



Positively Legal: The Art of Designing Your Legal Career and Life

Career Development



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[“We’re heading into the most uncertain future of work ... To be resilient in the future when you don’t know what jobs will be available and what will change, you need to adopt a designer’s mindset”](#)

Bill Burnett

Bill Burnett, executive director of the Life Design Lab at Stanford University said this in 2020 on the Creative Confidence Podcast. Not only does this still resonate today, it has become more important than ever to adopt a [designer’s mindset](#) to our careers and lives.

Burnett and co-author Dave Evans wrote [Designing Your Life](#) and [Designing Your Work Life](#) which focuses on the philosophy that, “You are the designer of your life and your job” and design thinking can make it better.

Why would a lawyer want to redesign their career? Because our careers are long, the investment of time and money is significant and we want to ensure we, and our teams, have longevity and find meaning in our every day without burning out. Often lawyers can feel stuck in their careers (and lives)

and Burnett and Evans' suggest shifting a mindset to designing a meaningful and successful career with a few principles. To understand what will make us happy we need to use design thinking which prompts us to be curious and explore, try new things, reframe problems to get unstuck, trust in the messy process, collaborate, and ask for help.

A pioneer in this space is Margaret Hagen, Director of the Legal Design Lab at Stanford University. In *Law by Design*, Hagen argues that the legal system is built for lawyers, not humans. By using human-centered design, lawyers can redesign legal documents, court systems, and communication strategies to be intuitive and empathetic. So why not our own lives?

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How to design a meaningful life and career

The first step to increasing your job satisfaction is understanding what drives it. [Burnett](#) “sees many people held up by dysfunctional beliefs — the tradeoff between money and meaning, for example. If you believe that you can either make lots of money or find meaning in your work (but not both), it can feel like a zero-sum game with no solution.”

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To design a life and career, Burnett and Evans suggest the following which can apply to lawyers:

- Access your current [Maker Mix](#) – we are paid for what we do in money, impact and expression. “Money is the most obvious form of payment, but we also care about making a change in the world (our impact) and being able to share our creative abilities (expression).” Burnett suggests assessing your current Maker Mix by rating each area from 1 to 100. For example, a corporate lawyer make divide things at 70 percent money, 40 percent impact and 10 percent expression whereas a not-for-profit lawyer may be well over 50 percent impact. Design your ideal mix (including looking at other areas of your life). If you want to increase your social impact, can you sit on a not-for-profit Board or do some pro bono work. Your social impact could be well outside of your work and could include coaching a kids sports team.
- Reframe dysfunctional beliefs — We should not be defined by dysfunctional beliefs. For example, the sunk cost belief – I spent time and money on a law degree and must practice corporate law, rather than considering whether you can do something law adjacent like move across to legal operations or a legal technology vendor or even move to a different area of law where you find more meaning and impact even if the money is less.

- [Redesign your job for a better fit](#) – Four strategies to redesign your current job to be a better fit include:
 - Reframe and change the “why” of your job and find a new reason to motivate you at work. If you are struggling to be energized and you are no longer motivated by the work, they suggest trying to find another reason including that it pays the bills at home for your family.
 - Try changing your role to use more of your strengths and align with your interest areas – If you want to move into a new in-house area, see if you can swap to a new stakeholder or ask a colleague to share some of their work so you both work in new areas and can feel more engaged.
 - Look for opportunities to move laterally within your organization (even for a secondment) before trying to leave.
 - If you want to move to a new area of law or you want to move across to legal operations, start studying again and learn new skills that can help you longer term.
 - Odyssey planning – Take time to draw or write out three alternative five year plans (the [College of Business](#) has a handy schematic for this process):
 - The current path – What does your life and career look like if you stay on the current path. This could include staying in private practice or and becoming a Partner or General Counsel.
 - The alternative – What does life look like if the current path can’t happen – can you pivot and do something adjacent – can you move from private practice to in-house; could you move from in-house to legal operations or a technology company selling its services to lawyers?
 - Wildcard path – What would you do if money and time were no object – this could very easily involve nothing legal or legal adjacent. You can try doing some of the wildcard path while keeping your day job. For example, if you think your ideal path is that of an author, take a writing course or go on a writers retreat for your vacation time and see if the experience matches up to what you imagine it to be.



Once you have done this, evaluate each path based on resources, possibility and coherence with

your values.

While Burnett and Evans provide the foundational framework for life design, other ways to apply design thinking or adjacent thinking that can help reframe our careers and lives:

- Michael Melcher's [*The Creative Lawyer: A Practical Guide to Authentic Professional Success*](#) considers similar concepts. Instead of taking a big career change, consider taking 15-minute daily actions to build your way forward – e.g. read an article outside of your practice area.
- Prototyping or trying out ideas for wellbeing at work including a "No-Email Weekend" policy or a "Focus Friday" (no internal meetings) for three weeks to gather data on whether well-being and productivity improve. It treats firm culture as an iterative beta-test.
- The [T-shaped model](#) provides a visual framework for career longevity. By designing horizontal skills, a lawyer fundamentally increases their career mobility, making it much easier to execute an "Odyssey Plan" into an alternative legal career.
- Shaw Achor's new book, [*The Power Of Beliefs*](#), reveals how our conscious and unconscious beliefs shape the way we experience the world and what becomes possible for us within it. One core belief is that "this work is meaningful" – he says that "from a scientific perspective, believing your work is meaningful is one of the greatest drivers of future performance." He notes that the closer you are to the people your work helps, the more meaningful it feels and the more friends you have at work also helps you find meaning. Believing your work matters "often can strengthen your core belief that you matter."

Whether we look to find meaning, try to reframe our careers or try something new, legal design can help us look at our careers and lives with a different lens worth trying as we continue to look for meaning in a fast paced and often stressful environment. Legal Design can help us. In an [earlier article](#), I wrote about how Legal Design can help bring empathy to our work, but it can also help us bring satisfaction to our careers and lives.

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[Caterina Cavallaro](#)



Deputy General Counsel

VGW Holdings Limited

Caterina Cavallaro is deputy general counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

Groups.

In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.