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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

LAWYER WELL-BEING

Well-being is generally defined as the state of being healthy and happy. In February 2015, the results of a recent study of lawyer well-being, conducted by pioneering researchers of the legal profession Lawrence Krieger and Kennon Sheldon, were published in their book entitled *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*¹. The study included the survey responses of 6,226 lawyers and judges from four different state bar associations.

The study explored the correlation between values, motivation, support for autonomy at work, and well-being. In addition, the study asked about law school experiences, current working circumstances (area of practice, hours worked, billable hours, and so on), personal life choices, and demographic information.

The study was guided by a well-researched psychological model contending that a state of subjective well-being for humans is produced by the satisfaction of the following three psychological needs: to feel competent/effective, authentic/autonomous, and related/connected to others. Subjective well-being was quantified by combining life satisfaction (evaluation of work, home life, relationships, financial status, and leisure opportunities) with feeling good and subtracting feeling bad.

The researchers then analyzed how these factors correlated with subjective well-being, with “1” being the highest level of correlation possible, and “0” indicating no correlation at all.

The following factors were found to have the strongest correlations with the lawyer participant’s reported subjective well-being:

- Autonomy, or being authentic and having a sense of control over one’s choices (0.66)
- Relatedness to others (0.65)
- Feeling competent in performing one’s job (0.63)
- Internal motivation at work (0.55) – that is, finding the work itself meaningful, enjoyable, and so on, rather than being motivated by external factors, such as pressure from others or needing to impress others
- Autonomy support at work (0.46)
- Intrinsic values (0.30) – these may include personal growth, helping others, and so on, in contrast to such extrinsic values as power, affluence, and others

The factors that had the lowest correlations to lawyer participants’ reported subjective well-being included:

- Income (0.19)
- School debt (0.19)
- Class rank in law school (0.12)
- Law review membership (0.00)²

Other findings:

The researchers categorized the study participants into four practice categories:

- Judges
- Lawyers in elite/highly prestigious positions (large firms, practicing in high-

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earning areas such as corporate, commercial transactions, securities, tax, or estate planning.)

- Lawyers in public service-oriented positions (prosecutors, public defenders, government, and non-profit lawyers, etc.)

- Lawyers in other typically non-high-earning law practices (general practice, family law, bankruptcy, private criminal defense, etc.)

Judges reported the greatest well-being on all measures: the highest satisfaction of all three psychological needs and internal motivation. The lawyers in the public service group reported greater well-being than the elite/prestige lawyers despite substantially lower earnings and greater well-being than the lawyers in the “other” law practice category.

Other findings:

- The external factors emphasized in law school and by many legal employers (grades, law school ranking, and law journal participation) were not related to lawyer subjective well-being to any significant degree.

- High income and prestige had quite limited relationship to lawyer subjective well-being.

- Regarding personal lifestyle choices, lawyers and judges who engaged in exercise regularly and took vacation days more regularly reported greater well-being. The correlation between exercising and taking vacation days and subjective well-being equaled or exceeded the correlation between increasing income, decreasing student debt, higher grades in law school, law review participation, or law school ranking and subjective well-being.

- The practice factor that had the strongest negative correlation/relationship to well-being was required billable hours. As required billable hours go up, income goes up and well-being goes down.

- Lawyers who were married or in a similar long-term, committed relationship reported the greatest well-being and the fewest depressive symptoms compared to those not dating or in a serious relationship.

This study confirmed that lawyers are not different from the general population regarding what they need to feel satisfied with their life and to maintain a feeling of well-being. To thrive, they need to have the same

authenticity, autonomy, close relationships, and focus on self-understanding and personal growth that promote thriving in non-lawyers.

The science of well-being, which studies the conditions and processes that promote thriving and optimal performance, is the purview of positive psychology. Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology, articulates the latest conceptual model of well-being in his most recent book, *Flourish*. Based upon the research to date, Seligman states that there are five essential elements of well-being:

- Positive emotion: how happy you are at a specific point in time; positive feelings

- Engagement: an absorbing activity that one can become completely lost in; a state of flow

- Positive relations: social connection; the capacity to love and be loved

- Meaning: believing in, belonging to, or serving something greater than oneself

- Accomplishment: the pursuit of accomplishment/mastery for its own sake

The findings of Krieger and Sheldon’s study of lawyer well-being are clearly in line with Seligman’s model of well-being.

The OAAP is offering Resilience-Building Workshops to help lawyers expand their capacity to deal effectively with stress; thrive in the face of change, adversity, and set-backs; and develop practices that promote well-being. For more information about these workshops, please contact Attorney Counselor Mike Long at 503-226-1057, ext. 11, or at mikel@oaap.org.

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References

¹Lawrence S. Krieger and Kennon M. Sheldon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy?: A Data-Driven Prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 *George Washington Law Review* 554, 2015

²*What Makes Lawyers Happy?* *Wisconsin Lawyer*, Volume 87, Number 7, July 2014