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Engaging Work, Working While Engaged



By [Rachel Van Cleave](#), *Law.com Contributor*

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Several recent items have led me to reflect on the meaning of work. Law students often ask my advice about their careers, and I typically ask them what they enjoy. “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day” is one of my favorite quotes. Therefore, Gordon Marino’s piece in the New York Times, Sunday Review, *A Life Beyond ‘Do What You Love’* (May 18, 2014), gave me pause. Marino questions whether the advice of do what you love is really sound advice, as well as whether it is advice only for the elite who might have the luxury of following their passion. I certainly love my current job, and I have always loved the different jobs I have held. What should I tell these law students and recent graduates, especially when the legal profession is undergoing tremendous transformations and remains a challenging job market?

Another recent opinion piece, by Aaron Hurst, *Being ‘Good’ Isn’t the Only Way to Go* (April 20, 2014), reports that a huge number of people are looking for volunteer work – far more than what the nonprofit sector can absorb. The conclusion of Hurst’s piece is that people seek volunteer work because they do not find meaning in their regular jobs. This seems quite a paradox – we tend to counsel people to strive for employment that allows them to do what they love, but the job satisfaction among workers is so low that many take on volunteer work to find meaning and a sense of purpose. How to address this conundrum?

Maybe it’s the workplace itself. As Tony Schwartz and Christine Porath point out in their New York Times piece, *Why You Hate Work* (June 1, 2014), employers have an important role to play in creating a workplace that values the ways in which employees engage best. These jobs lead to greater productivity and less turnover. But I think it is more than that — the mindset with which we approach our work, in combination with the workplace environment will create employees who are engaged and satisfied.

I had my first job at the age of thirteen – summer camp helper. I am sure that I did not consider whether I enjoyed entertaining a bunch of children; but I remember that I enjoyed getting a paycheck! Through high school and college, I had a variety of jobs from food service, to office work, to store security. Upon reflection, each job was a means to an end — I needed the money. Nonetheless, I certainly took pride in my work and always felt a sense of accomplishment when a supervisor gave me a glowing review or I received a raise in pay.

Perhaps not every job is fulfilling in and of itself. Perhaps, as Marino discusses, the noble purpose of providing for one’s family or otherwise putting aside one’s passion to serve others, is what makes a job fulfilling. Maybe it is all in one’s approach, or, as Hurst explains, about taking personal responsibility for creating meaning and

fulfillment in one's job. We must find meaning in *how* we engage in work – in a way that furthers personal growth, or that results in satisfying teamwork.

In my first year of law school, I decided I wanted to be a law professor. My first teaching job was as an instructor of legal research and writing – not my first choice! Yet, I love legal research and writing, I was able to work with tenured law faculty members and learn from them, and I loved working with law students. I decided to approach this work as an opportunity to learn more about the career I ultimately wanted. In some ways, this was similar to a clinic or externship experience a law student might have in law school. I was engaged in real work with real students, but I was also in a position to be able to observe academia as more of an outsider. Much the same way law students often engage in work on real cases and with real clients while also being able to observe licensed lawyers. This window on a profession allows space for reflection on what kind of law professor, or lawyer, one wants to be. What kind of reputation do I want? When a law student observes first hand those who are already part of a profession she seeks to join, it allows her to consider how actions speak to and define reputation, and therefore character. This is just one example of how to approach a job with a mindset that can make the work satisfying and contribute to personal and professional growth.

When law students and recent graduates talk to me about what they want to do with their law careers, I encourage them to keep an open mind, to try to find meaning in whatever type of legal work they do, or at least to learn all that they can from it – even if what they learn is that they really do not enjoy it. I encourage these students to consider the opportunity the employment presents for them. Perhaps it is a chance to stretch ones' skills or expand substantive knowledge. In short, I suggest that they approach their work with an engaging and engaged mindset; a mindset that looks for meaning.

The Marino and Hurst pieces and my own experience remind me of the parable of the farmer and the two travelers. The first traveler asks the farmer what sort of people live in the next town. The farmer responds, "What sort of people are in the town you come from?" The first traveler describes the people of his town as troublemakers, lazy and scoundrels. The farmer says, "You will find the same sort in that town." A second traveler comes along and asks the same farmer the same question. The farmer again responds with "What sort of people live in town you come from?" The second traveler describes them as hardworking, honest and friendly. The farmer says, "You will find the same sort in that town."

Certainly, the work environment plays a role in satisfaction and fulfillment, but meaningful and engaging work does not simply fall from the sky. In the abstract, a job is neither full of purpose nor intrinsically loveable. Rather, whether one's job is fulfilling, whether one loves his or her job depends in large part on the mindset, attitude and approach one brings to it.

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