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It's no secret that many lawyers are unhappy in their jobs, yet most find it difficult to leave. **Claire Chaffey** speaks to three lawyers who followed their dreams and launched successful new careers in the process



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WE WERE LAWYERS

That many lawyers are dissatisfied with their career is no startling revelation. For years now, there has been ample discussion about lawyers and their state of happiness or, perhaps more aptly, their state of unhappiness. There are plenty of media reports to indicate that young lawyers are disillusioned, mid-career

lawyers are burnt out, and far too high a percentage of lawyers - at all levels - suffer from depression.

But a law degree is not all doom and gloom.

Plenty of lawyers do enjoy their jobs, which is evidenced by the fact Australia has a legal talent pool envied by many outside of the profession.

For many lawyers, the law is a good fit: it suits their skills, their personality, and perhaps even the size of their financial aspirations.

Still, there will always be lawyers who are bored, disheartened or just downright miserable in their legal life.

And while the reasons for this are complex, there's little doubt that some people simply don't fit the mould of the modern lawyer.

But this is by no means fatal for those looking to use a legal background for achieving a fulfilling and successful alternate career. With a bit of inspiration, imagination and courage, any career is possible.

Deciding to leave

Given that lawyers hold some significant technical expertise and education, it's surprising to hear from some *Lawyers Weekly* readers that they are sticking with the profession of law, despite the fact they don't actually like it.

Author, columnist and critic of corporate life Lisa Pryor posed a valid question in her book, *The Pinstripe Prison - How Overachievers Get Caught in Jobs They Hate*.

"I am tempted to grab [the malcontent] by the collar and say ... 'why don't you just stop whingeing and leave?'" she wrote.

One person who did exactly that is ABC *Four Corners* investigative journalist Liz Jackson.

She says she became disheartened with what she perceived as an inability to make a real difference in her job as a juvenile justice lawyer at the Brixton Community Legal Centre in the UK.

"We were just processing our clients, rather than really assisting them," says Jackson.

"Over the years, they started coming back to us. It wasn't the view that I'd had of assisting the downtrodden, and lots of the problems facing the clients were policy failures ... It seemed to me that the solutions to these weren't legal."

Consequently, Jackson made the decision to leave her legal career.

General counsel-turned-gemologist Kingsley Wallman also left behind a successful legal career.

At the age of 39, having slogged it out for many years to get to the top of the multi-national telecommunications company Cable & Wireless, Wallman was presented with an opportunity: he was made redundant.

While this initially came as a shock, he quickly came to see his redundancy as the push he needed to take control of his life and seek happiness. "I got to the point where I thought to myself, enough is enough. I've done it," says Wallman.

"All I had wanted to be was general counsel. I did that for a couple of years and learned to hate it ... [When I was made redundant] my wife and I drove around the States for four months, and during that time I decided to give up law and the corporate life. I wanted to control my own destiny and do something different."

For corporate lawyer-turned-film producer Natasha Pincus, deciding to leave the law was easy.

Despite a love for the law's intellectual challenge, Pincus says she knew early on that she wasn't partial to pressed suits, long hours and fluoro lights - despite the fact her top ten finish at Monash University opened the doors to any firm she wanted. "It was so blatant to me that the legal world wasn't for me, so it was never really a decision - it was just a matter of time," she says.

"[Practising law] became really tortuous ... The people were wonderful, but I quickly realised I was counting down the days until my release."



"My friends and family thought I was mad. My mother said, 'Are you crazy? Why don't you just tear up your money now?'"



Taking the plunge

Wallman admits that turning his back on a successful legal career was not easy.

"If the truth be told, it was very hard to jump off the gravy train and into the unknown, and take on some of the risks that come with that," he says.

"My friends and family thought I was mad. My mother said, 'Are you crazy? Why don't you just tear up your money now?'"

And while forfeiting his attractive salary package was hugely daunting, Wallman's niggling discontent - and the realisation he had hardly seen his infant son - was enough to persuade him to take the plunge.

"I had one of those moments where I stopped and thought, 'This is bullshit. It's just bullshit. What am I doing?'"

When Pincus resigned, she was shocked by the reaction of many of her colleagues.

She says that it wasn't so much that they weren't supportive of her plans to pursue her passion (it was, in fact, to the contrary) but that so many people admired her for "getting out".

"I was amazed by the amount of people - who seemed to be quite stable and enjoying their position - who took me aside and said, 'Oh my god, how are you getting out? I wish I could!'" she says.

The revelation that so many of her colleagues felt trapped in unsatisfying jobs was astounding, she says.

"I said to them, 'Just leave. You are institutionalised. You can just go.' But they would say, 'What can I do?'"

Kingsley Wallman (top) and his store, Venerari, in Sydney's Strand Arcade

