

Is the Grass Actually Greener?

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Introduction

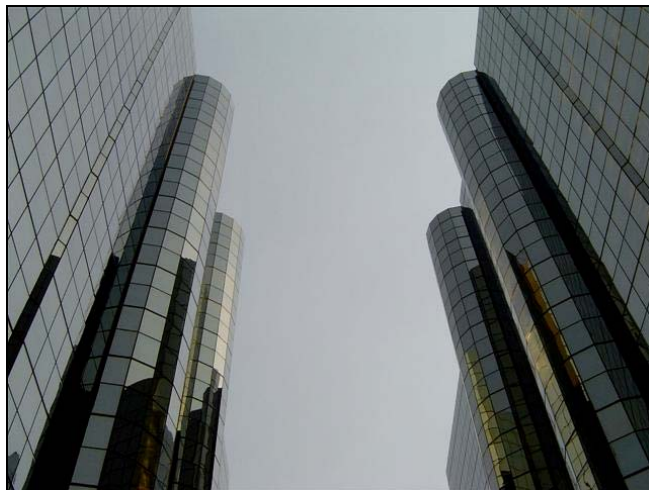
Twelve years ago I was an in-house lawyer with a pharmaceutical company.

Following a merger, I moved to head up the business development group, with a view to an overseas posting and maybe then a country manager role. After a while in that commercial role, I left the company and have been building a business with my brother since then.

This article is not my normal “how to add more value” message (for those articles, see www.lex.com.au). Instead, it’s about things to do with **career satisfaction**. Specifically, it’s about things I’ve learned recently that I wish I knew when I was an in-house lawyer. It’s about whether the grass is actually greener on the other side.

Think of this as a message in a bottle back in time to my younger self.

Commercial role



The move into the commercial role seemed an easy decision, and **the attractions were obvious**.

- It meant advancement in the company along a path to a CEO role, and a likelihood of overseas postings.
- It meant more direct reports and responsibilities.
- It meant better pay and more status.
- Lots of other people would jump at the job.

There didn’t seem to be any downsides.



The position seemed worth giving up my great in-house lawyer role for. I gave up that role knowing that the next person to get it would keep it. There would be no going back.

I was excited about my new role. But like many tropical holidays, the reality was different from the brochure.

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I was treated very well. I'm not saying don't take a commercial role like this yourself, as lawyers have a lot to offer. But being an in-house lawyer is pretty good, and the grass isn't always greener on the other side.



In reality, **the glamour quickly wore off.**

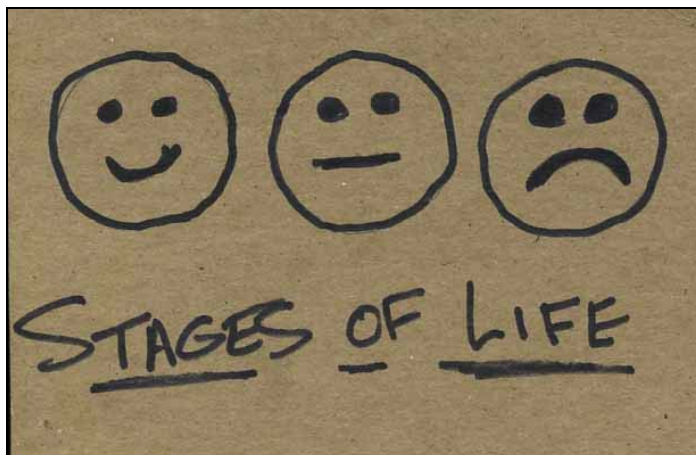
- I spent too much time waiting in airports.
- There were lots more meetings, retreats and team building sessions.
- There was still more striving to go, because that job wasn't the top of the ladder.
- There was a lot more worry, and not much fun.
- I no longer had my competitive "moat" (i.e. my law degree). I was competing in a much bigger pool.
- I no longer had inside access to everything going on in the company.

But mainly, the new job required a **very different skill set**. I've always thrived on quiet, detailed, meticulous, intellectual work. The new role was more about managing people and commercial relationships – things I could do, but didn't enjoy doing nearly as much.

This change in skill set might also confront in-house lawyers considering a move into managerial roles within a legal department, or taking on new responsibilities.



After a while I wondered: if I'm so "successful", why am I so unhappy. I thought there was something wrong with me, but turns out I wasn't alone.



I remember being at a dinner when a main board director was visiting from overseas. As the youngest member of the executive committee, I was seated at the far end of the table, with the director's wife. I asked her what life was like "at the top". She quietly said to me that, whilst her husband wouldn't tell me this, it wasn't as good as it looked from the outside. They were living far from their children, never knew where they'd be sent next, and were dealing with lots of corporate politics. I quit not long after this.

When I was saying my good-byes, several people at my level or above in the company confided they wished they'd done what I was doing when they had the chance (before taking on school fees and huge mortgages). They'd never said this to me before.

So it turned out that there wasn't anything wrong with me – the grass isn't always greener. I just didn't know any of this when I was taking the job.





What next?

OK, so I had to make a change. I couldn't go backwards - I'd already had what I considered the best pharmaceutical jobs in any law firm or company. So I leapt off the ladder, to pursue childhood dreams of inventing something and building a business.

My contemporaries were then partners, barristers and merchant bankers in New York. They said mine was a "brave move". They reminded me that overnight I had gone from wealth, power and prestige to no job, title, direct reports, business cards, clients, income, car or status.

Even my mother couldn't tell her friends what I did now. So there I was, 33 years old, and in some ways I had failed miserably.

You'd have thought my happiness would bottom out, but it did quite the reverse. My happiness jumped, and hasn't come down since.



Since the day I left, I've felt lightness in not having to be anything other than myself. Whilst there is no safety net in my new career, there are no boundaries or limits either. Also, it meant no more long commute, suit and tie, waking up to an alarm, team bonding sessions, managing staff, performance appraisals etc. (you get the picture).

For me, the move was easy. I'd tried a few careers, and decided they weren't for me. I had maybe two thirds of my life left. I wasn't married and had no children, so could take some risks. I had enough savings stashed away to last me 3 years. And I had an idea.

That idea was that the software then available for managing matters, contracts and intellectual property was too complex, and that I could do better.

So I had a go, and that idea has driven me for the last 10 years. During that time, my brother Richard and I have built a business

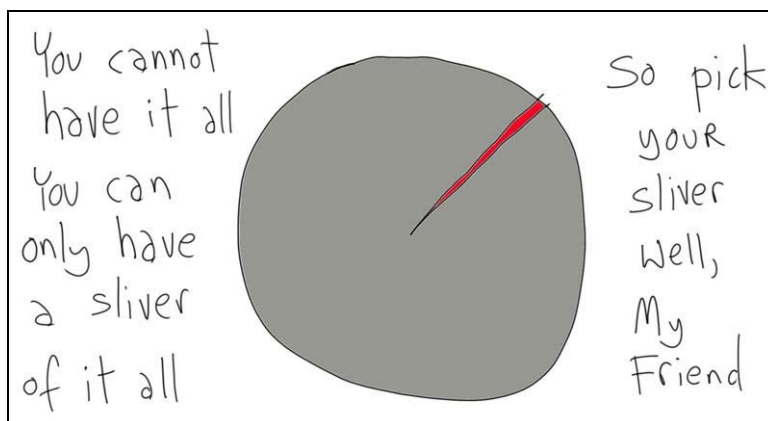


that, as far as we can tell, has helped more in-house lawyers, contacts managers and intellectual property managers than any other business move from their home-made ways of managing things to a professional system. We're very proud of our simple software and the business we're building, and grateful to all our clients.



What have I learned?

Along the way I've learned that, even if you try to keep your options open, you can only have a sliver of it all. So, like it says in the cartoon below, it's important to pick your sliver well.



I now realise I made the move into the Business Development sliver for the wrong reasons. I should have asked whether it was something that really suited me, or if it used the talents I enjoyed using most.

But I'm glad I "failed". It was a harsh lesson, but it taught me a lot about what really suits me, and what matters to me. I now know career satisfaction and happiness don't come from status or traditional "success". I'm less concerned with what I think other people think about me.



I know now that it's not just OK to "fail" and not have a plan, it's a major source of new learning. I've learned that it's possible to find work that is effortless and enjoyable (so much so that I feel I haven't really "worked" a day in the last 10 years).

Having unearthed what I really like doing, and built a business around that, I've now got the inner security in my ability to survive whatever happens in the future. I want my children to learn this same sense of security for themselves.

So having "been there and done that", here to be revealed for the first time, is **my secret of happiness**. It's the message about career satisfaction I would put in the bottle to my younger self.



Justin, I know you're in a good in-house lawyer job, but you should give it up for a promotion you won't like, where you'll acquire greater wealth, power and prestige, but must then give all that up, with nothing to go to, to pursue your childhood dreams in an area you're not trained in.

"Yeah, right!" my younger self would say.

So assuming I'd reject that advice, here's an alternative.

*Justin, spend more time working out **what you really like doing**. To do this, ask questions like "What fascinates me? What work would I do just for the fun of it? What work would I do if I already had \$200 million in the bank and only 5 years to live? What am I not just good at, but **genetically encoded to do**?" Use those things, rather than "status" and "more pay", to move into and through a series of jobs or roles that might suit you, until you find your best fit. You might even find you're already in your ideal job. In the meantime, stop worrying, and here are four tips for getting more happiness out of whatever job you're in at any time.*



1. Have a target

There's a reason golf courses have flags and holes, and why President Kennedy in 1961 pledged by the end of the decade to put a man on moon and bring him safely back.

It's because we humans are happiest when we've got a **target** to aim for, or a **big, hairy, audacious goal** to strive for, or a **defined purpose** to give us a feeling of control, or a **finish line** to tell us that a project will eventually be "done".



I think that without some sort of target, it's all just "mowing the grass". Let me tell you about grass mowing.

Imagine you've got a large field, covered in grass. You mow the grass, but it just comes back, so you've got to mow it again. At the end of the year, all you've got to show for your efforts is a pile of grass clippings and a field that still needs mowing.

At work, grass mowing is the feeling you get when all you do is get up, go to work, do emails, go to meetings, go home, watch TV, go to bed, and go shopping on weekends.

This way of working can feel like you're being swept along by an endless wave of disconnected "stuff". I think it's a **major destroyer of career satisfaction**.

Most of my day is coding, doing emails, and speaking with clients on the phone. But when people ask what I do, I don't say I'm a coder or in software support. I have two targets that I'm always thinking about. The first is "making our software as simple as possible whilst doing what it needs to do". The second is "building this business until it can work just as well without me there".



These targets give me something to aim for, and a context for all the bits that happen during a day. They stop me from a feeling of “just mowing the grass”.

For in-house lawyers, if most of your day is meetings, emails and handling transactions, this can easily feel like grass mowing. It quickly becomes not very exciting or motivating.

If so, perhaps it’s time to redefine your role (first in your head and then in your position description). **Give yourself a target**, and make it something compelling.

It’s up to you to pick something that motivates you, and gives you a context. But my suggestion is to get over the idea that your greatest contribution is the work you do on any particular deal. Consider having as your target “building a legal department that works whether I’m there or not”. It’s like shifting the department from Manual to Automatic. It’s a big goal, and something I’d find very compelling.



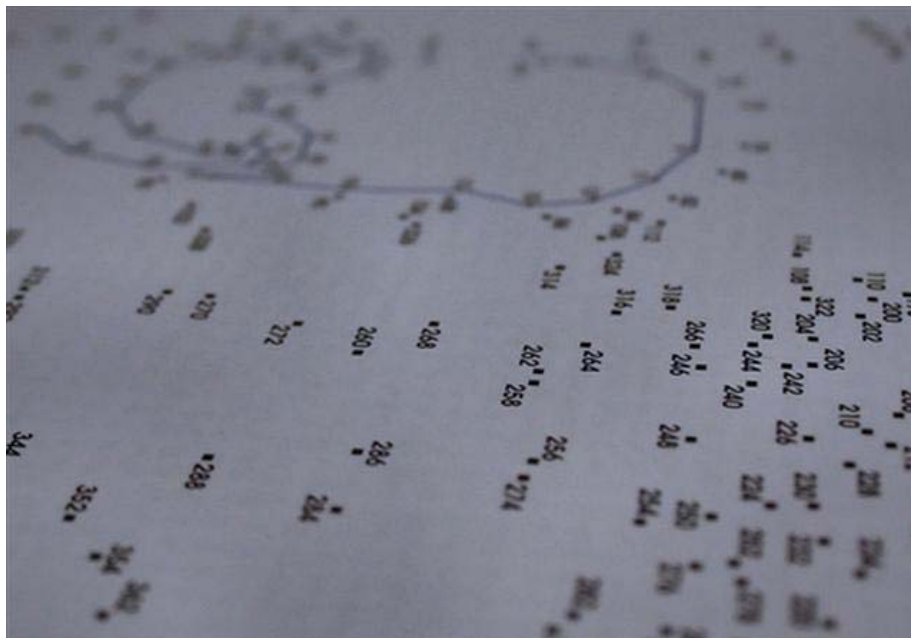
To make this switch in thinking, you need to start thinking of the legal department as a separate entity from the people working in it. Also, you need to believe that one day your legal department or position will be “done” (I bet you never thought of this concept before).

Whatever target you choose, remind yourself of it whenever you feel like you’re just mowing the grass.



2. Connect the dots

There's a reason Dyson cyclonic vacuum cleaners have clear dust bins. It's because we humans are happiest when we can see a **result for all our efforts**. In other words, we like to **connect the dots** between what we've been doing and a meaningful outcome.



At work, it's important to connect the dots between what you do and **what matters most to your organisation**. This helps you prove your value to others, and more importantly to yourself.

I think that a feeling of not being a contributor to what matters most is a **major destroyer of career satisfaction**. So how can you avoid this feeling?

My first suggestion is to make sure you report regularly on your activities, even if you're not required to report. My second suggestion is to make sure your report groups your activities under headings that reflect the organisation's priorities. This makes it easier for both you and others to connect the dots between what you're doing and what matters most.

I'll give you an example of what I mean by properly organising the contents of your report.

Think about a pile of clothes that need washing. The same pile of clothes needs to be organised in different ways depending on the context.

The first context is washing, where the clothes need to be grouped into whites, darks and pinks (given the young girls around our home). However, once the washing is done, the same clothes need to be grouped differently, into piles for ironing and folding. Finally, once that's done, the same clothes need to be grouped into even different piles, for putting away in various places.



If I presented the clothes for washing organised by the second context, they'd just have to be resorted. Yet this is what so many in-house lawyers do when they bother to report. They organise their activities into headings like "Litigation", "Commercial relationships" and "Intellectual property", when it would be more meaningful to group the activities into headings like "New alliances", "Launching new products", "Customer satisfaction", and "Cost control", or whatever matters in your organisation.

Connecting the dots in this way is likely to make you more satisfied at work, by giving you a sense of how your work connects with what matters to the organisation.

3. Regular bouts of concentrated solitude



Many workplaces I've seen for in-house lawyers are designed so that, because of all the interruptions, most real work must be done **outside normal business hours**. There's little opportunity during normal business hours for the lawyers to spend time thinking, concentrating, or learning new things. I think the absence of regular bouts of concentrated solitude during normal hours is a **major destroyer of career satisfaction**.

One of the best parts about my job is that I get to spend lots of uninterrupted time on really challenging projects. I never tackle an important project when there are likely to be distractions or if I'm tired, because it would take me twice as long to do it, and I would probably need to undo all the work the next day anyway.

There's nothing like that feeling of "flow", where you put your head down to a task, and the next time you look up, an hour or two have passed.

For in-house lawyers, ask whether you're inviting constant interruptions with the traditional offers that clients should "come



to us early” and “my door is always open”. I think you pay a heavy price for these unconditional offers, both in terms of the quality of your work, and the quality of the projects you get to work on.

I think it’s like being a good musician – the skill is in knowing what notes to play, and which notes **not to play**. While you’re busy helping everyone who fronts up to your door, chances are there are much more important projects getting no attention.

The question is how to ensure you get to spend lots of uninterrupted time on a handful of significant, challenging projects. Here are some suggestions.



First, clean out your office. Have a cull. Just as you defrag your hard drive, defrag your workspace. Get rid of the distractions that have sat there for ages (like old magazines, old books and old files).

Second, create a set of rules for the work you will and won’t do, and how you’re to be briefed. Think of it as a firewall, keeping out all the net nasties. Set some conditions and boundaries.

Third, get a gatekeeper, even occasionally. It could be another lawyer, or an assistant. The gatekeeper gets to triage the constant interruptions, and lets you have some regular bouts of concentrated solitude.

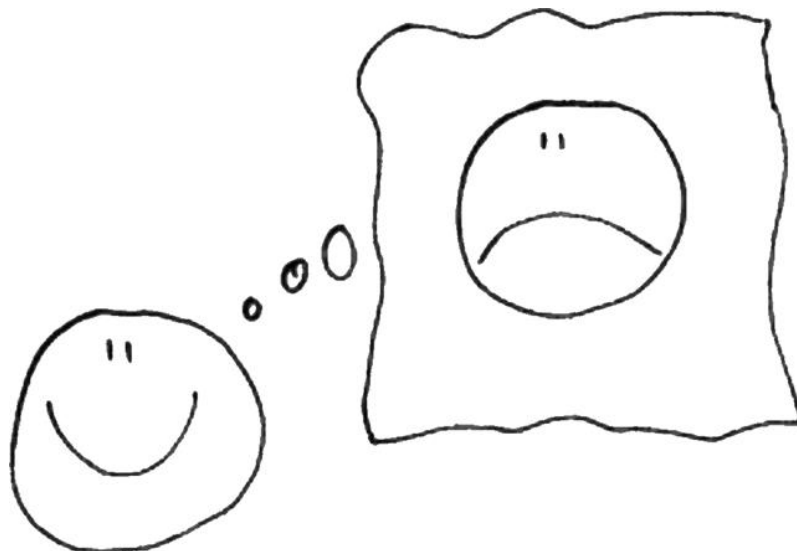
Finally, put plenty of systems in place. For example, I’ve got a PDF of instructions for installing our software. I’ve been polishing it up for years now, and adding and subtracting hints and tips as I learn more from each new client. This way, I can share years’ worth of knowledge with just an emailed PDF. Also, this knowledge is available whether I’m around or not.

Contrary to popular opinion, you’re not necessarily doing yourself or anyone else a favour by having a constantly open door.



4. Remember how lucky we are already

In my experience, forgetting how lucky we are already could be the **biggest cause of career dissatisfaction**. We're all so lucky already that we'd be quite happy if we didn't think ourselves into unhappiness.



I suspect our tendency to **think ourselves into unhappiness** comes back to how we humans are wired. Evolutionary psychologists tell us that just as our bodies are products of evolution, so are our minds. Evolution has programmed us to pretty quickly take for granted everything we've got, and then want more than the next person.

In a way, we should be thankful for this, because we're the descendents of a long line of ancient ancestors that lived in difficult times, never settled for what they had, always fought for more, and survived long enough to have children.

But now that we live with abundance (and there are no sabre tooth tigers after us), that wiring can be counter-productive. I say this because even someone with a perfectly good job is always scanning for what other people have got.

Our sense of being a success is relative, and the slightest variation torments us ("I'm not getting ahead fast enough"). We lawyers are particularly susceptible to this, because often we're high achievers, perfectionists and highly competitive.

It was this sort of thinking that led me onto the business development path when it didn't suit me.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying don't try to get ahead or get paid fairly. But if you're reading this you're well into the level of abundance already, so keep things in perspective.

Let me tell you about two things I do to remind myself how lucky I am already.



Stop “comparing up” and start “comparing down”



Imagine I give you \$1,000. It makes you a bit happier, doesn't it? But what if I give the person next to you \$5,000? Suddenly you're not so happy, even though you got a substantial gift. The trick is that you'd still be feeling happy if only you didn't know what I gave the other person.

It's for this reason that I've gone cold turkey on lots of sources of “information”. I consciously avoid **unhelpful comparisons** (i.e. things I don't need to know and that would make me less happy). Here are some examples.

- **Rich lists.** I never read any of those BRW rich lists (*Rich List, Young Rich List, Fastest Growing Companies List, Executive Rich List*). They won't motivate me to work any harder, and they'll only make me less satisfied with what I've got.
- **Salary surveys.** I never participate in or read salary surveys. If I did, I wouldn't be able to stop myself feeling unhappier afterwards, because there would always be someone earning more than me.
- **Honours and awards.** I don't check who is getting honours and awards, and don't seek them myself.
- **Alumni journals.** Until someone comes up with an alumni journal that profiles only people who have lost their jobs, money and hair, I won't be reading them either.
- **Sunday papers.** Same for the Sunday papers and their magazines, profiling “people that matter”. Instead, I read books (for myself and to my children), or take my girls on a train trip into city to see the buskers. I end up much happier.

I know I should know better than let these things get to me, but I can't help it, so why torment myself? Instead of making unhelpful comparisons upwards, I make helpful comparisons downwards. I'll give you an example.



Warren Buffett is an American investor, businessman and philanthropist. He's regarded as one of the world's greatest stock market investors, and is one of the world's richest men.

There's a story about when Warren once met with a group of young entrepreneurs. To their surprise, he didn't talk about stock picking, but the biggest lottery you could imagine.



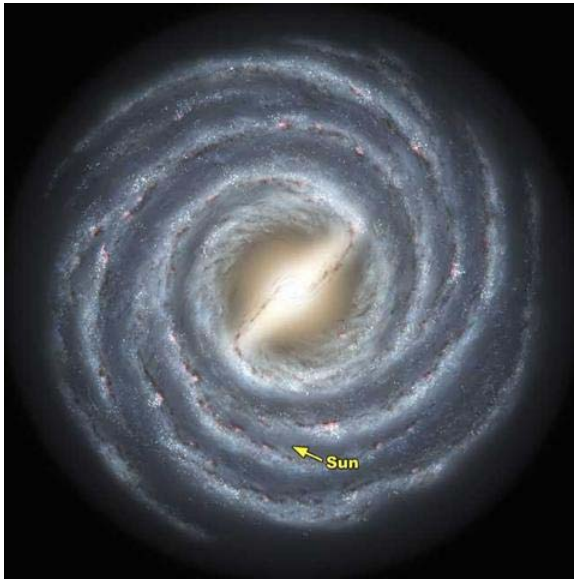
He reminded them that there are roughly 6 billion people in the world. Warren said to imagine the world's biggest lottery where every one of those 6 billion people was required to draw a ticket. Printed on each ticket were the circumstances in which they would be required to live for the rest of their lives.

If you're reading this, it's fair to assume **you've got a pretty good ticket already**. So you're unlikely to put up your hand to participate in that lottery, which was Warren's point. The thought of such a lottery should help you put into perspective how fortunate you are already, and stop worrying whether someone else might be earning more or have more status.

Remember the really big picture

Whenever you start feeling a bit hard-done-by for some reason, and about to sabotage your career satisfaction as a result, think about the following **really big picture**. Hopefully it will remind you you're lucky to be here, and to have everything you've got.

Let's start with the Earth. Compared to any one person, the Earth is pretty big. But the Earth is tiny compared with the Sun. But even the Sun, which is a star, is tiny when you think about our galaxy, the Milky Way (shown below) which contains about 400 billion stars. There's our Sun, nestled in one of the galaxy's spiral arms.



But the picture gets even bigger. The Hubble Space Telescope is a telescope in orbit around the Earth. In late 2003, scientists pointed Hubble at an unremarkable patch of the night sky, about the size of a pencil point at arms length. The resulting picture is called the Ultra Deep Field. Here's a small part of it (you'll easily find the whole picture on the web).



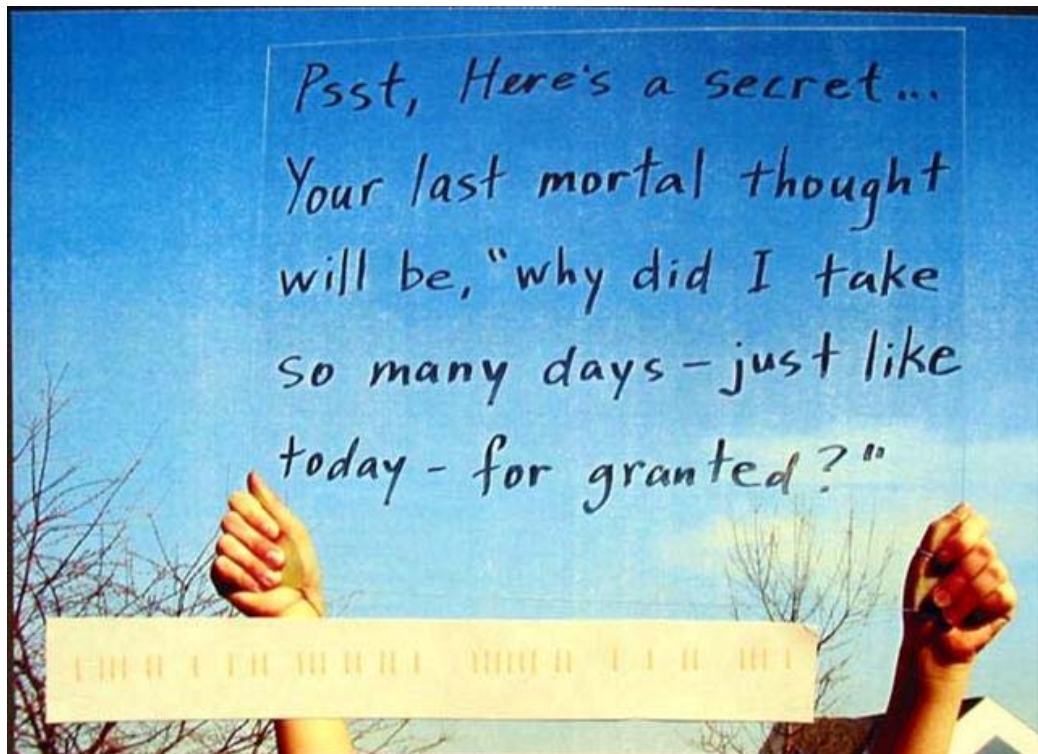
The Ultra Deep Field shows about 10,000 objects in that tiny patch of sky. The amazing thing is that each object is not a star, but a galaxy. Think about that for a moment. That's a really big picture, and possibly the biggest one ever taken.

None of us knows whether there's intelligent life on any planet, other than Earth, in all these galaxies in the universe. With the way we forget how lucky we are, maybe there's not much intelligent life on Earth either!



The Ultra Deep Field reminds me that nothing much outside my business and my family revolves around me, and to focus on those things. It reminds me to keep things in perspective when I start taking for granted how good things are already, or start experiencing **career dissatisfaction** because someone I know is earning a bit more than me or has a bit more status.

Life seems long, but it's not, and we're dead a long time. I know that one day will be my last day, and I'll regret having taken any of my days for granted.



So, despite how I'm wired, I try to be grateful every day for what I've got already, and to remember how lucky I am. This perspective alone immunises me against all sorts of things that would otherwise undermine my career satisfaction.

That's all

That's all I wanted to say about **career satisfaction** and whether the **grass is greener** on the other side. Let me recap the message in a bottle back to my younger self.

First, happiness is fragile, and the grass isn't always greener.

Second, as an in-house lawyer, you've got it good, so don't endanger that by worrying too much about things like status and even more pay.



Third, instead, spend more time working out what you really like doing, and then find a job that lets you use those skills all the time (it might even be the one you're in).

To work out what you really like doing, try lots of jobs while you can, and read lots of books in diverse areas, until you find whatever grabs you most. Follow your interests, even if they lead you in unexpected directions. For example, I never thought I'd be building a software business.

Fourth, whether you're currently in your ideal job or not, give yourself some happiness by:

- **Having a target** (because we like to have something to aim for).
- **Connecting the dots** between what you do and what matters (because we like to feel that we're making a difference).
- **Having regular bouts of concentrated solitude** (because that feels great and helps you get things done).
- **Remembering how lucky you are already**, how short life is, and not to waste any of that time on unhelpful comparisons.

It's too late for my younger self, but **it's not too late for us**. So if we're smart enough to listen to this message in a bottle, rather than our competitive instincts, maybe we'll spend less time worrying about things that won't make us happier, and more time enjoying the things that do, in the precious, little time we've got left.

