Do I want to be a *LAWYER?*

Career Services

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This is a difficult question to answer. Some people claim that they knew they wanted to be a lawyer since they were quite young, but most struggled with this decision up until the time they applied to law school. In fact, many law students and even recent graduates are still unsure of the answer to this question.

While it is impossible to know for certain the answer to the question "Do I want to be a lawyer?" before entering law school, there is some value in talking with practicing lawyers, attending criminal and civil trials, attending law school classes or even working as a messenger at a law firm. The value of these activities is in gaining some insight into what a lawyer does; however, it will be somewhat of a superficial view of the legal profession, highlighting the excitement and overlooking the real complexity, difficulty and demands of the job. Television shows dealing with lawyers have perfected this superficial view of the legal profession.

One's decision-making process can also be skewed by the difficulty of defining what a lawyer does on a day-to-day basis. There is no "typical lawyer." The legal profession today has embraced specialization to a significant extent. There are differences in workload, client contact, work environment, compensation and overall quality of life, depending upon whether one specializes in criminal law, family law, personal injury or defective product litigation, tax law, employment or labor law, environmental law, patent and trademark law, civil rights litigation or in other specialized areas. There are many "professions" within the profession of law.

The only meaningful way to determine whether you may want to be a lawyer is to look at the type of skills that a person must develop and ultimately become proficient at in order to be a competent lawyer in any area. Even though there are significant differences in the various practice areas of law, the essential skills required of any lawyer are very much the same.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- **Do I enjoy working closely with people regarding significant events or issues affecting their lives?**
  The practice of law is a "people's business." Lawyers do not work merely on "cases" or research interesting legal issues. A lawyer makes a living by helping people who have come for aid and advice regarding personal, criminal, social or business related problems. Necessarily, a client already has concluded that he or she cannot solve the problem on his or her own. The client knows it will be necessary to divulge very personal or private facts to a lawyer. Personal and confidential relations are created. The client most often will not perceive the problem as merely "ordinary," but as a personal or business crisis. A lawyer must enjoy working with people and must derive specific satisfaction from helping people work through difficult, threatening and significant events in their lives.

- **Can I empathize with a client's situation, yet have the ability to objectively analyze the issues and their consequences in light of the existing law?**
  The main task of a lawyer is to solve a client's problem. People come to a lawyer for help in solving their problems. A lawyer must be able to empathize in order to properly understand the needs and concerns of his or her client, but a lawyer must develop objective, analytical skills to identify the potential legal issues that must be addressed and then to formulate a plan to reach a result that is consistent with the desires of the client as well as with the requirements of the law.

- **Do I enjoy educating or teaching a person about a subject about which he or she may be ignorant or have significant misconceptions?**
  We live in a very complex society that has required the development of very far-reaching, technical laws. Understandably, most clients either are wholly uninformed about the existing law or have significant misunderstandings of what the law prohibits or requires. A lawyer must be able to educate competently his or her clients. This teaching task is complicated by

the fact that the "student" has a direct interest in the subject area. The degree of comprehension will be affected by the client's vested interest in the subject area, an unwillingness to hear the bad news, a strong disagreement about the goals of the law, etc. The need to educate is critical, though, so that a client can make an informed choice about how to proceed. Tact is required in telling a prospective client that his or her view of the applicable rules is wrong.

- **Am I able to articulate in a clear and concise manner my analysis of a problem to others, both orally and in writing?**
  Two vital skills of a lawyer are the ability to speak and write in a clear, articulate manner. Since a lawyer's job is to solve problems, the key to success is the ability to convince others of the correctness of one's analysis of the factual problem, the requirements of the law and the best result that can be reached for all concerned parties. A lawyer must be able to perform this task equally well by speaking or writing. One may be a genius, but it will be to no avail if others cannot understand what he or she is saying. The skill and art of communication is an important key to success of becoming a competent lawyer.

- **Do I enjoy being an advocate? Can I argue both sides of the question with enthusiasm?**
  A lawyer's personal satisfaction must come from helping others achieve a desired result or ameliorate the consequences of a difficult situation. A lawyer must provide the client with sufficient information concerning all possible alternatives to allow the client to make an informed decision. Ultimately, the client must decide what is best for him or herself. The lawyer must be able to accept and advance the client's decision, even if he or she would not have personally chosen the particular course of action, so long as the attorney stays within the ethical parameters of the Code of Professional Responsibility. Whether one is writing a will, negotiating a contract, litigating a lawsuit or settling a divorce, a lawyer is advocating the personal needs, desires, and goals of the client. One need not be flamboyant or overreaching to be an excellent lawyer, only capable of persuasively articulating concrete positions.

- **Do I like detail work? Do I enjoy searching for the facts of a situation?**
  The practice of law is a jungle filled with pockets of quicksand for the sloppy, lazy lawyer. The law has made great strides in eliminating unnecessary requirements of form to allow cases to be resolved on the merits rather than by one's ability or failure to follow rules of procedure. However, rules of form, practice and procedure are necessary for the orderly conduct of business within the law. A lawyer must pay strict attention to facts and detail, for detail work is a significant aspect of the practice of law.

- **Do I like to read and study?**
  A lawyer never stops reading the law. From the day one enters law school until the last day before retirement, a lawyer must keep abreast of the ever-changing law. Whether it is statutes, agency rules and regulations, or court decisions, a lawyer may never assume the law remains static. Each and every competent lawyer must dedicate a significant number of hours on a regular basis to educating himself or herself. This study time may be added on top of the many hours spent in the law library completing legal research on very specific issues of law pertaining to particular cases.

How many questions did you answer "yes"? Did you enthusiastically say "yes" or were you thinking, "If I have to do it, I will"? To be a competent lawyer, it is not necessary that you have all of these skills now nor that you have presently developed them to a high degree. You will have plenty of time to do that. Utilizing these types of skills on a weekly, daily or hourly basis is, however, the "life" of a lawyer.

Television dramas portraying attorneys are correct on one point. The practice of law is exciting, meaningful, and rewarding. You will have the ability to beneficially and significantly affect the lives of many people throughout your career. You will be exposed to a variety of people, events and areas of knowledge that you might not otherwise have experienced within the confines of your own personal life. The practice of law is a broadening and educational experience. However, the practice of law is not for the lethargic, the lazy or the clockwatcher. It is an ongoing, never-ending, demanding life experience. As is true in any area of life, whether you are in medicine, science, education or in law, your attitude towards life and your work is all-important. In simple words, you should be one who truly enjoys learning and who strives to do all that you can with your work.

(adapted from UT Liberal Arts Career Services)