

# Secrets of Successful Careers for Lawyers: Finding Your Core Purpose & Strengths

By: Dr. Maynard Brusman

**Why are some people promoted to positions that bring out the best in them, while their peers, who are equally talented, get left behind in positions that do not allow them to flourish?** Are there secrets to a rewarding and satisfying career in the corporate or legal world?

**According to Gallup research, only twenty percent of people are working in jobs that provide them the opportunity to excel in what they do best.**

**Since we spend so many of our waking hours working, shouldn't we try to make that time rewarding and fulfilling?** Unfortunately, many of us feel trapped in mediocre careers and place the blame on poor company or law firm leadership and lack of opportunities. In these situations, daily work becomes a grind when we cannot apply our strengths into our work.

**Do we then change jobs or move on to another company or law firm?** Why change seats on board the Titanic? The key to career fulfillment and success lies within you. It is up to you to find out where your passion lies and how you can become successful no matter where you are.

**In spite of having a degree of success at your job, even at the executive level, there may be times when you may experience dissatisfaction or emptiness.** This happens when you come to a mid-career point, a life transition or crisis, or when a promotion or becoming partner does not materialize. You begin to ask yourself if there truly is meaning in the work that you do.

**Earlier in your career life, career choices were probably easier to make as it was clearer which options were advantageous.** At that point in time, you probably plotted your ascent up the corporate or law firm ladder and went after career enhancing goals.

**However, by the time you reach mid-career, the ladder has moved quite a bit.** With flatter organizational structuring and more difficulty becoming partner, it can be challenging to know how to make the right career moves.

## You Are in Charge

**No one manages your career but you and you must rely on yourself as your own guide, even if you are fortunate enough to have a trusted mentor.**

**Most professionals have already moved between a few organizations by the time they reach mid-career points.** This may be due to company or law firm upheavals, downsizing, or mergers and acquisitions. With each change comes reflection on the next strategy required to sustain a long and successful career.

**Complicating anyone's career landscape is the fact that people change jobs and organizations more frequently than in the past.** Executive turnover is at an all-time high. According to an international study conducted on 484 corporations by Drake Beam Morin, a management consultancy firm, 58 percent of large and medium-size companies changed CEOs between the years 1998 and 2001. The median tenure of CEOs is now 2.75 years, down a year from 1999. Only 12 percent of CEOs have held their position for 10 years or longer.

**Low-performing companies have nearly twice the number of turnovers among top-performing employees as high-performing companies, according to the consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide.**

**Career choices are no longer simple, and career paths seem to be varied and unpredictable.** There are many forks in the road, and one wrong turn can mean years of waiting for the next opportunity to come along.

**The fact is that if you are an ambitious executive you are most likely going to move through more jobs within a decade as compared to an executive thirty years ago.**

**The average professional with 35 years of work experience has worked for over six different companies throughout his or her career.** However, those with only ten years of experience have on average been employed in four companies already. This will continue to occur as companies are increasingly rigorous about cost management and efficiency measures.

**There is no safety net.** Your individual career is becoming as complex as the business environment. While companies and law firms are becoming more sophisticated and creative in their quest to attract and retain talent, issues of incentives, compensation and opportunities also become increasingly complex.

**Career success is not achieved easily as it requires investment of time, effort, focus, emotional intelligence and some personal sacrifices.** Those attaining the highest levels of professional success report being more satisfied with their jobs, their lifestyle, their compensation, and the balance in their lives.

### **Three Core Questions**

**The factors that form the core of career success lie in the answers to these three questions:**

1. Who are you, and what are your core values?
2. What is your core purpose?
3. What are you trying to do with your life?

**Those people who experience high levels of success in their careers state that there is an alignment in what they do with who they are.** They somehow manage to attain that magic blend of their purpose in life with what they do in their jobs.

**The power of these questions lies in the *power of purpose*.** The search for one's purpose is important but it is by no means an easy task. Many of us spend our lifetime searching for our true purpose. We all seek meaning in life. Everyone wants to leave footprints. Yet finding and clearly defining what that is can be elusive.

**A mission or purpose is the contribution you make to the world; it is that which gives meaning and direction to your life, as well as your reason for being.** Knowing your purpose gives you a context for making life choices. A vision is a powerful image of what you want to create in the future. It is a compelling and explicit picture of how you will actualize your purpose and talents. Values define what is most important to you. They energize, motivate and inspire. According to Chris Argyris, it is important to recognize the difference between "espoused values" (what you say you believe) and "values-in-action" (how you live your life). True professionals commit themselves to the pursuit of happiness and strict adherence to their highest values (David Maister, True Professionalism). Vision, mission and values need to be aligned.

## **The Power of Purpose & Energy**

**Many experts believe that we can identify our purpose by looking within ourselves.** Regardless of our spiritual or philosophical beliefs, most people agree that when we act in alignment with our strengths, talents and desires, there is a sense of heightened energy and flow. Therefore, when our purpose is aligned with our vocation, we become more driven and motivated in our lives. Work no longer becomes a chore but rather an enjoyment, reflected through our expressions and behavior.

**The key to acting with purpose is to connect the needs of the world, legal profession, or business to our unique talents in the form of a vocation – a calling.** We apply our talents and passion to the tasks that we perform. At this juncture, work becomes a way of actively making a contribution to the world or society.

**Without purpose in our lives or without knowing what that is, work lacks direction and joy for us.** Many of us aspire to be recognized and to be able to contribute.

**Unfortunately for many of us, we only detect this need in ourselves after we experience some level of crisis—an illness, death, divorce or losing our jobs—and only then are we forced to pay attention to finding purpose.**

## **Ambition isn't Sufficient**

**For lawyers to really excel in their work, they need more than just ambition.** Satisfying goals, winning cases, reaching billable hour requirements, receiving rewards and compensation and attaining status is rarely enough. We must be connected to our core values and intrinsic motivators in order to be truly fulfilled. Determining what our internal drives are is not an easy task. Most of the time we require a professional coach or a career coach to assist us in our quest.

**The mid-career phase may also be a time for reassessment with some of the evaluation measures available through human resources or coaching organizations.** Even if assessments have already been administered earlier in a career, it is wise to update your self-knowledge.

## **The Tools for Self-Knowledge**

**Here are a few types of assessment tools which you can use to know yourself and your strengths better:**

- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
- Strong Campbell Interest Inventory
- 16 PF
- FIRO-B
- NEO PI-R (big five personality traits)
- Reiss 16 Basic Psychological Needs
- DISC & PIAV
- Emotional intelligence assessments
- CPI 260
- Multi-rater 360-degree feedback tools

**Although there are many formal ways in which you can discover your strengths, reflections on your past successes are excellent starting points.** Make a list of when you are at your best at work. What activities do you love doing, and what makes you so engrossed that you lose track of time?

**Similarly, you can also identify areas in which you struggle, and therefore discover where your weaknesses lie.** It may be best to delegate or restructure your responsibilities when you encounter areas where you are weak.

**Research shows that emphasizing strengths instead of working on weaknesses is the key to performance improvement.** Not coincidentally, that same key is also useful in sustaining career success and satisfaction.

### **Finding Your Core Strengths**

**Your strengths—whether they are problem solving, intuition, inspiring action, relationship building, altruism or a keen analytical mind—are your natural appetites.** You will find a way to express these strengths no matter what position you are in. Since your strengths and natural talents are reinforced positively whenever you use them, this leads to a powerful and confident feeling.

**Most law professionals gravitate into legal positions where they can use their strengths frequently, so that they can shine naturally.** But what happens when you are recognized for your strengths, and asked to apply these same strengths to a new position? The same strengths may not work as well under new conditions or in different situations. It may be tempting to accept a new job opportunity, even though it is not in your best interests because it does not emphasize your strengths.

**The key to sustaining personal success is by knowing and understanding which legal position and roles will allow you to utilize your assets and which will not.** You have to say “no” to opportunities if you won’t be able to use your natural talents, even when a new position appears to be challenging and offers possibilities for growth and development.

**This requires us not only to recognize and identify our strengths and to seek opportunities to express them, but also to understand our weaknesses and to avoid being involved in roles that are not our forte.** This can be difficult. Nobody likes to turn down a promotion or a challenge. We even relish opportunities to overcome weaknesses in order to prove ourselves capable. But to sustain career success, you must wisely turn down positions that will not bring out the best in you.

**To accept such challenges will only leave you feeling drained and unfulfilled.** Sure, you may be able to stretch yourself, but it is better to focus on your strengths and develop them, rather than fight to overcome a weakness.

### **Stop Doing What You Don’t Like!**

**Career success is more like sculpting and editing, rather than accumulating or building.**

*“Discover what you don’t like doing and stop doing it!” – Marcus Buckingham, *The One Thing You Need to Know* (2005)*

**According to research from The Gallup Organization and Marcus Buckingham, it does not make sense to stretch yourself with new and challenging assignments, or even to balance your life, if it involves doing things that you don't have an affinity for.** Buckingham contends that you will not feel energized when you focus on your flaws.

**Some legal professionals will protest and defend the common belief that you don't have to like the law—you just have to be good at it.** Others will insist that you can't choose your work, and you certainly can't avoid the things that are difficult; you must take the grit with the good.

**Attorneys who are already successful are where they are because they have had the courage to choose their work wisely.** They are unwilling to tolerate aspects of their job which do not allow them to flourish, and they also seek ways to delegate or avoid certain tasks.

**Of course, you must pitch in and work to support colleagues in some aspects that are not ideal for you.** The point is simply that you will contribute the most as an individual performer or as a team member when your role closely matches your strengths. It is your responsibility to try to arrange your work world so that it does.

**The longer you put up with aspects of your work that don't play to your strengths, that are not aligned with your core values and purpose, the less successful you will be.**

**When you focus on your best talents and what you love to do, you will achieve more.** You will experience sustained career success. You will find that your career path is exactly where it should be, on purpose, and aligned with who you are.

## **CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

**In the increasingly demanding world lawyers face; many lawyers desire to achieve professional success, a fulfilling life, and true happiness.**

**However, achieving both their personal and professional goals sometimes proves to be very difficult.** Many lawyers report being unhappy with the choices they have made and desire a different future.

**Most lawyers live hectic and stress-filled lives.** They experience a great deal of pressure from the billable hour requirement and client/firm demands. Finding a balance between work and life without sacrificing professional success, deciding on the best practice area or work setting, and making possible career transitions can be challenging tasks, even for the most talented and accomplished lawyer.

**Are you clear about what you want out of your legal career?** Are you fully engaged in your work and love the practice of law or are you looking for an alternative?

**There are a lot of things you can do with a legal degree.** What are your talents, skill, and interests? If you are considering leaving the law you need to have an accurate diagnosis of the problem. Is it the practice of law, your area of specialty, your job, the firm you are with, financial pressures, the number of clients, or lack of work/life balance? Career coaching may help you find the best fit between your talents, skills, interests and values. Personality assessment tests and career interest inventories can help you learn about yourself and determine work where you will be happy and fulfilled.

**A number of lawyers choose to develop their own practice or seek alternative careers.** Lawyers frequently find marketing their practice or creating a career that is more aligned with their values and evolving interests a significant challenge.

## **MARKETING AND PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT**

**The difference between successful lawyers and firms and those that are struggling may be due to business development skills.** Successful legal enterprises have developed the competencies of rainmaking, marketing and client development.

**The business side of being a lawyer can be exciting and fun. A well run successful practice and/or firm can provide a great deal of happiness and professional satisfaction.** The following are a few tips to help you focus your efforts.

1. Create a compelling purpose, vision, and goals.
2. Craft an attention-getting marketing message.
3. Develop a dynamic website.
4. Get consistent visibility for yourself and firm.
5. Do keep-in touch marketing that shows you care.
6. Determine your ideal clients
7. Change your mindset and overcome disempowering beliefs about practice development.

**You have worked hard to get where you are -- you serve others, both personally and professionally.** You've earned the right to both career success and a happy and meaningful personal life.

## Resources

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Working Resources Self-Assessment Quizzes

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VIA Strengths Survey

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\* ID code available when Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D.O. (2001) *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. New York, NY: The Free Press is purchased

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