



FT.com You've earned it. Protect it. FT Wealth

Sunday Jan 16 2005 . All times are London time.

- [Home](#)
- [World](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Markets](#)
- [Markets & funds data](#)
- [Industries](#)

- [Aerospace & defence](#)
- [Autos](#)
- [Basic industries](#)
- [Consumer industries](#)
- [Drugs & healthcare](#)
- [Energy & mining](#)
- [Financial Services](#)
- [Insurance](#)
- [IT](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Professional services](#)
- [Property](#)
- [Retailing & leisure](#)
- [Telecoms](#)
- [Transport](#)
- [Utilities](#)

- [Lex](#)
- [Comment & analysis](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Business life](#)
- [Your money](#)
- [Arts & Weekend](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Jobs & classifieds](#)
- [In today's FT](#)

FT Reports

Creative Business

FTfm

FT-IT

World reports

Business Reports



News in depth

- [Asian earthquake disaster](#)
- [Pre-Budget 2004](#)
- [Iraq in Transition](#)

Columnists

- [Philip Stephens](#)
- [Quentin Peel](#)
- [Lombard](#)
- [Martin Wolf](#)
- [Lucy Kellaway](#)
- [Amity Shlaes](#)

Industries / Professional services

[Print article](#) | [Email article](#)

Lawyers laid low by timesheets

By Reena SenGupta
Published: January 13 2005 02:00 | Last updated: January 13 2005 02:00

Lawyers have it all: glamour, prestige, money. They have the chance, in private practice, to be owner-managers of their businesses. They do intellectual, well-respected jobs in the commercial and civil worlds. So, why are lawyers so unhappy?

A partner at a top UK or US firm earns on average more than £500,000. Newly qualified solicitors can earn £50,000 in their early 20s. Yet cumulative research over the past 10 years indicates that lawyers are the professionals most likely to suffer from stress, depression and alcohol abuse.

Alcohol-related deaths in the UK legal profession are double the national average. About 30 per cent of male lawyers and 20 per cent of female lawyers drink to excess, according to LawCare, an organisation set up to help lawyers overcome stress and substance abuse.

In the US, figures from the American Bar Association put alcohol abuse at 15 to 18 per cent of all lawyers compared with 10 per cent of the general population. In 1988, the ABA created the Commission on Impaired Attorneys. Now every state has formal assistance programmes to help lawyers deal with substance abuse.

But the problem appears to be worsening on both sides of the Atlantic.

Hilary Tilby, chief executive of LawCare, says: "Initially we started off as a charity helping people with alcohol-related problems. Now 75 per cent of our calls relate to stress and depression." Lawyers who are just starting out call about stress. By the time they have put in 20 years' service, they are calling about alcoholism. According to one study in the US, the incidence of depression for lawyers is four times higher than for all employed people.

White Water Strategies, a London-based consultancy specialising in executive coaching, says that lawyers are so unhappy because of the personality of the lawyers themselves, the structure of the legal profession and the way in which law firms function.

The "legal personality" is now an accepted term in legal circles and refers to the archetype - a highly driven, detail-conscious perfectionist. Most important, lawyers tend to be pessimists, a fact that François Moscovici, director at White Water Strategies, says keeps them in a vicious circle of "permanence and pervasiveness" - lawyers blame themselves for any predicament.

This view is echoed by Ms Tilby at LawCare: "Lawyers display facets of the obsessive personality. They have to do a perfect job and if that means giving 110 per cent they do so whatever the price."

Most lawyers charge clients on the basis of billable hours, and annual targets can be harsh: 1,600 hours on average for UK associates and 2,400 for those in the US.

ADVERTISEMENT



Welcome

Bruce MacEwen

- [Edit Profile](#)
- [Take a Tour](#)
- [Log out](#)

Search & quotes

Go

News Quotes

- [Power search](#)
- [My portfolio](#)

Get 50 free trades
AMERITRADE Apex

Site services

- [Personal office](#)
- [Download news ticker](#)
- [FT mobile](#)
- [FT Research Centre](#)
- [FT conferences](#)
- [Currency converter](#)
- [Working at the FT](#)

Research tools

- [Analyst reports](#)
- [FT Research Centre](#)
- [Free annual reports](#)
- [Market research](#)
- [Growth companies](#)
- [D&B business reports](#)



For many, this focus on achieving a set number of chargeable hours is the single biggest cause of stress. The tyranny of the timesheet was one reason Richard Pell-Ilderton, formerly a partner at London law firm Wilde Sapte, changed career. He left in 1995 to join Société Générale as an investment banker and is now a director of a hedge fund company. "Lawyers, even senior ones, are ruled by their timesheets. Being liberated from the timesheet was one of the main reasons I left the law. Although I worked long hours as an investment banker, they were not as long as those I worked as a lawyer."

The way that law firms are structured gives rise in itself to stressful situations, especially when firms increase in size.

For example, Clifford Chance, the largest global law firm, has a turnover of £950m and about 3,000 lawyers working in 29 offices in 19 countries. Like most top law firms, it has two identities - one as a professional services firm and the other as a global business.

Lawyers, especially partners, are expected to be both competent lawyers and international business people. Patrick Raggett, formerly a partner at UK law firm Pinsent, says: "The problem is that law firm partners want the security of being in the infrastructure of a big firm but they also want to act as sole traders."

They tend not to like being managed, or managing in any formal sense. Ask any group of lawyers why they entered the field and they will say it was to practise law, not to be marketers or finance directors. But with billing targets sometimes as high as £2m a year, partners have little choice but to learn new skills.

As the business elements take over, many lawyers experience less job satisfaction through a loss of control both at the partner and associate levels. Stephen Rodney, director at legal headhunters Fox Rodney, has noticed that partners' control over their careers has lessened. "We now have partners asking us what is going on in their own firms."

At the associate level the strain can be more marked. Few law firms give much direct client responsibility to senior associates. Jeremy Tobias-Tarsh, formerly a corporate lawyer at Clifford Chance and US firm Paul Hastings, says the result is that "the work ends up being car maintenance for very intellectual people".

The environment is also very competitive and often lacking in feedback. "You are only as good as your last deal," is the common refrain of many law firm partners.

Mr Tobias-Tarsh says: "Lawyers are terrified of making a mistake - especially in a business where there is unlimited liability. One serious error could blow apart a practice."

It is also an environment in which women make up only 23 per cent of partners of all UK law firms, although they comprise 60 per cent of all trainees. The "win/lose" environment, says Mr Moscovici, is linked to poor health and satisfaction.

Stuart Popham, senior partner at Clifford Chance, recognises the pressures that working in today's law firms bring. He says the firm is trying to get across to its people that what they do individually does make a difference.

But in general there remains the underlying unhappiness that can arise from disappointed expectations. Many law students go into law to do worthwhile, interesting jobs that fail to materialise as they hoped.

A recent survey of qualified assistant solicitors by Legal Business magazine showed two-thirds were primarily motivated by money and achieving partnership. Neither idealism nor passion was mentioned.

A CASE OF THE BLUES FOR LAW PROFESSIONALS

* Research over the past 10 years indicates lawyers are the professional group most likely to suffer from stress, depression and alcohol or substance abuse.

* For many lawyers the focus on a set number of chargeable hours is the single biggest cause of stress. Annual targets for billable hours are on average 1,600 for UK associates and 2,400 for US associates.


* Lawyers, especially partners, are expected to be both competent lawyers and international business people: "Law firm partners want the security of being in the infrastructure of a big firm but they also want to act as sole traders," says one former partner.

* At the associate level, the strain can be particularly marked. Few law firms give much direct client responsibility to senior associates.

 [EMAIL ARTICLE](#)

 [PRINT ARTICLE](#)

 [MOST POPULAR](#)

 = requires [subscription](#) to FT.com

[Home](#)

[World](#) | [Business](#) | [Markets news](#) | [Markets & funds data](#) | [Industries](#) | [Lex](#) | [Your money](#)
[Comment & analysis](#) | [Reports](#) | [Arts & Weekend](#) | [Sport](#) | [In today's FT](#) | [Media inquiries](#)

[Contact us](#) | [Help](#)

© Copyright [The Financial Times](#) Ltd 2005. "FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Corporate](#)