principles offered here and in Hidden Sources are applied to your career, burnout will be a most unlikely event for you.



Burnout is a specific form of depression identified by mental or emotional exhaustion (depletion), cynicism, and loss of interest and meaning in work.¹¹ It can include other common symptoms of depression — fatigue, changes in sleep and eating habits, and loss of interest in relationships, hobbies, and/or sexuality. One of the signal components of burnout is a sense of emotional numbness or dullness; this results in depersonalization/objectification of clients, coworkers or others, and creates a sense of isolation in the affected person. “Burned out” employees also create major economic and human problems for employers, through reduced performance, increased absenteeism and turnover, and spillover of their negativity to other employees.

Many people believe that burnout results directly from long hours or demanding work, but the reality is not so simple.¹² In some cases the personal depletion at the heart of burnout is caused by excessive work, but more often depletion results from a combination of too little meaning in the work, too little social support at the workplace, and excessive (or uninteresting) work. People who work few hours are, of course, unlikely to burn out, but such a workload is unusual for lawyers. On the other hand, even high hourly demands will not produce burnout in special situations where the working conditions are ideal: (1) the work is guided by deep purpose (a genuinely felt cause or religious belief, for example); (2) the work is seen as helping others; (3) there is a close sense of community and mutual support at the workplace; and (4) the workers have shared core values.¹³

Notice that these ideal conditions mirror very closely the principles described in Hidden Sources and applied to the job search here. In fact, “burnout” may be a common term that describes the result of failing to honor intrinsic motivations, values, and the basic human needs for meaning, self esteem, intimacy, and community. Indeed, as people “burn out” they have been specifically observed to begin substituting extrinsic for intrinsic values – shifting, for example, from



a more helping, community-oriented focus to more individual desires for higher salary or greater prestige.¹⁴

The proper choice of work and workplace will have the greatest effect in preventing burnout¹⁵ – another good reason to implement the recommendations about job choice below. Once on the job, your personal efforts¹⁶ to minimize emotional depletion and maximize personal renewal will also be important for maintaining mental and physical health. On the other hand, if you have not chosen well — if your work is not infused with meaning, or if your workplace does not support you with community and shared values — such personal efforts become even more important. Ultimately they may not be enough for you to maintain your enthusiasm and well being, so do not ignore the overarching importance of choosing intrinsic motivation, values, and a sense of community in your work. The scoring method suggested below will guide you.

Making Your Decision: The Scoring Process and Two Examples

You are, of course, looking for something as close to the perfect job as possible — a combination of many considerations. Here again is that listing of the factors, in approximate order of importance, that are likely to produce your maximum happiness and career satisfaction:

- work that provides interest, enjoyment, and meaning
- time and energy remaining for your personal, family, and social activities
- shared values and a sense of community at the work place
- a geographical location that is attractive to you and fits your life preferences
- good pay
- an employer who provides quality mentoring



For a serious job prospect, write down actual ratings from 1-10 for each of these considerations, keeping in mind the relative importance among them.¹⁷ Remember that a prospect providing all “10”s is most unlikely; almost everyone will have to make some compromises in this mix, particularly early in their careers. With subsequent job changes these compromises will become fewer and smaller, assuming that the purpose of the change is to increase happiness and career satisfaction. For the first job, if you come up with good numbers (perhaps 7 or higher) for your top priorities and acceptable numbers for the rest, this is a positive opportunity for you. Remember that your most important priorities should probably include at least the first few factors listed. Be flexible, but do not flex too far, nor in areas that will undermine your overall work or life satisfaction.

Example #1: Firm A or Firm B?

Two examples of recent students illustrate the process. The first student came to my office with a question about raising her young child and working for the firm where she had been clerking. They had made her a permanent offer that was very generous, doing the kind of work that most interested her, and in exactly the city in which she and her husband preferred to live. But the hours were excessive for her family commitment. I suggested that she ask if the firm would consider a lower hourly commitment for a pro-rata lower salary (about 80% of each). She did so and the firm declined. Thus we learned that, despite family-friendly rhetoric, the firm’s values in that area were not sufficiently strong to provide the flexibility she needed. We discussed other work settings that might provide more personal and family time, including public agency and judicial clerking, but she preferred the specialized kind of work that the firm offered.

The next proposed solution was to seek a firm that would offer similar work, but that was open to an hourly commit-



ment consistent with her other desires for life. Such a position became available, not in her preferred city but in an acceptable location, and she decided to take this position. She compromised on money (roughly from a “10” to a “7”) and on the city location (from a “10” to a “6”), but remained firm in two critical areas — her primary work interest (“9” in both places) and time for outside commitments to herself and her family (from a “2” with the first offer to a “7/8”). The mentoring factor seemed acceptable in either firm, while the level of shared values and community support would be better in the more flexible office. This was a realistic, constructive process. It required clarity, resolve, patience and faith, and it ultimately yielded an outcome that is likely to serve her well over time.

Example # 2 Private or Public Setting?

The second student came to law school with a strong interest in graduating and working in a specific public service position in his home city. He performed a clinical semester in that office, enjoyed it greatly, and was offered a position after graduation. At about the same time he was also offered a position in a highly rated law firm, in a large city several hundred miles from his home town. The salary offered was three times that of the agency. The firm did everything it could to match his needs, including agreeing to place him in the division of his preference. The offer was most attractive, and he reasoned that he could pay off his loans quickly and help his family financially. Ultimately he accepted this position, although he knew that he was more suited to the work and social environment at the agency.

I knew this student well during law school. It was obvious that the outcome of this job decision was very difficult for him. We kept in touch for the years that he remained with the firm, and he was unhappy with his work most of the time. We can see why. In making this choice he gained in pay



(from a “4” to a “10”). I didn’t ask, but the quality of mentoring also may have been better. However, he sacrificed in all of the areas that are likely to have the most impact on work and life satisfaction: enjoyable, meaningful work (from a “10” to a “5/6”), time/location for outside life interests (from an “8” to a “3”), and a work community of closely shared values (from a “10” to a “4/5”).

There are two key lessons to learn here. First, you must consider all of the important factors when making career decisions. Further, your consideration should include weighing the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the factors to predict their relative impact on your happiness. This student focused on one extrinsic factor while undervaluing several intrinsic ones that would predictably matter more to his career and life satisfaction. Second, career and job decisions are personal and individual. The problem here was *not the firm, nor the work, but the fit* between the student’s real desires and the day-to-day reality of work at the firm. This position could have been ideal for some other students, but it simply did not fit this student’s intrinsic interests, values, or motivation. The work was not meaningful for him, the values of the overall office and of most of the individuals did not match his, and as a result he was often frustrated and unhappy.

The Role of Commitment For a Successful Job Search


Our focus thus far has been on finding out what your ideal job will look like, locating appropriate offices in locations that also suit your outside interests, and then recognizing those “right” opportunities when they become available. Once you are clear on the kind of work, work place, and geographical location that will really suit you, major benefits accrue. First, you can more sharply focus your job search on the opportunities that best fit your needs and preferences. This will save



you huge amounts of time and energy. It also avoids the discouragement of a constant flow of rejection letters, the inevitable result of the “shotgun” approach employed by many students. Second, the process of working through the many possibilities and finding your genuine preferences will create a sense of real commitment to the positions you ultimately identify. As you become more clear and committed you will become enthusiastic about them, because you can see how well these positions suit you. This enthusiasm has a powerful effect in keeping you motivated as you go through the search, and provides a further buffer against discouragement when an application doesn’t turn into an offer. Third, *feeling and expressing genuine commitment to a prospective employer is the key to getting hired by that person.* When you approach a prospect and can honestly say that after careful investigation you have decided that you are most interested in the kind of work she is doing, in the kind of office she has, and in the location of her practice, the employer sees you as a very attractive future employee.

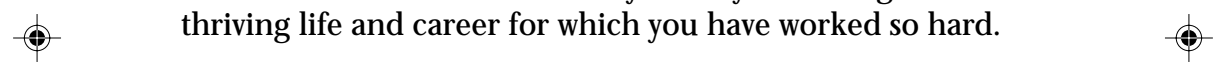
Employers know that enthusiasm and commitment are the foundations of a strong office. Commitment translates into *dedication* (both to the employer and to the work), *performance*, and *retention*. Ultimately, the right career decision for you is also the right hiring decision for your employer. You experience career and life satisfaction while earning your living, and your employer has a dedicated, effective employee who creates good morale for others and is likely to stay. Wouldn’t you hire such a person if you could find him?

There are, of course, more specific skills to consider, such as creating an effective resume, interviewing well, and following up appropriately. For these purposes you should consult with your placement professionals and other resources. However, the most important piece is finding and expressing your genuine commitment; it is the critical ingredient at each of those steps in the process. The fact that you truly want this kind of work in this office and in this location should defi-



nately come across in the resume (and/or accompanying cover letter), the interview, and any further contacts with the prospective employer. That commitment will maintain your enthusiasm and help move you to the top of the hiring list in those offices that will be the very best for you over time.

All of this brings us back to our earlier conclusions about the importance of an intrinsic orientation to your work and life. When you are considering your career, ask yourself those suggested questions to discern your true interests. Explore those areas directly until you find the kinds of work and the offices that attract you most. Review the principles here and in [The Hidden Sources of Law School Stress](#), and carefully weigh all the factors before making your decisions. As you implement these ideas you are putting decades of scientific research into practice for your personal benefit. Take your time and give these decisions the attention they deserve. You should be well on your way to finding the thriving life and career for which you have worked so hard.



For additional readings and related information visit:

http://www.law.fsu.edu/academic_programs/humanizing_lawschool.php

To correspond with Professor Krieger, e-mail: lkrieger@law.fsu.edu



Endnotes

¹LAWRENCE S. KRIEGER, *THE HIDDEN SOURCES OF LAW SCHOOL STRESS: AVOIDING THE MISTAKES THAT CREATE UNHAPPY AND UNPROFESSIONAL LAWYERS* (2005)

² The guidance here is broad, and is intended to complement rather than replace the specific services of your placement office.

³ These principles are discussed and supported throughout *HIDDEN SOURCES*, *supra* note 1.

⁴*See, e.g.*, Tim Kasser and Richard M. Ryan, *A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration*, 65 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCHOL. 410 (1993), demonstrating negative psychological effects of money and luxury as a core value; and Kennon M. Sheldon, et. al., *What Is Satisfying About Satisfying Events? Testing 10 Candidate Psychological Needs*, 80 J. PERS. & SOC. PSYCHOL. 325 (2001), finding that affluence is not a human “need” in the scientific sense – it does not correlate with well-being or life satisfaction.

⁵ Kasser and Ryan, *supra* note 4.

⁶ *See* Krieger, *supra* note 1, notes 5-7 and accompanying text.

⁷ A sole practice has special rewards and advantages, but “going it alone” also presents special demands and challenges. Be careful: (1) Monitor your hours, your stress level, and your life balance carefully and regularly; (2) Moderate the isolation and pressure of total self-reliance by arranging early with other solos or small firms for coverage when personal and family needs interfere with your work plan; and (3) *Schedule vacations regularly and well in advance or they will not happen*. Consider consulting a professional coach, and pay special attention to the discussion of burnout and self-replenishment in this booklet.

⁸ Thanks to Professor Mike Mullane for these insights about office personality.

⁹ CARY CHERNISS, *BEYOND BURNOUT* 9, 17 et. seq. (1995)

¹⁰ There are many negative findings about lawyer health and satisfaction. For example, lawyers have the highest incidence of major depressive disorder among more than 100 occupations studied. William Eaton, et. al., *Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder*, 32 J. OCCUP. MEDICINE 1079 (1990). For a brief summary and discussion, *see* Lawrence S. Krieger, *The Inseparability of Professionalism and Personal Satisfaction*, 11 CLIN. L. REV. 425, 426-27 (2005); for a fuller literature review *see* Patrick J. Schiltz, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, 52 VAND. L. REV. 871 (1999).

¹¹ Christina Maslach, et. al., *Job Burnout*, 52 ANNUAL REV. PSYCHOL. 397, 402 (2001)

¹² Rosalind C. Barnett, et. al., *Fit as a Mediator of the Relationship Between Work Hours and Burnout*, 4 J. OCCUP. HEALTH PSYCHOL. 307 (1999)

¹³ Cherniss, *supra* note 9 at 184-86

¹⁴ *Id.* at 83-87



¹⁵ Maslach et. al., *supra* note 11 at 418 et. seq.

¹⁶ Time management strategies will minimize your personal depletion, and stress management strategies may both minimize depletion and provide renewal/revitalization. There are countless resources you may consult; keep an open mind and experiment until you find life style choices (supportive socializing, hobbies, sports, exercise) or more specific techniques (yoga, meditation, mindfulness) that work well for you. One recommended author is Steven Covey, because his approaches bridge both time management and the deeper considerations of meaning, purpose, and morality.

¹⁷ The factors relating to meaningful work, shared values, and community/social support at work are the ultimate protections against burnout. *See* Cherniss, *supra* note 9 at 184-86.