

Practicing Law “On Purpose”

by Amy Kosterlitz



When embarking on a legal career, most attorneys look for a job that fits with their capabilities and interests, and provides favorable working conditions, opportunities for advancement, and good compensation. While these are important factors, many attorneys don't pay as much attention to how their job prospects align with their deeply held values or sense of "purpose." Yet the latest research on career success from McKinsey & Company's "Centered Leadership Project" demonstrates that meaningful work, aligned with one's values and purpose, is critical to high job performance and satisfaction. This research shows that only when we connect with what is deeply meaningful to us are we able to achieve our highest potential and inspire others.

Why is it that lawyers, both newly minted and mid-career, often fail to assess how a prospective job fits with their core values? An obvious answer is that most of us don't expect to find a vocational match for our values and purpose because we believe there are few legal jobs that might fit — especially if our goals are idealistic. Certainly the lack of job options is particularly acute in today's tough economy. However, a less obvious but equally compelling answer is that lawyers overlook the fit of job options with their core values because it's difficult to discern what these are and how to incorporate them into a

legal career. What follows are some suggestions about how to clarify your values and sense of purpose, and how these can inform both a thoughtful job search and a satisfying legal career.

Fortunately, using your values as a guide to planning and management of a legal career rarely involves a stark choice between "black hat" or "white hat" pursuits. There are many ways to infuse a wide range of law jobs with meaning and "purpose" based on how you conceive of your role and act on your values. The key is developing enough self-knowledge to discern your values and then being intentional and courageous about putting them into action. Often, this is not about grand gestures and world-changing results. It's more about "showing up" daily in ways that give voice to your values and making decisions in line with your purpose.

This search for meaning or purpose in a profession is sometimes described as finding one's "calling" or "vocation." Author John Schuster defines a "call" in his book, *Answering Your Call*, as "your higher self sending you a message about what you should be doing." Discerning one's "calling" is not easy and requires self-examination. It is often hard to separate society's imperatives from our own values, and to separate the imperatives of the ego from those of the soul. It can also be scary to look for one's "calling," because living it might demand courage, especially if

your calling diverges from the status quo or conflicts with others' expectations, and when the path forward is unclear.

To figure out what is truly important, you need to look inward and reflect on what gives you the most motivation and satisfaction. This requires looking at which of your experiences have been most fulfilling and what has made them so. Because it's hard in our busy lives to find time and discipline for inner reflection, it can be helpful to work with a coach or mentor who has experience with this discernment process and who can provide guidance and accountability. There are also good books that contain exercises to help identify your values and purpose, such as *Answering Your Call*, and *The Creative Lawyer*, both by Michael Melcher, which focuses on the career dilemmas of attorneys.

Connecting your values and passions to a job, especially if it's not your "dream job," can take creativity and commitment. However, in most law jobs — even those involving difficult conflicts or mundane tasks — people can find opportunities to connect with their purpose by how they approach their role and conduct their activities. Creating a "mission statement" to guide your actions and decisions is a helpful tool for clarifying your values and sticking to your purpose. A mission statement articulates your values and goals and how you will put these to work in your profession.

The following is an example of a mission statement for a litigator:

My mission is to apply my gifts, **good communication skills and creativity**, in service of that which I deeply value,

cooperation between people and building community, by modeling respectful communication and finding creative ways to resolve disputes with a minimum of suffering and expense for all involved.

This sample can be used as a template to create your own mission statement, by placing your own language in the bolded portions.

Another example is a probate attorney who, while dealing with the technicalities and potential discord that can accompany probate matters, sees her "mission" as being a guide and support to families in times of distress.

A mission statement is helpful in figuring out when and how to make adjustments in your work so that you can act more "on purpose." Sometimes even small changes in how you envision and carry out your work can turn a job into a calling. For example, finding ways to be more authentic and open in relationships at work can greatly improve satisfaction and results. Or adding pro bono legal work or other volunteer activities can balance out unpleasant aspects of your paid job. Sometimes it's a matter of "re-framing" and seeing your role in a different light. On other occasions, a larger change is needed — if a job is so out of line with your core values that you are miserable, it could be time to try something new.

The difficult part is evaluating the trade-offs in a particular situation and determining which ones you can live with and which ones you can't. As Melcher points out in his book, every "career, no

matter how wonderful, involves a certain amount of B.S." He describes a process for articulating your values and examining trade-offs so that you can see if there are trade-offs that "violate your bottom line." Melcher also suggests that just because you make compromises doesn't necessarily mean that something is wrong. Compromise is a fact of life and can be a way of getting things right gradually. He notes that unless your job truly violates your "bottom line" values, it helps to be clear about trade-offs and accept them for what they are so that you don't waste energy "fighting reality."

While you may not find the perfect job, with some reflection and intention, you can find meaning and purpose in how you do your job, and this can lead to greater fulfillment. Getting in touch with and acting in accordance with your values takes time, courage, and persistence, but the evidence demonstrates it is well worth the effort. ♦

Amy Kosterlitz is a certified executive coach and an attorney with three decades of experience in law practice, law



firm management, advising businesses, and leading interdisciplinary teams. She coaches lawyers on professional development, leadership, work-life balance, and career/life transitions, and consults with law firms on strategic planning and team-building. She works in Seattle and can be reached at a.kosterlitz@comcast.net.