Job Satisfaction in the Legal Industry

<<When Howard Bashman was 16, he wanted to be a journalist. Then his father, a criminal defense attorney, died of a heart attack. It was sudden, unexpected, and devastating.

"There were limited resources," explains Bashman. "So I had to re-evaluate whether journalism was the right course, knowing the family would appreciate self-sufficiency."

In the wake of his Father's death, Bashman decided to become a lawyer. To some, giving up an occupational dream could be the first misstep in a long and dissatisfying career. But for Howard Bashman, it was the start of an occupation he has found both financially and personally rewarding.

When Jim Nelson was young, "my parents and grandparents always assumed I'd be a lawyer." In Nelson's household, it was understood that "to be successful you either had to be a lawyer or a doctor."

Nelson followed his family's wishes, and in 1974 he graduated from George Washington University Law School with honors. That kind of beginning could have easily led to disillusionment in the workplace. But for Nelson, now a Montana Supreme Court Justice, it was the start of a long and distinguished career.

Howard Bashman and Jim Nelson are not unusual. In fact, contrary to the general myth that lawyers are unhappy in their work, most are generally satisfied (according to one survey, approximately 75 percent). Of course, that means about one quarter of all attorneys may find the practice of law about as pleasant as hearing fingernails scrape across a schoolroom blackboard.

If you decide to go to law school for reasons other than a burning desire to be a lawyer, will you be happy in your profession? Surveys provide a mixed picture of attorney satisfaction with the practice of law. Anecdotal interviews both cloud and clarify the issues. And if you want to research the idea of finding happiness in the workplace, there are plenty of experts who'll give you guidance. In the final analysis, most everyone agrees: the work involved with becoming a contented lawyer must be done by you.

Surveys Provide a Mixed Picture

Over the past 20 years there have been several lawyer surveys conducted by federal, state and local bar associations, national and local legal newspapers, and various other organizations and publications. Sometimes these surveys focus on particular aspects of the practice of law. Sometimes they focus on particular groups. And while the surveys provide plenty of useful information about lawyers and their jobs, their results are mixed. In general, these surveys give a good overall picture of the law, but definitive conclusions remain sketchy.

One of the most oft-cited surveys is the American Bar Association's A National Survey of Career Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction. This survey was conducted in 1984 and 1990. While dated, it is one of the most comprehensive and detailed national surveys on lawyer job satisfaction. Since 1990, there have been plenty of smaller-scale surveys, and while they've differed in particulars, for the most part their findings are similar to the National Survey.

Some of the more interesting parts of this survey relate to the reasons lawyers give for having chosen their profession, what they cite as important job factors, and why some are dissatisfied with the practice of law.

One of the myths about attorneys is that they've decided to practice law purely for financial gain. While in general the legal profession is one of the better compensated professions, becoming an attorney for the money is not particularly high on most lawyer's lists.

When Ron Solynjtes, who passed the Bar in 1980, decided to study law, it was for the same reason most often cited in the National Survey: "It was an intellectual challenge," explains Solynjtes. "The practice of law involves so many areas: sociology, psychology, politics, research and writing. Not to mention the importance of the rule of law," he concludes.

The top reasons for becoming a lawyer given by respondents to the National Survey included:

Intellectual Challenge 40%
Social Service 17%
No Attractive Alternative 14%
Financial Opportunity 11%
Role Model 7%
Family Pressure 4%
Escape Economic Background 3%

While money is on the list ("Financial Opportunity"), it was only cited by 11 percent of respondents. When asked about this determining factor, most attorneys we interviewed agreed with Kimm Alayne Walton, an attorney and author of America’s Greatest Places to Work with a Law Degree. In an article appearing in The CBA Record (January 2000), Ms. Walton states: "If you take a job that starts at $80,000 a year because you figure there’s no way to be unhappy with that kind of money flowing in, you could not be more wrong. If you don’t have any time in which to spend it, it doesn’t matter how much you make. And if you hate your job, you’ll find yourself resenting the money. It will turn to ashes in your hands."

So if the vast majority of attorneys enter the profession because of the intellectual challenge, or to do good ("Social Service"), what are they looking for in a job? According to the National Survey:

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<tr>
<th>1984</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Challenge</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time for Self/Family</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control Over Work</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>Substantive Area of Work</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Reward</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Pressures/Work Atmosphere</td>
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Understandably, these survey results are largely in line with the reasons lawyers enter the profession.

"I like practicing law," comments Bill McDonald, Vice President, Associate General Counsel and Deputy Secretary for Ceridian Corporation. Why? In large part because of the intellectual challenge. "Every day there's something new," McDonald explains.

For the first few years of his career, McDonald worked in private practice with a large multinational law firm. He switched to working in a corporate law office because "I was hoping to have more control over my schedule. You work just as hard in a corporation, but you have a little more control." Now when McDonald plans a family vacation, he can feel reasonably certain he’ll be able to take it. The situation in private practice was somewhat different, when you had to be ready to work long hours literally at a moment's notice.

McDonald's experience is not unusual. Many attorneys start practicing in one area of the law, or with a large law office, only to discover it's not what they expected. Rather than sour them on the profession entirely, these attorneys make modifications to their practice, changing them in subtle or substantive ways in order to bring their occupation and workplace more in line with what they consider to be their important job factors.

In fact, in many instances, attorney job dissatisfaction provides the impetus to make an occupational or workplace change. According to the National Survey, negative job experiences range from "Not Much Time for Self" to "No Collegial Respect from Superiors."
The National Survey shows an increasing trend in these areas of job dissatisfaction, at least from 1984 to 1990. Other attorney surveys conducted since 1990 show a leveling off of dissatisfaction, though it's worth reiterating that more recent surveys have varied with regard to percentages and, in some instances, other particulars. While these survey differences tend to blur the overall picture of lawyer job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the National Survey still provides a good, relevant snapshot of how lawyers feel about their work.

Attorneys Don't Always Practice Law in Traditional Ways

The good news is that almost all of the attorneys interviewed for this article were generally satisfied with the decision to get their law degrees. The bad news is that not everyone who received a law degree liked practicing law—at least in the traditional sense of private law firm practice, or as counsel in a corporate law office. Some JDs modified their practice of law to suit their own particular interests and needs. Others have used their JDs in very non-traditional ways.

Howard Bashman wanted to be a journalist. But for personal and family reasons he felt compelled to become a lawyer. But, he reasoned, "becoming a lawyer would enable me to use my writing skills."

Today Bashman has a thriving boutique appellate practice because it's an area of the law that enables him "to be a writer and thinker about the law." He also writes "How Appealing: The Web's first blog devoted to appellate litigation." Finding the proper marriage of his skills and interests has enabled him to "remain satisfied with my career path. If I was spending my time fighting over discovery, that would make me less satisfied."

When Ron Solynitjes began practicing law, it was as a claims adjuster in a national insurance firm. From there he moved to CPT Corporation, where he helped market technology products specifically geared toward lawyers. Then he worked as marketing director and a salesperson for Quorum Litigation Services, a company that specializes in litigation support services. After taking a two year hiatus from Quorum, he returned as General Manager of the company, running it for three years until the company was sold to private investors.

Solynitjes has used his law degree to great effect, but in non-traditional ways.

What the Experts Tell Us

According to Kevin Campana, Interim Dean of Students at the William Mitchell College of Law, graduating lawyers often make terrible mistakes, in large part because they don't know themselves or what they really desire in the workplace.

"If you're in the top 10 percent of your class, you're expected to be part of on campus interviewing,"
explains Campana. "If you happen to be one of those people-people who step onto the treadmill, go to interviews, and then accept an offer from a big firm" without knowing what's expected or anything about the firm or its values—it's a recipe for disaster. It's one of the primary reasons, Campana says, for the "huge turnover of associates in the big firms."

Campana and William Mitchell are taking two approaches to address these issues. First, "this Fall, in orientation, we're going to talk a lot about getting students in to do the Myers-Briggs personality test, so they're grounded on who they are and what they like and what fulfills them." The law school has already used the test to great effect in its placement program.

In order to help law students begin to get a sense of what work life in a private firm can be like, the school has brought in Bill Koster, the retired managing partner of a large Minnesota law firm. The course is intended to instruct law students on how law firms operate, and to let them know that before accepting a job at a law firm, they need to do their homework.

In 1995, Ambassador Sol M. Linowitz, author of The Betrayed Profession — Lawyering at the End of the Twentieth Century, spoke on the current state of the legal profession and the profession's future. In part, he said, "When I entered the legal profession about a half a century ago, a lawyer was a member of an esteemed and honored profession. In recent years, however, I have lost some of my confidence, even some of my respect, but not my love for my profession."

Linowitz is not alone. For the most part attorneys are generally satisfied with their work. According to some surveys, attorneys are more satisfied with their work than the general professional populace.

But anecdotal comments from the people we interviewed indicate a JD and a job in a law firm doesn't ensure your occupational happiness.

The good news is, lawyers have plenty of job options. The difficult news is, it takes plenty of time, effort, study and experience to figure out which job is right for you.

Check types of law job openings on LawCrossing.