

Finding Work That Works For You

By Helen Campbell Harder

“Finding the right work can influence your emotions, your physical well-being, your energy levels, indeed your whole way of life...”

As a psychologist who specialises in career consultancy, this quote caught my eye some eight years ago. It continues to resonate as I meet with clients and engage with stories of their lives and work.

Of particular interest has been the increasing volume of younger lawyers who have made their way to my office. It is striking how the threads of their stories echo similar refrains - disillusionment, dissatisfaction and exhaustion. It followed that many were struggling with psychological and physical symptoms of ill health.

Long before visiting with me, they had begun to engage with the idea of identity: “If not a lawyer then who am I? Who do I want to be, and what do I want my life to look like?” It takes resolve to excavate uncertainty and to honestly explore aspects of life supporting nagging dissatisfaction.

Themes appeared of work not sitting comfortably with personal values and principles; for example discovering that their chosen vocation (Law) was not focused on helping people in the way they had imagined. For other practitioners, disrespectful communication and behaviour created toxic working environments, a strong part of the picture related to their unhappiness.

Stories come forward of traditional ways of working that have contributed to compromising health, relationships and confidence. Clients speak of high volumes of work and over-long work days, a regular feature of their week. The prospect of a fifty to sixty hour week would not be uncommon for many lawyers. Accounts of giving up life-generating activities (creative and physical), of having little or no time to catch-up with friends as well as fractious personal relationships. Others want to start a family but find it difficult to imagine how these responsibilities can fit with the demands of their profession. *Once clients begin to acknowledge that they are grappling with realities that may not be able to shift, these realisations become compelling motivations for change.*

Clearly the profession of Law is not the only one where difficult and sometimes unhealthy work practices survive. For many individuals, the requirements of a profession or vocation just don't fit with their qualities, skills and personalities. With sustained effort, my clients begin to see how other careers and options could be more compatible. Regardless of work history, all my clients speak of wanting satisfying work, work that fits with who they are and with their identified priorities.

Most of my clients come through the door saying, “I know what I *don't* want to do, but I don't know what I *do* want to do with my work life”. So the prospect of change often begins with the acceptance of *not knowing*. Changing a career, finding work that works for you, can be a major life transition, one that requires thought, planning and action.

We need to give ourselves permission to question our lives and explore the roots of disappointment. This includes examining the prevailing notions of success and achievement, as well as noticing how our ideas may differ from the work culture with which we are aligned.

The option is not simply: Will I stay or go?, but includes some thoughts around what you want to let go of, and what might be really important to you in life. It's often about finding the courage to execute decisions that will chart the path to better health, to the balance you need and to a sense of fulfilment that drives you.

A law degree is a valuable achievement and a solid foundation from which to survey other possibilities. Taking that first step, having conversations about how life is for you now and how it could be different, are actions that can support your efforts to reclaim the ways you value your life.

Consider some of these activities and ideas.....

- Purchase a binder/book that can accommodate your career research/notes/information/advertisements. You could also carry a small pocket notebook of ideas, recording ideas and thoughts without evaluating them...just yet.
- Review in writing “pros and cons” of leaving your current employment.
- Think about how you can alter the way you work, to leave space for other activities that have a high priority for you.
- Look for strategies to manage your current employer or supervising partner more skilfully. How are you thinking? What are you doing/saying? How are your current habits contributing to your dissatisfaction? How can you shift even one or two of these? Notice what a difference even small changes can make.
- Give yourself permission to leave your work, and become more alert to other career directions of interest. Review the Careers section of the newspaper (local and interstate), cut out and keep a log of interesting advertisements.
- Have conversations with people who cross your path, about the sort of work they do. Really allow yourself to take an interest.
- Browse the internet, large career sites, small professional sites, etc., ...
- Notice your intuition and allow yourself to act on it, even when these actions seem strange or really different for you.
- Look at volunteer possibilities in areas of interest. Even though you might not be ready to commit to these, even researching them is a good beginning.

For more information about Helen Campbell Harder and how her services can facilitate career transition see www.psychcareer.com

