



## Life After the J.D.

Agents Mulder and Scully, step aside. The usually stodgy ABA is asking whether there is an afterlife ... or at least life after earning a J.D. For many of us, that begs the *real* question: Was there life *before* the J.D.? Certainly there was no life during.

A panel sponsored by the American Bar Foundation and the Young Lawyers Division at the midyear ABA meeting is focusing on the immediate, not the ethereal. The Foundation has researched the “actual career paths and actual career development patterns” followed by young lawyers after law school.

For most people, a post-JD career path discussion is a simple four-letter word: WORK. Perhaps some can talk themselves into having a full and meaningful life in which the rigors of maintaining 2,000 annual billable hours are perfectly balanced with producing two children, rehabbing a house in a historic district, teaching yoga, buying a BMW and leading civic organizations into moral and financial success—all by the age of 30. Now THAT would be quite a “how-to” panel. And entirely unreal.

The panel says that it will address:

1. The type of environments and skills that help young lawyers reach their goals
2. The factors that influence their job satisfaction
3. Whether educational debt affects career choices

This could be a very brief panel. The politically incorrect answers are:

1. Who cares
2. Who cares
3. Yes, unless you want to go to jail

Simple truth: There is just one “career path and pattern” for a young lawyer who wants to be any good at it. No matter what we wish were the case, practicing law is really, really hard. So the only career pattern is long, long hours in an office in front of a PC with stacks of documents and books.

I wish it were not so. I would love to have the answers be:

1. Something with a garden and four or five MIT software engineers to organize everything online.
2. Catered lunches, soft lighting, tons of money, no dress code, a three-day week and working on high-impact civil rights cases for people who but for your skills would be destitute.
3. Not at all, as all my loans were forgiven when I told the school that I changed my mind about wanting to pay them off.

It’s not that I don’t identify with the young ’uns who want it to be mostly fun and deeply meaningful and always balanced and never too hard. That would be a super career path and environment.

I have actually given that quest a good shot.

For many years an old friend, Mike Guinan, and I tried to find an area of “easy” law. Each time we thought we found something that would fit, it turned out to be very complex. For example, specializing in single car accidents with cars in which the manufacturer did not install any brakes: Did the driver ask for a car with no brakes? Was the driver’s alternative to mechanical brakes—moving the car slowly with one leg out the door to drag his shoe—sufficient? And even those issues immediately escalated into third-party concerns: Should the car or the driver have been sold as “fully loaded”? Was the car’s revolving neon sign—“NO BRAKES IN THIS CAR”—suffi-

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cient notice to invoke the last-clear-chance rule? First thing you knew it was really hard again.

After years of sorting through possibilities, we gave up our search, resigned to jam our lives with too much work in too little time, most of it darn difficult stuff. But there is a bright light in all this.

If the panel were to ask, “In spite of how hard it is and how much you can never find the balance between work and play, family and the office, and how indifferent you become to office décor or placement or size, and how expensive it is to live and how you are never quite paid what you are sure you are worth, would you do it all again? the answer would be surprising. I asked Mike. I asked about 20 other very good lawyers. I asked myself. We all said, “Yes.”

But we also realized that job satisfaction is not an absolute that can be measured and recalibrated to ensure that each day will have more pluses than minuses. Rather, the best career path for a young lawyer is just that, a road going forward, with twists and turns that sometimes puts you in dark woods and sometimes gives you magnificent views. It is not always in your control, but it is always your responsibility.

Attorneys who embrace their profession all agree that satisfaction is only possible when they accept being accountable for the choices they make each day, without expecting someone else to assume that burden or blaming anyone else for the outcome. So here are answers to the questions that are more real and more helpful:

1. An environment that permits failure without condemnation, letting young lawyers harvest the learning that occurs so quickly in adversity.
2. The young lawyer’s own emotional and personal maturity, neither of which can be outsourced.
3. Not incurring more debt (delay the BMW!) so that involuntary servitude ends ASAP.

Now *that* panel—one that discards the notion of entitlement in favor of young lawyers being independent, even courageous, thinkers and doers—is worth attending!



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