

CHARTING A COURSE FOR SATISFACTION AND SUCCESS  
IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION  
*By Marcia Pennington Shannon*

**Satisfaction and success in the legal profession -- an oxymoron, you might say. Can't have both?**

**To prove it, all we have to do is point to those surveys about lawyer dissatisfaction. Back in 1995, the ABA Young Lawyers Division published a study that stunned many of its readers. For the first time in print, the idea that life in the law was not always all these new practitioners had imagined was voiced to the legal world. At the time, only 21% pronounced themselves "very satisfied" with the practice of law - a figure that surprised many senior colleagues. Today, the issue of dissatisfaction causes alarm among law firm partners, managers, and administrators.**

**Actually, this crisis could have been predicted. In 1990, Dr. John Eaton et al, at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health conducted a landmark study of tens of thousands of individuals in many different professions ("Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder," *The Journal of Occupational Medicine*, November, 1990). They found that lawyers experienced the highest levels of depressive symptoms among all professions studied. The reasons for this, they speculated, largely involved issues concerning workload, stress, and job complexity – all characteristics of most lawyers' daily work.**

**Do Lawyers Have to be Unhappy?**

**So where does all this information leave attorneys today? How can we chart a different course and find both personal satisfaction and professional success?**

**First, and foremost, be aware of possible pitfalls. The law is and always will be an extremely challenging (thereby stressful) profession. Because the primary goal of legal services is to serve the best interests of the client, the control of workflow and time rarely will be entirely in the hands of the attorney. Recognizing this fact, lawyers should focus on the areas over which they *can* exert control and work to develop habits that make satisfaction and success mutually compatible objectives.**

**Characteristics of Satisfied, Successful Lawyers**

**It may make sense to take a look at lawyers who have developed strategies to address these issues and find out what they have in common. Lawyers who are both satisfied and successful appear to have several shared characteristics:**

**☞ *They enjoy the practice of law.* The substance of their work energizes them and keeps them motivated to learn and grow.**

- ✍ *They have interests outside of law* - hobbies, activities, people or pets that provide outlets for the other parts of their personalities. They did not give these up as soon as work became demanding. They found ways to apportion some time to these interests.
- ✍ *They have excellent time management skills.* They approach their work efficiently, never using two words where one will do, getting all the information they need up front, always setting and meeting personal deadlines.
- ✍ *They are good listeners.* It has been said the best way to be a great listener is to stop talking. These folks have learned the lesson. Not only does this skill allow them to get all the information they need; it enhances their client and other interpersonal relationships immensely.
- ✍ *They develop meaningful relationships with others.* They seek out and value relationships with colleagues, clients, staff, family and friends because they genuinely enjoy interacting with others. They know whose birthday it is, who just got a promotion and who lost a parent. They care enough to devote time to each of these relationships.
- ✍ *They are mentors and teachers.* Most find great satisfaction in helping others develop the skills they themselves struggled to master. Everyone in the firm knows who they are and comes to them for help and assurance - but what many people do not see is the personal satisfaction they get from being the counselor.
- ✍ *They know what makes them happy.* They seek out experiences like mentoring, developing relationships and learning new legal skills because they know that these experiences will add joy to their day-to-day practice.
- ✍ *They are proactive about their lives and careers.* They have taken time to define satisfaction and success for themselves, by no one else's definition but their own. They reevaluate their lives regularly, usually annually, and create plans that incorporate their evaluations. At the end of the day, they know that the responsibility for satisfying and successful lives is theirs and only theirs.

### **A Deliberate Journey**

As you can see, each characteristics is tied in to all of the others. Most satisfied and successful lawyers eventually develop all of these characteristics, albeit one at a time. The true beauty is that the successful development of one naturally leads into the development of the next.

**While the statistics can be daunting, they only represent past behaviors. You can chart a course that will bring you your measure of satisfaction and success. Begin by reviewing the characteristics above. Which characteristics have you already developed? Which areas need developing and honing? Create a plan with specific steps that incorporates your personal definitions of satisfaction and success.**

**You can be professionally successful and personally satisfied in the legal profession, but you must be deliberate about it! I wish you the best as you map out and travel along *your* personal course.**

**(For ACTION box: Author's Note: Any lawyer striving towards success and satisfaction must have the following books on your bookshelf – First Things First by Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill (Simon & Schuster, 1994), The Lost Art of Listening by Michael P. Nichols (The Guilford Press, 1995), and Changing Jobs – A Handbook for Lawyers in the New Millennium edited by Heidi McNeil Staudenmaier (Law Practice Management Section, American Bar Association, 1999).**

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