

# Find your blue sky

Some lawyers seem to thrive, having found their ideal practice, while others still search for their blue sky. Discovering your values is a journey. As children we are brought up with the values our parents instilled in us. In early adulthood we may have experiences that challenge those family values. Attending university and unfettered from the bonds of parents, you may have even broader experiences that cause you to re-evaluate old belief systems. We embrace new friends, new music, new styles, and new ideas. In middle age we grow into our professional selves and develop deeper bonds with family and friends. As we enter the twilight of our careers we can be freed from obligations once held so dear.

When you look back at your journey, did you live the way you wanted? Did you come to know yourself and pursue a meaningful and satisfying life and career?

On your legal journey you will also face winds of change and the stage of your career may impact your values and how you see things. A young lawyer may seek to make a contribution to the world and the community. A lawyer well into the first or second decade of practice may find meaning in mastering an art. And an established partner may take the most joy in establishing a legacy and mentoring. Across generations, you may find your professional values changing with the vicissitudes of life.

Apart from the wisdom gained from experience, it is not uncommon to have an epiphany mid-career or a life event that resets your outlook. Changed values can cause you to take joy in new experiences and, at the same time, find painful what was once pleasurable. The excitement of closing a deal or preparing for trial can give way to boredom or dread. You may no longer wake up wanting to go to work, lose sleep over your files, or wonder why you do it. Perhaps this is a passing phase, a winter in a seasonal practice – or have you experienced a fundamental change in values?

The birth of a child, death of a loved one, divorce, or simply maturing can cause unhappiness in your practice. With the birth of a child you may find that you now deeply value providing for your family and need to arrive at a higher socioeconomic level. Conversely, you may be compelled to spend more time with your family instead of spending all hours at your practice. A death of a loved one or a divorce can free you from responsibilities and allow you to pursue your dream, or cause you to evaluate if you have been living your life the way you should.

Life events can serve to solidify your values. Finding them immutable, you may take even greater joy in your practice. Or, if you find yourself unhappy on one path, you may take the opportunity to blaze a new trail.

Each practice area, type of firm, or legal position presents a match with a certain set of values. Entrepreneurial spirits may find practising as a solo or in a small firm to be invigorating. Attracted to the big deals? Bay Street is the answer. Still others enjoy the intertwining of business with law as in-house counsel. Understand the options out there and find your blue sky.

## Craving a challenge

Those craving a challenge often find practising on Bay Street satisfying. The legal work is complex, the route to making partner difficult, and the hours are long. Meet the challenge and the rewards may include significant compensation and prestige. Mergers and acquisitions, banking, cross-border transactions, securities, and large-scale litigation work dominate the field.

The “work hard, play hard” philosophy is prevalent. Firms often set billable hour targets for associates from 1,800 hours per year and up. Extra hours are needed to develop business, attend board meetings, bar association events, and community events. Especially intense are the days and weeks conducting trials and leading up to closing deals.

Working your way up to partner is an achievement. The attrition rate can be high. Junior associates typically have narrow roles defined

by executing carved out tasks such as research and drafting. As a cog in the wheel, juniors may find that there is simply not enough time for senior lawyers to walk through the big picture on every multi-million dollar transaction or piece of litigation. Given what is at stake, there are typically fewer opportunities to engage in multiple aspects of a file and interact directly with clients. But as the firm's confidence in a lawyer grows, so does the role.

## Have it your way

Settle into a community, see your clients around town, work with the same lawyers on transactions, and face familiar opposing counsel when you litigate – these are the hallmarks of solo and small firm practices. Areas include real estate, family law, and estates, personal injury and small business. These kinds of practices favour the lawyer who treasures autonomy.

No matter how trivial, tasks must be executed across the board, from drafting documents and conducting research to negotiating deals and attending motions and trials. Solo and small firm lawyers must see the big picture on every file and take steps according to his or her own strategy. There is typically no robust precedent directory to draw from, no flock of students at one's beck and call, no juniors to rely on. But the local bar association is (hopefully) friendly and accommodating. And as the sole lawyer on a file, the pleasure of receiving thanks typically comes directly from the client for a job well done.

The high level of autonomy means work-life balance is more under your control (although the balancing act is always challenging). Time can be set aside for family and friends, or to enjoy other life endeavours. Or a laser focus can be spent on growing the firm. Since spending time in the former takes away from the latter, it is all too easy to let the needs of the firm take priority.

Entrepreneurs are drawn to solo and small firm practice. The extent of legal and marketing success directly impacts profits. Happiness, for these lawyers, is watching the planted seed grow into a tree.

## Helping those in need

Should you value helping those in need, you may find satisfaction in public interest law. Ranging widely, public interest law can include human rights, immigration, government, and poverty law. These lawyers stand on the front lines of the battle to provide access to justice for all. Perhaps because there is often a match between the lawyer's values and the work pursued, research has shown that lawyers in public interest law consistently report the highest ratings of happiness in the profession.

Empathy and patience are assets to the practice. Unsophisticated clients dealing with government boards, tribunals and the courts

require significant education and support. Administrative and regulatory law can be frustrating, as successes may be few and far between. Sometimes getting a hit one out of every three times is good enough.

While most of the work happens under the radar, some cases reach the highest levels of court. The outcomes can affect (and reflect) society's mores and “change the world.”

## The trusted advisor

In-house lawyers serve one client and fill the role of trusted advisor. The position often suits lawyers who value work-life balance but want to maintain the legal work they are used to doing. The typical route to go in-house is to pursue private practice for several years before making the switch. In-house practices vary widely, as positions can be found in local, national and international enterprises, and virtually any industry.

The breadth and depth of work varies. Some in-house counsel find the practice can be narrow, especially where expertise in a certain area coincides with a large-volume business need. Others find a broadening of the practice as multiple business groups call on the lawyer to fill in the gaps. In-house legal work can bring you into the inner machinations of doing business and free you from the need to docket. On the other hand, working within the corporate machine can mean navigating more red tape and office politics.

Unlike private practice, promotion is less obvious in-house. There are a number of employees for every one manager, and only one General Counsel. Career development requires some gymnastics as you may need to develop new skills and find a way to market what you bring to the table. Neither will your year of call dictate your salary (as it does in some settings), as you trade that in for the world of the “salary band.” In-house counsel work also differs from private practice in that the position presents a cost to the company and does not act as a profit-centre. Nonetheless, freed from the need to develop business, job security is perceived to be better and positions often come with robust benefits packages and a pension.

## Discovering your values

Finding the right practice area, law firm, or legal position requires introspection and, perhaps, trial and error. Learn what is important to you. Wherever you are on your journey, life experience can cause your values to be re-calibrated. And actually living and breathing inside your daily work is the only way to know if you have found your place in the legal world. Discover your values, and live and work according to them. ■

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