

# Coaching for Lawyer Well-Being: a Qualitative Investigation of What Makes Lawyers Happy

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*Abstract: The focus of this paper is to identify what it is that makes lawyers happy. Krieger's 2015 study of more than 6,200 lawyers across four states found that experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others most strongly predicted attorney wellbeing, while conventional markers of success, such as income, law review participation, law school rank, and partnership in a firm were weak predictors of wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, using a systematic review methodology of global literature about lawyer well-being, Lucinda Soon et.al identified a dearth of research on positive measures of well-being for lawyers like, "experiencing purpose and meaningfulness or personal growth and flourishing."<sup>2</sup> To address this gap, I performed qualitative research on what makes lawyers happy<sup>3</sup>. I did eight in-depth interviews: managing attorneys from two large international law firms, a Manager of Career Services for a large international law firm, managing partners for two medium sized law firms, managing partners for two small law firms and the District Attorney for a large metropolitan US City. In preparing for my interviews, I used Martin Seligman's PERMA model as a framework for understanding well-being and human flourishing. The model includes five core elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment.<sup>4</sup> I used the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research Guidelines.<sup>5</sup> My major findings were that across the board, lawyers at large law firms, medium law firms, small law firms and the district attorney's office indicated that engagement, accomplishment and relationships were important sources of happiness. Indeed, relationships with clients were an important source for a sense of engagement and accomplishment. Relationships with other lawyers were an important source of stress resiliency. Relationships with clients and lawyers have an important connection to positive emotions. But in the private sector, lawyers struggled to articulate their Meaning and Purpose and their moments of Positive Emotion seemed isolated as sources of happiness. From a coaching perspective, my research indicates that coaching is generally used at large law firms and is emerging at medium sized and smaller law firms.*

Keywords: Lawyer, well-being, positive psychology, meaning and purpose, relationships, flourishing.

## Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to learn and identify what makes lawyers happy and whether executive coaching is being used and can be used to help make lawyers happier. As a thirty-nine-year trial lawyer with twenty years' experience as a managing partner, I was the beneficiary of executive coaching. But I never had the sense that lawyers were taking advantage of executive coaching to enhance their careers or their happiness. I also had an acute sense of unhappiness in the profession.

## Review of Selected Literature

**Attorney well-being.** My first search on googlescholar was “(Lawyer OR attorney OR law firm) AND purpose AND meaning AND (wellness OR happiness OR wellbeing OR well-being).” From previous reading I knew the legal profession struggled with high incidence of substance abuse, suicide, and depression. It is there that I found the studies by Patrick Krill on substance abuse.<sup>6</sup>

I then performed another search on googlescholar adding “AND (personal growth OR flourishing).” The results from that search introduced me to various articles by Seligman.

I then performed another googlescholar search designed to see if coaching had been applied in a peer reviewed study, which I did not find. I searched, “(Lawyer OR attorney OR law firm) AND (coaching OR “Executive coaching” OR “executive coach” OR “executive leadership” OR “leadership coaching” OR “organizational coach!”) AND (wellness OR happiness OR wellbeing OR well-being OR resilien\*<sup>7</sup>

While there is no peer reviewed research on the benefit of coaching in the legal industry, my research did introduce me to the research of Lucinda Soon, “Lucinda Soon; Almuth McDowell, and Kevin R.H.Teo, “Towards a Context-Specific Approach to Understanding Lawyers’ Well-Being: a Synthesis Review and Future Research Agenda *“Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 31, no.3 (2024); 564.

It is from this review that I identified the gap in research on lawyers:” a dearth of literature on positive measures of well-being like, “experiencing purpose and meaningfulness or personal growth and flourishing.”<sup>7</sup> They also noted a lack of qualitative research on the sense of purpose and meaning across the legal practice.

I did a ChatGPT search, “Peer review paper on human behavior and performance improvement of lawyers” that cited me to the research of Krieger & Sheldon “Krieger, L. S., & Sheldon, K. M. (2015). What Makes Lawyers Happy? A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success. *George Washington Law Review*, 83, 554–627.”

I tested the alleged research gap on positive measures of well-being. I performed the following search on ChatGPT: "I have a 15-page paper for certification in "coaching." Please give me 10 peer reviewed qualitative studies in law, behavioral psychology, and/or organizational psychology space on what makes big or large law firm law or business lawyers or civil trial lawyers happy in their careers?" None of the results directly referred to or related to lawyers.

## Definitions

word	Source	Definition
Well-being	Martin Seligman,	PERMA is the model of psychological well-being developed by Martin Seligman. The acronym stands for core elements of well-being: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. <sup>8</sup>
	National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being	A continuous process whereby lawyers seek to thrive in each of the following areas: emotional health, occupational pursuits, creative or intellectual endeavors, sense of spirituality or greater purpose in life, physical health, and social connections with others. <sup>9</sup>
	Lucinda Soon, Almuth McDowell, and Kevin R.H. Teoh, "Towards a Context-Specific Approach to Understanding Lawyers' Well-Being: a Synthesis Review and Future Research Agenda" <i>Psychiatry, Psychology and Law</i> , 31, no.3 (2024); 551.	"Well-being is a multidimensional composition of positive facets such as work engagement, motivation, job satisfaction, personal growth, purpose and meaningfulness, as well as negative facets such as psychological strain, anxiety, depression, burnout

		and work-related trauma <sup>10</sup> ”
Positive psychology	Martin E. P. Seligman & Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, <i>Positive Psychology: An Introduction</i> , 55 AM. PSYCH. 5 (2000).	Positive psychology focuses on enhancing wellbeing by cultivating strengths, positive emotions & meaningful experiences
	Barbara L Fredrickson (2001)	The broaden-and-build theory posits that experience of positive emotions broadens people's momentary thought-action repertoires, which in turn serves to build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources <sup>11</sup>
	Elina Teboul,” Positive Psychology Coaching Model for the Legal Profession,” <i>Journal of the Legal Profession</i> 46 (2021): 105	positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and transformational coaching are used as guiding principles. The model distills interventions and processes most likely to be successful in counteracting the maladaptive thought and behavioral patterns cultivated in the legal profession, thereby empowering legal professionals to thrive.
Self-determination theory	Lawrence S. Krieger with Kennon M. Sheldon, <i>What Makes Lawyers Happy? A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success</i> , <i>George Washington Law Review</i> 83 (2015); 554	All human beings have basic psychological needs; to feel competent/effective, autonomous/authentic and related/connected with others.
	Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, “Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being,”	Ryan and Deci proposed that humans have three innate psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel in control of

	<i>American Psychologist</i> 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78.	one's actions), competence (the need to feel effective in one's activities), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others). When these needs are met, individuals experience higher motivation and well-being, whereas frustration of these needs can lead to reduced motivation and mental health issues.
Stress hardiness	Suzanne C. Kobasa, "Stressful Life Events, Personality, and Health: An Inquiry into Hardiness," <i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i> 37, no. 1 (1979): 1–11.	Three key components that contributed to hardiness: Commitment-a sense of purpose and engagement in life. Control-the belief that one has the ability to influence events and outcomes in their life. Challenge - the ability to view stressful situations as opportunities for growth rather than threats.
	Salvatore R. Maddi, Richard H. Harvey, Deborah M. Khoshaba, John. L. Lu, Michele Persico, Marnie Brow, <i>The Personality Construct of Hardiness, III: Relationships with Repression, Innovativeness, Authoritarianism and Performance</i> , 74 J. OF PERSONALITY 575, 576 (2006)	Stress hardy individuals are strong in commitment and "find it interesting and meaningful to stay involved with the people and events around them. Individuals strong in control are those who believe that "they may be able to influence ... outcomes taking place" and that "powerlessness and passivity" are "wasteful." Individuals who are strong in challenge "see change as

		natural and an opportunity to continue to grow by what is learned through negative as well as positive experiences. “ <sup>12</sup>
	<p>Pamela B. Pierson, Ashley Hamilton, Michael Pepper &amp; Megan Root, Stress Hardiness and Lawyers,” <i>Journal of Legal Profession</i> 42 (2017) 22 Available at: <a href="https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac_articles/526">https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac_articles/526</a></p>	<p>Stress-hardy individuals, although experiencing the same stress as everyone else, manage stress better, demonstrating "positivity and resiliency in meeting life's changes." Stress hardy individuals do not experience physical and psychological manifestations of stress; in fact, they perform better under stress. These individuals tend "to view life events as less stressful, cope effectively with these events, avoid excessive physiological arousal, and pursue positive while avoiding negative health practices."</p>

## Origins/History of Well-Being

1. Ancient and Classical Philosophy (400 BCE – 500 CE) The concept of well-being can be traced back to ancient Greek and Eastern philosophies, which laid the foundations for later conceptualizations. Socrates emphasized that living a virtuous life was integral to human well-being. He proposed that knowledge and virtue were central to achieving a flourishing life. For Socrates, living well meant living according to reason and virtue. Plato, in his work *The Republic*, defined the good life in terms of justice, wisdom, courage, and moderation, emphasizing harmony within the individual and society as essential for well-being. Aristotle expanded on these ideas by introducing the concept of *eudaimonia*, often translated

as “flourishing” or “living well.” He believed that well-being arises from living a life of virtue, where one engages in activities that align with their true nature and purpose. He also discussed *hedonia* (pleasure) but considered *eudaimonia* as the more holistic form of well-being (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999)).

2. The 20th Century: Psychology and the Measurement of Well-Being. The 20th century saw the rise of psychological frameworks that defined well-being in terms of individual happiness, mental health, and personal growth. Sigmund Freud explored well-being through the lens of psychoanalysis, suggesting that mental well-being was achieved through resolving unconscious conflicts.<sup>13</sup> B.F. Skinner, with his behaviorist approach, linked well-being to external reinforcement and adaptive behaviors.<sup>14</sup> Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs placed self-actualization—the realization of one’s full potential—at the top of human motivation, seeing it as essential to well-being. According to Maslow’s original formulation, there are five sets of basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. These needs are related to each other in a hierarchy of prepotency (or strength) beginning with the physiological needs that are the most prepotent of all.<sup>15</sup> Carl Rogers focused on the importance of personal growth, self-concept, and unconditional positive regard in achieving psychological well-being.<sup>16</sup> Martin Seligman’s Positive Psychology movement emphasized the cultivation of happiness, hope, and meaning in life. Seligman’s PERMA model (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) became central to understanding well-being.<sup>17</sup>

3. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conceptualizations of Well-Being include those of Ed Diener who popularized the term “subjective well-being,” which emphasizes individuals’ self-reports of life satisfaction, happiness, and emotional well-being as key indicators of overall well-being.<sup>18</sup> Carol Ryff developed a model of eudaimic well-being that focuses on personal growth, autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Her work emphasizes the fulfillment of one’s potential and alignment with one’s values.<sup>19</sup> Other researchers

like Corey Keyes emphasize the importance of social well-being, which refers to positive relationships, social integration, and a sense of belonging as integral parts of overall well-being.<sup>20</sup>

## **Related Concepts**

### **Origins and History of Positive Psychology**

Martin Seligman introduced the field of positive psychology in 1998. He argued that psychology should focus not only on treating mental illness but also on promoting positive aspects of human experience, such as happiness, gratitude, and resilience. Seligman identified three areas that positive psychology should focus on: positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions. Seligman's work provides a framework for cultivating flourishing in individuals and communities by identifying and developing personal strengths and virtues.<sup>21</sup> This focus was in contrast to the deficit-based approach of traditional psychology, which often emphasized treating mental disorders.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 2000s, Barbara Fredrickson developed the Broaden-and-Build theory, which posits that positive emotions broaden one's thinking and foster resilience and social connections, which in turn build psychological resources that help individuals thrive.<sup>23</sup>

**Origins/History of Self-Determination Theory.** Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers were instrumental in shaping the conceptualization of motivation and well-being. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>24</sup> emphasized self-actualization as the goal of human motivation. Carl Rogers, similarly, stressed the importance of self-determination and autonomy for psychological growth and well-being. These ideas influenced Deci and Ryan's later work on self-determination theory, particularly the focus on the importance of autonomy in motivating individuals to pursue meaningful activities.<sup>25</sup> Earlier research by Harry Harlow and Edward L. Deci himself provided crucial insights into the nature of intrinsic motivation, particularly in relation to the enjoyment of

activities for their own sake, rather than for external rewards. Harlow's studies on primates and Deci's work on human motivation in the early 1970s paved the way for the development of Self-Determination Theory by showing how intrinsic motivation leads to higher engagement and well-being.<sup>26</sup> In 1971, Edward Deci conducted a groundbreaking study showing that external rewards (such as money or praise) can undermine intrinsic motivation if the rewards are perceived as controlling. This research indicated that autonomy was a critical factor in maintaining intrinsic motivation. This idea became a central tenet of Self Determination Theory, which posits that motivation thrives when people feel that their behaviors are self-determined rather than externally controlled.<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, Richard Ryan joined Deci in developing the full framework of Self Determination Theory. They expanded on Deci's findings by proposing that motivation exists along a continuum from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation, and that various forms of extrinsic motivation can be internalized. Self Determination Theory emphasizes that intrinsic motivation and internalized forms of extrinsic motivation contribute to personal growth and well-being, while controlled forms of motivation can be detrimental.<sup>28</sup>

### **Origins of Stress Hardiness**

The development of stress hardiness theory is associated with the work of Suzanne Kobasa. In the 1970s, while conducting research on people under stress, Kobasa discovered that some people exhibited a unique combination of traits less likely to suffer from the negative effects of stress and more likely to thrive under pressure. She identified three key components that contributed to hardiness: 1. Commitment: a sense of purpose and engagement in life. 2. Control: the belief that one has the ability to influence events and outcomes in one's life. 3. Challenge: the ability to view stressful situations as opportunities for growth rather than threats.<sup>29</sup>

In the 2010's stress hardiness theory began to be integrated with other psychological concepts particularly in the fields of positive psychology and psychological flexibility. Recent research focusses on the integration of hardiness with psychological flexibility and whether psychological flexibility can allow individuals to adapt to stressors more fluidly.<sup>30</sup>

In 2017 Pamela Pierson published in the Journal of the Legal Profession a study on stress hardiness positing that the characteristics of stress hardy individuals; a sense of control, sense of purpose and cognitive flexibility-can be learned and improved upon. Her data "operationalizes" these characteristics, showing specific, concrete ways lawyers can become more stress hardy.<sup>31</sup>

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry commonly used in the social sciences to explore and understand human experiences, behaviors, motivations, emotions, and social phenomena. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem<sup>32</sup>. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to measure variables numerically and test hypotheses statistically, qualitative research is concerned with how and why people behave the way they do, focusing on depth over breadth. "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them."<sup>33</sup> It aims to understand meaning from the perspective of participants, often exploring questions like 'What does this mean to you?' or 'How do you experience this?' "The aim is to understand how participants make sense of their experience, their feelings, their intentions, and the context in which their behaviors occur."<sup>34</sup>

Common methods of data collection for qualitative research include in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, document, or content analysis. "Data are collected through interviews, observations, and documents, and the data are typically analyzed inductively."<sup>35</sup> Data is typically textual or visual—such as interview transcripts, field notes, videos, or photos—rather than numerical. "Qualitative research uses non-numerical data, such as interviews, open-ended survey responses, and visual materials,

to uncover patterns of meaning.”<sup>36</sup> Researchers analyze data by identifying patterns, themes, or stories rather than using statistical methods.<sup>37</sup>

## Method

The present paper considered the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research Guidelines.<sup>38</sup>

Qualitative Approach and research paradigm	Narrative research constructivist/interpretivist paradigm
Researcher characteristics and reflexivity	I am a 39-year practicing lawyer with casual relationships with the lawyers I interviewed.
context	Zoom interviews of twenty-year/plus lawyers in their working environment in 2025
Sampling strategy	I identified currently practicing lawyers and administrators that manage large, medium, or small law firms or administer large law firms. I wanted the sample to include lawyers that practice in different areas, either litigation, transactional or criminal practice backgrounds. Because of the limited time, I limited the sample to eight interviews.
Ethical issues pertaining to human subjects	Because of the competitive issues in the industry, I conducted the interviews under strict confidentiality. I was not in a position of power among any of the interviewees
Data collection methods	Long interview
Data collection instruments and technologies	I conducted interviews on zoom or by cell phone
Data collection instruments and technologies	Data was collected by notes.
Units of study	8 lawyers, each with approximately 25-40 years of experience, were interviewed. They came from large, medium, and small law firms including a district attorney from a major metropolitan area. I also interviewed a coaching administrator at a large international law firm.
Data processing	Field notes were taken digitally. No qualitative software was used.
Data analysis	I used Seligman’s PERMA theory as a basis for my questioning. I was the only person conducting the interviews
Techniques to enhance trustworthiness	The interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality.

## Procedures

Via email, I contacted managing partners from three major international law firms, two medium sized law firms, two small law firms, a district attorney from major metropolitan area and a wellness administrator

from a large international law firm. All were attorneys. I considered these attorneys because their legal careers directly addressed issues of lawyer well-being not only for themselves but also for the attorneys that worked for and with them. Data collection was via thirty-to-forty-minute interviews. I spoke with them to provide “self” and “other” reports.

All interview invitations included information sheets detailing the study's purpose; requirements, risks, and benefits of participating; withdrawal options; data management and usage processes; and contact details for the researcher and strict privacy. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded participants of the study's purpose and gave them an opportunity to ask questions. I assured participants of the confidentiality of their interview. There is substantial competition in the industry for lawyers and practice groups and information about well-being is relevant to that competition.

The same question schedule was used in all interviews (see Appendix). However, I adjusted questions as data collection progressed to reflect issues emerging from preliminary data analysis and the responses to prompts. Questions focused on subjective perceptions of the causes of unhappiness and wellbeing, while exploring observations or—where volunteered—participants' firsthand experiences. I conducted all interviews via Zoom or by phone, from May to July 2025. Although I have pre-existing professional relationships with the participants, I do not hold a position of power in these relationships and found the pre-existing relationship facilitated, rather than impeded data collection. I used my notes in place of a transcript. I labelled my notes with the participant position, size of law firm and years of practice and location.

I developed the questions from Seligman's PERMA model of psychological well-being. The acronym stands for the core elements of well-being: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.<sup>39</sup>

Positive Emotion

Positive Emotion refers to the experience of pleasant feelings such as joy, gratitude, and hope. According to Seligman (2011), these emotions help broaden our awareness and encourage innovative thinking, which in turn builds enduring personal resources. Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory also supports this, demonstrating how positive emotions enhance resilience and social connection. While not denying negative emotions, cultivating positive affect is essential for developing an optimistic and resilient mindset.<sup>40</sup>

### Engagement

Engagement involves deep psychological involvement in activities, often described as a state of 'flow'<sup>41</sup> Seligman emphasized that people are most engaged when they are using their signature strengths in challenging yet attainable tasks. This immersive experience leads to intrinsic satisfaction, even if it doesn't generate strong emotions. Engagement is a key pathway to enhanced well-being because it fosters concentration, creativity, and a sense of fulfillment.<sup>42</sup>

### Relationships

Relationships refer to the positive, supportive connections we have with others. Seligman posits that strong social bonds are crucial for well-being. Empirical research supports this view, showing that social support is a predictor of mental health, longevity, and life satisfaction<sup>43</sup>. Positive relationships amplify joy, provide emotional and practical support during adversity, and fulfill the human need for belonging and connection.<sup>44</sup>

### Meaning

Meaning refers to having a sense of purpose and being connected to something greater than oneself. Seligman described meaning as the pursuit of significance through belonging to or serving a larger cause, such as religion, family, or community.<sup>45</sup> Research by Baumeister and Vohs support this, indicating that individuals with a strong sense of meaning report higher life satisfaction and are better able to cope with stress. Meaning helps people endure hardship and align their actions with their values.<sup>46</sup>

## Accomplishment

Accomplishment involves setting and achieving goals, developing competence, and experiencing mastery. Seligman highlighted that striving to achieve and feel capable contributes to self-efficacy and well-being. Locke and Latham demonstrated in their goal-setting theory that specific and challenging goals improve performance and motivation. Accomplishment builds confidence and provides a tangible sense of progress and purpose.<sup>47</sup>

**PERMA's symmetry with the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being.** The National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being defined well-being as a continuous process whereby lawyers seek to thrive in each of the following areas: emotional health, occupational pursuits, creative or intellectual endeavors, sense of spirituality or greater purpose in life, physical health, and social connections with others.<sup>48</sup>

**Analysis** I began my analysis by reviewing each interview as part of the transcribing process, identifying general themes emerging from each. Where there was unanimity among all interviewees for a specific lawyer group, I provided a check.

## Summary of Major Findings

### **Lawyers Experience Distinctive and Destructive Challenges.**

Studies show alarming statistics on the prevalence of substance abuse and other mental health concerns among American attorneys.<sup>49</sup> Substantial rates of behavioral health problems were found, with 20.6 % screening positive for hazardous, harmful and potentially alcohol dependent drinking...Levels of depression, anxiety and stress among attorneys were significant, with 28%, 19% and 23% experiencing symptom of depression, anxiety and stress, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Researchers at Johns Hopkins University found statistically significant elevations of major depressive disorder (“MDD”) in only three of 104 occupations surveyed.<sup>51</sup> When adjusted for socio-demographic factors, lawyers topped the list, suffering from MDD at a rate 3.6 times higher than employed persons generally.

Empirical studies link heavy workloads and overwork, an emphasis on profits, and time-billing targets to poor well-being outcomes in lawyer populations, including stress, anxiety, depression and burnout<sup>52</sup> Empirical studies also link experiences of competence and skill to lawyers' psychological well-being (Krieger & Sheldon<sup>53</sup>; Soon et al.,<sup>54</sup>) with higher levels of burnout, depression, anxiety and stress correlating with lower levels of perceived intellectually challenging work (Chan et al.<sup>55</sup>; Hopkins & Gardner<sup>56</sup>).

While conducting my literature review, it was noted that, while there is much research on attorney discontent in the attorney profession including stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout<sup>57</sup> , the research on what makes lawyers happy is limited.

**There is much research on why lawyers are unhappy.**

*Lawyers are selected for their pessimism.*

Research reveals a surprising correlation between pessimism and success in law school. Students at the University of Virginia School of Law, Class of 1987, were tested for optimism-pessimism with the Attributional Style Questionnaire ("ASQ").<sup>58</sup> The ASQ is a well-standardized self-report measure of "explanatory style" - one's tendency to select certain causal explanations for good and bad events. To date the ASQ has been administered to more than half a million American adults. In the University of Virginia Law School sample, the students' performance was then tracked throughout law school as it related to their initial explanatory style. In sharp contrast to results in other realms of life, law students whose attributional style defined them as "pessimistic" fared better than their optimistic peers. Specifically, the pessimists outperformed more optimistic students on traditional measures of achievement, such as grade-point average and law journal success.<sup>59</sup>

*Low-decision latitude*

Decision latitude refers to the number of choices one has or, one believes one has.<sup>60</sup> Workers in occupations that involve little, or no control are at risk for depression and for poor physical health. An important study of the correlation of job conditions with depression and coronary disease used two dimensions: (1) job demands and (2) decision latitude. There is one quadrant particularly inimical to health and morale: high job demand combined with low decision latitude. Individuals with jobs in this quadrant had a much higher incidence of coronary disease and depression than individuals in the other three quadrants.<sup>61</sup> From my qualitative interviews, it is mostly associates at larger law firms that experience low decision latitude. At medium and smaller law firms and at the District Attorneys' office, lawyers are given wide decision-making latitude, experience in interacting with clients, opportunities to appear in courtrooms and to try cases.

*The Zero-Sum Nature of American Law.* Lawyers are trained to be hyper competitive whether it is advocating in litigation or negotiating at the business table. While the adversary system may be a social good, one problem with the adversarial paradigm, according to leading lawyers like Sol Linowitz, is that "the single-minded drive toward winning the competition ... will make these young lawyers not only less useful citizens ... but also less good as lawyers, less sympathetic to other people's troubles, and less valuable to their clients".<sup>62</sup> When the practice of law is tied up with a large number of zero-sum games, it will produce predictable emotional consequences for the practitioner, who will be anxious, angry and sad much of his professional life.<sup>63</sup> From my qualitative interviews, transactional lawyers did not experience the transactional practice as a zero-sum nature. Trial lawyers expressed some emotional toll from the zero-sum nature. Criminal lawyers expressed deep concerns about post-traumatic stress from dealing with crime scenes and images of crime scenes more so than the zero-sum nature of the adversary system.

*Quality of Life.* Work-life balance is also consistently cited, particularly by female lawyers as further cause for stress and burnout.<sup>64</sup> The competitiveness and the compensation model based on billable hours creates a "race to the bottom" in terms of well-being. Excessive workloads are a

leading cause of stress, substance abuse, and mental health difficulties. The pressure to bill hours leads to "time famine," which threatens competence and work-life balance.<sup>65</sup> Except for the lawyers in the District Attorneys' office, the lawyers I interviewed expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with work-life balance.

**A number of studies identify different theories to promote happiness among lawyers, but there have been no qualitative studies on what makes lawyers happy.**

*Positive psychology.* Advocates of Positive Psychology suggest remedies for pessimism and low decision latitude. For pessimism, the antidote is to enlist the opposite dimension - optimism<sup>66</sup>. Flexible optimism and learned optimism can be taught. For high-pressure low decision latitude problem, advocates of Positive Psychology suggest that by modifying this dimension by for example modifying the workday to allow for more decisional control or for firm management to provide for more client contact and more decisional control<sup>67</sup> Appreciative inquiry is another approach to change that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry can be used to identify what is working in legal organizations, what are the strengths of each of the lawyers, what are their values, their dreams and how they could live and practice with greater purpose. Together, Appreciative Inquiry and Positive Psychology ask, "how can lawyers and legal organizations succeed."<sup>68</sup>

*Self Determination Theory.* Self Determination Theory posits that to thrive and maximize their positive motivation, which may come from extrinsic and intrinsic sources, all human beings need to regularly experience (1) competence, (2) autonomy, (3) and relatedness to others.<sup>69</sup> More specifically: [P]eople need to feel that they are good at what they do or at least can become good at it (competence); that they are doing what they choose and want to be doing, that is, what they enjoy or at least believe in (autonomy); and that they are relating meaningfully to others in the process, that is, connecting with the selves of other people (relatedness).<sup>70</sup> These experiences are considered needs because they produce wellbeing in subjects, while a dearth of these experiences

produce angst or low vitality.<sup>71</sup> Over the last decade and a half, researchers Kennon Sheldon and Lawrence Krieger have conducted several empirical studies to assess the psychological needs of law students and lawyers. Their longitudinal studies show that law school students experience a precipitous decline in mental health correlated with a reduction in intrinsic motivation as they progressed through law school. Sheldon and Krieger concluded that "all negative outcomes resulted from decreases in satisfaction of the fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others after students entered law school."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, their 2015 study of more than 6,200 lawyers across four states found that experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others most strongly predicted attorney wellbeing, while conventional markers of success, such as income, law review participation, law school rank, and partnership in a firm were weak predictors of wellbeing.<sup>73</sup> Self Determination Theory posits that, "choices that promote or express autonomy, relatedness, competence, internal motivation, or intrinsic values are likely to support lawyer well-being."<sup>74</sup>

### **The gap in qualitative research on what makes lawyers happy.**

But in 2024, using a systematic review methodology of global literature about lawyer well-being, Soon et.al.<sup>75</sup> noted a "distinct focus on negative well-being dimensions such as burnout, stress, anxiety and depression."<sup>76</sup> Their systematic review identified a dearth of literature on positive measures of well-being like, "experiencing purpose and meaningfulness or personal growth and flourishing."<sup>77</sup> They also noted a lack of qualitative research on the sense of purpose and meaning across the legal practice.

### **The Qualitative Study on Lawyer Happiness.**

#### **Survey results for lawyer unhappiness.**

- Except for the district attorney's office, all lawyers interviewed indicated work-life imbalance as a source of dissatisfaction.

- Large and medium-sized law firms specifically identified “lack of relationships” as a source of concern.
- Low decisional latitude existed as a source of unhappiness only for large law firms. But work/life balance was a source of unhappiness among all groups of private practitioners.
- Across the board there was a sense of pessimism among lawyers.
- Lack of meaning and purpose was not indicated by any group as a source of unhappiness.

Lawyer group	Predisposed to pessimism	Low decisional latitude	Lack of meaning and purpose	Work/Life Balance	Lack of relationships
Large Firm	✓	(for associates)		✓	(growing concern for associates)
Medium Firm	✓			✓	✓
Small Firm	✓			✓	
District Attorney	✓				

### **Survey results for lawyer happiness.**

- Feelings of positive emotion were limited at large law firms and small law firms.
- Across the board, lawyers at large law firms, medium law firms, small law firms, and the district attorney’s office indicated that engagement, accomplishment, and relationships were important sources of happiness.
- In the private sector, lawyers struggled to articulate their Meaning and Purpose and meaning and purpose changed across the span of a lawyer’s career. The moments of Positive Emotion seemed isolated as sources of happiness.

Lawyer Group	Positive emotion	engagement	relationships	meaning	accomplishment
Large Firm		✓	✓ not so much for younger associates		✓
Medium Firm	✓	✓	✓		✓

Small Firm		✓	✓		✓
District Attorney	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

### **Executive Coaching**

- Executive coaching of some kind appeared to be of common use among the large law firms. (In a recent survey by the legal coaching firm Volta, the use of coaching has increased across all segments of the AM Law 200. Indeed, “in terms of market segmentation, the higher you go up the Am Law 200 rankings, the more likely you are to find adoption and more widespread use of coaching.”<sup>78</sup>)
- The use of coaching across medium-sized firms was inconsistent. One medium-law firm used coaches on an *ad hoc* basis but expressed concern about the return on investment and lack of tangible progress for coachees.
- The District Attorney did not use executive coaches, but rather internal mentoring programs for leadership and skill development. The District Attorneys’ office also provides psychological counseling to address post-traumatic stress.

### **Relationships**

During the interview process a number of the interviewees noted a trend of lawyers’ not coming into the office and lamented the adverse effects including lack of relationship building among senior and junior lawyers.

### **Application and Implications for Coaching Practice**

**Coaching can help lawyers find happiness.** My research on lawyer happiness integrates **seamlessly** with my training at the Columbia Coaching Certification Program (“3CP”) Coaching can help lawyers manage their natural pessimism, identify practices that engage them, pursue and recognize the importance of

relationships with the clients and with their teams, source their meaning and purpose and pursue careers where they feel a sense of competence and accomplishment,

**Adhere to High Standards of Ethical Conduct-commitment to continuous and personal and professional development:**

Artificial intelligence is transforming the practice of law. Research, brief writing and motion practice were common areas where junior litigation lawyers cut their teeth. Tax research and the use of forms were similar entry projects for transactional lawyers. Artificial intelligence will supplant the competence and accomplishment lawyers felt from these entry-way assignments. But competency in the use of artificial intelligence and prompting may create alternative entry-way practices for newly minted lawyers.

Continuous growth and development of the impact of artificial intelligence in the legal profession will be required to give feedback and to explore options for lawyers.

Artificial intelligence is similarly transforming coaching practice. Artificial intelligence reshapes executive coaching by enhancing personalization through data analytics and natural language processing (“NLP”), scales accessibility via AI platforms, and supports coaches with insights and administrative relief. Despite ethical concerns around empathy and confidentiality, hybrid AI–human models demonstrate strong potential for effectiveness and reach.<sup>79</sup>

**Focus on the Client’s Agenda:** The research indicates that there are many factors that contribute to lawyer unhappiness. “These include heavy workloads, perceptions of being valued for revenue generation over professionalism, inconsistency between employee and organizational values, constraints over job autonomy and decision latitude, low perceived organizational support particularly in relation to junior and mid-level lawyers.”<sup>80</sup> Because there are so many factors that contribute to lawyer unhappiness and happiness, it will be important to concentrate on the client’s personal and organizational context. Here high-leverage questions would be helpful in helping lawyer-clients make discoveries for themselves. Examples could be, “Are you currently happy with your practice? What do you enjoy about your

practice? What do you hate about your practice? Is there anything you would like to change in your practice? Why would you want to change your practice? How would you change your practice? What are your needs from your practice?" On the other hand, from my qualitative research, lawyers find meaning and purpose in diverse ways; by helping solve transactional problems, by winning a trial, by being a subject matter expert, by their relationships with their clients. In addition, my qualitative research is consistent with other research indicating that a lawyer's purpose and meaning may change over the course of their careers. The lawyer-client's context (personal and organizational) is key to unlocking the door to happiness.

**Build Commitment Through Involvement:** As identified by Sheldon and Krieger, legal professionals may be confused as to conventional markers of success. Conventional markers of success, such as income, law review participation, law school rank, and partnership in a firm were weak predictors of wellbeing.<sup>81</sup> It is important for lawyer/clients to buy-in to the coaching process. High leverage questions designed to help clients discover for themselves the sources of their professional happiness or unhappiness are one step. Using self-determination theory as a basis for high-leverage questioning designed to determine sources of unhappiness, include; do you feel competent? Do you feel in control? How do you feel about your relationship with your co-workers and supervisors? Using PERMA as a basis for questions designed to identify sources of happiness in the practice of law can help lawyers discover for themselves what makes them happy. Such high-leverage questions include; when did you feel the most joy in your profession? When did you feel you were in the "flow" at work? What relationships at work do you enjoy? What do you consider your greatest work accomplishments? What about your practice aligns with something you believe is larger than yourself? What about your practice aligns with your beliefs?

**Earn the Right to Advance at Each Stage of the Coaching Process:** Until lawyers have clarity of their core organizational and personal values, it will be difficult to link interventions to their goals, wants, or needs. Once identified, a coach can use Appreciative Inquiry to identify those strengths that can be

marshaled to attain organizational and personal goals. Once those goals are attained, that explicit progress may be celebrated to elicit positive emotions that further support lawyer happiness.

### **Core coaching competencies.**

**Co-creating a relationship.** The studies show the practice of law is unique among businesses and professionals in the depth and expanse of unhappiness. Few experiences compare to the incessant conflict of the adversary system. Experienced lawyer-coaches can leverage their experiences in the profession to co-create a relationship. Lawyer coaches are familiar with the technical language in the law. They are also familiar with the high ethical standards for confidentiality that are the basis for trust. The adage “misery loves company” may create the initial bond for lawyer coaches with their coachees. But because autonomy is so important to lawyer happiness, lawyer coaches must avoid prematurely giving advice.

**Making Meaning:** Making meaning with others is a core competency of the Columbia 3CP coaching process. Krieger and Sheldon’s research indicates that choosing work for internally motivated reasons (i.e. for enjoyment, interest, or meaning ) was highly predictive of well-being.<sup>82</sup> In addition, as pointed out by Mamaysky, “our sense of meaning changes over time, as do our personal goals.”<sup>83</sup> My interviews suggest that very few lawyers in private practice readily articulate their meaning or purpose and have little understanding of its importance. Coaching to help lawyers find a sense of significance and purpose in their work involves exploring internal motivations and intrinsic values. Techniques like job crafting help lawyers redesign their roles to align with their strengths and passions. Exploring personal values helps lawyers reconnect with what inspired them to become lawyers in the first place and align their actions with those values. Coaching helps lawyers understand that pursuing a meaningful career path based on internal values leads to greater satisfaction than focusing on external “success” markers like income or prestige.

**Helping Others Succeed:** Reframing. Experimenting with flexible optimism can counteract the “maladaptive thought and behavioral patterns cultivated in the legal profession,” such as the

negativity bias and pessimistic explanatory style<sup>84</sup> In her paper “A Positive Psychology Coaching Model for the Legal Profession”<sup>85</sup> Elina Teboul posits that coaching helps lawyers cultivate flexible optimism, separating the necessary professional prudence from their personal worldview. It also helps lawyers “rewire” their brains for positivity through exercises like focusing on “three good things”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, coaching addresses perfectionism, a common trait among lawyers, by helping them shift towards optimism and embrace self-compassion to overcome the fear of failure and inability to take action.<sup>87</sup>

Organizational acumen will be key to helping young associates find meaningful access and engagement with clients and mutually beneficial relationships with supervising attorneys. My thirty-nine years of experience might also allow me to contribute my experiences from which younger lawyers and associates may mine ideas for creating action plans.

### **The 3CP Coaching Process Phases**

**Context** On entry and contracting, surfacing hopes and concerns will be important because of the various purposes pursued by lawyers in their careers. Understanding the lawyer relationship with self and others will be required to create developmental frames. In the legal industry the advances in communications and artificial intelligence will require commitment to continuous personal and professional development. During my interviews several of the law firm managers from large firms and medium-sized firms recounted concern about the empty offices at the law firms. Because of the advances in communication, lawyers were working from home rather than in the office. The concern was that the profession was missing out on the relationship building between peers and between senior and junior lawyers. From my research on wellness, Seligman posits that strong social bonds are crucial for well-being. Empirical research supports this view, showing that social support is a predictor of mental health, longevity, and life satisfaction (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010<sup>88</sup>). Positive relationships amplify joy, provide emotional and practical support during adversity, and fulfill the human need for belonging and connection.<sup>89</sup> As a result it will be important for personal and

professional development to learn how to incorporate advances in communication in such a way that it enhances relationships rather than isolating lawyers from their peers and clients.

*Developmental frames* in the coaching process, determining emotional and social capacities for stress would be important to the client professing feelings of stress. Psychological stress refers to a particular kind of relationship between a person and their environment. The stress relationship is one in which demands tax or exceed the person's resources. According to the *transactional theory of stress and coping*<sup>90</sup>, a central aspect for experiencing stress is the judgement of a situation as challenging. Under this theory "stress is a result of an interplay between a person who has specific motives (e.g., goals and values) and beliefs (e.g., self-esteem, mastery, sense of control) and the immediate environment that is characterized by certain demands (e.g., pressure at work), resources (e.g., social support of colleagues) and constraints (e.g., company policies). A person's subjective cognitive appraisal (*primary appraisal*) of the situation as dangerous, harmful, threatening, or challenging relation to their personal goals and well-being leads to the regarding stress response. A *secondary appraisal* follows as a person relates it to resources regarding the situation and possible coping options. When the person evaluates the situation as straining and exceeding their coping capacity, it results in the occurrence of stress."<sup>91</sup> Studies and empirical evidence demonstrate that Coaching can successfully address "all aspects of the transaction process of stress and coping, beginning with the appraisal of the stressors and coping resources culminating in the rearrangement of behavior related strategies."<sup>92</sup> Coaching can help clients gain the ability for self and problem-reflection, thereby improving their viewpoint towards the stressors (primary appraisal). In addition, they could activate resources (secondary appraisal) and the development of transformation strategies to contribute to the resolution process (coping response). The coaching should contain a precise goal-definition in combination with a resolution- oriented phase of self- and problem-reflection, as well as the improvement of coping- strategies through cognitive reappraisal and observational learning<sup>93</sup>

*Situational Analysis* identifying questions to focus data collection and feedback could include the values clarification exercise, the wheel of life exercise, and the Johari window exercise. Coaching

can support lawyers in gaining a sense of autonomy and control over their work and lives, counteracting the negative effects of high demands and low decision latitude. Techniques like the "spheres of influence" exercise, setting boundaries, and improving delegation skills are suggested.<sup>94</sup>

Job crafting empowers lawyers to redesign their roles to align with personal strengths and passions, and this bottom-up approach inspires them to take control of their professional lives.<sup>95</sup> This process involves changing daily activities, the nature of interactions, or the way one thinks about the job, and it is a key technique for finding a sense of significance and purpose.

**Content Feedback** Lawyers receive various forms of feedback, reviews by superiors, criticism by clients, opposition by their adversaries, rulings by Judges, verdicts by juries. People rarely ask lawyers about the seminal positive and negative moments in their career or when they feel in the "flow" at work. Feedback may be essential to helping lawyers identify what gives them their greatest joy and what creates the deepest obstacle to overcome to find happiness. *Exploring options* about future practices and the potential benefits and costs may alleviate stress as well as activating a mindset for growth. *Planning* that aligns goals with values and organizational priorities will move lawyers towards results that make them happier.

**Conduct action strategies.** My qualitative research indicated that large law firms often hire coaches to help partners build their client roster. There is demand for marketing strategies designed to help lawyers discover opportunities and develop legal business. But marketing cuts into billable hours and may further exacerbate work-life imbalances. But my research indicates that much of the positive emotion comes from relationships with clients. Much of lawyer happiness comes from accomplishments for clients. Holding lawyer attention to these important sources of happiness and away from billable hours can do much to promote self-renewal and see the big picture. *Celebrating* lawyer successes is also an important component. My research confirms that lawyers are pessimistic and that there were limited instances of positive emotion. Under Fredrisckson's broaden and build theory of positive emotions, "certain discrete positive emotions –

including joy, interest, contentment, pride and love- all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources, <sup>96</sup> all essential for resilience and combatting negative emotion. Coaching to celebrate client successes highlights those instances of joy and pride that allow lawyers to draw upon those emotions to combat pessimism and stress.

*Growth and renewal.* My research is consistent with other studies that feelings of competence are an important source of happiness for lawyers. Coaching supports the development of skills and confidence, fostering the feeling of being capable and effective. Encouraging a growth mindset helps lawyers believe they can acquire necessary skills. "Our sense of meaning changes over time, as do our personal goals, and we must be prepared for our careers to change alongside them.<sup>97</sup> As stated by Liu and Boyatzis "acceptance of self and life, and individual competence are two factors on the resilience scale."<sup>98</sup>

**Competencies that are not captured in the 3CP competency framework.** From the survey, uniformly across private practitioners, there was a noted demand for coaches to assist lawyers in building client bases and business referrals. That competency draws upon the coach's experience in the legal field. But with permission from the client, an experienced lawyer/coach may feed forward potential options for building business.

## **Conclusions**

*Lawyer Relationships may be undervalued as a source of lawyer happiness.* Across the spectrum of lawyers I interviewed, each identified relationships with clients as an important source of happiness or unhappiness. The managing partner of one of the largest law firms in the world said, "finding a business solution for one of my clients is something I really enjoy." A highly respected trial lawyer at another large firm said, "I no longer get the rush from winning a hearing or a trial as I once did. Now I am much more into my relationship with my clients and advising them." A lawyer from a small law firm said, "one of the most fulfilling

moments in my career was a *pro bono* representation of a client and the sincere appreciation that client expressed.” The managing lawyers for two midsized law firms expressed dismay at lawyers reluctant to show up at their offices. They miss out on mentoring opportunities. “They miss out on the development of interpersonal skills. If you do not have good interpersonal skills, you are not going to be good at your job.” The relationship between partners was also identified as important. “My relationship with my partners was incredibly important when we were building our practice. My close personal relationship with my partners is real source of satisfaction for me. My survey results are consistent with much of the research that positive relationships amplify joy, provide emotional and practical support during adversity, and fulfill the human need for belonging and connection.

*Remarkably, feelings of positive emotion were often tied to relationships with clients and other lawyers.* Across the spectrum of lawyers, positive emotion was most often associated with expressions of gratitude by clients, finding solutions for clients or efforts on behalf of clients, “at trial even when we lost.” At the District Attorneys’ office, lawyers expressed positive emotion from their experiences with crime victims. Otherwise, lawyers are a pessimistic bunch that need more instances of positive emotion to broaden and build their resilience and psychological resources. Lawyers need to celebrate their accomplishments, pursue practices that interest them and in which they may take great pride.

*The lack of autonomy was not perceived as a source of unhappiness except to a limited extent at the large law firms.* Managing partners at medium and small law firms and the District Attorney uniformly said the lawyers mostly had wide latitude and autonomy in their practices. Even the managing partners at large law firms said the complaints about lack of autonomy were limited. The lack of autonomy was particularly acute in the work-life balance and there particularly among women.

*Except for the District Attorney, there seems to be confusion among lawyers in the private sector of the importance of meaning and purpose to happiness.* From the survey, few lawyers expressed a lack of meaning and purpose as a source of unhappiness. Managing partners from the large law firms recognized the lack of meaning and purpose as an issue that is addressed by *pro-bono* work and by client relationships.

But an in-house coach for an AM200 law firm said that in her experience she often sees a “misalignment of expectations and a loss of personhood and values.” That lawyers at the large firms wear “golden handcuffs” whereby they are paid a lot, but do not want to continue under the current structure. “They have no idea what they want to do.” This is consistent with the work of Pierson et.al. on stress hardiness among lawyers.<sup>99</sup> At midsize and smaller firms there was not much expression of lack of meaning and purpose as a source of unhappiness. But, on the other hand except for the District Attorney, most of the lawyers in the private practice struggled to articulate their meaning and purpose. After prolonged thought, “to make money” was identified by the managing partner of one of the medium sized firms. The managing partner of another medium sized firm said, “being a part of a litigation team,” made him feel like he was connected and part of something bigger than oneself. Lawyers at smaller firms could not readily articulate their meaning and purpose. Under these circumstances, the exploration of meaning and purpose seems fertile ground for unlocking lawyer happiness. As Soon et.al. identified in their work, more exploration needs to be done on meaning and purpose for lawyers.

## Appendix

### Survey Questions

#### Confidentiality

1. How many lawyers are at your firm?
2. What is your position from an administrative function?
3. There are a few theories as to why lawyers are so unhappy. I am going to read you a list of theories as to why lawyers are so unhappy: from your experience, which ones resonate with you as a managing partner.

A. Inherent Personality Traits and Psychological Factors: Lawyers often possess certain personality traits that may predispose them to distress. They tend to be achievement-oriented, competitive, aggressive, self-reliant, and perfectionist. Research suggests lawyers disproportionately represent the "Thinking" type rather than the "Feeling" type on the Myers-Briggs assessment<sup>3</sup>. A key factor is a tendency towards pessimism, often framed as "prudence." While prudence helps lawyers anticipate potential problems for clients, this pessimistic explanatory style can generalize to their personal lives, leading them to view bad events as pervasive, permanent, and uncontrollable, which is a major risk factor for unhappiness and depression. Law schools may reinforce this pessimistic outlook. This self-reliant and perfectionistic profile also makes lawyers reluctant to seek help with mental health issues due to perceived stigma and fear of professional repercussions.

B. High Demands and Low Decision Latitude: Lawyers often face high workloads and pressure under tight deadlines. Many positions, particularly for junior associates in large firms, are characterized by low decision latitude—meaning little control over work tasks, schedules, or methods. The combination of high job demands, and low decision latitude is considered particularly detrimental to health and morale. The billable hour model, prevalent in many firms, exacerbates this by creating pressure to maximize hours, leading to overwork and a focus on quantity over other values.

C. Adversarial and Zero-Sum Nature: The legal profession's adversarial system means lawyers are often pitted against one another, focusing on winning, which is seen as a "zero-sum game." This inherently generates negative emotions like sadness, anxiety, and anger for practitioners.

D. Lack of Meaning and Purpose: Despite entering law with ideals, many lawyers find their work repetitive, removed from client interaction, and overly focused on profit, leading to a loss of a sense of duty or higher cause. This lack of meaning and purpose is a significant contributor to dissatisfaction.

E. Financial Strain: High law school debt creates significant financial pressure, potentially limiting career choices to high-paying jobs that may not align with personal values or interests. Unrealistic expectations about future earnings can also lead to disappointment.

F. Work-Life Balance: The long hours and unpredictable nature of the work often make it difficult for lawyers to maintain a healthy work-life balance, limiting time for personal life, relationships, and self-care.

G. Self-Determination Theory (SDT): This is a prominent theory used to explain lawyer unhappiness. SDT posits that human well-being requires the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (feeling a sense of control and volition), competence (feeling capable and effective), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). Studies show that lawyers experience a dearth of these experiences, which strongly predicts lower well-being. Furthermore, pursuing external motivations (money, status) at the expense of internal ones (interest, meaning) is linked to decreased happiness. Supportive supervision ("autonomy support") is found to be crucial for needing satisfaction and well-being.

H. Are there other common reasons that you have observed the cause of lawyer unhappiness?

4. There are a few theories as to what makes lawyers happy. I am going to read to you a list of theories as to what makes lawyers happy: from your experience, which ones resonate with you as a managing partner.

A. Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs: A prominent theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), suggests that human well-being relies on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs:

- i. Autonomy: Feeling a sense of control and volition over one's work and life, doing what one chooses and believes in.... This is seen as particularly important, as low decision latitude combined with high demands is detrimental<sup>20</sup>.... Strategies for maintaining control include preparation, time management, setting boundaries, and learning to "turn it off."
- ii. Competence: Experiencing oneself as able and effective in dealing with the environment, seeking out and mastering challenges<sup>21</sup>.... This is about feeling capable, not just having high grades or prestige<sup>29</sup>....
- iii. Relatedness: Feeling connected to others, relating meaningfully to people in the process, and experiencing a sense of belonging<sup>21</sup>.... Relationships are crucial for mental health<sup>11</sup>.... These three needs are the *strongest predictors* of attorney well-being, showing very large correlations.
- iv. Internal Motivation and Intrinsic Values: Happiness is strongly linked to pursuing work for internal motivations (interest, enjoyment, meaning) rather than external ones (money, status, recognition)<sup>21</sup>.... Pursuing external goals at the expense of internal ones is associated with decreased happiness<sup>45</sup>.... Intrinsic values (self-understanding, growth, relationships, helping others, community) are also more predictive of well-being than extrinsic values (affluence, status, fame)
- v. Meaning and Purpose: Feeling a sense of meaning and purpose in one's work is a significant contributor to happiness and less stress<sup>21</sup>.... This can be derived from helping clients, contributing to the legal system, or finding

intellectual challenges. Job crafting exercises can help lawyers find purpose in their daily tasks. A strong sense of purpose correlates inversely with stress levels

5. Do you or your law firm or lawyers use professional coaches?
  - a. Whether you use internal or external coaches.
  - b. What are three reasons why your firm use coaches?
  - c. Whether your firm has a budget for coaching.
  - d. If you use coaching, at what level do you use coaching?

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>83</sup> Isaac Mamasky, “Finding Happiness in the Law: Lifelong Learning as a Path to Meaning and Purpose,” *Santa Clara Law Review* 63, no. 1 (2023): 65–102, at 80.

<sup>84</sup> Elina Teboul,” Positive Psychology Coaching Model for the Legal Profession,” *Journal of the Legal Profession* 46 (2021): 105

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<sup>98</sup> Han Liu and Richard E. Boyatzis, “Focusing on Resilience and Renewal from Stress: The Role of Emotional and Social Intelligence Competencies,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (June 24, 2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.685829/full>

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