

Column Attorney Wellness

“The Happier Lawyer,” Improving Job Satisfaction

BY TED ANDERSON

I hate reading the dismal statistics on lawyer job satisfaction. The stress, the long hours, the anxiety. Lawyers also suffer an abnormally high incidence of substance abuse and mental health issues. The cycle caught me too.

After a year on Wall Street, I went into law school pretty set on my career path. I focused on transactional law with a view towards making some serious money. My inconsistent grades mildly concerned me, but I landed a job. Working at the firm I reviewed the tax consequences of employee-benefit plans to corporate mergers. But weirdly, reading plan documents made my eyes bleed. Then the economy fell apart. The firm’s transactional practice vanished. I felt lost. With no book-of-business, I needed to reevaluate.

I took a personality profile with a business coach. The results opened my eyes to some real blind spots. From my profile, I learned that my personality was

off-the-chart “social” and below-the-chart “theoretical.” My inconsistency in law school grades, the energy-suck I felt reading employee benefit regulations, all that stuff was theoretically my weakness. My stuff was people. The profile said, I “had the ability to instinctively notice and respond to people.” My lack of self-awareness led me down the path of transactional lawyer motivated by money. No wonder I was neither energized, happy, nor succeeding. My ambition blinded me to my weaknesses and my strengths. But armed with a new self-awareness, I rethought my practice. The energy I needed to succeed must come from people, not money.

So, I changed my practice. I started representing people, not institutions. My clients were workers wrongfully terminated from their jobs, executives terminated to avoid payouts, inventors that lost their companies and creations. I became a trial lawyer with my face to judges and juries. Not a wordsmith buried in documents. I learned to acknowledge

and forgive myself for my weaknesses. I managed around them. I hired support staff who complimented my weaknesses; people focused on the theoretical, people attentive to the details I invariably overlooked. My career ignited.

We all have different personalities. Different values motivate us. These differences are not right or wrong. They just are. Some lawyers thrill over resolving complex deal terms that close deals and spur the economy. I applaud them. They do what I cannot. But until we take the time to seriously examine ourselves and uncover our core motives and values, it is difficult, if not impossible, to build a successful and fulfilling legal career.

Law school and the early years of practice train us to expect and withstand enormous amounts of stress and anxiety. They normalize reactions that should alarm us. Rather than adjust, we cope. We think, “if I only work harder on my deficiencies my performance will improve. More money will make me more satisfied.” But we cannot change who we are. We can only discover who we are. So, until we step away from the billing clock and spend focused time and effort uncovering our blind spots, we risk running the hamster wheel without any true job satisfaction. Worse, we run the risk of developing unhealthy coping mechanisms.

My process for aligning my practice with my strengths and values trans-

formed my career. My new self-awareness and career redesign resulted in 38 years of practice, 20 as managing member. I took great joy fighting for the people that trusted me. I felt solemn satisfaction from building a practice that provided jobs and health care for our employees and their families. It was lucrative too.

Now many law firms turn to business coaches. Some hire them in-house to improve, not just under-performing lawyers, but star-performers too. The demands on lawyers and the investments made in their education and training are just too high to allow their careers to wither. The identification of blind spots, the alignment of career with core values, and managing weaknesses are vital to optimal performance and career satisfaction. I used a coach for 20 years. Recently when I noticed one of my weaknesses cropping up—“routine”—I recognized my need to transform again. Trying lawsuits for people I cared about gave me great satisfaction. But the repetition started wearing on me. Now as I move onto my next career, my self-awareness reminds me that my next career must involve people. What can a practice that is properly aligned with your values, your strengths, and your weaknesses do for you? **HN**

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- Getting Paid: A Mid-Year Checkup on the Ethics of Fees and Billing Jeanne M. Huey, Hunt Huey PLLC