



# A Full Life

Five ways to foster meaningful work and boost lawyer well-being.

BY ANNE M. BRAFFORD

The cliché that, on our deathbeds, we'll never wish we had worked more implies that work is inevitably a soulless, meaningless transaction for pay. That's not what most of us were looking for when we applied to law school. But, for too many lawyers, it's an accurate depiction of what their work has become. The result is that too many end up feeling trapped, cynical, and burned out—and lawyers, clients, and the profession suffer. One way to avoid such deathbed regrets is to make work more meaningful. Report after report about millennial lawyers say that's what they want. And don't we all agree?

The importance of creating meaningfulness in our lives can hardly be overstated. It is profoundly vital to our health and happiness, and, for many people, it is the ultimate goal of our work and non-work lives.<sup>1</sup> The good news is that social scientists have devised many evidence-based strategies to enhance our own work-related meaningfulness and that of our colleagues and staff members. Below, after an explanation of why meaningfulness should play a central role in lawyer well-being initiatives, are five strategies that you can start using right away to boost meaningfulness and well-being.

## Meaningful Work, Well-Being, and Work Engagement

“Work” is among the most common responses to surveys asking what gives life meaning,<sup>2</sup> and most people identify having important and meaningful work as the single most valued feature of their employment.<sup>3</sup> But this source of well-

being too often has been overlooked in a profession that narrowly favors rationality and logic.<sup>4</sup> This blind spot may help explain why many lawyers experience a “profound ambivalence about their work”<sup>5</sup> and are not fully thriving.<sup>6</sup>

Meaningful work has been defined as a sense that one's work has significance, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good.<sup>7</sup> Work has “significance” when we judge it as being worthwhile and important within our own value system.<sup>8</sup> When work is meaningful, people feel motivated to fully invest themselves, as is reflected in the many positive outcomes of meaningful work—including work engagement as well as higher job performance, job satisfaction, and lower anxiety and depression.<sup>9</sup> Work engagement is a form of workplace thriving in which people feel energetic, resilient, a sense of meaning and purpose, and optimally challenged.<sup>10</sup> High engagement contributes to, for example, better mental health, job satisfaction, and performance, as well as reduced stress, burnout, and turnover.<sup>11</sup> According to multiple studies, the biggest driver of work engagement is the experience of meaningful work.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, dwindling meaningfulness is highly damaging—and is a primary cause and effect of burnout.<sup>13</sup> Burnout is a debilitating response to chronic stress that can have serious psychological and physiological effects that can negatively impact work performance. For example, burnout and related conditions undermine the capacity for emotion regulation, impulse control, and deliberative decision-making.

Notably, it is meaningfulness and not generic workplace stress that drives burnout. One scholar has argued “the root cause of burnout lies in people’s need to believe that their lives are meaningful, that the things they do are useful and important.”<sup>14</sup> People with high initial expectations for deriving significance from their work gradually can become overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness as they come to view their work as ultimately futile or not enough to live up to those early ideals. Generally, if people are able to recover a sense of significance in their work, the problem of burnout can be resolved. Accordingly, having a sense that one’s work is meaningful is a key factor for stimulating engagement and avoiding burnout.

### **Making Work Meaningful**

Although social science researchers have identified many meaning-making strategies, there is no one-size-fits-all formula. As noted above, whether we deem our work “significant” is tied to our own values. The best approach will be to try out any of the five science-backed strategies below that interest you to see what works best for you.

**Strategy No. 1: Prioritize Positivity.** People who plan their days to foster naturally occurring positive emotions more frequently experience them and have higher well-being—a positive mental habit called “prioritizing positivity.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, a high frequency of positive emotions is strongly associated with feelings of meaningfulness, engagement, and physical and psychological well-being.<sup>16</sup> Not all positivity-boosting activities are created equal, though. The most effective will be those that allow us to achieve something that provides a sense of accomplishment, develop feelings of mastery, help others, express personal values, or tackle just the right amount of challenge.<sup>17</sup>

**Strategy No. 2: Experiment With Job Crafting.** To create true meaning, people first must get to know who they really are, including their values and priorities, and then act in accordance with that knowledge.<sup>18</sup> Self-congruence is a key condition for feeling a sense of meaningfulness.<sup>19</sup> For work, this means that the tighter the “fit” between ourselves and our jobs, the greater the sense of meaningfulness. The more that our work aligns with who we are—including our interests, skills, abilities, strengths, and values—the happier we’ll be.<sup>20</sup>

Through a technique called job crafting, lawyers can seek to enhance meaningfulness by proactively shaping their sense of fit with their work.<sup>21</sup> Job tasks, relationships, and our own thoughts and feelings all can be targets of job crafting. In what’s called *cognitive crafting*, for example, we train our attention on our work’s benefits—including the benefits that flow even from the undesirable parts. For example, a hospital custodian might frame his or her job not as simply mopping floors but as creating a healing environment for patients. In *relationship crafting*, we seek out people who energize us and cut back on contact with those who deplete us. *Task crafting* includes seeking out tasks that interest us and possibly delegate or trade work tasks that we like less. Through job crafting, we can amplify the experience of meaningfulness of our work without having to change jobs or employers.

**Strategy No. 3: Value High-Quality Relationships.** Close interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging are major contributors to a sense of meaningfulness at work.<sup>22</sup> An important way relationships affect a sense of meaningfulness is by making people feel that they *matter*.<sup>23</sup> People feel that they matter when others pay attention to them, support and care for them, appreciate them, and also seek their contribution. Feeling valued and valuable is at the very heart of work engagement.<sup>24</sup> The opposite of mattering is feeling marginalized—that one does not fit in, is not significant, and is not needed. Colleagues can support each other’s sense that they matter and that their work matters through activities, communications, and cues that reinforce that their work is valued by society and influences people’s lives, that individual lawyer’s ideas and suggestions are valued, and that their contribution is desired and appreciated.

**Strategy No. 4: Strive for Continuous Learning.** We all have an inborn desire to seek opportunities to exercise and express our capacities and to seek optimal challenges that stretch our abilities without overmatching them.<sup>25</sup> Personal development efforts, coaching, feedback, and goal-setting all can play a role in achieving a sense of personal enrichment that contributes to a sense of meaningfulness.<sup>26</sup> Feeling that we are continuously learning, growing, increasing our level of mastery, and enhancing our capacity to respond effectively to challenges provides a strong source of meaning in work.<sup>27</sup> In fact, people who are committed to continuous learning are more likely to feel that their work is meaningful. But when work feels boring, repetitive, and unchallenging, meaningfulness can nosedive. To avoid this, try continually setting challenging developmental goals and tracking progress.

**Strategy No. 5: Appreciate Your Positive Impact.** Most of us have a strong desire for our work to make a positive difference in others’ lives.<sup>28</sup> In fact, feeling that we are directly helping others or are contributing to the greater good has been found to be the biggest contributor to meaningfulness.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the perceived absence of a positive impact raises the risk of burnout and undercuts job satisfaction.<sup>30</sup>

One strategy for reminding ourselves that our work positively contributes to others and the greater good is to regularly orchestrate ways to come face-to-face with people who communicate with us about the positive impact of our work. Research shows that doing so gives a powerful boost to engagement and meaningfulness. For example, in one study, a college scholarship recipient met with callers who solicited alumni donations. For only five minutes, the recipient talked about how the scholarship had made a difference in his life. One month after the visit, the callers showed average increases of 142 percent weekly time spent on the telephone and 171 percent in scholarship funds raised.<sup>31</sup>

Business organizations have sought to take advantage of the positive consequences of such research in a variety of ways. For example, Medtronic has an annual custom of inviting patients to its holiday party to share stories about how the company’s technology has helped them. At Wells Fargo, managers show bankers videos of people describing how low-interest loans rescued them from severe debt. Olive Garden

shares letters from customers describing meaningful events celebrated at the company's restaurants.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, law firms might find innovative ways to allow clients to share stories of how lawyers have made a positive difference in their lives.

## Conclusion

Promoting well-being is an imperative for the legal profession. Lawyers owe a responsibility not only to themselves to craft happy, satisfying lives but also to protect their professional competency and be their best at work. As the above reflects, multiple meaning-making strategies are available for lawyers to do so. Perhaps the current cliché that, on their deathbeds, people will never wish that they had worked more eventually will give way to physicist Stephen Hawking's perspective that, "Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it." **TBJ**

## Notes

1. Stephen E. Humphrey et al., *Integrating Motivational, Social, and Contextual Work Design Features: A Meta-Analytic Summary and Theoretical Extension of the Work Design Literature*, 92 J. App. Psychol. 1332, 1332-1356 (2007).
2. Blake A. Allan et al., *Meaning in Life and Work: A Developmental Perspective*, 10 J. Posit. Psychol. 323, 323-331 (2015).
3. Catherine Bailey et al., *The Mismanaged Soul: Existential Labor and the Erosion of Meaningful Work*, 27 Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev. 416, 416-430 (2017).
4. Pat M. Sullivan, *Spirit of the Law: How Lawyers, Judges, Law Professors, and Legal Staff Bring Spirit to Work*, in *Handbook of Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace:*

## WELLNESS AND WELL-BEING RESOURCES

*A short list of helpful links to keep bookmarked.*

Mental health and substance use disorder resources for lawyers across the nation

[https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer\\_assistance.html](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance.html)

Comprehensive mental health and substance use disorder treatment resources for every community in the United States

<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Suicide awareness and prevention resource for the legal world

<http://www.daveneefoundation.org/>

Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program mental health and substance use resources

<https://www.tlaphelps.org/>

The 2017 Report of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being

<https://texasbar.com/well-beingreport>

A leading mental health and wellness blog for lawyers

<https://abovethelaw.com/health-wellness/>

A popular lawyer site for lawyers struggling with depression

<http://www.lawyerswithdepression.com/>

## TEXAS LAWYERS' ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

*By the Numbers from June 1, 2017, to May 31, 2018*

- 717 callers were assisted
- 115 presentations were made to 11,462 members
- 4 volunteer trainings were held for 913 volunteers
- \$147,380 in grants were distributed through the Sheeran-Crowley Trust

- Emerging Research and Practice 315, 330 (Judi Neal ed., 2013).
5. David L. Chambers, *Overstating the Satisfaction of Lawyers*, 21 Law & Soc. Inquiry 1, 1 (2013).
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  7. Blake A. Allan et al., *Meaning in Life and Work: A Developmental Perspective*, 10 J. Posit. Psychol. 323, 323-331 (2015).
  8. Douglas R. May et al., *The Psychological Conditions of Meaningfulness, Safety and Availability and the Engagement of the Human Spirit at Work*, 77 J. Occup. & Org. Psychol. 11, 11-37 (2004).
  9. Jing Hu & Jacob Hirsh, *The Benefits of Meaningful Work: A Meta-Analysis*, Acad. Manag. Proc. (2017).
  10. Wilmar Schaufeli, *What is Engagement?* in *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice* (C. Truss, K. Alfes, R. Delbridge, A. Shantz, & E. Soane eds., 2013).
  11. Catherine Bailey et al., *The Meaning, Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee Engagement: A Narrative Synthesis*, 19 Int. J. Manag. Rev. 31, 31-53 (2017).
  12. Anne M. Brafford, *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing Profitable Firms Through the Science of Engagement 14* (American Bar Association 2017).
  13. Christina Maslach et al., *Job Burnout*, 52 Annu. Rev. Psychol. 397, 397-422 (2001); Ayala M. Pines & Oreniya Yafe-Yanai, *Unconscious Determinants of Career Choice and Burnout: Theoretical Model of Counseling Strategy*, 38 J. Empl. Counseling 170, 170-184 (2001).
  14. Ayala M. Pines & Giora Keinan, *Stress and Burnout: The Significant Difference*, 39 Person. & Indiv. Diff. 625, 626. (2005).
  15. Jesus Alfonso D. Datu & Ronnel B. King, *Prioritizing Positivity Optimizes Positive Emotions and Life Satisfaction: A Three-Wave Longitudinal Study*, 96 Person. Indiv. Diff. 111, 111-114 (2016).
  16. Anne M. Brafford, *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing Profitable Firms Through the Science of Engagement 14* (American Bar Association 2017).
  17. Aaron M. Eakman, *Relationships Between Meaningful Activity, Basic Psychological Needs, and Meaning in Life: Test of the Meaningful Activity and Life Meaning Model*, 33 OTJR: Occup. Partic. and Health 100, 100-109 (2013); Frank Martela et al., *Meaningfulness as Satisfaction of Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, and Beneficence: Comparing the Four Satisfaction and Positive Affect as Predictors of Meaning in Life*, J. Happiness Stud. (2017).
  18. Netta Weinstein et al., *Motivation, Meaning, and Wellness: A Self-Determination Perspective on the Creation and Internalization of Personal Meanings and Life Goals*, in *The Human Quest for Meaning* 81, 81-106 (Paul T. P. Wong ed., 2012).
  19. Brent D. Rosso et al., *On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review*, 30 Research Org. Behav. 91, 91-127 (2010).
  20. Neal Chalofsky & Liz Cavallaro, *A Good Living Versus a Good Life: Meaning, Purpose, and HRD*, 15 Adv. Devel. Hum. Resour. 331, 331-340 (2013); Ryan D. Duffy et al., *Work Volition and Job Satisfaction: Examining the Role of Work Meaning and Person-Environment Fit*, 63 Career Dev. Quart. 126, 126-140 (2015).
  21. Amy Wrzesniewski et al., *Job Crafting and Cultivating Positive Meaning and Identity in Work*, 1 Adv. Posit. Org. Psychol. 281, 281-302 (2013).
  22. William A. Kahn, *Meaningful Connections: Positive Relationships and Attachments at Work* 189-206 (Lawrence Erlbaum 2007); Brent D. Rosso et al., *On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review*, 30 Research Org. Behav. 91, 91-127 (2010).
  23. Kathleen M. Connolly, *Work: Meaning, Mattering, and Job Satisfaction*, in *Counseling Employees: A Multifaceted Approach* 3-15 (Daya S. Sandhu ed., American Counseling Association 2002); Ae-Kyung Jung, *Interpersonal and Societal Mattering in Work: A Review and Critique*, 63 Career Dev. Quart. 194, 194-208 (2015).
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  26. Catherine Bailey et al., *The Mismanaged Soul: Existential Labor and the Erosion of Meaningful Work*, 27 Hum. Resour. Manag. Rev. 416, 416-430 (2017).
  27. Brent D. Rosso et al., *On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review*, 30 Research Org. Behav. 91, 91-127 (2010); Neal Chalofsky & Liz Cavallaro, *A Good Living Versus a Good Life: Meaning, Purpose, and HRD*, 15 Adv. Devel. Hum. Resour. 331, 331-340 (2013).
  28. Frank Martela & Richard M. Ryan, *Prosocial Behavior Increases Well-Being and Vitality Even Without Contact with the Beneficiary: Causal and Behavioral Evidence*, 40 Motiv. Emot. 351, 351-357 (2016).
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  31. Adam M. Grant et al., *Impact and the Art of Motivation Maintenance: The Effects of Contact with Beneficiaries on Persistence Behavior*, 103 Org. Behav. Of Hum. Decision Proc. 53, 53-67 (2007).
  32. Adam M. Grant, *How Customers Can Rally Your Troops: End Users Can Energize Your Workforce Far Better Than Your Managers Can*, 89 Harv. Bus. Rev. 97, 97-103 (2011).



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