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Singing Those Law Office Blues

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Singing Those Law Office Blues

Money is only part of the
problem for young lawyers

Many young lawyers feel that their dues have been paid by the time they struggle through three years of law school and successfully pass the bar examination. Visions of awesome paychecks, satisfied clients and competent partners sometimes cloud the perspectives of young lawyers as they embark on hopefully satisfying careers.

Unfortunately, those dues haven't even begun to be tallied. In fact, according to a recent survey on career satisfaction published in the Spring 1980 issue of *BARRISTER*, 40 percent of the young lawyers indicated that they were dissatisfied with their careers. The survey, prepared by members of the subcommittee of the YLD Career Planning and Placement Committee, was created to discover some of the reasons for this rather widespread dissatisfaction.

Exactly who was surveyed and who responded? The survey's profile of respondents shows a group of young lawyers who are diverse both in geography and type of practice.

There were 2,750 young lawyers, 1.8 percent of all young attorneys in the ABA, who responded to the Career Satisfaction Survey. The preliminary survey involved in-depth interviews with 150 young lawyers. The final

questionnaire was based upon these interviews. The responses were many and varied, and it was difficult to find many answers in common. Some respondents found it necessary to elaborate on their answers by writing comments in the columns of the survey. A few of these answers are included because they were both humorous and enlightening.

For example, the "Law Office Blues" was defined by one respondent from Atlanta, when he wrote, "I've had a terrible case of the 'blues' for almost a year now. Let's face it; life is a roller coaster. Does anyone really escape? It's been my goal to become competent, almost excellent, as well as fair and courteous. The most dissatisfied attorneys I know are either lazy, greedy, a combination of the two, inherent dilettantes—or misplaced in their careers." Although many of the respondents sympathized with this lawyer's frustration, it will become clear that his definition of the term "dissatisfied" may be too narrow.

In the profile of respondents, 60 percent answered "yes" when asked if their present job met their goal of personal satisfaction. One corporate lawyer from Missouri wrote, "I love being a lawyer. I would not, however, return to private practice for twice my

salary. It was all the bad things you listed under disappointments and pressures . . . and the senior partner didn't care!" The analysis which this particular respondent presented, concerning the difference in levels of satisfaction between Corporate Counsel and Firm Practice, seems to be verified by the survey results.

IS ANYBODY SATISFIED?

In examining the survey results, it is possible to discern probable reasons for some differences in satisfaction levels. For example, nearly 12 percent more corporate counsel indicated that their jobs met their goals of personal satisfaction than did those practicing in law firms. An examination of the significant responses to sources of pressure/stress, and disappointments, reveals that "Salaries" and "Financial Worries" were listed in both. A corporate counsel, at least in the earlier years of practice, is often paid more than his law firm counterpart, which may account for a portion of the difference. Furthermore, many of the corporate counsel interviewed prior to the publishing of the *BARRISTER* survey, indicated that their hours were more regular, enabling them to spend more time with their

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by Gary A. Munneke and N. Kay Bridger-Riley

yourself off from them and thereby isolate yourself inside the partnership. You may not get involved in important partnership decisions. Such tendencies work to limit your personal contribution to the firm, whatever the quality of your performance on your own assignments. If you cut yourself off from the information required for effective partnering, gauging the true worth of your own contribution to the firm is very difficult.

ARE YOU A PERFECT PARTNER?

Compare your results with the configuration presented below. This composite profile is based on a study of the questionnaire scores of 100 successful partners, and has the following breakdown:

Five A's,
Eight B's,

not only to your specific strengths in partnering but also to your weaknesses. You can identify what you have to work on to develop a more effective partnering style.

Continuing effort on your part is needed. A partnership is a living, dynamic entity, not something merely set in motion and then left to proceed on its own. Here are some important lessons that successful partners learn:

- It takes more than professional expertise to be successful. Talents in partnering are necessary to take full advantage of a partnership's potential, and compatibility and teamwork can be learned by partners.
- An individual partnering style can change through both personal effort and the influence of partners who can

effectively with partner idiosyncracies.

- Policies and procedures to identify and develop partner talent at all levels within a firm are essential.
- Errors in the selection of colleagues are not uncommon. These mistakes, however painful, represent a significant opportunity for learning about what the firm really needs in the way of partnering abilities and talents.

With progress in eliminating administrative gaps, in sharing mutual goals, in learning more about each other and becoming aware of personal partnering patterns, you should be optimistic about your future as a successful partner. **■**

From "Partners in Business," by Dr. Melvin Wallace.
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PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

<u>Sex</u>		<u>Years out of Law School</u>	
Male	75.5%	Less than one:	3%
Female	24.5%	1-3:	33%
		3-5:	32%
		More than five:	31%
<u>Ages</u>		<u>Type of Practice</u>	
23-25:	5%	Law Firm Associate:	34%
26-28:	27%	Law Firm Partner:	18%
29-31:	32%	Corporate Counsel:	13%
32-35:	31%	Solo Practitioner:	13.5%
Over 35:	7%	Government Attorney:	11%
<u>Marital Status</u>		Military:	1%
Married:	65%	Judiciary:	1%
Single:	27%	Legal Educators:	1%
Divorced:	8%	Outside of the Law:	6%
<u>Region of Country</u>		<u>Salary Range</u>	
Northeast:	24%	Under \$15,000:	12%
Northcentral:	7%	\$15-25,000:	35%
Southeast:	19%	\$25-35,000:	29%
Midwest:	18%	\$35-45,000:	13%
Southwest:	12%	\$45-55,000:	5%
West:	15%	More than \$55,000:	6%
Northwest:	5%		

SOURCES OF PRESSURE/STRESS

Time Pressures Which Cut Performance Standards.....	13.4%
Trying to Do Well in the Profession.....	13.2%
Concurrent Responsibility of Career and Family Life.....	12.3%
Financial Worries.....	10.6%

factor accounted for more than 15 percent of the answers.

HIGHEST LEVEL OF SATISFACTION BY JOB CATEGORY

1. Legal Educators:	96.2%
2. Judiciary:	77.3%
3. Legal Aid Programs:	70.4%
4. Corporate Counsel:	69.2%
5. Solo Practitioners:	62.5%
6. Outside of the Law:	61.9%
7. Mid-Size Firm:	57.5%
8. Small Firm:	56.7%
9. Government:	54.8%
10. Large Firm:	54.7%

Regarding salaries, one California attorney commented: "I can't believe how little money there is in law business today. All of my clients assume I'm rich because I'm a lawyer, but it's not at all so. The biggest disappointment has been to see dozens of quali-

fied candidates applying for low-paying jobs. Many factory workers, and most plumbers, make more money than I do."

Another California respondent added a category to the biggest disappointment answers: "Lack of a Sense of Helping People." Although this may be a source of disappointment for that attorney, at least 12 percent of the respondents identified "Helping Other People" as their biggest satisfaction:

TRADE-OFF BETWEEN SALARY AND SERVICE

If the sense of helping other people is such an important factor in a young lawyer's satisfaction level, then maybe one should not be so surprised to find that the survey showed the highest level of satisfaction is found among law professors, judges, and those who participate in legal aid programs. Although members of these

groups frequently complain that they are the most underpaid members of the profession, when an individual enters one of these three fields, it usually involves a conscious trade-off of salary for personal growth through service to society or the profession. If, indeed, the trade-off between salary and service to society is a conscious one, then it may be that low salaries are expected and, therefore, would not be a major disappointment. As the attorney from California explained, however, the general misconception in society is that all attorneys are wealthy. Attorneys are expected to live in the same neighborhoods, drive the same type of cars, and wear the same expensive clothes as their medical counterparts. Unfortunately, much of this misconception is not dispelled until a new lawyer finally accepts a position at a disappointing salary, after investigating the job market and finding it to be the best offer. For this new lawyer, there has been no conscious trade-off as with the legal aid attorney, the judge and the law professor—thus disappointment results.

To verify this theory that conscious trade-offs do not breed discontent, discrepancy scores were calculated from the survey responses regarding what the respondents expected to obtain when they got out of law school versus what they actually obtained (as far as salary, responsibility level, type of job, and hours expected/required). These discrepancy scores were then compared with the corresponding responses to answers about personal satisfaction, personal freedom, and feelings of professionalism in the respondents' present jobs. The results of this comparison showed that the lower the discrepancy between what respondents expected and what they obtained, the higher the satisfaction level and the level for feelings of professionalism. In other words, if the respondents obtained what they had expected before entering the job market, they were more satisfied with their jobs and reported a greater level of "feelings of professionalism." If, on the other hand, they expected more than they actually obtained, their "feelings of professionalism" were lower, as was their satisfaction level. Thus, it might be concluded that shattered dreams and expectations were closely related to disappointment and dissatisfaction levels.

YOUR BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT

Time Spent on Trivial Matters	14.2%
Salaries Not Appropriate for Responsibility	12.8%
Economic Realities of Practicing Law	12.7%
Not Enough Time to Do an Adequate Job	12.0%
Lack of Feedback/Evaluation from Superiors	8.0%
Dumb or Incompetent Attorneys	6.6%
Tedious and Routine Work	5.9%

YOUR BIGGEST SATISFACTION

Personal Learning Experience and Growth	16.8%
Helping Other People	12.1%
Freedom to Come and Go As I Please	10.1%
Respect of Others for My Opinions	9.9%
Achieving Excellence	9.0%

One attorney from Long Beach, California, added a 16th category which the Committee had neglected to add as a choice under Your Biggest Disappointment: "Los Angeles Traffic."

A fact that every young lawyer in the practice hears time and again, and that is brought home by senior partners when billings are being discussed, is that "Time is the only thing a lawyer has to sell!" Although lawyers may know this adage, it may be one of the most misunderstood elements of private law practice today. In responses to Disappointments and Pressure/Stress questions, time-related problems were among the top responses: "Too much time spent on trivial matters," "Not enough time to do an adequate job," "Time pressures which cut performance standards." Additionally, it should be noted that the number one response to Your Biggest Surprise was "Pressure/Workload"—another time problem.

If, indeed, disappointment is closely linked to the element of surprise, then time problems may be the largest single factor in the 40 percent dissatisfaction level. Unfortunately, however, time problems may just be an

inherent part of the practice of law.

One nagging question remains—why did 60 percent (a majority) of the respondents indicate that their jobs are satisfying? Of the respondents who indicated that they were satisfied, 28 percent said that they achieved satisfaction in their first year and in their first job. Of those who achieved satisfaction after their first year, however, the largest group (36 percent) indicated that it was in their third year of practice that they reached their expectations of personal satisfaction. When asked if there had been a turning point in their careers, 37.5 percent of the respondents indicated that a feeling of increased competency was responsible. The survey further showed that increases in age, years out of law school and salary level correspondingly increased satisfaction.

"DUMB OR INCOMPETENT ATTORNEYS"

Some inherent problems in our profession, such as time management, can only be alleviated with practice. Other problems, however, should be given immediate attention by the leaders of our profession. One of the

significant responses to the Disappointment question (6.6 percent) was "Dumb or Incompetent Attorneys." Furthermore, the "Incompetence of Older Attorneys" received the second highest response under the Surprise question. This is one problem area that deserves immediate consideration.

Another obvious element of disappointment was the "Lack of Feedback/Evaluation from Superiors," or the "Lack of Supervision," which was also identified as a significant surprise to young lawyers. One attorney addressed the feedback and incompetence problems when he wrote, "If I had to summarize disappointment, the older practitioner is too enraptured with him/herself to give a younger colleague a chance." A Minnesota lawyer wrote, "In my case, it can best be said that lack of supervision and feedback, coupled with office politics, drove me to seek the status of solo practitioner. It means more work, but it also brings more satisfaction."

If the lack of feedback and evaluation is enough to drive one to the status of solo practitioner, and increased competency is the key to a turning point in one's satisfaction with the practice of law, it seems to follow that more attention must be directed to the young practitioner by more experienced lawyers in the organization. One Texas lawyer identified her biggest surprise as "how poorly equipped I was to do anything more than a simple task without help." The 150 young lawyers who responded to the preliminary interviews overwhelmingly agreed that more attention should be placed on both the practical aspects of lawyering (for law students preparing to enter the profession) and the "nurturing" of new lawyers, as they learn the practice, by their superiors in a law firm.

Summarizing his view of the problem, one lawyer from Virginia wrote,

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"This survey operates on the bias that it's a particular job, not the profession, that determines a lawyer's career satisfaction. My own experience, and that of my friends in the law, is that the problem is the law—it is not a happy profession for many who are in it. The job I have right now is as enjoyable as any I can think of in this profession; however, it's the profession itself that undermines personal satisfaction, freedom and professionalism."

This survey should not be considered "scientific" and "random" for several reasons. First, the survey was distributed only to the readers of *BAR-RISTER*, and therefore lawyers who were non-subscribers were omitted. It might also be significant to mention that most of the lawyers who receive the magazine are members of the American Bar Association, so a large number of non-ABA members were also not included in the sample population.

LEADERSHIP MUST PAY HEED

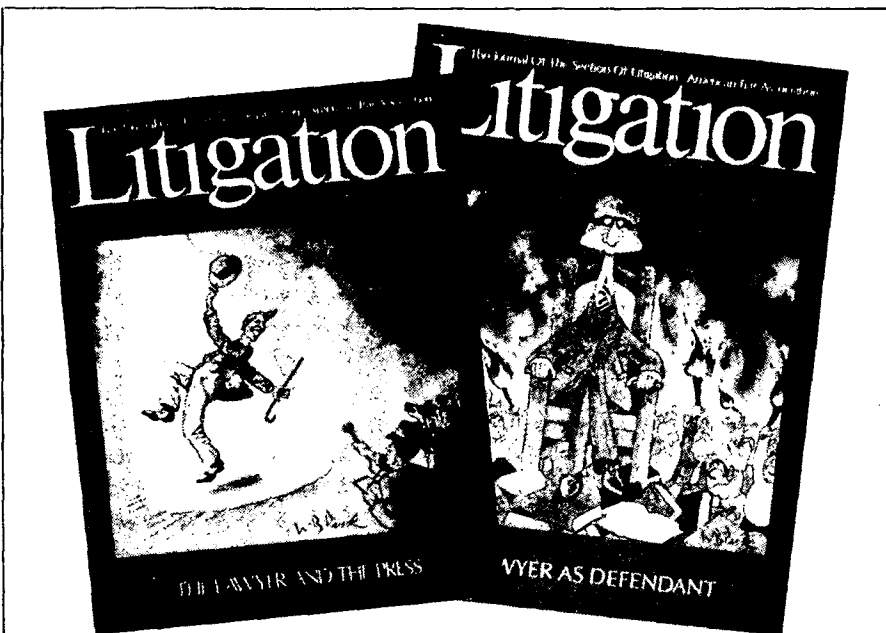
A second variable which should be considered, in light of the survey results, is the method in which the responses were gathered. The 2,750 respondents were readers who were motivated to reply voluntarily, and personal interviews were not conducted. Therefore, the survey results may not reflect the views of the total population of young lawyers in the United States.

The Committee firmly believes that the results of this survey identify a number of areas to which the leadership of the profession (legal educators and individual senior members of the bar, the senior partners in law

firms, the general counsel of legal departments, the administrators of law schools, the directors of legal services programs, and the experienced, knowledgeable solo practitioners) need to direct their attention, but which they have thus far neglected.

Specifically, they must address the questions of competency for all lawyers, as well as effective training and evaluation of new lawyers. They must deal with the problems of time and stress management for these

lawyers. Finally, law schools must provide adequate career education to provide students with realistic expectations of future work in the profession. While the 40 percent dissatisfaction rate may not be a scientifically accurate reflection of the total population of young lawyers, there is enough independent evidence available for the Committee to conclude that job dissatisfaction is a serious problem which deserves greater attention than it has received in the past. **3**



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Members of the Career Planning and Placement Committee who actively participated in the YLD "Law Office Blues" project include: Gary A. Munneke, Delaware Law School; N. Kay Bridger-Riley (Vice Chairperson, ABA/YLD Career Planning and Placement Committee), Tulsa, OK; Jeffrey M. Decile, Columbus, OH; Nancy Dodson, Tulsa, OK; David Erickson, Des Moines, IO; Michael Magness (New York University School of Law), New York, NY; Sharon Meyers (Assistant District Attorney, Essex County), Salem, MA; Wellford Sanders, Richmond, VA; Susan Stedman, Dallas TX; Susan S. Swatek, Tulsa, OK; Jane Theiberger (NYU School of Law), New York, NY; Patrick F. Timmons, Houston, TX; Robert A. Zupkus, Denver, CO.