

Ensuring purpose as a practitioner

Law is, perhaps more so than most professions, a calling. Its myriad demands on daily life give rise to one more duty: to undertake a legal vocational journey truest to one's self



/ by Jerome Doraisamy /

To what extent do you actually turn up to work each day and find yourself engaged and interested or – to use a psych term – in flow? Is your work fulfilling? Do you have freedom to stimulate your brain and think creatively about things? That's what most professionals really want."

These are key questions that lawyers need to be asking of themselves and their jobs, says psychologist Audrey McGibbon, who used to work as an executive coach for ANZ, Baker McKenzie and MinterEllison. They're questions that I can personally affirm are fundamental to one's happiness.

I knew, from an early point of my legal career, that practice was never going to be my thing. After being briefly exposed to it, I realised that I had only chased that path because it had appeared to be the smart move – thinking perpetuated by the fact that my closest law school classmates were chasing such a path. What I subsequently learned (aided by an 18-month bout of severe clinical depression and anxiety, including one period of hospitalisation) was that my health and happiness were – and are – paramount, and that professional success could only come from feeling motivated and engaged.

I was, I remembered, always much better at writing, research and public speaking – and the rest, as they say, is history.

What was perhaps the most important vocational lesson from those early stages of my career was that no one is going to put you on the right path if you don't first ask for directions. It is incumbent upon legal professionals to look inward, and then outwardly question, what is best for them.

Ensuring one's purpose is being lived out as a legal practitioner should be a top priority on any given day. In the age of coronavirus, that need may be amplified. And, as Australia turns its attention to a post-pandemic world in which a "new normal" will be born, living out one's true vocational path may soon manifest as being inextricably linked to lawyers' futures.

The vocational necessity of careers coaches

A vocation "literally means a calling", says Lara Wentworth, a performance and wellness coach who, up until early this year, was a partner at Sydney-based firm Madison Marcus. It goes beyond a mere job or occupation, she posits, and refers to feelings of affinity, passion or even duty.

"Some would say that being a lawyer needs to be a calling in order for a person to find

deep fulfilment and meaning and have longevity in their career. It is important to keep your finger on the pulse as far as those emotions, that are associated with your vocation are concerned. It is often those emotions that define our individual story of success," she tells *Lawyers Weekly*.

Such check-ins are increasingly pertinent, given that there is a growing dissatisfaction within the legal profession, argues Claire Bibby, with regard to the opportunities for promotion at all levels but especially for practitioners in the mid to late stages of their careers.

Those wanting to have check-ins about their careers are often "heavily motivated", Ms Bibby explains, by discontent with workplace culture, leadership, perceived lack of direction, and a desire for better quality work or opportunities for better work-life balance and flexibility.

"Young lawyers are also leaving the legal profession in increasing numbers. Fears that technological advancements will replace lawyers, as well as systemic issues in the industry itself, are seeing women, in particular, leaving the profession more than men. At the same time, the legal profession has a higher than average depression score than the general population, telling

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us that the legal industry needs ongoing improvement and cultural change," says Ms Bibby, a non-executive director and former GC who runs her own careers coaching business.

"In the United States, there is a thriving cohort of consultants and coaches who specialise in coaching lawyers, whether they are focused on a career change or want to work on other issues in their personal or professional lives. Australia is likely to go the same way in seeing the value of coaching. However too often, law firms only ever engage coaches for remedial problems.

"Changing that mindset and expanding the market's awareness of the benefits of coaching [are] slowly growing."

Glenn Dennett – a former assistant GC for Colgate-Palmolive and senior solicitor at Ashurst and Allen & Overy, who now works as an executive coach and law lecturer – agrees, saying that the business and political models in which the legal profession operates have been rapidly changing in recent years.

"Without a regular check-in on where your career is at, you can easily find yourself left behind, left out or locked out of what is 'around the corner,'" he warns.

"Like other fast-paced, high-responsibility jobs (e.g. medicine, engineering or technology-based careers) – it is very easy to be kept extremely busy in the law and often consumed by the present activities of your role. That can be extremely motivating – but what also ends up happening is that lawyers often 'let slip' the very important monitoring and evaluation of their careers and their practices. So, having a vocational check-in, that is diarised and locked in, is about the only way to ensure that this very important 'moment to pause and seriously reflect' takes place for lawyers and other high-paced professionals."

Lawyers need coaching regularly

Most of the time, lawyers choose to engage with a coach because something has tipped them "over the edge", Ms Bibby explains.

"I often see an uptick in demand immediately after salary and performance review time – generally mid and end of the year/new year. Potential clients are often dissatisfied with their pay or in missing out on a promotion, or are being offered coaching by their employer as a method of performance management or support," she notes.

"Buyer perceptions are often driven by the impact of the service being a personal 'value-add' – that can take many different forms, but [are] generally [outcomes-focused], in the sense of reaching that next career position,

transitioning to a new employer, improving work-life balance, etc."

In order to extrapolate such matters, there must be alignment and congruency in one's environment, behaviour, capabilities, beliefs and values, identity and connection to purpose, Ms Wentworth says.

"This internal check-in allows us to align our neurological level and remain in touch with our purpose, that which we draw inspiration and resilience from," she outlines.

"This then informs our identity (who we are in our vocation), our identity then filters through to our beliefs and values about our vocation (our why). This then provides us with a belief system about what we are capable of and what level of skill we can reach (our how). As a result, we behave in a way that corresponds with that level of skill (our what). This then affects our environment (our when and where of our vocation."

For Ms Wentworth, there are "no hard and fast rules" as to the frequency of such check-ins, but indicators that one is due will include changes in career circumstances or one's level of satisfaction and happiness, time of crisis or upheaval (such as COVID-19) or feelings of "misalignment or incongruency with your purpose".

Mr Dennett advocates for a more definitive schedule of check-ins, saying that one should be scheduled annually – together with a "serious five-year plan" inclusive of "emergency or exit plans, otherwise known as a plan B, he says.

"Exit plans are so important to have for lawyers. Plan Bs or exit plans also help lawyers be creative in their consideration of their careers and skills, responsible for themselves and, most importantly, they also [help reduce] stress. Life is so much easier when you have some certainty about what you can fall back on if things don't go your way. And, for all sorts of reasons, having a Plan B up your sleeve also tends to give you a lot more confidence and courage in your working life – both of which are important especially when you are in a leadership role or need to show leadership from time to time with your team, your peers, your clients and in your community," he says.

Ms McGibbon supports this in that such check-ins should be considered like going to the dentist, she offers.

"There's nothing particularly the issue, but it's always lovely to get a clean bill of health or a dental check-up where you don't have to come back for a filling or whatever it might be. So, I think it is just good practice for any professional to take time out for a bit of an inflection point," she says.



Benefits of careers coaching

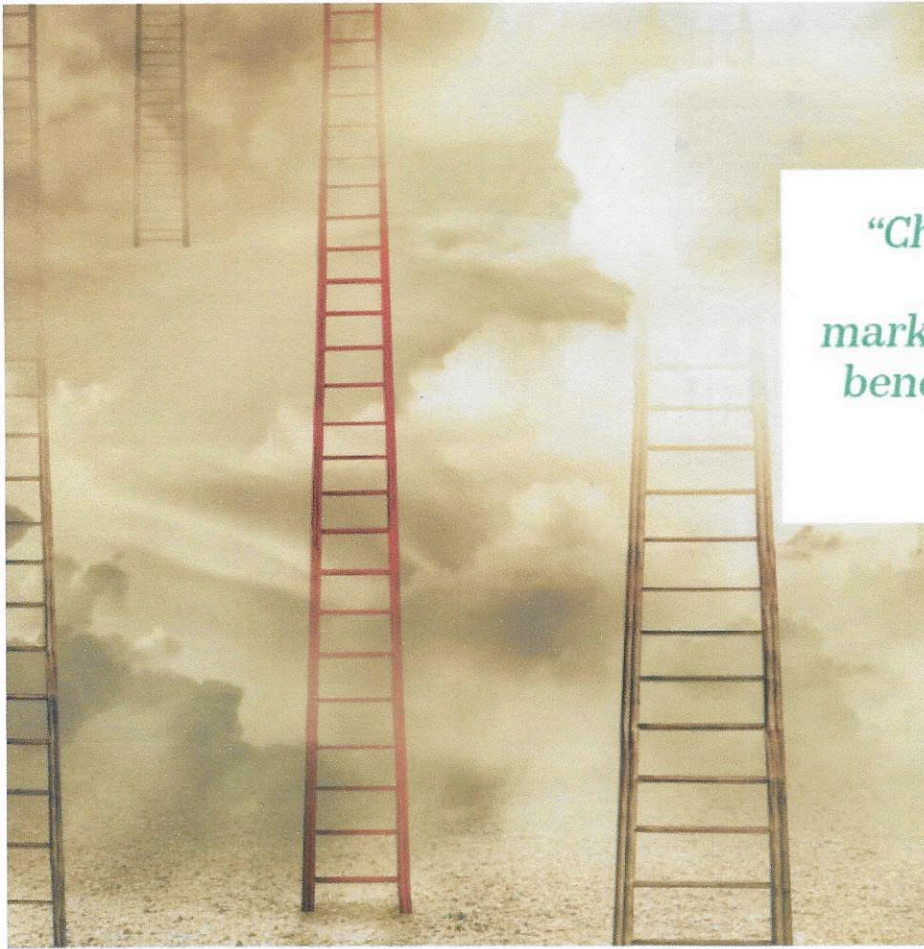
There are many upsides to engaging a coach, Mr Dennett submits.

Vocational check-ins are "invariably 'all about you', which is a nice benefit particularly when so much of lawyer's time is spent focusing on their clients' needs and their employee's needs", he notes.

"The main professional benefit of a vocational check-in is that it forces you to critically assess whether you have the skills and resources you need to perform your current role (or your future roles) competently. In this ever-changing and uncertain world, you do need to consider any emerging obsolescence of your current skills or any skill gaps for your current practice," he says.

Psychologically, one can walk away with increased confidence, greater peace of mind generally, reduced anxiety, reduced stress and better self-regulation skills, among other boosts. And, elsewhere, such check-ins are "core" to being a good leader, Mr Dennett adds.

"Good leaders regularly check-in on where their skills, competencies and future directions are being set. They will often share their musings and decisions around their vocational considerations with others – which positively 'models' this practice to others and, in turn, helps those who hear their leader's musings to adopt this practice as well," he says.



“Changing that mindset and expanding the market’s awareness of the benefits of coaching [are] slowly growing”

Claire Bibby, non-executive director

There is also the benefit of having a dedicated opportunity to better shape one’s direction in the coming decade.

“When you wake up every day, what’s going to matter to you? How do you want to be feeling? Do you want to be feeling turbocharged and stretched and challenged and thrilled? Do you want to be pretty chilled out and relaxed? What do you envisage for your health? Where are your family or friends in the equation? What is going to matter to you?” Ms McGibbon asks.

Put more succinctly, a coach can and will help lawyers not only realise goals, but help achieve them in areas of one’s life that matter the most.

“While success takes work, dedication and time, a coach not only helps you set goals and make an action plan, but also consistently provides supportive tips, tools and strategies as you make progress. Friends and family can provide advice and listen to you vent. But a life coach will help you determine what really matters in an honest, non-judgmental way and make a strategic plan on how to move forward,” Ms Bibby stresses.

Inherent risks of not appreciating values and ideals

The main danger of not working in a fashion fully in tune with one’s values or ideals, Mr Dennett warns, is that it “tends to rob you of your motivation”.

“Lower motivation often reduces your

productivity – and lower productivity often reduces your likelihood of being successful. But the reality is that we often find ourselves having to act in a way that is not in line with some value or ideal we have. Not all our values necessarily lead us to the same outcomes. So, acting in a way that is not in line with our values won’t necessarily destroy all our motivation. In those situations, what we can do is find other values that support those actions and then focus our attentions on those values to help us achieve the outcome we want or need to achieve,” he details.

Ms Wentworth backs this, saying that living and practicing outside of your value system “will leave you feeling a sense of lack, loss and incongruity”.

“When we are not in tune with our values and our own sense of who we are as a lawyer, we become misguided and may even feel broken. The profession has lost many talented lawyers this way. Being aligned with our purpose, our identity and our values and being aware of those on a conscious level, [provide] us choice of how to show up in our career and live up to our own story of success. The alternative is to work very hard to adhere to the profession’s version of success only to wake up years later with that same sense of lack and loss even when having seemingly achieved ‘that success,’” she says.

Everyone is intimidated from time to time by professional challenges, Ms Bibby suggests, adding that the difference is that

successful people understand and appreciate how best to find inner strength and grow as professionals instead of repeating old, ingrained habits.

“The biggest issue I regularly see in lawyers is self-confidence – people are often scared to change or look for something new. Clients often feel lost or confused, doubt themselves, or have a vision, but no clear plan. As the weeks, months and years pass, that pressure mounts and they continue to suffer, often in silence. We often get so set in our ways that it’s hard to see things from a fresh perspective and digest the possibilities that exist out there because we’re so used to operating within what we’ve deemed safe for so long,” she recounts.

Another thing that legal professionals must be wary of, Ms McGibbon submits, is the danger of “just buying into the socialised piece of Western propaganda” about what constitutes success.

“Not to get too political about it, it’s really about you as an individual, you need to think about well, what does success mean for you? Define that. Not what does success mean for anybody else. You are the only person that walks in your shoes with the only set of family and friends. It is a unique set of circumstances so why would you pick up anybody else’s formula for success? And that [is kind of] what we’re fed from a very young age in most societies these days,” she says.

Simply put, when lawyers are not in tune with what’s important to them, Ms Wentworth surmises, “we navigate our career with a broken compass”.

Enhanced need for vocational certainty during COVID-19

Depending on how one perceives the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic, there has arguably never been a more important time than now for present-day legal professionals to reflect on their vocational pathways.

COVID-19 has, unquestionably, upended many norms of daily legal practice and, almost overnight, forced a rethink of how best to carry out practices across the board.

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Whilst this has – most understandably – been a time for lawyers to protect the downside and safeguard their job security, it has, Ms Bibby feels, been a “tipping point” for many of them to take a step back and consider if their current roles are truly what they want long-term.

This is exacerbated, she posited, by parental struggles with homeschooling and adjustments to WFH and remote working, rather than being sidelined as a result of such burdens.

“A number of my clients have lost their jobs, or are now underemployed, by reason of COVID-19, but they have all stayed on the coaching journey with me, albeit for some there has been a shift in their goals. I’d say there’s potentially never been a better time to go deeper into the question, “Is this what I want?,” she says.

Ms Wentworth supports this, noting that times of upheaval and drastic change often have the effect of altering what was once important to us, personally and professionally.

“Our values change to adapt to our environment. What was important to you as a student for example may not be the same as what is important to you now as perhaps a partner or a director, as we navigate the uncertainty and risks as well as look for the opportunity and the reward. Times of change are important to reflect, on where we are and where we want to be. That’s the opportunity that COVID-19 has provided many lawyers,” she explains.

Mr Dennett takes a slightly different

approach, musing that – given that the full impacts of the pandemic have not yet unfolded, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions as to what legal professionals will deem to be most important in their immediate futures.

“I think it was already very important to keep on top of our vocational paths. So, rather than make it ‘more’ important to do so, I think the coronavirus outbreak has simply illustrated, in a more graphic or present way, how important keeping on top of your vocational goals is,” he reflects.

“Hopefully, the fallout from the recent restrictions has jolted many into doing more about vocational planning and evaluation going forward. Maybe it has been the ‘jolt’ we needed to have... to borrow a former prime minister’s catchphrase.”

How else to determine one’s vocational path

Legal professionals should not neglect to tap into their personal networks to clearly see their path ahead, and can do so, Mr Dennett says, with one question: “If I was not going to continue doing my current job, what do you think I might ‘like and enjoy’ and/or ‘be good at’ doing?” he suggests.

“Never underestimate, or lose sight of, the wise and creative ‘resource’ that is in our friends and family. The moment we think we are the sole source of wisdom in our lives, is the moment we cease to grow and discover new solutions,” he says.

However, one should be wary of

receiving subjective or biased advice, Ms McGibbon warns.

“Most people’s advice – although it can be really genuinely given and well intentioned – I doubt whether it truly is impartial and objective and reflective of what’s best for you,” she feels.

That said, she continues, “I don’t think there’s anything nefarious in that. I just think that’s part of the human nature: we sort of validate and justify the choices we make”.

As a result, a balance of trusted advisers and objective adjudicators is required, Ms Bibby proposes.

“Friends and family are great sounding boards, but they will more likely than not give you advice and tell you their opinions – a trained coach knows to never do that, as coaching is all about empowerment, not advice or consulting. I encourage people to build a trio of support – namely mentors, sponsors and coaches – and call upon the appropriate source as and when required,” she says.

It is also possible, the interviewees say, for lawyers to be sounding boards for each other. This requires, Mr Dennett says, listening without judgment.

“So simple – but so hard to do well. For lawyers, this is almost the antithesis of what we are trained to do. When you listen non-judgementally, all you communicate back to the person is a genuine, unconditional, positive regard for the person and what they are saying. Listening non-judgementally is a ‘gift’ you are giving and it is experienced, by the person talking, as incredibly supportive,” he advises.

Ms Wentworth supports this, reflecting that everyone is on their own journey: “Create a safe space for people to find their own answers and path by listening deeply and being present. Holding back on offering advice and instead be curious about others and perhaps encourage them to challenge their own limiting beliefs and narratives that maybe holding them back”

Be proactive, not reactive

Ms Bibby puts an exclamation point on her arguments by stressing that “to change something, you must take action”.

“The word coaching comes originally from the world of sport. All top athletes have a coach because their emphasis is on action, accomplishment, excellence, and having measurable results. Everyone deserves that and if you don’t know what you want, it won’t be long until someone else will tell you what they want you to do,” she advises.

Ms McGibbon makes a similar point (albeit with a different metaphor), noting that proactivity is a bit like paying care insurance. ♦