

## Career Talk: Yes, You Can Enjoy Your Life as a Lawyer An Interview with Tim Batdorf

By Melissa Dewey Brumback

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Have you ever wondered whether you can actually enjoy—really, truly enjoy—your job? Are you afraid that, because you are a certain type of lawyer now, you are doomed to always be that same type of lawyer? Do you want to start your career over again, but are not sure how? The answers to these common questions and more can be found in *The Lawyer's Guide to Being Human* by Timothy D. Batdorf, a solo lawyer and career counselor from Michigan. In addition to his legal career, Tim now advises others on how to find their true passion in the law.

Tim, who went through several legal career changes himself, recently explained how young lawyers can take stock of their careers, find their true calling, and even re-invent themselves as lawyers.

### Describe your book in one sentence.

Practice law and remain true to yourself.

### Why did you decide to write a book on this topic?

Too many lawyers are miserable. Statistics bear it out. I started thinking about all of the ripples created in the world by one miserable lawyer—the effect on the lawyer, the lawyer's family, the lawyer's colleagues, the clients, the clients' families, opposing counsel, the opposing party, the legal community and so forth. Then, I thought about how many of us are miserable. According to statistics, as a profession, we have high addiction and anxiety rates and the highest incidence of clinical depression. Certainly no one ever enters the legal profession thinking they will suffer from anxiety, depression, or addiction.

I thought about the fact that lawyers are one of the most powerful and influential constituent groups in the country. Lawyers are everywhere. We make the rules and interpret the rules. Unfortunately, we also advise our clients to do some really awful things. In my past, I've given "legal advice" and offered a "quick fix" when, quite frankly, I should have offered more perspective and wisdom. Imagine if more of us examined our lives and followed a path that was true to our personal values instead of working out of a deep sense of fear and desperation. How might the world be different?

These were the types of thoughts that inspired me to write my book.

Most of *The Affiliate's* readers are leaders in their local young lawyer organizations. What top piece of advice would you give to them to help them "become human"?

As human beings, we seek meaning. If you want more meaning in your career, ask yourself the right questions. "How do I work harder to please my boss?" is not one of those questions.

### If you had to print your life philosophy on a bumper sticker, what would it be?

Lesson #1: Life is about learning. Lesson #2: Never forget lesson #1.

### What was your first job out of law school? What did you learn from it about yourself?

As a middle of the road law student, I had a difficult time finding a job out of law school. So, when the offer came in, I took a job as an insurance defense litigator for a law firm, even though a part of me knew it was not a good fit. From my perspective, the entire litigation process seemed extremely odd and antiquated. As a result, I was probably the worst insurance defense litigator in the world.

In retrospect, the job did push me into finding another area of law I could relate to and helped motivate me to seek my LL.M. More than anything, that job taught me that work doesn't have to be miserable. I needed to trust my intuition and find a career path that I truly enjoyed.

I also realized that if I don't enjoy what I do, I won't care about what I do. If I don't care about what I do, I'll be fired, commit malpractice, and/or become highly depressed.

### Tell me about your other legal jobs—why did you change jobs? What were you looking for?

After getting my LL.M., many doors opened for me. After interviewing with over a dozen different firms, I eventually settled on one that I thought was the perfect fit—good hours, major clients, solid mentoring, nice salary. But, over time, I noticed that I began feeling overstressed, anxious, and guilty. I never thought I could do enough in my job. I didn't have any personal sense of purpose or meaning to what I was doing. Essentially, I felt like I was on a treadmill that was going nowhere, and it seemed to be moving faster and faster.

Eventually, the promises of money, status, and prestige were not worth my life.

### You started your own practice—why? Was it terrifying?

More than anything, I wanted a personal sense of purpose in what I was doing and the freedom to achieve it my way. And, yes, it was absolutely terrifying starting my own practice. As a lawyer, my mind went to the worst possible scenario. (I imagined myself eating out of

garbage cans within six months.) I eventually found the courage to fly solo because my misery exceeded my fear. I was so miserable in my job that I was ready to move through my fears.

**If you were advising someone considering going out on their own today, what would you advise them to do first? What else should they do?**

Simplify, simplify, simplify. Next, put enough money into your bank account to survive for six to nine months. Rest assured: you will make business and marketing mistakes. Having a simple lifestyle and money in your bank account will be a huge relief. After that, hire a career coach who can help you move forward, preferably a coach who has accomplished what you want to accomplish.

As attorneys, it's easy to believe that we can learn everything from books. Unfortunately, many lessons must be experienced, and reading alone will not do the trick. Working with a quality coach to address specific issues—as they arise—is the best way to accelerate your learning curve. Why muddle through the next ten years of your career before you actually start doing what you are meant to do?

**What can a lawyer do if he is unhappy, but doesn't want to hang out his own shingle?**

First of all, young lawyers need to know that many opportunities are available for law school graduates. I've read that law school graduates have obtained over 700 different types of jobs. Perhaps most significantly, new and emerging ways to practice law are developing such as collaborative law in which lawyers are trained to work together to resolve conflict. Facilitative mediation is making great strides and offers opportunities for those who want to resolve conflict more peacefully. If a lawyer opts for private law practice, there are dozens of substantive areas in which to practice. There are a number of different settings in which to practice as well (e.g., law firms, government, corporate, public interest, and so on). As lawyers, we have virtually unlimited possibilities in what we do. Knowing what's meaningful and actively creating opportunities are all that's truly required.

**How can a young lawyer decide whether to make changes in his current job or to look for a new job instead?**

That's one of the most difficult questions to answer. So many questions come to my mind in response. Do you enjoy your substantive area of law? Are you unhappy because of your office environment? Are you satisfied with your hourly requirements? Is your boss a good legal mentor? Do you enjoy working with your clients? Do you have a sense of meaning in your job? Do you have fun? Does your family support what you do? Do you honor your values in your job? Do you have a life outside of the office? The list goes on.

My recommendations would vary depending on how a lawyer answers those types of questions. For example, if a lawyer has a personality conflict with his or her boss, it may be as simple as learning new communication techniques that can be acquired with a bit of coaching. On the other hand, if a lawyer lacks a sense of meaning in his or her job (and assuming meaning is important to that lawyer), then looking for another type of job may be the best alternative. As outlandish as it may seem, if you are not completely overjoyed going into your office, you would certainly benefit from asking yourself the types of questions I've raised. In other words, it's possible to love being a lawyer.

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*The Lawyer's Guide to Being Human* was featured in the June 2007 *ABA Journal* and is available online at [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com).