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# IN SIGHT *for Oregon Lawyers*

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

## WHO'S ENJOYING PRACTICING LAW?

Over the past 20 years, much has been written about the high levels of dissatisfaction and distress among lawyers. Much less has been written about lawyers who are enjoying the practice of law and about the aspects of practice they find most satisfying. Because satisfied lawyers typically do not access the OAAP's services, the OAAP created a survey to take the general satisfaction pulse of Oregon lawyers.

In February 2007, the OAAP sent a broadcast e-mail to all 9,625 active members of the Oregon State Bar and invited them to complete a Lawyer Satisfaction Survey. Approximately 1,500 Oregon lawyers have completed the survey, giving it a confidence level (the level of certainty that the survey results are within the margin of error) of 95%, +/- 3%. The following are some of the preliminary results from this survey.

Almost 9 out of 10 lawyers who responded are working full-time; about two-thirds are working in private practice, with about one-third of those practicing as sole practitioners or with one other lawyer. Almost 60% are male, and 40% are female. Over half are between the ages of 40 and 59 and well established in their careers.

Two-thirds of the lawyers who returned surveys had not been exposed to the day-to-day life of a lawyer before attending law school. This finding confirms our experience as attorney counselors that most lawyers don't have realistic expectations for law practice when they enroll in law school and embark on this career. So what motivates

lawyers to go to law school? The top three reasons lawyers cited are:

- Desire for intellectual stimulation 38%
- Interest in the subject matter 38%
- Desire to make a difference 32%

### A Majority of Oregon Lawyers Are Satisfied

Seventy percent of lawyers who returned surveys report being either very satisfied (26%) or satisfied (44%) practicing law; 12% are neutral; 14% report being somewhat dissatisfied; and only 5% report being very dissatisfied practicing law. The satisfied and very satisfied Oregon lawyers report that what they enjoy the most about practicing law is:

- The intellectual stimulation/challenge 81%
- Counseling/advising clients 56%
- Feeling of making a difference w 54%
- The subject matter of their practice 50%

Most lawyers highly value intellectual challenge. This survey confirms that the thirst for intellectual stimulation is a primary motivator in the decision to go to law school and is cited by lawyers as the aspect of practicing law that they enjoy most. In the Lawyer Retirement Survey conducted by the OAAP in 2006, the loss of intellectual stimulation was the personal concern that lawyers most frequently cited when contemplating retirement.

The percentage of lawyers who reported being either very satisfied or satisfied practicing law varied by employment setting:

- Private practice 69%
- Corporate counsel 72%
- Government 75%
- Judge/hearings officer 82%
- Law school faculty 100%
- Legal aid 88%
- Non-legal 30%
- Other 59%

### Other Findings from the Survey

- Eighty-seven percent of the lawyers who returned surveys agreed with the statement: **“The role I play and the work I do as a lawyer are consistent my values, beliefs, and who I am when I am not practicing law.”**

- Two-thirds of the lawyers who returned surveys report that they are either very satisfied (22%) or somewhat satisfied (41%) with the income that they earn practicing law; 10% are neutral; 18% are somewhat dissatisfied; and 9% are very dissatisfied.

The lawyers identified the following as the most effective in helping them to manage the stress of practicing law:

- Vacations/time away from the practice/hobbies 70%
- Exercise, sports, and/or outdoor activities 66%
- Relationships with and the support of family and friends 67%
- Relationships with and the support of other lawyers 34%

The three aspects of practicing law that lawyers find most dissatisfying are:

- Time pressure/workload 54%
- Concerns about making mistakes 48%
- Adversarial nature of practice 42%

These factors were the three most frequently cited sources of dissatisfaction among lawyers, although their ranking changed depending on age, gender, and practice setting. When asked, **“Knowing what you know now, if you had it to do over, would you become a lawyer?”**

70% said yes; 30% said no.

One survey finding that is a continued cause for concern is that almost one in five lawyers reported that either alcohol (11%) or drugs prescribed by their physician (7%) best helps them manage the stress of practicing law. In addition, several lawyers indicated that marijuana is what best helps them manage the stress of practicing law. Clearly, practicing law continues to be a high-stress profession. Lawyers who rely on alcohol and/or drugs to manage that stress remain personally, medically, and professionally at risk.

One alarming finding of the survey is the confirmation of the dramatically increasing student debt load of lawyers graduating from law school over the past 15 years. The table at the top of this page shows the total educational debt (unadjusted for inflation) that the different age groups of lawyers report carrying on graduating from law school.

Not surprisingly, as student debt load increases, lawyer satisfaction with the income they are earning from practicing law decreases. The Chicago Lawyers Study (Heinz, Nelson, Laumann, and Sadefur, 2005) found that, in the profession as a whole, the level of satisfaction is highly correlated with the lawyers’ incomes. If this trend continues, lawyers carrying high debt loads are likely to experience decreased job satisfaction in practicing law.

To review all of the results of the survey, go to the OAAP’s Web site at [www.oaap.org](http://www.oaap.org), select In Sight, select this article, and then select the following link: <http://www.zoomerang.com/web/SharedResults/SharedResultsPasswordPage.aspx? ID-L22W663BLNGQ>

Mike Long  
OAAP Attorney Counselor

**DEBTLOAD BY AGE**

	<b>70 years +</b>	<b>60 – 69</b>	<b>50 – 59</b>	<b>40 – 49</b>	<b>30 – 39</b>	<b>20 – 29</b>
\$0	94%	47%	27%	11%	7%	5%
\$1 – \$5,000	6%	20%	11%	3%	1%	2%
\$5,001 – \$25,000		23%	41%	32%	8%	4%
\$25,001 – \$50,000		9%	10%	24%	16%	9%
\$50,001 – \$100,000		1%	10%	23%	47%	45%
\$100,001 – \$150,000			1%	7%	17%	23%
Over \$150,000					3%	12%