

Where the
HAPPIEST
lawyers work



Many law students assume that successful and prestigious careers will lead to happiness. But research shows that happiness comes from autonomy, rewarding work and human connection.

BY MIKE STETZ

Who are the happiest attorneys?

That's easy.

The retired ones. Barack Obama, for one, clears \$200,000-plus annually in pension benefits. And he only worked eight years . . .

How about Andrea Campbell, a Toronto attorney who hit the lottery for \$35 million a few years back? Goodbye student loans, hello private jets.

Actually, this is one serious question. Forget torts, contracts, outlining and exams for a moment. Think happy thoughts.

You'll need the practice, apparently.

Numerous studies show that lawyers suffer from higher rates of depression, anxiety and substance abuse than professionals in other fields. This is attributed to the demanding workloads many lawyers face, as well as the adversarial nature of the work. But it's also tied to career choices.

"There's an emphasis on making money, on making partner, on winning cases, but such factors only help bring happiness to a small extent and are not sufficient to base your life on," said Lawrence Krieger, a law professor at Florida State University College of Law in Tallahassee. Krieger has become something of an expert on lawyers and happiness. He's dug deep into the subject, particularly in a much-referenced paper called, "What Makes Lawyers Happy."

He and social scientist Ken Sheldon, surveyed 6,200 lawyers, judges and other legal professionals to identify the happiest lawyers and why. They looked at numerous factors and found that prestige, power and money are not the most important things when it come to happiness.

Human factors, such as integrity, relating to others and meaningful work, are far more essential.

"There's nothing wrong with making money," Krieger said. "I'd like to make more money. Who wouldn't? But when you replace that with making friendships, being part of a community and doing rewarding things, then it leads to unhappiness."

Krieger's findings are supported by other recent studies, which reveal that lawyers in public-interest jobs tend to report greater happiness than lawyers at large firms.

"Surveys consistently show that lawyers engaged in government work or in public-interest work demonstrate greater levels of satisfaction than attorneys working in private practice, even though [they have] much lower financial remuneration," Jerry Organ wrote in a 2011 paper, "What Do We Know About the Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction of Lawyers?"

Organ, a professor at University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis, looked at 25 years of research.

"While lawyers in large firms receive significantly greater compensation, many have less control over their practice and frequently feel that the nature of their work makes it harder to see how they are contributing to the common good," he said.

ARE ALL BIG LAW ATTORNEYS UNHAPPY?

Not all Big Law lawyers are unhappy, though. In fact, the majority are happy with their decision to become a lawyer.

"After the JD," a comprehensive survey of lawyers who graduated from law school

in 2000, surveyed 3,000 lawyers three times: in 2003, 2007 and 2012.

In the 2012 survey, lawyers working in firms with between 101 and 250 lawyers had one of the lowest satisfaction rates at 64.8 percent. But lawyers at large firms with 251 or more attorneys fared far better at 80.4 percent. This satisfaction rating was higher than those of government lawyers, nonprofit lawyers and all others in private practice. Big Law did particularly well on the so-called "power track" score, which looked at satisfaction in relation to compensation, opportunities for advancement and recognition received for work.

However, Big Law scored lower on "substance of work," which looked at, among other things, satisfaction with the work's value to society.

Public interest law, meanwhile, scored best in that category. In the 2012 survey, public interest lawyers were the most satisfied overall, at an 87.6 percent clip. That percentage rose dramatically from the first survey, which found only 65 percent of lawyers working in public interest were as satisfied.

Job satisfaction also rose for those working as public defenders and in legal services, from 80.5 percent in 2003 to 86.1 percent in 2012.

Krieger is quick to point out that its not the job but the reason for taking the job that leads to happiness.

"The data shows that it's not necessarily what you're doing," he said. "It's why you're doing it."

If you take a job because you are excited about the work and the firm offers autonomy, then you have a good chance of being



I put all of my focus on being a good lawyer. But I felt I was missing a big part of my life. I felt empty.

— **Maia Aron**

GIVING BACK

But lawyers can have a happier and more meaningful career by giving back to those outside the walls of their profession.

Just ask Maia Aron, who's an attorney at Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, a law firm in Miami, where she works as a commercial litigator. That practice specialty was her dream job, and she enjoyed it immensely. For nine years, she rocked it. Yet one day she realized something

was missing.

"I put all of my focus on being a good lawyer," she said. "But I felt I was missing a big part of my life. I felt empty."

Aron is one of the subjects in a new audiobook called, "A Lawyer's Guide to Creating a Life, Not Just a Living," by Paula Black, a Miami-based consultant and life coach for lawyers. She wrote the book after hearing many of her clients voice frustration about their work. With her help, they made changes to increase their happiness.

Aron is a hard-driving, determined, smart person. In school, she was active in a number of student organizations, but she withdrew from community involvement when she began her legal career. That was a mistake, she said.

"It's very important to have a life outside of work," Aron said.

She found that she needed to do something. She's Jewish and occasionally went to temple and discovered she missed that connection. She was later invited to a breakfast hosted by the Jewish National Fund Miami Chapter, and that moment struck her. She used the Yiddish term, "beshert," which means "fate" or "fortuitous event," to describe the moment.

Aron noticed that few young professionals were present. She asked about starting a young leadership chapter and was encouraged to do so. Since then,

she has taken on many roles in the local and national Jewish community, including president-elect of the Jewish National Fund Miami Chapter and chair of the Young Leadership Section of the American Jewish Committee's Miami Chapter.

"I still work hard," she said of her legal career. "It can be a challenge managing time. But I make time for what's important to me."

Not all lawyers do this, she noted. Some are very much consumed by their work, and she sees it as a common problem in the profession.

"Luckily, my firm encourages community engagement, but it's still a challenge to balance everything," Aron said. "It's important to make it happen. I made it happen, and it makes me a better lawyer, a more engaged citizen and a happier person."

Black, the author of the audiobook, said it's vitally important for lawyers to have other interests because professional success alone doesn't cut it.

"They may have this big fabulous career, but there's nothing else," Black said.

She's counseled countless lawyers, and each one is different, she said. Some simply had little idea of what they were getting into when they entered the field. The sheen they felt when entering law school began to evaporate once they tackled the real thing.

"A lot of them are doing work they don't care for. They may not like their clients," she said. "They didn't get the training in law school how to handle that. It's stressful."

Others are in solo practices or in small firms and are constantly fighting to get business.

"All kinds of things are in play," Black said. "I try to teach them to be in harmony with their lives. It's a process. Sometimes it takes a while to see it. Some need to stand back and figure out what they really want."

happy. But if you're doing that kind of work just to make money or for the prestige of it, then you likely won't be skipping to the office.

Junior partners report the same level of well-being as senior associates, even though the partners are paid more. Junior associates are less happy than those two groups, primarily because they lack autonomy.

Most people in legal-aid jobs or working as public defenders took such jobs for human factors, rather than for the pay and prestige. They knew that the pay would be low but that the personal rewards would be higher.

"The people who are taking those jobs are taking them for the right reasons," Krieger said. "If people took the firm jobs for the same reasons, and had the same level of meaning and autonomy in their work, they would likely be equally happy."

The key is knowing how and from where happiness is derived, he said. Unfortunately, many law students don't know. They feel they need to do great in law school, land a great job, make money, become partner . . .

"I think most students have an assumption that law school and working as a lawyer is going to be a hard grind but success will make them happy. The study shows success cannot replace a balanced human life full of love and meaning," he said.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION

Personal connections are also vital to happiness, and that is apparent even without the survey results. Harrison Barnes, founder of the legal recruiting firm BCG Attorney Search, wrote about happiness in an article titled, “The Only Way to Be Happy Practicing Law.”

“The only constant that I can find in terms of what makes people more likely than not to be happy practicing law is whether or not they have client contact and work closely with clients,” he wrote. “Client contact gives attorneys a sense of personal connection to, and satisfaction with, the work, and also gives them a feeling of control over their careers. The closer and more committed an attorney is to a client, the more likely that attorney is to be happy.”

He’s worked with countless attorneys, from those in Big Law to those in small practices, and he’s found the work is not as rewarding when the personal connection is absent.

“Legal work is fungible. Many people can do it, and in the abstract it is rather meaningless. But a bond with a client is personal

Satisfaction with decision to become a lawyer



Source: *After the JD*



and meaningful,” he wrote. “Because people are driven by having personal bonds, caring for others and feeling connected, when an attorney has a personal bond with a client, the attorney ceases to be a faceless drone doing meaningless work behind the scenes.”

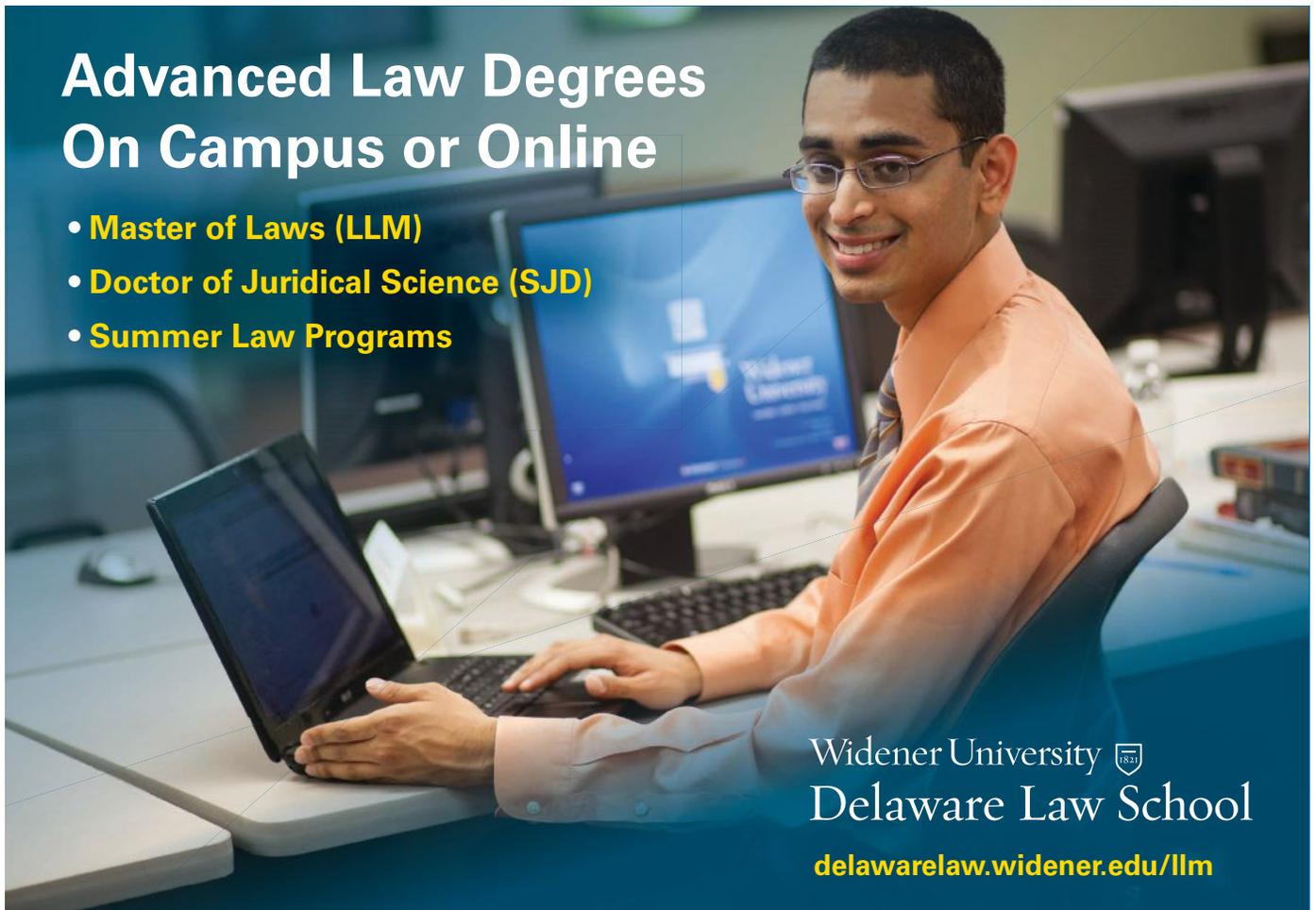
Lawyers who work with immigrants work closely with clients, no question. It’s

one of the reasons that Angelo Paparelli is happy. An immigration lawyer with the Los Angeles firm of Seyfarth Shaw, he co-wrote an article called, “Why Are Immigration Lawyers So Happy?”

The business of law can be tough, he notes. For one, the work is not nearly as glamorous as TV and movies make it seem.

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It can consist of reviewing documents, drafting contracts, doing research and readying for trial. “Not really anybody’s idea of fun,” he wrote.

Lawyers face other stressors too. Technology is bringing about change that can disrupt revenue streams. Clients are looking for more efficient and less costly legal assistance.

“So why do we think immigration lawyers are different?” Paparelli asks. They do face some of the same challenges, such as technological changes, but immigration practice “fundamentally revolves around people,” he notes.

“Whether you’re helping a Fortune 500 company manage its global mobility program, defending an individual against removal (deportation) in Immigration Court or helping a U.S. citizen’s foreign spouse apply for permanent residence, as an immigration lawyer you are ultimately assisting people through a major personal transition that will profoundly transform their lives and the lives of their families,” he wrote.

That has not changed, even in this era

of Trump, who has been cracking down on America’s immigration policies. The crack-down concerns him, he said. However, he remains fulfilled, which is a key component of happiness.

“My work is even more essential and meaningful than any time in my 40-year career,” he said.

HAPPY CAREERS START IN LAW SCHOOL

If you think you don’t have to worry about your future happiness while in law school, think again. Krieger and others have found that the path toward unhappiness can begin in law school, fueled by the focus on thinking like a lawyer and academic pressures. A study funded by the American Bar Foundation found similar results.

That’s right. You could be miserable already.

Krieger has written a short book on the matter called “The Hidden Stress of Law School and Law Practice,” which delves into why law students become susceptible to depression.

For one, being trained to think like a lawyer means that you are taught to view the world analytically. This can come at the expense of personal emotions. As an example, a person new to law school may be introduced to a court decision that, while following the law, seems unfair. If the student challenges the law with an emotional reaction, he or she may be admonished for doing so.

In law school, people aren’t people anymore, Krieger notes. “They’re parties.”

Another stressor is competition, Krieger said. Goals such as earning a high class rank, making law review and landing prestigious summer jobs become paramount.

“For many students, it becomes the only thing that matters,” he said. “And it’s usually fear-based.”

And that, he said, erodes happiness.

“Recognize that the pressures you feel for high grades, income or status are based on false assumptions and will not create happiness, even for the most successful,” he wrote. “Be wise; prefer goals and motives that will reliably produce happiness in your life. Choose high-quality, intrinsic goals that are achievable (i.e., not competitive).”

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