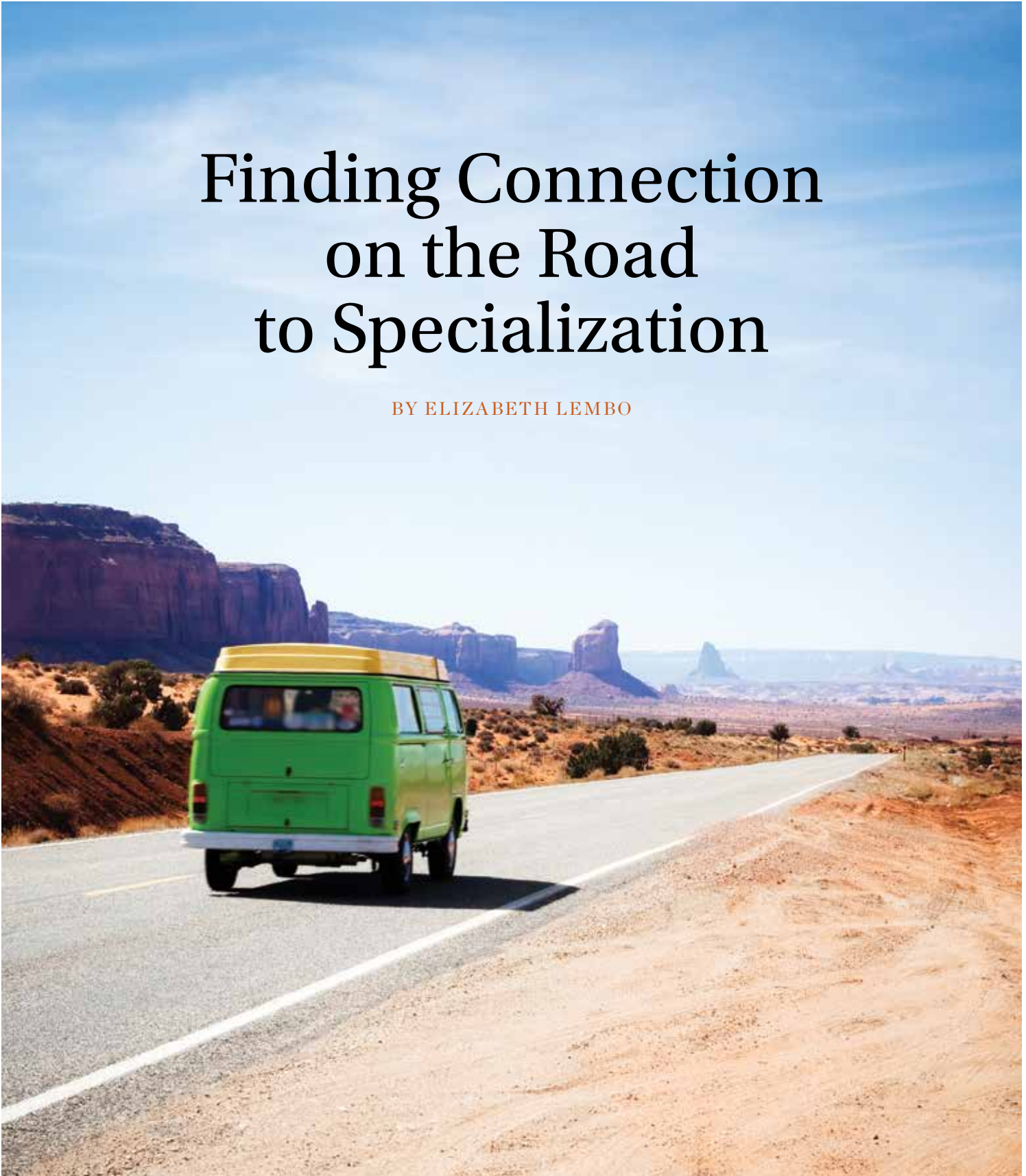


Finding Connection on the Road to Specialization

BY ELIZABETH LEMBO



The road to specialized careers can feel like a cross-country road trip—sometimes, you’re surrounded by travelers forging similar paths through bustling cities; other times, you feel like the only car on the road. While there are countless roads to career specialization, we all share the ups and downs of traveling toward our destination.

It’s no secret that the journey into the legal profession is highly specialized and demanding. It’s also no secret that anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns can arise out of the enormous levels of stress and pressure commonly associated with demanding professions like the law. Underlying the intersecting experiences of sacrifice and demand is an elusive topic due for a day in court: professional isolation.

This article explores how and why feelings of loneliness and isolation often occur on the road to specialization in the legal field. It also offers methods to combat isolation and boost community and connection among legal professionals.

How Workplace Dynamics Promote Isolation

Within the legal profession, career demands are consistent and time intensive. In 2015, the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal Systems described how competing priorities minimize opportunities for professional development.¹ For example, lawyers who are expected to maximize their billable hours necessarily become less involved in bar associations, inns of court, and other organizations and groups that bolster community and collegiality.² Technology compounds this issue by increasing access to information and limiting communication to electronic transactions, creating a “lone, time-intensive profession.”³

The Colorado Supreme Court further explored the divide between competing priorities in its 2021 well-being report.⁴ The report highlighted numerous factors that create isolation within the legal field, including escalating billable hours requirements and the nondiverse and hierarchical nature of the profession. The report emphasized a greater need for

community, mentorship, and assistance, noting that professional development and mentoring solutions are essential to increasing collegiality and decreasing isolation within the profession.

The report also highlighted the importance of allowing employees to be their authentic selves at work. The report included recommendations

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for promoting work-life integration, such as encouraging dialogue and self-expression in the workplace and increasing representation through diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.⁵ These recommendations challenge a historical pattern of encouraging employees to compartmentalize themselves into two separate beings: the personal and the professional, never should they meet.

While setting healthy professional boundaries is crucial to avoiding compassion fatigue and burnout, compartmentalization can dissuade us from appropriately sharing how we feel out of fear of appearing weak, thus leaving us to judge or attempt to suppress our own emotional responses in unhealthy ways. Compartmentalization can also discourage meaningful discussions that alleviate imposter syndrome and feelings of being misunderstood, out of place, “othered,” or even “not good enough.” Meaningful discussions can foster normalization and productive self-reflection by allowing us to compare personal and professional experiences, strategies, and techniques that provide clarity and new ideas, especially when shared with colleagues or mentors whom we respect and trust.

You might remember being a newly licensed attorney, putting in long hours, going above and beyond to serve your clients, seeking success and promotion. While this is normalized and systemically reinforced, those closest to you might have struggled with your increased absences due to work, or with the amount

of time you spent at home being distracted by work while “off the clock.” It’s important to remember that every time you say yes to something, you’re saying no to something else. For many within the legal profession, saying yes to extended hours means less time with loved ones and cultivating friendships outside the practice of law. This can increase the risk of isolation, especially if you’re uncomfortable finding personal and professional support among colleagues.

How Specialized Skill Sets Promote Isolation

Workplace dynamics are not the only contributing factor to isolation within the legal community. While many professionals face isolation due to workplace demands, different professions have subtle nuances that contribute to isolation in ways that are unique to their field. For example, certain professions require skills that those without their specialized training lack. Both the journey toward, and mastery of, these skills can make professionals feel less relatable to those outside their professional circles.

Ingrained skills required for success as a lawyer may also contribute to isolation.

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Contingency planning, critical thinking, extreme attention to detail, resolute objectivity, and knowing how to argue a point while swaying people's opinions make for great lawyers, but these skills don't always help foster positive personal relationships. After all, no child wants to be cross-examined by a parent at the dinner table.

Considerable use of these skills has the potential to shift not just how others view someone, but also how someone views the world, people, and situations. For example, an overly cautious and skeptical outlook can create harmful cynicism, particularly if we start experiencing the world as unsafe or full of

untrustworthy people. In addition, work might expose professionals to graphic forensic evidence, the suffering of others on a regular basis, or incivility or competitive peer relationships. These dynamics can also contribute to feelings of isolation and even fuel increased physical isolation in extreme cases.

Employer-Based Well-Being Solutions

So, what can be done to support and protect the legal community from isolation? Solutions to professional and personal isolation involve employer and employee buy-in. Both are essential to ensuring isolation does not lead to greater concerns such as loneliness and depression.

Organizational psychologist Constance Noonan Hadley suggests that loneliness is the "subjective internal belief [that] few people truly know me or would support me in my time of need."⁶ She directs employers to generate and implement new approaches to facilitating work relationships that hedge isolation, regardless of whether the work platform is remote or in-person.

These suggestions are supported by the American Psychological Association's 2022 Work and Well-being Survey, which found a high level of employee interest in employer-based well-being solutions and mental health support in the workplace.⁷ A resounding 81% of respondents agreed that "employers' support for mental health will be an important consideration when they look for work in the future."⁸ Other frequently requested employer-based solutions included flexible work hours, respect for time off, ability to work remotely, and the option of four-day work weeks.

Themes of these findings are echoed in the Colorado Supreme Court's well-being report, which names work-life integration and creating cultures of well-being as two of six goal areas in its well-being recognition program,⁹ and in the US Surgeon General's 2022 well-being report, which focuses on essentials such as connection and community, work-life harmony,



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matter at work, opportunities for growth, and protection from harm.¹⁰

Creating a Healthy Support System

Outside of seeking a workplace culture that supports well-being through connection, what can legal professionals do to reduce their own experiences of professional isolation? The Colorado Supreme Court's well-being report defined lawyer well-being as "a continuous process in which lawyers strive for thriving in each dimension of their lives," listing emotional, intellectual, occupational, physical, spiritual, and social dimensions.¹¹ Consider which dimensions are most supportive of your well-being and connection to others, and then give yourself permission to prioritize them.

While combatting isolation looks different for everyone, there is no question that investing in a strong social support system is essential. To take stock of your support system, consider the following questions:

- Do you have someone to speak to about personal and professional struggles without concern of consequence?
- Do you have supportive people around you who understand the unique challenges of balancing the competing demands of the legal profession and your personal life?
- Do you support yourself in keeping a broad and balanced perspective of the world?


If you answered no to any of these questions, consider increasing efforts to shift toward a yes in this area. If you answered yes, plan how you will continue to invest in maintaining these strengths. Without investment and connection, the quality of relationships can naturally fade over time. To maintain support systems, we must actively contribute to them. When possible, try to balance your commitments and priorities between work and those who provide you with love and support. Establishing a healthy balance can help replenish resiliency to work-related stress and burnout. Schedule a time to have dinner with friends, send a message to a loved one expressing gratitude for their support, and acknowledge the sacrifices others make to support you.

Check in with those you care about by asking them how they're doing, actively listening to their responses, and sharing honestly how you're doing as well. Authentic connection requires balanced disclosure between parties over time. The superhero friend who is always doing well and managing everything without issue or concern is nearly impossible for most people to relate to. It's also a feat that is difficult to believe. For these reasons, it's common for people who don't open up to trusted family members and friends to see those connections fade over time.

If you find your support system wanting and don't know where to start, expand it by meeting new people through activities you already enjoy. Return to a hobby you let go of long ago, or finally sign up for that recreational pickleball league you've been eyeing. Consider trying new things, taking breaks throughout your day, enjoying time off, and learning about positive outcomes of human efforts across the globe; these can all help keep our perspectives of the world more balanced. For confidential support, reach out to COLAP for a well-being consultation or consider therapy.

Conclusion

No matter where you are along the road of specialization, it's never too late to take a slightly different route, shared by professionals working

toward similar goals, and preferably one with many stops to enjoy the sights, rest, and refuel along the way. Whichever path you choose, investing in professional development, your social support, and overall enjoyment of life can make a positive impact in fostering connections and reducing experiences of professional isolation. Buckle up, put the top down, and enjoy the ride! 

For more well-being related strategies visit the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) website at www.coloradolap.org or contact COLAP at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a confidential, free well-being consultation.



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NOTES

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9. Colorado Supreme Court Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being report, *supra* note 4.
10. The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being at 10 (2022), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/workplace-mental-health-well-being.pdf>.
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