



CENTER FOR CAREER & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

# Do You Want to Be a Lawyer?

Some people claim that they knew they wanted to be a lawyer since they were quite young, but most struggle with the 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. Making meaning of your undergraduate academic experience and shaping your professional identity are two major areas of development facing you as you consider becoming a lawyer.

While it is not necessary to have a definite 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 lies in gaining insight into what a lawyer does; however, it will be a somewhat superficial view, 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. The legal profession today has embraced specialization and there is thus no "typical lawyer." There are differences in workload, client contact, work environment, compensation, and overall quality of life that depend on one's specialization: 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 other specialized areas. There are many "professions" within the profession of law.

The only meaningful way to determine whether becoming a lawyer fits into your construction of a well-managed professional life is to look at the types of skills that a person must develop and ultimately become proficient in 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 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 merely work "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 person seeking a

lawyer has already 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 their lawyer. Personal and confidential relations are created. Most often, the client 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 analyze objectively the issues and their consequences in light of the existing law?**

The main task of a lawyer is to solve a client's problem. While a lawyer must be able to empathize in order to properly understand the needs and concerns of his or her client, he or she must also develop objective and analytical skills in order to identify potential legal issues needing to be addressed. A lawyer must then formulate a plan to address these issues in a way that is consistent with the desires of the client as well as with the requirements of the law.

- **Do I enjoy educating others on a subject about which they 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 are either wholly uninformed about the existing law or have significant misunderstandings of what the law prohibits or requires. A lawyer must be able to competently educate 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, willingness to hear bad news, agreement/disagreement with the goals of the law, etc. Education is critical if a client is to 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 my analysis of a problem to others in a clear and concise manner, both orally and in writing?**

The ability to speak and write in a clear, articulate manner is a vital skill in a lawyer. Since a lawyer's job is to solve problems, one of the keys to success is the ability to convince others of the correctness of one's analysis of the problem, convey the requirements of the law, and describe

the outcome that will be best for all concerned parties. A lawyer must be able to perform these tasks equally well speaking or writing. One may be a legal genius, but it will be to no avail if others cannot understand what he or she is saying. The 21<sup>st</sup> century career-readiness skill and art of communication is crucial to 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. Even if he or she would not personally have chosen a particular course of action, the lawyer must be able to accept and advance the client's decision, provided the attorney stays within the ethical parameters of the Code of Professional Responsibility. Whether 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 aggressive or obnoxious to be an excellent lawyer, simply 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 to sink the sloppy, lazy lawyer. The law has made great strides in eliminating unnecessary requirements of form to allow cases to be resolved based on content rather than one's ability 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 day of 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 regularly dedicate a significant number of hours to educating himself or herself on the current content of the law. This study time may likely be added on top of the many hours spent completing legal research on very specific issues of law pertaining to particular cases.

To 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 have a future in law, it is not necessary for you to have all of these skills now. You will have plenty of time to develop and hone them as you finish your education and begin your career. However, it is important to understand that utilizing these types of skills on a weekly, daily, or hourly basis is 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 significantly and beneficially 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. The practice of law is a broadening and educational experience. However, the practice of law is not for the lethargic, the lazy, or the clock-watcher. It is an ongoing, never-ending, demanding life experience. As is true in any field, whether it be medicine, science, education, or law, your attitude towards life and your work is all-important. To that end, being a good lawyer means truly enjoying learning and striving to use your work to do all that you can for those seeking help.

*(Adapted from UT Liberal Arts Career Services)*