



How to Hate Your Job (the Right Way)

BY J. RYANN PEYTON

You hate your job. Congratulations. You've joined a long and distinguished line of lawyers who have stared at a billing spreadsheet at 9:47 p.m. and wondered, "How did I get here?"

And if that's where you are, that's okay. You're allowed to hate your job. Not in a "throw your laptop through the window" way, but in the perfectly ordinary, mumbling-under-your-breath "I hate this place" way as you walk out of yet another meeting that could have been an email.

But don't stop there. "I hate my job" is a conclusion, not an analysis. And if you're going to hate your job, you might as well do it productively. Engaging in legal work with excellence requires you to figure out what you hate, what you don't, and what that tells you about what comes next in your professional trajectory.

The "Happiness at Work" Paradigm

Our complicated relationship with work has a long history. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin helped broaden the concept of vocation, arguing that ordinary secular occupations could constitute a "calling" through which a person could serve God and contribute to the community.¹

The Industrial Revolution changed the relationship again. As labor moved from farms, homes, and small workshops into factories, work became increasingly governed by clocks, schedules, supervision, and wages tied to time. The factory bell replaced the rhythms of the task, and workers increasingly sold not simply what they produced, but their time.²

Then, in the second half of the 20th century, our expectations began to shift again. As economies became increasingly professional and knowledge-based, work became more than a way to earn a living. It increasingly became a source of identity, meaning, autonomy, and self-expression. Today, scholars describe meaningful work in terms of purpose and self-realization: work can serve something larger than ourselves while also helping us express who we are and realize our potential.³

Humanistic psychology helped accelerate this shift. Abraham Maslow's ideas about self-actualization began influencing management thinking in the 1950s and 1960s, as employers and management theorists increasingly considered whether work could satisfy higher psychological needs.⁴ Over time, that idea evolved into something more familiar: the

expectation that we should "do what we love."⁵ Sociologists now describe this as the passion paradigm driving the increasingly powerful cultural belief that work should be passion-driven, personally meaningful, and expressive of our authentic selves.⁶

And therein lies the problem. If work is merely a job, having a bad day at work is just having a bad day at work. But if work is supposed to be an expression of who we are, what happens when we hate it? A bad job can start to feel like a bad life. And that may be one reason we have become so very bad at simply hating our jobs.

The legal profession has a strange relationship with the "happiness at work" paradigm. Commonly dubbed a "calling" à la Martin Luther, law is frequently cited with medicine and the priesthood as a sacred vocation. On the one hand, everyone quietly agrees the work can be brutal and the stress is real. On the other, there's an unspoken rule that admitting you're unhappy makes you weak, ungrateful, or unqualified. As a result, legal professionals white-knuckle through it, alone, until they burn out.

In Bloomberg Law's 2024 *Attorney Workload and Hours Survey*, attorneys reported feeling burned out an average of 42% of the time, with mid- to senior-level associates hitting 51%.⁷ Law360 Pulse's 2025 *Lawyer Satisfaction Survey* found that, for the first time in the survey's five-year history, a majority of attorneys said they feel stressed most or all the time.⁸ While the research on well-being in the legal profession continues to be dark, the data is not a result of the personal failings of lawyers. It is the profession itself and the systems, structures, and cultures within it that keep people unwell and cause people to hate their jobs.

Regardless of the cause, constantly feeling burnt out and stressed is what turns a "hard job" into "I need to leave the law entirely," sometimes when what you actually needed was a smaller, more specific fix. Hating your job *well* is how you tell the difference. So, if you're going to complain about your job, at least build a good case.

Building a Complaint to Be Proud Of

You might recall when a Department of Homeland Security lawyer made national news in

February 2026 when she expressed frustration at her job during an immigration hearing by telling the judge, “The system sucks. This job sucks. I wish you could hold me in contempt so that I could get 24 hours of sleep.”⁹ While clearly reaching existential-crisis level, the complaint itself is uninspired. If you’re going to complain about your job, do it with craft. A great complaint is specific, gets a little melodramatic, and reveals what you actually want or don’t want. Compare “This job sucks” with “I’ve been in this Google doc for 45 minutes and the only substantive change anyone has made is swapping *shall* for *will*.”

The second one is more useful. It tells you something about your value for decisiveness, attention to details, and tolerance for grammatical wordsmithing. Good complaints are diagnostic tools. Vague misery just keeps you stuck. Specific, well-observed misery tells you what you aren’t getting enough of or what you are getting too much of from your work. This is the first step to either fixing it or knowing you can’t.

Make a list of the things you dislike. Then categorize them:

- the actual legal work
- the people
- the workload
- the hours
- the compensation
- the lack of autonomy
- the lack of recognition
- the culture
- the clients
- the commute
- the uncertainty
- the fact that someone schedules meetings about scheduling meetings.

Then ask: *Does this point to something I need, something I value, or something that simply isn’t a good fit for me?*

These are important distinctions to determining if you need a new career or just a different job, practice setting, workload, role, or set of boundaries.

Not All Job Hate Is Created Equal

Now take that specific complaint and sort it. Hating your job the right way means interrogating and understanding the kind of hate you’re

dealing with. Generally, career hate falls into three categories.

Bad Weather

This is the kind of stuff that rolls in and rolls out like a thunderstorm. For instance, a brutal week of closing a deal or that opposing counsel who sends nastygram emails at 2 a.m. It’s annoying and inconvenient, but at the end of the day, it’s temporary. You probably don’t need to restructure your career around bad weather. Grab an umbrella and find some solace in a great book or a cup of tea while the storm moves through.

Paper Cuts

These are the small, localized, and recurring irritations in your work. It might be a time-tracking system that always crashes when you print pro formas, or a weekly status meeting that could’ve been a two-line email. This kind of hate is fixable. It needs a rinse and a Band-Aid. That might be a conversation with IT or a boundary around your calendar.

But not all paper cuts are created equal. The small scratch on the top of your hand carries much less consequence than a deep cut in that space between your fingers. And while a single cut probably won’t kill you, we’re all familiar with the metaphorical meaning of “death by a thousand paper cuts.” When these recurring irritations assault your identity, conflict with your values, or challenge your sense of belonging, their impact is greater and their accumulation can eventually become insurmountable. Knowing whether your hate is fixable is key to hating your job the right way.

Existential Crisis

Then there’s the kind of job hate that’s less transient. Not “this deposition prep was brutal,” but “I feel a low hum of dread every single morning, and it’s been going on for months.” This is closer to what researchers mean by burnout. It’s not just the fleeting stress of a big case or an irritating supervisor, but a slow erosion of engagement and meaning. You might find yourself rehearsing your resignation letter in the shower each morning, staring down an unruly inbox with 132 unread messages and unfiled

emails from pandemic times, or sitting in your parked car for 20 minutes staring blankly at the parking garage wall before you can go inside.

This type of hate is primarily structural and often stems from a feeling (real or imagined) of low decision-making latitude toward who, what, where, when, or how you perform your work. The harder we work without control over how we work, the more existential our hate becomes until it reaches crisis level.

Getting the Diagnosis Right

Unfortunately, most people treat all three types of job hate the same. The result can mean leaving a job that could have been saved or staying too long while hoping the weather will change. You can’t fix what you haven’t diagnosed. Half the battle is figuring out whether you need an umbrella, a Band-Aid, or a serious conversation about your next move.

Keep a “Proof of Life” List

Legal professionals are paid worriers and trained to take a more cynical approach to problem identification and problem solving. Once you start drafting the complaint list, it may become very difficult to stop. As a result, it’s important to balance complaining with a list of things you don’t hate. These aren’t pinnacle moments of achieving self-actualization, but small moments that give you life: “Won the motion.” “My paralegal does a devastating impression of opposing counsel.” “Left at 4:30 on a Thursday and it felt wonderful.”

The goal of the Proof of Life list isn’t to gratitude-journal your way into loving a job that’s draining you. It’s about creating more accuracy in your analysis. Existential Crisis hate convinces you that *everything* is bad, and that’s almost never true. A Proof of Life list keeps your hatred honest. Despite the gloomy data on lawyer stress, satisfaction in law is often higher than the stereotype suggests. Law360’s 2025 *Lawyer Satisfaction Survey* found that 73% of lawyers would choose the same career again if they had a do-over, and roughly 60% were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs overall.¹⁰ That being said, if your Proof of Life list is genuinely empty three weeks running, that’s a pattern worth paying attention to.

Notice the Difference Between “Hard” and “Hate”

Bad days can feel identical to bad careers when you’re mired in the temporary stresses of law practice. Our nervous systems can’t always distinguish between a terrible week and a terrible fit. As human beings, we react to the intensity of fear and anxiety. It’s a deeply ingrained survival mechanism that continues to manifest itself in our lizard brains. A bad day is intense, but it’s short-lived. A bad fit is constant, but usually quieter. As a result, the way to tell the difference between “hard” and “hate” is time, not intensity. Hard days, weeks, and even months are common and expected elements of a legal career. The goal is not to make a permanent decision based on a temporary season.

Take the Tuesday Test

The Sunday-night dread and the Friday-afternoon euphoria are unreliable data points. Instead, consider an ordinary Tuesday. The kind of Tuesday with no big deadline, no looming trial, no vacation on the horizon, and no particularly good reason to feel one way or another. How does your job feel on a normal Tuesday? Are you mostly fine, occasionally frustrated, and sometimes even interested? Or are you counting the hours until you can leave, wondering how many more Tuesdays you can reasonably be expected to endure? One terrible Tuesday proves very little. But if Tuesday is reliably miserable, that’s probably more than a hard day.

Permission to Pivot

You’ve diagnosed the hate, sharpened your complaints, and kept the Proof of Life list honest, and you can see clearly that this isn’t just a bad week. The final way to hate your job well is to give yourself permission to pivot. Our professional reluctance to ask for help or admit that we’re struggling keeps many of us stuck. Pivoting doesn’t necessarily mean leaving a practice or an employer. It can mean setting a boundary or changing an internal system. Regardless of what your pivot looks like, you can’t hate your job well if you aren’t willing to embrace the changes that can make it better.

Remember those three categories? They tell you how big a pivot you need. Bad Weather doesn’t need a pivot, it needs you to wait it out. Paper Cuts need small pivots that don’t show up on a résumé. If the cut is fixable, fix the cut. Existential Crisis needs a bigger pivot because at that point, the problem usually isn’t a system you can patch, it’s a structural mismatch between what the role demands and what you’re able or willing to give it.

Law is a genuinely large profession with a genuinely large number of doors in it, and “lawyer” doesn’t have to mean one specific version of the job you happen to be doing right now. The key is to recognize that you don’t have to hate your job enough to justify changing it. This process isn’t about creating a litigation-ready case against your career. You don’t need to prove to yourself or anyone else that the job is objectively terrible or that your misery outranks everyone else’s. You just need to recognize, honestly, when it isn’t the right fit for you anymore. “This isn’t it for me” is a legitimate reason to pivot.

Conclusion

The goal isn’t to love your job. That’s a lot to ask of a job. Your job doesn’t have to be your passion, your purpose, your identity, or the thing that makes you leap out of bed every morning. It does, however, need to work for you.

Your job needs to provide something you value. Whether that’s money, meaning, flexibility, intellectual challenge, community, autonomy, stability, growth, or some combination of the above, it needs to do so without costing you more than you’re willing to pay.

So go ahead. Hate your job. Just hate it productively.

Figure out what you’re actually unhappy about. Notice what you don’t hate. Change what you can. And when you’ve gathered enough evidence that the problem isn’t just a bad week, a bad boss, or a bad case, give yourself permission to do something about it.

Sometimes the healthiest career move isn’t learning to love the job you have. It’s admitting that you don’t and figuring out what comes next. 



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NOTES

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