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FINDING HAPPINESS IN THE LAW: LIFELONG LEARNING AS A PATH TO MEANING AND PURPOSE

Isaac Mamaysky*

Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself. . . . Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it.

-Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*¹

We begin with the premise that the happiest and most fulfilled attorneys are those who live a life of meaning and purpose. While many in the legal profession have achieved this goal, many others are unsatisfied with their career trajectories but feel, for a variety of reasons, that they aren't empowered to make a change. Unfortunately, study after study finds that many attorneys are stressed and unhappy with their professional lives, and would even leave the law entirely if they could.

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1. VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*, (Use Lasch trans., 4th ed. 2006).

The Article argues that these attorneys have a far more dynamic set of options than simply leaving the profession or staying unhappy. It's not just possible—but, for many attorneys, should be the goal—to merge personal and professional interests to achieve a career filled with meaning and purpose.

The Article goes on to argue that lifelong learning is the path to achieving this goal. As every practitioner knows, law school taught us an analytical framework—how to “think like a lawyer”—which is reinforced in all aspects of legal practice. Relying on those analytical skills, it's entirely possible to learn new practice areas, write on new topics, and continually evolve to ensure that one's legal career aligns with personal goals.

We say “continually evolve” because meaning and purpose change over time, so even the most fulfilled attorneys need to make adjustments throughout their careers to hit this mark. While these types of career adjustments certainly may entail significant transitions from one practice area to another, they more commonly entail smaller adjustments to one's trajectory and current role that are minor in the moment but can have significant impact over time.

The Article concludes with a discussion of the value of failure and rejection to achieving meaningful professional goals, and a reminder that regrets in old age often center on the things we didn't do rather than the those we did. The goal of this Article is to reinforce to law students and attorneys that they need not sacrifice their values for a job, and it's entirely possible to combine professional and personal goals in one's career—and, indeed, doing so may very well lead to a happy and meaningful life.

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I. INTRODUCTION

While scrolling through my LinkedIn feed earlier this year, I stumbled on the following post by a third-year associate at Davis Polk & Wardwell named Travis Mitchell:

[I] found out at my review that I billed over 400 pro bono hours this year. Before going into “big law,” I promised myself that I wouldn’t lose touch with the issues I care deeply about and worked closely with pre-law school Many people told me or heavily implied that this wouldn’t be possible as a corporate lawyer at a large law firm. I’ve found that not only is it possible, but the firm has also been supportive and enthusiastic about attorneys taking on this work.

As a law student, I know I was not the only one [who] experienced the angst of feeling torn between two seemingly disparate paths (each with their own advantages and drawbacks). However, as is often the case, this was a false choice of my own making.

You should never sacrifice your values for a job, and you can always find a way to combine your professional and personal goals.²

Quickly accumulating thousands of reactions and dozens of comments, Mr. Mitchell’s post clearly struck a chord.³ “I can’t tell

2. Travis B. Mitchell, LINKEDIN (Jan. 2022), https://www.linkedin.com/posts/tbmitchell_found-out-at-my-review-that-i-billed-over-activity-6881310146736328705-2PEl/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop.

3. *Id.*

you the amount of relief and joy your post brought me,” wrote a law student, “I’ve struggled to figure out how I will be able to help my community if I turn to ‘big law.’”⁴ Another student commented: “This is so inspiring . . . I feel like I’m in this consistent battle with myself to chart out how to plan a career path that satisfies what often feels like a dichotomy of my legal interests.”⁵ Sharing this experience, a junior associate wrote: “I also realized this past year that I had internalized a false dichotomy between law firm employment and doing ‘work that matters.’”⁶ Numerous commentors conveyed the same sentiment.⁷

Having now practiced for nearly fifteen years, I can confirm from personal experience that Mr. Mitchell is exactly right: one need not sacrifice their values for a job, and it’s entirely possible to combine professional and personal goals in one’s career. However, when I was a law student and subsequently an associate working in “big law,” this conclusion was far less obvious to me than it is today. In law school, I engaged in the same all-or-nothing reasoning that Mr. Mitchell describes—you either go into private practice or do “work that matters,” with no options in between—but this was most certainly a “false choice of my own making.”⁸

Over years of practice, I have come to realize that we, as a profession, are failing to properly convey to law students and attorneys that they can align their values and careers, just as we are failing to convey that pursuing meaning is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Although my typical publications concern more traditional business law matters, I decided to take a detour to write this Article for the benefit of those law students and attorneys who feel the same sense of angst that Mr. Mitchell, myself, and so many other attorneys once felt.

4. *Id.* (comment by Dinoro Orozco).

5. *Id.* (comment by Keith Collins).

6. *Id.* (comment by Thomas Matthew).

7. *See id.*

8. Mitchell, *supra* note 2; *See* Roy Strom, *Big Law’s Blowout Year Piling Hours on Associates, Survey Shows* BLOOMBERG LAW (Aug. 24, 2021, 11:43 AM), <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/business-and-practice/big-laws-blowout-year-piling-hours-on-associates-survey-shows> (A typical attorney at a large firm bills about 2,000 hours per year. This means that Mr. Mitchell spent about 20% of his time on pro bono work. An attorney who bills 400 pro bono hours at one of the most prestigious firms in the country, bringing their partners, colleagues, and firm resources to bear on their work, may have a far greater positive impact than an attorney who works full time in an underfunded nonprofit organization. This is not to say that attorneys shouldn’t work for nonprofits or that they should work for large firms, but only that it’s not an all-or-nothing choice.).

With this Article, we enter the realm of philosophy and positive psychology as they relate to a career in law. I should state from the outset that I'm not an expert in either field, but I do have some insight from personal experience about how certain lessons from these fields apply to finding meaning and purpose in one's legal career. Perhaps most apparent from its ancient origins, philosophy involves the study of what it means to live a good life.⁹ While more recent work in the field has shifted focus in various ways, other disciplines have picked up where philosophy left off, such as the budding field of positive psychology with its focus on the "character strengths and behaviors that allow individuals to build a life of meaning and purpose."¹⁰

Academic delineations aside, I have been drawn throughout my education and in the years since to the professors and writers whose lessons have practical applications to the way we live our lives.¹¹ To my mind, these are the true philosophers, regardless of the university departments in which they're based. It is thanks to such professors that I graduated from college with a deep commitment to living a life of meaning and purpose, a goal that has driven all my career decisions in the intervening years.¹² With this context, I begin by briefly explaining the winding road of my own career trajectory to help illustrate some of the points that appear throughout this Article.

9. See, e.g., PLATO, *THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO* (Allan Bloom trans., 2nd ed. 1968); Lawrence Yeo, *Philosophy Has Lost Its Way*, MORE TO THAT, <https://moretothat.com/philosophy-has-lost-its-way/> (last visited on Jan. 8, 2022) (Yeo insightfully argues that recent literature in philosophy is frequently incomprehensible to a lay reader and often devoid of any practical application); Jack Sherefkin, *Philosophy As a Way of Life*, N.Y. Pub. Libr., (Sept. 13, 2017), <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/09/13/philosophy-way-life> ("Philosophy, as it is practiced today, is abstract, theoretical, and detached from life, just one academic subject among others. In the Greco-Roman world, it was something quite different, argues the French philosopher Pierre Hadot. Philosophy was a way of life. Not merely a subject of study, philosophy was considered an art of living, a practice aimed at relieving suffering and shaping and remaking the self-according to an ideal of wisdom; 'Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one's way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom.'").

10. *Positive Psychology*, PSYCH. TODAY, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/positive-psychology> (last visited on Jan. 8, 2022); Yeo, *supra* note 9.

11. See generally e.g., SHAWN ACHOR, *THE HAPPINESS ADVANTAGE: THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY THAT FUEL SUCCESS AND PERFORMANCE AT WORK*, (1st ed. 2010).

12. While I had many excellent professors in college, I will remain forever grateful to Dr. Cheryl Foster, whose lessons and example have inspired innumerable students to become the best versions of themselves by seeking meaning, purpose, and passion in their lives. See Dr. Cheryl Foster Bio, UNIV. R.I., <https://web.uri.edu/politicalscience/meet/cheryl-foster/> (last visited Jan. 4, 2022).

II. A PERSONAL CASE STUDY

I began my legal career in the Manhattan office of an international law firm that was founded in 1891.¹³ Coming out of law school, I didn't know exactly what "securities litigation" was, but it was an exciting job offer that came with the opportunity to move to Manhattan, work at a well-known firm, and start paying off some student loans. But after a few years of billing 2,200+ hours while working late nights on projects of questionable significance, I was ready for a change.

At this point, I should briefly pause the story so law students don't take the wrong lesson away from my experience. Working in big law provides tremendous professional training, immense networking opportunities, sophisticated work, and an excellent professional launchpad for future endeavors.¹⁴ Even for a recent law school graduate whose passions and interests are most aligned with a career outside of big law, working in this type of environment for a few years is something akin to a post-graduate education in the *practice* of law.¹⁵ Coming out of law school, most law students would be well-served to take a job that teaches them how to actually practice law, even if that job doesn't fully align with their passions and interests.¹⁶ To be sure, this can be accomplished in many law firms and busy legal departments, in or out of big law.¹⁷ Some new lawyers will end up staying and thriving, while others will learn to

13. To be more precise, I began my career at McKee Nelson, which then merged with Bingham McCutchen, which then merged with Morgan Lewis. See Jennifer Smith, *Morgan Lewis Partners Approve Bingham Deal*, WALL ST. J. (Nov. 14, 2014 6:40 PM), www.wsj.com/articles/BL-LB-49821; Sara Mui, *Bingham McCutchen, McKee Nelson to Merge on Aug. 1*, ABA J. (July 6, 2009, 4:48 PM), https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/bingham_mccutchen_mckee_nelson_to_merge_on_aug_1.

14. Matt Spiegel, *8 Benefits (And 5 Drawbacks!) Of Working in a Large Law Firm*, NAT'L L. REV., (Apr. 26, 2022), <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/8-benefits-and-5-drawbacks-working-large-law-firm>.

15. See *id.* (emphasis added).

16. David Segal, *What They Don't Teach Law Students: Lawyering*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 19, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/business/after-law-school-associates-learn-to-be-lawyers.html>; Leigh McMullan Abramson, *The Only Job With an Industry Devoted to Helping People Quit*, ATLANTIC (July 29, 2014), <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/07/the-only-job-with-an-industry-devoted-to-helping-people-quit/375199/> ("While law schools are efficient at funneling students into law firms, much of the curriculum is based on theoretical analysis, and, as a result, there's a disconnect between the training students receive and the skills required in practice. People graduate from law school not knowing what lawyers actually do.") (internal citations omitted).

17. See *id.*

practice and go on to seek meaning elsewhere after some number of years.¹⁸

As a fifth-year associate, I fell firmly into the latter category.¹⁹ To add some meaning to my day, I began teaching philosophy at a local community college while still practicing law.²⁰ Twice per week, I would leave my law firm around 6:00 pm to teach an introductory level philosophy class. The students would grapple with readings such as *Man's Search for Meaning*, and I would deliver lectures about the value of finding meaning and purpose in one's career—before, quite ironically, going back to my law firm to do what felt like meaningless work until midnight.²¹ For a couple hours each week, teaching gave me a glimpse of what it meant to engage in work that aligned with my sense of meaning and purpose. The experience helped me realize that it was time to make a significant change to my career trajectory.

But this is easier said than done: How does one go about finding meaning? What is a meaningful job? Different people obviously answer these questions in very different ways.²² As for myself, I

18. *Id.*; See Debra Cassens Weiss, *What Makes 44% of BigLaw Lawyers Happy?*, ABA J. (Sept. 29, 2010, 1:49 PM), https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/what_makes_44_of_biglaw_lawyers_happy

19. See, e.g., Alex Su, *Don't Waste Your Time Collecting Golden Tickets*, ABOVE THE LAW (July 11, 2022, 1:16 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/abovethelaw.com/2022/07/dont-waste-your-time-collecting-golden-tickets/?amp=1> (“[W]hen you spend all your time collecting Golden Tickets, you’ll find yourself doing a lot of things that aren’t aligned with your original goals. I knew that for all my ‘success’ [working in big law] I didn’t actually **accomplish** anything. I didn’t help any clients. I didn’t win any cases. I wasn’t having the impact I had always wanted. . . . Eventually, I came to my senses and realized that this kind of job wasn’t right for me. At the end of the day, competing for all these stupid Golden Tickets was making me unhappy. It wasn’t at all what I wanted out of my career or my life. And it was starting to impact my health and well-being. That’s when I decided to leave.”) (emphasis added).

20. *Philosophy Courses Offered*, LAGUARDIA CMTY. COLL., <https://www.laguardia.edu/philosophy/courses-offered/> (last visited Apr. 21, 2022).

21. See FRANKL, *supra* note 1.

22. Kirsten Weir, *More than Job Satisfaction*, 44 AM. PSYCH. ASS’N 39 (2013), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/12/job-satisfaction> (“Of course, there are different ways to find meaning in one’s work . . . [Consider] the tale of three bricklayers hard at work. When asked what they’re doing, the first bricklayer responds, ‘I’m putting one brick on top of another.’ The second replies, ‘I’m making six pence an hour.’ And the third says, ‘I’m building a cathedral — a house of God.’ All of them have created meaning out of what they’ve done, but the last person could say what he’s done is meaningful. Meaningfulness is about the why, not just about what. Something that’s meaningful for one person may be inconsequential for another, however. What makes work worthwhile to you probably depends on your culture, your socioeconomic status and how you were taught to see the world. An academic might find value in scholarship, for instance. But a

took inventory of past experiences: What had I found meaningful? How could I bring that sense of meaning into my professional life? I have no doubt that you'll be surprised by how I answered these questions but rest assured that it will all come back to law.

Throughout college, I had spent my summers working at a nonprofit sleepaway camp for kids and had found the work deeply meaningful. It made a positive impact on the next generation and attracted more mission-driven coworkers than my colleagues in big law.²³ I was also passionate about health and fitness. This combination of interests led to the highly unconventional idea to *start* a sleepaway camp focused on healthy, active living.²⁴

While still working at my law firm, I spent every evening and weekend for two years writing a business plan and grant proposal and then pitching the idea to every investor and foundation executive who was willing to meet with me.²⁵ After countless rejections, I ended up raising a few million dollars to launch a large public health nonprofit called CZ Wellness Group. Notably, the skills I developed as a securities litigator—including how to write, stay organized, execute complex projects, and persuade—were instrumental to raising these funds (and, subsequently, managing the organization).

CZ Wellness Group now operates a summer camp for kids focused on healthy, active, living in addition to a year-round retreat center for families with the same mission.²⁶ The organization welcomes thousands of campers and retreat guests every year, and gives hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarship funding annually to make the experience affordable for everyone who wants to participate, regardless of their income. I was doing work with

firefighter might look at an academic and ask, 'Are you helping people on a daily basis? If not, it's not worthwhile work at all.'") (internal citations omitted).

23. See Jessica Coleman, *The Power of Camp: Camp Changes Lives in Positive Ways*, AM. CAMP ASS'N, (May 1, 2009), <https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/power-camp-camp-changes-lives-positive-ways>.

24. *Our History*, CAMP ZEKE, <https://campzeke.org/prospective-families/our-history/> (last visited Nov. 12, 2022).

25. See Adam Soclof, *Foundation for Jewish Camp announces four new specialty camps*, JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY (Sept. 13, 2012, 2:15 PM), <https://www.jta.org/2012/09/13/united-states/foundation-for-jewish-camp-announces-four-new-specialty-camps>.

26. See CAMP ZEKE, <https://campzeke.org>, (last visited Nov. 12, 2022); BLOCK & HEXTER, <https://www.northeastretreatcenter.com>, (last visited Nov. 12, 2022). The skills that I relied on daily in big law came in quite handy to achieve this goal. As a fifth-year associate, I had, as if by osmosis, learned how to write, stay meticulously organized, execute complex projects, and present arguments persuasively. See Spiegel, *supra* note, 14.

tremendous purpose and remain actively involved with the nonprofit to this day, but my career story doesn't end there.

A few years after getting married and having kids, it occurred to me that life can start feeling expensive on a nonprofit salary.²⁷ The work that I once approached with tremendous passion began to feel a bit burdensome when paying bills became more of a challenge. This set the stage for my next professional pivot.

As of this writing, the nonprofit has employed about 1,000 people since its inception in 2012. Having managed so many employees, and having been deeply involved in various legal and HR matters as a result, I had learned quite a bit about employment law and realized that I enjoyed the dynamic, people-oriented practice much more than litigation.²⁸ My camp experience also helped me see a gap in the legal marketplace: despite the fact that 14 million people take advantage of the camp experience every year, there was a complete dearth of attorneys serving the industry.²⁹

This gave me the idea to launch a law practice focused on both employment law and the camp industry.³⁰ I made a business plan and pitched the idea for a new practice group to a number of national corporate law firms—they had to be national because camps are in every state, and they had to be corporate because many camps have large budgets and complex corporate needs.³¹ Having received a couple offers from firms that were willing to take a chance on this practice, I once again pivoted in my career and went back to law in a very different practice area than the one I started in.³²

27. See, e.g., *Public Service Loan Forgiveness*, FEDERAL STUDENT AID, <https://studentaid.gov/manage-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service> (last visited Apr. 21, 2022).

28. See KYLE EDWARDS, ET AL., *LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT LAW: A CAREER GUIDE* (2012), <https://hls.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/laboremployment2012.pdf>.

29. See *Camp Trends: Enrollment*, AM. CAMP ASS'N, <https://www.acacamps.org/press-room/camp-trends/enrollment> (last visited on May 12, 2022).

30. See *Youth Serving Organizations Practice*, POTOMAC LAW GROUP, <https://www.potomaclaw.com/practices-camps-and-youth-programs> (last visited May 12, 2022).

31. See M. Deborah Bialeschki, *The Dollar\$ and Cents of Operating a Camp*, AM. CAMP ASS'N, (Sept. 1, 2012), <https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/dollar-cents-operating-camp>.

32. See Dan Mills, *An Innovation Model for Firms to Follow*, WASHINGTON LAWYER, Sept.-Oct. 2020, <https://washingtonlawyer.dcbarr.org/septemberoctober2020/index.php#/p/8>; POTOMAC LAW GROUP *supra* note, 30; Emily Tan, *LawTech Asia Quick Chats: Dov Greenbaum, Director of the Zvi Meitar Institute for Legal Implications of Emerging Technologies*, LAWTECH.ASIA, (Jan. 8, 2019), <https://lawtech.asia/lawtech-asia-quick-chats-dov-greenbaum>.

Not long after, I began teaching as an adjunct professor of law and publishing legal scholarship, both of which have been tremendously rewarding.³³ As time went on, my practice evolved and now incorporates broad-based corporate and commercial work going far beyond employment law and the camp industry. Over time, I also received the opportunity to become the chief operating and compliance officer of an asset management firm, which I helped launch.³⁴ In turn, this led to the launch of the *Investment Advisers, Asset Managers, and Private Funds Practice* at my law firm.³⁵

I'll stop here, except to say that this story is likely not over. In each professional pivot, I've relied on the skills accumulated over the course of my prior experience while engaging in ongoing learning and development. I've also relied on quite a bit of grit—we'll discuss below how many rejections, failed attempts, and disheartening developments paved the way to each new stage of my career.

III. THE VALUE OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

The twists and turns of my career journey point to a foundational premise of this Article, which is that meaning and purpose change over time.³⁶ What is meaningful to a twenty-two-year-old may become far less meaningful to the same person when they are twenty-seven, and what is meaningful to a twenty-seven-year-old may become far less meaningful to the same person when they are forty.³⁷ *If*—and this is an important *if*—meaning and

33. *Human Resources: Law, Leadership, and Policy*, ALBANY LAW SCHOOL, <https://www.albanylaw.edu/graduate/human-resources> (last visited Apr. 21, 2022).

34. QUANTSTREET CAPITAL, <https://quantstreetcapital.com/> (last visited on Sept. 23, 2022).

35. *Investment Advisers, Asset Managers, and Private Funds*, POTOMAC LAW GROUP <https://www.potomaclaw.com/practices-Investment-Advisers-Asset-Managers-Private-Funds> (last visited Nov. 9, 2022).

36. See Michael Stegar, Shigehiro Oishi, Todd B. Kashdan, *Meaning in Life Across the Life Span: Levels and Correlates of Meaning in Life from Emerging Adulthood to Older Adulthood*, 4 J. Positive Psych. 43 (2009) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247520299_Meaning_in_life_across_the_lif_e_span_Levels_and_correlates_of_meaning_in_life_from_emerging_adulthood_to_older_adulthood (“Meaning creation should then be linked to individual development, and is likely to unfold in conjunction with other processes, such as the development of identity, relationships, and goals. Previous research has revealed that people experience different levels of the presence of meaning at different ages.”); Kira M. Newman, *How Purpose Changes Across Your Lifetime*, GREATER GOOD MAG. (July 14, 2020), https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_purpose_changes_across_your_lifetime.

37. Weir, *supra* note 22, (“People assign significance to their work in a variety of ways Some may derive meaning not from the job itself, but from the fact that it

purpose are your goals, then you would be well-served to continually evolve in your career to meet the mark.

To be sure, finding meaning and purpose in your career need not be the goal. Not everyone wants a job that speaks to their deepest passions.³⁸ Many employees thrive in just the opposite kind of environment: they come to work every day, have friendly relationships with colleagues, finish their projects, and then leave work at work when the day ends.³⁹ There are plenty of ways to find meaning outside of one's career.⁴⁰ As Lauren Howe, Jon Jachimowicz, and Jochen Menges write for the *Harvard Business Review*:

[D]rawing a line between what you love and what you do from nine-to-five can help you build healthy boundaries between your work and personal lives, and allow you to build and become a part of communities who share your interests. You can get to know like-minded people who might give you better insight into what your day-to-day would look like if you ultimately do decide to make your passion your job.

There are other benefits to keeping work and passion separate. Some research suggests that transforming hobbies into work could undermine your enjoyment of these activities, as your interest gets sapped by the pursuit of external rewards like compensation. This may be particularly true for creative passions, such as writing, painting, or music. Your passion(s) might also evolve over time, so you may not want to lock into a career path based solely on your current interest.⁴¹

While these are compelling points, this Article is much less for the attorneys who like their careers and much more for those who don't. If you have a job with reasonable hours that pays your bills and allows you to live the life you want outside of work, then this Article may not provide you with much actionable insight. If, by

allows them to provide for their families and pursue non-work activities that they enjoy. Others may find meaning in being able to advance themselves and be the best they can be. People with a craftsmanship orientation take pride in performing the job well. Those with a service orientation find purpose in the ideology or belief system behind their work. Still others extract meaning from the sense of kinship they experience with co-workers.”).

38. Lauren C. Howe, Jon M. Jachimowicz, & Jochen I. Menges, *Your Job Doesn't Have to Be Your Passion*, HARV. BUS. REV. (June 04, 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/06/your-job-doesnt-have-to-be-your-passion>.

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.*

41. *Id.*

contrast, you're unhappy with your career trajectory, or long for work that aligns with your sense of meaning and purpose, then perhaps you will find some of the advice that follows useful.

Here we reach our second foundational premise: attorneys who are unhappy and dissatisfied with their careers would benefit from aligning their sense of meaning and purpose with their professional goals.⁴² Professor Lawrence Krieger explains his research on this topic:

Authenticity was the single factor ... that most strongly predicted happiness and satisfaction in our lawyers and judges. The correlation of lawyer well-being with this factor was [66 percent], meaning that for every increase in a lawyer's sense of being authentic or true to himself or herself, happiness and life satisfaction increased by two-thirds of that amount. (For a sense of the comparative insignificance of "success," by contrast, the correlations of the success factors with happiness ranged from zero to a maximum of 19 percent.)⁴³

Professor Krieger concludes that the happiest attorneys act in a way that is "consistent with their beliefs and the truth as they know it."⁴⁴

We need only remember Mr. Mitchell's observation on LinkedIn: "[Y]ou can always find a way to combine your professional and personal goals" and ensure they align with the issues about which care deeply.⁴⁵ Setting forth a life goal that plays out across cultures, geographies, and academic disciplines, Mr. Mitchell's statement is reminiscent of a famous quote commonly attributed to another lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi, who said that "happiness is when

42. Jan-Emmanuel De Neve & George Ward, *Does Work Make You Happy? Evidence from the World Happiness Report*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Mar. 20, 2017), <https://hbr.org/2017/03/does-work-make-you-happy-evidence-from-the-world-happiness-report> ("Since most of us spend a great deal of our lives working, it is inevitable that work plays a key role in shaping our levels of happiness.").

43. Lawrence Krieger, *The Surprising Master Key to Happiness and Satisfaction According to the Lawyer Research*, 92 FLA. BAR 16 (2018), <https://www.floridabar.org/the-florida-bar-journal/the-surprising-master-key-to-happiness-and-satisfaction-according-to-the-lawyer-research/>; See Lawrence S. Krieger & Kennon M. Sheldon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 554 (2015), <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/articles/94>.

44. *Id.*

45. Mitchell, *supra* note 2.

what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony,” a conclusion that is well-supported by Professor Krieger’s research.⁴⁶

Looking across cultures, the sentiment is similar to the Japanese concept of *Ikigai*, which translates to “a reason for being” and refers to the state of wellbeing resulting from one’s devotion to that which gives them a sense of purpose and fulfillment.⁴⁷ It likewise aligns with the concept of “flow,” pioneered by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which refers to the focused mental state and complete absorption that results from doing work that aligns with one’s passions and skills.⁴⁸ It’s also a conclusion that is supported by extensive research in the field of positive psychology.⁴⁹

Researchers have even concluded that doing work that aligns with one’s sense of meaning and purpose can be a key ingredient to living a long and healthy life.⁵⁰ A group of researchers out of Harvard found that, among a cohort of older adults, an increase in purpose in life is associated with increased physical health and plays an “important role” in staying healthy as we age.⁵¹ Likewise, when studying the groups of people across the world with the longest lifespans—those living in the world’s “Blue Zones”—researchers found that one common attribute of the longest living individuals is having a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives.⁵²

46. See Krieger, *supra* note 43. See also, e.g., David J. Cole, *Happiness as a Strategy?*, MED. UNIV. S.C., (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://web.musc.edu/about/leadership/president/the-chase/2021/november/happiness>.

47. Jeffrey Gaines, *The Philosophy of Ikigai, 3 Examples About Finding Purpose*, POSITIVE PSYCH. (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://positivepsychology.com/ikigai/>.

48. *Id.* (“Ikigai also appears related to the concept of flow, as described in the work of Hungarian–American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. For Csikszentmihalyi, flow occurs when you are in your ‘zone,’ as they say of high-performing athletes. Flow is a string of ‘best moments’ or moments when we are at our best. These best moments ‘usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limit, in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.’ Flow can be said to occur when you are consistently doing something you love and that you are good at, with the possible added benefit of bringing value to others’ lives. In such a case, flow might be seen as in tune with your ikigai, or activities that give your life meaning and purpose.”).

49. See, e.g., ACHOR, *supra* note 11.

50. See generally DAN BUETTNER, *THE BLUE ZONES OF HAPPINESS* (2017). Dan Buettner, *Power 9 – Reverse Engineering Longevity*, BLUE ZONES (last visited Dec. 27, 2022), <https://www.bluezones.com/2016/11/power-9/>.

51. Eric S. Kim, et al., *Association Between Purpose in Life and Objective Measures of Physical Function in Older Adults*, 74 JAMA PSYCHIATRY 1039 (2017).

52. See generally BUETTNER, *supra* note 50. Dan Buettner, *Power 9 – Reverse Engineering Longevity*, BLUE ZONES (last visited Dec. 27, 2022), <https://www.bluezones.com/2016/11/power-9/>.

The key takeaway for our purposes is that attorneys who are unhappy with their careers would benefit from aligning their jobs with their sense of meaning and purpose. Meaningful work often leads to job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and happiness itself.⁵³

Before moving on, I would be remiss not to mention that it's nearly impossible to feel fulfilled at work if you have abusive coworkers, put in difficult hours that are outside of your control, or are subject to other problematic workplace conditions.⁵⁴ Perhaps it would be fair to say that, if some aspect of your job makes you miserable, then for that reason alone, your work doesn't align with your personal goals or sense of meaning and purpose. So, if you regularly miss family time because supervisors assign unexpected projects on nights and weekends, if you have colleagues who yell at you or mistreat you, or if you have similarly significant challenges at work, then you should begin by addressing those issues before attempting to find a larger sense of meaning and purpose in your career.⁵⁵

Of course, it's important to appreciate that even the most meaningful job may often feel stressful. There's a fairytale quote that appears on mugs and tee-shirts: "Find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life."⁵⁶ This is absolute nonsense, but if you believe it, then your career will be worse for it. It's far more accurate to say that, when you have a job you love, you can find a deeper meaning and purpose in the hard work, stress, and sacrifice that the job entails.⁵⁷ As Sinem Gunel insightful writes:

Doing something you love is not about not doing annoying work.
It's about a sense of fulfillment despite the difficulties you face.
Even the most enjoyable and fun job or business will feel like a
job at times. And that's fine. The problem is that we're being

53. Weir, *supra* note 22.

54. Many employees who love their jobs put in long hours by choice. This is fundamentally different than working difficult and unpredictable hours that are outside of our control. Research shows that having a sense of control over our work, including our work schedule, is an important component of happiness in the workplace. When supervisors regularly assign unexpected projects on evenings and weekends, and thus take time away from family, hobbies, and personal pursuits, they do not set the stage for fulfillment at work. This is very different from an employee choosing to work those same hours. See ACHOR, *supra* note 11; Patrick J. Schiltz, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, 52 VAND. L. REV. 871 (1999), <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vlr/vol52/iss4/2>.

55. *See id.*

56. Sinem Gunel, "Find Something You Love and You'll Never Work a Day in Your Life" *Is Horrible Advice*, MEDIUM (May 20, 2021), <https://medium.com/swlh/find-something-you-love-and-youll-never-work-a-day-in-your-life-is-horrible-advice-5b13ddae19b7>.

57. *See* FRANKL, *supra* note 1.

told that's not how it's supposed to be and that we should be feeling joyful and passionate 100% of the time. That's not only unrealistic but destructive The truth is great things aren't meant to be easy. Every job and business will feel like work if you have ambitious goals. Big goals always require big action, even if you love what you're doing. Instead of expecting work to feel like fun, aim to find something you love so much that you don't want to stop doing it even if it gets hard.⁵⁸

No matter how meaningful the job, work will often feel stressful and challenging. When we have a sense of meaning and purpose in our work, these stresses and challenges serve a higher purpose—we feel justified powering through them because we believe in what we're doing.⁵⁹ You should expect to sometimes feel stressed and put in long hours to achieve a great outcome for a client you care about; your care for the client justifies the hardships of the work. Of course, this is fundamentally different from feeling stressed because you have an abusive supervisor who regularly assigns projects of questionable significance on nights and weekends. Some workplace stressors mean that it's time for change, while others are simply an inherent part of doing work you care about.

A. Meaning Changes

I was recently speaking with a colleague who, like so many other attorneys, is contemplating leaving the legal profession entirely.⁶⁰ She began her career in litigation because, as a law student, she was intrigued by the idea of being a trial lawyer and arguing in court. But now that she has been litigating for the past decade, she has concluded, also like so many other attorneys, that litigation is adversarial, stressful, and not suited to her personality or disposition.⁶¹ Leigh McMullan Abramson writes of a similar experience for the Atlantic:

I had no appetite for conflict and found it hard to care about the interests I was serving. I realized I had never seriously considered whether I was cut out to be a lawyer, much less a

58. Gunel, *supra* note 56.

59. See FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS, OR, HOW TO PHILOSOPHIZE WITH A HAMMER (Richard Polt trans., 1997). See also FRANKL, *supra* note 1.

60. See Abramson, *supra* note 16; see also LIZ BROWN AND AMY IMPELLIZZER, HOW TO LEAVE THE LAW (2022).

61. Abramson, *supra* note 16. BROWN & IMPELLIZZER, *supra* note 60.

corporate litigator. After a few years, I just wanted out, but I had no idea where to begin. . . .

Young lawyers are . . . often unprepared for the adversarial nature of practice. It's common for people to go into litigation because they write and speak well, but they don't realize you have to go in and fight every day. And many feel disappointment that there is not more social good in the work they do for corporate clients.⁶²

While these examples happen to address litigation, the takeaways remain exactly the same when applied to every other practice area: namely, what is meaningful to a young law school graduate may be far less meaningful to that same person a decade later. The critical question becomes: What should we do when our sense of meaning and purpose changes? What is the appropriate response?

When the original path loses meaning, many attorneys stay in a fixed mindset and conclude that they have to stay the course⁶³—"I am a litigator," they reason, "I cannot make a change because this is who I am." But this line of reasoning is a recipe for career dissatisfaction!⁶⁴ As Emerson famously wrote, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."⁶⁵ So it goes as we aspire to align our professional goals with our personal sense of meaning and purpose.

Our sense of meaning changes over time, as do our personal goals, and we must be prepared for our careers to change alongside them.⁶⁶ I suggest to you that, rather than concluding "I am a litigator," the far more productive conclusion, which is much more likely to lead to career satisfaction and happiness, goes like this: "I have worked as a litigator and gained useful skills and experience. I am now infinitely free to rely on those skills and experiences to

62. *Id.* (internal citations omitted).

63. See Annie Little, *Why Most Lawyers Hate Their Jobs (and Stay Anyway)*, LINKEDIN (Feb. 19, 2020), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-most-lawyers-hate-jobs-stay-anyway-annie-little-/>.

64. *Id.*

65. Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, in *THE COMPLETE ESSAYS AND OTHER WRITINGS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON* 145, 145-70 (Bennett A. Cerf, Donald A. Klopfer, & Robert K. Haas, eds., 1950).

66. *Id.*

change the course of my career.”⁶⁷ A foolish consistency only leaves us burned out and unhappy.⁶⁸

B. The Consequences of Lacking Meaning and Purpose

Let’s briefly consider the consequences of having unmet career aspirations and *not* pursuing meaning and purpose in our careers. Researchers have identified a U-shaped curve in job satisfaction: many employees start out satisfied with their careers when they are younger, have a crisis and bottom-out in midlife, but then are once again satisfied in older age.⁶⁹ As Dr. Hannes Schwandt explains in the *Harvard Business Review*, the research “tell[s] a story in which the age U-shape in job (and overall life) satisfaction is driven by unmet aspirations that are painfully felt in midlife.”⁷⁰

While we’d all like to avoid this sense of midlife dissatisfaction, many attorneys have far greater challenges. In his influential paper, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, Patrick Schiltz explains that attorneys suffer from alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression at disproportionately high levels when compared to members of the general population.⁷¹ Schiltz compellingly attributes these issues to focusing exclusively on money and stature while working long and difficult hours and lacking a larger sense of meaning and purpose.⁷²

67. See Ashley Stahl, *How Your fixed Mindset is Limiting Your Career, and How to Change it*, FORBES (July 23, 2020, 9:27 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2020/07/23/how-your-fixed-mindset-is-limiting-your-career-and-how-to-change-it/?sh=4cc2dd9d2a06>.

68. See Abramson, *supra* note 16.

69. Hannes Schwandt, *Why So Many of Us Experience a Midlife Crisis*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Apr. 20, 2015), <https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-so-many-of-us-experience-a-midlife-crisis>.

70. *Id.*

71. Schiltz, *supra* note 54.

72. *Id.* (Note that this article was written in 1999. The numbers have changed but the principles have remained exactly the same. “Our hypothetical partner has a choice, then: He can make \$200,000 per year and work many nights and most weekends—routinely getting up early, before his children are awake, driving to the office, eating lunch at his desk, leaving the office late, picking up dinner at the Taco Bell drive-through window, and then arriving home to kiss the cheeks of his sleeping children. Or he can make \$160,000 per year and work few nights and weekends. He can spend time with his spouse, be a parent to his children, enjoy the company of his friends, pursue a hobby, do volunteer work, exercise regularly, and generally lead a well-balanced life—while still making \$160,000 per year. If all such lawyers making \$160,000 per year sat down and asked themselves, “What will make me a happier and healthier person: another \$40,000 in income (which, after taxes, will mean another \$25,000 or so in the bank) or 600 hours to do whatever I enjoy most?” it is hard to believe that many of them would take the money. But many of them do take the money. Thousands of lawyers choose to give up a healthy, happy, well-balanced life for a less healthy, less happy life dominated by work.”).

Might we minimize job dissatisfaction and its more extreme consequences while improving our health and potentially even living longer lives, by pursuing purpose and meaning in our careers?⁷³ While we may not be able to eliminate the U-curve entirely, the curve is shorter and turns upward sooner for happier people, who are also less likely to succumb to the alcoholism, drug use, and depression plaguing our profession.⁷⁴ And what is among the key factors that makes attorneys happy? Having a sense of authenticity in their career by aligning their work and life with their sense of meaning and purpose, which begins with ensuring that the conditions of our workplace are conducive to happiness.⁷⁵

IV. LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE POWER OF INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Since meaning and purpose change over time, the question becomes, how do we keep our careers on track? This is where lifelong learning comes in. Lifelong learning is the tool that allows us to continually align our careers with our changing sense of meaning and purpose over time.⁷⁶ And luckily, the skills we gain in law school, and then reinforce throughout our legal careers, allow us to learn just about anything.

73. See Schwandt, *supra* note 69 (Dr. Schwandt suggests the possibility that midlife crisis may be unavoidable. "If the burned-out Wall Street lawyer and the dissatisfied NGO activist were to change seats," he writes, "perhaps neither would end up more content." *Perhaps*. But perhaps the NGO activist who now has kids and a mortgage feels that they need to make more money. The activism about which they were once so passionate may be less of a priority when family expenses and retirement goals seem looming. By contrast, perhaps the burned-out Wall Street attorney might have once found meaning in making money and paying off student loans but has now made enough and wants to contribute to the greater good. Perhaps switching places is exactly what they both need to rekindle meaning in their careers and realize some of their aspirations.).

74. See Schiltz, *supra* note 54; SHELBY WAYTE, ADDRESSING THE MIDLIFE HAPPINESS 'DIP': AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED, MINDFULNESS-BASED APPROACH TO SUPPORT & PROMOTE WOMEN'S WELL-BEING, (2020), https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1038&context=mindfulness_theses.

75. See Krieger, *supra* note 43 ("Regardless of lawyers' apparent level of 'success,' the only exceptionally strong predictors of happiness among these thousands of subjects were their sense of authenticity, relatedness to others, and internal motivation/competence in work. Once you realize this, you realize that you must seek these experiences regularly if you expect to have a joyful and meaningful life as a lawyer."); see generally Krieger & Sheldon, *supra* note 43; see also ACHOR, *supra* note 11; Schiltz, *supra* note 54.

76. See Jeffrey J. Selingo & Simon, *The Future Of Your Career Depends On Lifelong Learning*, FORBES (Oct. 9, 2017, 7:35 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/schoolboard/2017/10/09/the-future-of-your-career-depends-on-lifelong-learning/?sh=3dcf09b11bd7>.

Many attorneys find the idea of a career change daunting and have numerous good reasons to maintain the status quo, ranging from financial concerns and fear of failure to lack of knowledge and lack of time.⁷⁷ But these concerns are often based on a one-dimensional view of career change. We often envision a career change as dropping everything we know and taking a huge financial and professional risk with no certainty as to how we'll come out on the other side—a metaphorical deep dive into the unknown.⁷⁸

To be sure, pursuing meaning and purpose in one's career is a fundamentally entrepreneurial venture: taking steps to ensure that your career aligns with your values means that you'll have to chart your own professional course and leave the beaten path. For many attorneys, this may simply mean making small adjustments in their current job over time. For others, this may mean pursuing a new venture in the more traditional sense of entrepreneurship. But much like the one-dimensional conception of career change described above, we envision the entrepreneur as someone who quits their job, sinks their life savings into a risky venture, and puts everything on the line for their idea.⁷⁹

If this is what it means for an attorney to make a career change or launch a new venture, then it's no wonder why so many of us are reluctant to do so. But it's critical to understand that career changes can be slow and gradual, can involve subtle shifts from your current role, and certainly need not entail huge professional risks.⁸⁰ Regardless of how big or small your career goal, the path to getting there can begin after work and on your own time without

77. See Liz Shumer, *Why Following Your Passions Is Good for You (and How to Get Started)*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 10, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/smarter-living/follow-your-passion-hobbies-jobs-self-care.html>.

78. See Utkarsh Amitabh, *The Right Way to Make a Big Career Transition*, HARV. BUS. REV. (July 19, 2021), <https://hbr.org/2021/07/the-right-way-to-make-a-big-career-transition>.

79. Neil Patel, *Entrepreneurs Should Always Be Dabbling in Side Business. Here's Why*, ENTREPRENEUR (May 25, 2016), <https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/entrepreneurs-should-always-be-dabbling-in-side-businesses/275241> (“When you test your side business, you can quickly gauge demand for the product or service. If none exists, you have the freedom and flexibility to change the offer before diving head-first into a new venture. I usually avoid recommending that new entrepreneurs ‘follow their passion’ when starting their first business; but for side hustles, just the opposite is true. You want passion. You need it. . . . If you start a side hustle while maintaining focus on your core business, and it fails, you haven't lost anything significant. You still have your main business to fall back on; and, hopefully, you walk away with a few valuable lessons.”).

80. Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

interrupting your job stability or consistent income.⁸¹ We will come back to this point momentarily.

A. Learning New Areas of Practice

As every practitioner knows, law school taught us an analytical framework—how to “think like a lawyer”—which is reinforced in all fields of legal practice.⁸² Relying on those analytical skills, it’s entirely possible to learn throughout our lives, explore new practice areas, write on new topics, and continually evolve in our careers.⁸³

For the benefit of law students, I should note that when practitioners seek to understand a new area of law, they typically do so much more efficiently than the way you learn in law school. For example, attorneys don’t sit down with a dense casebook and attempt to answer the hypothetical questions after trying to glean the key takeaway from a twenty-page case.⁸⁴ That is the law school method, and it teaches you how to think like a lawyer, but it’s certainly not the most effective or efficient way to learn a new area of law.⁸⁵ When practitioners seek to understand a new area, they read articles and practitioner guidebooks, speak to colleagues, take CLEs, and often enough, simply dive into the work and learn by doing.⁸⁶

If you pick up a four-hundred-page practitioner’s guide to a particular area of law, you’ll be amazed what you can learn in about seven pages per day. After two months, you will have read the entire book and absorbed a tremendous amount of content. Then you pick up the next book and start reading that one. Again, you only need seven pages per day. Once you’ve read a couple books, you can write a few short articles on the topic to explore interesting questions that

81. See Jonathan Marciano, *10 Lawyers-Turned-Entrepreneurs Creating a Revolution in Law*, ENTREPRENEUR (June 14, 2017), <https://www.entrepreneur.com/science-technology/10-lawyers-turned-entrepreneurs-creating-a-revolution-in-law/295194>; Melanie Lockert, *5 Entrepreneurs Who Took Their Side Hustle Full Time*, LIVEABOUT (Sept. 9, 2021) <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/entrepreneurs-taking-side-hustles-full-time-4136679>.

82. See Geoffrey R. Stone, *The Importance of Law School*, N.Y. TIMES (July 25, 2011, 11:41 AM), <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/07/21/the-case-against-law-school/the-importance-of-law-school>.

83. See Jeffrey J. Selingo, *The Future Of Your Career Depends On Lifelong Learning*, FORBES (Oct. 9, 2017, 7:35 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/schoolboard/2017/10/09/the-future-of-your-career-depends-on-lifelong-learning/?sh=3dcf09b11bd7>.

84. See Segal, *supra* note 16; Abramson, *supra* note 16.

85. Segal, *supra* note 16.

86. Of course, reading case law also has its place, but it’s never from a casebook, rarely for an overview of an entire area of law, and normally the result of a focused search to answer a specific question or find a particular principle.

came up during your reading. After you've written a couple articles, you can use the same content to present a CLE, speak at a relevant conference, and otherwise engage in the dialog and discourse of the practice area. From there, it becomes much more natural to bring on a client to build your skills in the area—perhaps at a discounted rate and writing off some hours while you learn. You can also ask a practitioner who works in the area to help with a small project or two. And when you do a good job, one project can lead to another and then another.

When you take these types of small steps, guess what happens over time? You start to know the answers to more and more questions and *you* become an expert, which leads to the next step in your career as a natural progression from your current position—without ever taking a deep dive into the great unknown.

Taking our example from above, what would be my advice to the litigator who wants to transition into transactional work? Start by studying commercial contracts. Read articles about best practices, read a treatise in the area, publish a couple short articles exploring what you've read (perhaps write about a litigator's perspective on effective contracts), teach a CLE, speak to transactional lawyers about your interest, and see if you can work on a few commercial contacts for smaller clients.⁸⁷ Continue working as a litigator but spend some time every day on these efforts. Over time, slowly but surely, you'll learn more and more about transactional work, gain experience and expertise, and eventually find that it will be easy and natural to make the switch.⁸⁸ Career changes can be a very gradual process, but just knowing that you're taking steps towards your goal will immediately introduce meaning and purpose into your career.

B. Incremental Change

We overestimate what we can do in one year and underestimate what we can do in ten. You can change your industry, your function, and your geographical location but all three are unlikely to change immediately. Gradual change is often much more sustainable.

Please don't take my suggestion of being realistic to be at odds with dreaming big. Both can coexist with the proper timeframe.

87. See Teresa Matich, *Changing Legal Practice Areas? Here is Everything You Need to Know*, CLIO, <https://www.clio.com/blog/changing-legal-practice-areas/> (last visited Nov. 12, 2022).

88. As already noted, the terms "litigation" and "transactional work" in this example can be replaced by almost any current job and almost any professional goal. *Id.*

Dream big and act small by trying to take micro-steps in the right direction. . . . Micro-actions compound over a period of time to deliver exponential results. Take the first step and be consistent about it. Urgency in actions, and patience with results, will serve you well.⁸⁹

-Utkarsh Amitabh, *Harvard Business Review*

I appreciate, of course, that switching from litigation to transactional work is a significant change; these practice areas feel like diametrical opposites, at least in modern big firm practice.⁹⁰ To be sure, I don't suggest that attorneys regularly (if ever) switch practice areas, casually jump from one field to another, or otherwise make drastic changes to their careers. Sometimes drastic change is necessary, and when that's the case, you should know that it's certainly possible. But the very same principles apply to making smaller career adjustments, which may be all you need to keep your career aligned with your sense of meaning and purpose.

"It's not uncommon to be generally happy at your organization but miserable in your job," writes Rebecca Knight.⁹¹

One possible remedy is to consider what kinds of small changes you can make to bring yourself more fully to your work. Even if you cannot change your circumstances, you might be able to change the microenvironment in which you operate. For instance, you could seek out an exciting and immersive project, hire employees with different backgrounds, or join an internal committee or team that will stretch you in new and different ways. You could also try to negotiate different work arrangements or schedules, or request a move to a different office. Shaking up your routine and rejuvenating your commitments can have a big impact on your outlook and perspective. The key is being deliberate in what you choose to

89. See Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

90. See Tasha Norman, *How to Make It: Transactional Law vs. Litigation—How, When and Why to Choose*, LAW (Apr. 25, 2022, 8:42 AM), <https://www.law.com/2022/04/25/how-to-make-it-transactional-law-vs-litigation-how-when-and-why-to-choose/#:~:text=So%2C%20to%20oversimplify%2C%20transactional%20practice,that%20a%20lawsuit%20is%20inappropriate.>

91. Rebecca Knight, *How to Beat Mid-Career Malaise*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Aug. 2, 2018), [https://hbr.org/2018/08/how-to-beat-mid-career-malaise?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=hbr&utm_source=facebook&tpcc=orgsocial_edit.](https://hbr.org/2018/08/how-to-beat-mid-career-malaise?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=hbr&utm_source=facebook&tpcc=orgsocial_edit)

do, whom you choose to do it with, and where you choose to do it.⁹²

Others refer to this as “job crafting” to better “shape their work experience” so it’s more aligned with your goals and aspirations.⁹³ “Every job has elements that make it feel like, well, work. But most employees do have some leeway to tweak their duties. “You can be an architect of the tasks,” Dutton says. Employees might choose to spend more energy on the existing tasks they find particularly gratifying.”⁹⁴ Rather than seeking a new job or making a major career change, many employees simply need to engage in this process of job crafting to make adjustments to their role over time.

We also shouldn’t overlook internal opportunities that would spare us the need to make more significant changes. Consider our LinkedIn poster, who spent four hundred billable hours focusing on pro bono efforts.⁹⁵ While that’s a huge number of pro bono hours, how many big firm attorneys would find more meaning in their careers, without ever having to leave their firms, if they set the same goal for themselves?

And even if your goal is a more fundamental career change, it doesn’t need to happen overnight. Making consistent micro-adjustments can lead to a gradual evolution of your practice over time.⁹⁶ It may be imperceptible from month-to-month but significant over some number of years. By staying in your current position while focusing some amount of time every day on learning to reach your next professional goal, you can gradually evolve as an attorney and continually align your practice with your sense of meaning and purpose.

C. A Note on Formal Education

To this point in the discussion, we’ve focused on self-directed learning rather than formal education. As already mentioned, I believe the analytical tools students learn in law school, combined with the continual sharpening of those tools in legal practice, create the foundation for attorneys to be able to learn just about anything. Sometimes you may have to study a subject so hard that your brain will hurt, but with the right amount of focus and effort it’s almost always possible to learn what you set out to learn. Thus, for most

92. *Id.*

93. Weir, *supra* note 22 (internal citations omitted).

94. *Id.*

95. Mitchell, *supra* note 2.

96. See Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

career growth, no formal education is necessary beyond your juris doctor.

However, self-directed learning is not the only option. We now live in a world of asynchronous online education.⁹⁷ In the past, furthering one's formal education necessarily meant sitting in a physical classroom at a local university, which is often impossible for busy professionals.⁹⁸ Online education has opened up new worlds, giving attorneys more options today than ever before to continually learn new skills and empower themselves to pivot in their careers. You can get a certificate or graduate degree from a wide range of institutions in almost any field from the comfort of your home and on your own schedule—without being geographically bound to a university, without having to attend daytime classes during working hours, and while being able to juggle family life and busy careers.⁹⁹

V. EMBRACING FAILURE AND REJECTION

“The fastest way to succeed is to double your failure rate.”

-Thomas Watson, IBM¹⁰⁰

When I was a law student, I applied to countless law firms before getting a few offers. I actually still have an envelope of every rejection letter that I received during that application process. I saved them as a reminder of the importance of pressing on in the face of rejection. As it happens, I still have the rejection letter from the *first* time I applied to the firm where I started my career. When I decided to start teaching philosophy as a young lawyer, I applied to every university in the New York area. Most ignored me, some rejected me, but one allowed me to teach (after rejecting me the first time I applied). When I started the nonprofit, the process entailed two years of consistent rejection until receiving a multi-million-dollar grant. When I then went back to practicing law, countless firms rejected my idea before a couple offers came in. When I then

97. See *The 5 Benefits of Asynchronous Learning*, MIT (Dec. 15, 2021), <https://curve.mit.edu/5-benefits-asynchronous-learning>.

98. *Id.*

99. Online Graduate Program Profiles, U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, https://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/graduate-degree-profiles?rv_test3_contro (last visited Nov. 12, 2022); see Selingo, *supra* note 83.

100. Richard Farson & Ralph Keyes, *The Failure-Tolerant Leader*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Aug. 2022), <https://hbr.org/2002/08/the-failure-tolerant-leader>.

decided to teach law, numerous law schools either ignored me or rejected me before I got a teaching offer. Likewise, before I published my first book, dozens of publishers rejected it, which was also the fate of each paper I've written prior to its acceptance.

Making a career change to align your job with your sense of meaning and purpose likely won't be easy. The path to reaching any career goal—whether it's finding a new position, starting a new venture, switching departments within the same company, or expanding one's scope of practice—often includes failure, rejection, and an uphill climb.

"Unfortunately," Amitabh explains, "most career transitions and hiring processes rely heavily on past experience. . . . Most recruiters will nudge you towards a role very similar to your current job, even if you have the skills necessary to transition to a different sector."¹⁰¹ Explaining his own interdepartmental transition within Microsoft, Amitabh cautions applicants to "expect multiple rejections:"

After approaching peers on dozens of teams, I realized that very few wanted to take a bet on someone with a different experience. Finally, one hiring manager gave me a project to work on. I performed well on that project and got the opportunity to interview for his team. After eight months of trying relentlessly, I finally made the internal transfer happen.¹⁰²

I've found over the course of my career that achieving anything of value begins with a process of collecting rejections.¹⁰³ In most professional pursuits, you will receive many more negative responses than positive responses; you will need many people to say "No" before one person says "Yes." "Thankfully you don't need everyone to take a bet on you," writes Amitabh. "Just one will do. Finding that person/hiring manager/recruiter will take time. Expect multiple rejections before you do. If your resolve and preparation is strong enough, you will get someone to take that chance."¹⁰⁴ Shaun Rawls conveys the same sentiment:

Everyone yearns to hear "Yes," but the way you handle hearing "No" will make you great. Most people only set their sights on

101. Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

102. See Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

103. See Farson & Keyes, *supra* note 100.

104. See Amitabh, *supra* note 78.

“Yes” targets throughout their day; they worry about hearing “No,” and feel deflated when it happens. . . . I learned that “No” is an important part of the “Yes Process.” Embrace it. Rather than avoiding “No,” I learned to “Go for No!” It became my primary goal to reach each day. The difference between “Wanting No” and “Avoiding No” made all the difference. . . . Remember: all of the “Yeses” you want are buried in a sea of “No’s.”¹⁰⁵

And having a sense of meaning and purpose behind one’s career goal provides a very strong incentive to press on through that sea. To my mind, you should only feel nervous while working towards certain significant goals if you’re not collecting a consistent stream of rejections, because that suggests you’re not being sufficiently aggressive in the pursuit.

VI. CONCLUSION

When reflecting on the arch of our careers, we may benefit from considering the experience of those who came before us and are now in a position to provide mentorship and guidance to the next generation of attorneys. In his essay, *Lessons from a Life in Law*, Richard Rothman advises younger attorneys to seize their opportunities.¹⁰⁶ He writes:

Reflecting back on my career, I realize that truly major opportunities—whether to gain important new clients or great trial experience—did not come often. I’ve taken advantage of some, and they propelled and shaped my career. But I also missed at least a few. I missed them because I was not sufficiently assertive or persistent in pursuing those opportunities in the face of obstacles or because I was unduly hesitant to promote myself aggressively, or a combination of these. In recent years, I’ve been less reticent. When I see a good opportunity, I pursue it more boldly and persistently than in my younger days—and time and again, I’ve benefited. So my simple advice to those at the other end of the age spectrum: When your big chances come along . . . be sure to make the most of them. And don’t worry about failing!¹⁰⁷

105. 8 Proven Habits for Ultimate Success, *ENTREPRENEUR* (Mar. 22, 2018), <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/310691>.

106. Richard Rothman, *Lessons from a Life in the Law*, WEIL, GOTSHAL & MANGES, <https://richrothman.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Lessons-From-A-Life-In-The-Law.pdf> (last visited May 12, 2022).

107. *Id.*

Mr. Rothman's words reflect a common sentiment among the older generation reflecting back on their careers. Reviewing a book of interviews of seniors in the *New York Times*, Jane Brody writes: "Not one [older] person in a thousand said that happiness accrued from working as hard as you can to make money to buy whatever you want."¹⁰⁸ The nearly universal view regarding careers was that "[t]he most important thing is to be involved in a profession that you absolutely love, and that you look forward to going to work to every day."¹⁰⁹ Brody goes on: "Although it can take a while to land that ideal job, you should not give up looking for one that makes you happy. Meanwhile, if you're stuck in a bad job, try to make the most of it until you can move on."¹¹⁰

At the end of life, people more often regret the things they didn't do than the things they did.¹¹¹ "Putting aside the specific type of life decision, enduring regret typically centers around failing to get closer to our ideal versions of ourselves," writes Jonathan Wolf. "Long-term regrets are usually about an inaction that we perceive in hindsight as likely to have [hindered us from] becoming a better individual."¹¹² He goes on: "We're never going to eliminate regret from our lives entirely. But, when presented with a choice, we could all benefit from asking ourselves more often, 'Which path will bring me closer to becoming the person I want to be?'"¹¹³

Many of us would become much closer to our ideal selves by aligning our careers with our sense of meaning and purpose. When you have a vision for your career that hasn't materialized, or if you have an idea that means something to you, my simple advice is to start pursuing it—as slowly as you want, but start pursuing it. If your legal career doesn't align with your sense of meaning and purpose, then start engaging in the learning process that will allow you to pivot into an area that does speak to your authentic self. If some aspect of your job doesn't align with your personal goals, then start the job crafting process as soon as you can. Just taking those

108. Jane E. Brody, *Advice From Life's Graying Edge on Finishing With No Regrets*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 9, 2012), <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/health/elderly-experts-share-life-advice-in-cornell-project.html>.

109. *Id.*

110. *Id.*

111. Jonathan Wolf, *Later In Life, People Regret Things They Didn't Do And Failure To Become Better Versions Of Themselves*, ABOVE THE LAW (Mar. 30, 2022, 12:30 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2022/03/late-in-life-people-regret-things-they-didnt-do-and-failure-to-become-better-versions-of-themselves/>.

112. *Id.*

113. *Id.*

first steps will immediately give you the satisfaction that comes from working towards your goals while creating optimism for a future in which your work and purpose align.

You may not know where your professional life will lead—I certainly couldn't have predicted my own career trajectory years ago—but if you follow your sense of meaning and purpose, then you'll end up exactly where you're supposed to be. As Viktor Frankl wrote:

I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had *forgotten* to think about it.¹¹⁴

114. FRANKL, *supra* note 1 (emphasis added).