




The pursuit of happiness in the law




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A panel of legal experts have explored how to define success in the legal profession, and how lawyers can assess whether they are ready for a career change.

Speaking at the International Bar Association (IBA) conference in Sydney earlier this month, six experienced lawyers have explored the way a successful career is defined in the legal profession.

One of the key themes of the discussion is that success is about more than just money.

Shelley Dunstone, the principal of career consultancy Legal Circles, said she defines success using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In this psychological theory, self-actualisation is the most advanced of human needs.

"I view success in terms of Maslow's concept of self-actualisation," Ms Dunstone said.

"Self-actualisation is about achieving your potential, becoming what you want to be, making something of yourself.

"I encourage people to aspire to something, and sometimes when I ask lawyers: 'What are your aspirations? What do you aspire to in your practice and in your career?', sometimes they really give me a funny look because their practice is all about meeting other people's expectations.

"They actually don't have any aspirations of their own in their lives, and I think aspiration is a necessary ingredient for happiness and success."

The panel also highlighted the importance of self-awareness, to help lawyers understand when it's time to make changes in their careers. While some may choose to leave the law altogether, others alter the way they practise to improve their [wellbeing](https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/biglaw/21990-worried-about-wellness) (<https://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/biglaw/21990-worried-about-wellness>).

Panel chair Robert Bata, vice-chair of the senior lawyers committee of the IBA, said adaptability is a valuable trait in the profession.

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“One of the words that we hear an awful lot of is disruption: disruptive technologies, disruptive business models and so forth, but the reality is that we also have to disrupt ourselves,” he said.

“I think that, when we talk about what’s the key to success or what’s the key to happiness by being successful, it’s the extent to which you are able to rethink who you are and what you want to be, and not fit yourself, necessarily, into a mould.”

However, lawyers may not always find it easy to make career changes. Ronda Muir, principal of consultancy Law People Management and author of *Beyond Smart: Lawyering with Emotional Intelligence*, said lawyers often struggle to recognise emotional cues telling them it may be time for a change.

“I think a lot of success is being in touch with your own emotional constitution, being able to recognise and understand what your emotions are telling you,” Ms Muir said.

“I’m a big fan of emotional intelligence and it’s something that lawyer’s tend not to have high scores in, so I think being in touch with your emotions is something very important to lead you to success.”

Ms Muir listed some emotional signs for lawyers to watch out for.

“So because we’re maybe not so good at understanding what we’re feeling about our careers, here are some things to look for, opportunities for change,” she said.

“One of them is physical signs, [for example] low energy. You feel low in energy, it might be telling you something about your emotional state. Frequent illness, [being] slow to heal, eating disorders and addictions. These are all things that could be telling you how you feel about your current situation.

“Mental signs: reduced focus, slower processing time, no ‘flow’. Flow is a psychological term where you are so engrossed and enjoy so much what you’re doing that you don’t even look up. Time can go by so fast. So hopefully there [are] times in your career that you have that sense of flow.

“Emotional signs: do you feel disengaged? You don’t feel that close to the mission or the people or the objectives or the organisation that you’re with? Do you feel low or depressed?

“Negative self-talk: are you telling yourself negative things? ‘I’m not very good, this is not very fun, I don’t like what I’m doing.’ Negative self-talk comes from a place of unhappiness, so that might be sign to tell you that ‘You know, maybe I need to make a change’.

“Limited joy: come home late, tired. Get up, tired. Not that much joy in what you’re doing. So if any of these are signs you feel, maybe that’s one of your opportunities for making a change.”

Panel members

Robert Bata, founder and principal, WarwickPlace Legal, LLC

Shelley Dunstone, principal, Legal Circles

Irina Paliashvili, managing partner, RULG-Ukrainian Legal Group

Ronda Muir, principal, Law People Management, LLC

Douglas Raftesath, principal, Meridian Lawyers

Nilam Sharma, managing director, Nilam Sharma Ltd

Pictured top L-R: Nilam Sharma, Douglas Raftesath, Irina Paliashvili, Ronda Muir, Shelley Dunstone, Robert Bata

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