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<https://www.law.com/americanlawyer/2022/06/10/want-your-lawyers-to-stay-put-value-them-for-their-skill-not-billing-habits/>[NEWS](#)

## Want Your Lawyers To Stay Put? Value Them for Their Skill, Not Billing Habits

Big Law attorneys are among the most stressed and least happy in the profession, according to a recent survey of nearly 2,000 lawyers in California and Washington, D.C.

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Mental Health



**Dan Roe**  
Reporter

### What You Need to Know

- A new study found that lawyers who feel valued for their skill and professionalism are less stressed and less likely to quit than those who feel valued for their productivity.
- Attorneys at large law firms and corporate legal departments were more likely to feel valued primarily for their productivity.
- The research is tied to the psychological theory of Self Determination, which states that people need to feel valued for skills and competence.

Two years ago, lawyer and mental health consultant Patrick Krill set out to test a hypothesis: Is the commodification of the legal field, such that it looks more like big business than a profession, tied to deteriorating mental and physical health among attorneys?

The answer appears to be yes, according to [a study Krill published](#) with the University of Minnesota's psychiatry department this month in Behavioral Sciences. Having surveyed nearly 2,000 attorneys in California and Washington, D.C., in summer 2020 about their well-being and the value they felt they represented to their employers, Krill's team discovered that lawyers who felt valued for their individual skills were happier, less stressed, less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and less likely to quit their firms or the profession altogether than those who felt like billing units or got no meaningful feedback.

About 62% of respondents, which included attorneys at law firms, corporate legal departments and government agencies, said their employers made them feel valued as professionals. Roughly 27% of lawyers said they felt their firms valued them for their financial worth and availability, and 10% of lawyers said they didn't feel valued or didn't receive meaningful feedback.

The responses varied by employer type and size: Lawyers at law firms were more likely to feel valued for their productivity than their skill, compared to those at corporate legal departments and government agencies. The same trend occurred for lawyers at large law firms and corporate legal departments, Krill said. They were also disproportionately recognized for being productive, compared to peers in smaller firms and legal departments.

"Even though our hypothesis was confirmed, I was surprised by how unequivocally it was confirmed across every metric we looked at," Krill said. "Mental health, physical health, has your time in the profession been harmful to you, does your workplace normalize bad behavior, has your time in the profession caused you to drink more or use drugs—in every category, we saw this hierarchy emerge."

The data lines up with the self-determination theory in psychology, Krill said, which states that people need to feel autonomous, competent and connected in order to grow psychologically. Without making lawyers feel valued for their ability, firms aren't satisfying attorneys' need to feel competent.

"Lawyers spend a lot of time, effort and money to become lawyers, and most probably pride themselves on their intellect and their skill," Krill said. "If they're not being recognized for that in a meaningful way, that core psychological need we all have is going unmet. I think it's reasonable to say that feeling like you're in a primarily transactional relationship with your employer doesn't lead to the best mental health outcomes.

Lawyers with a lifetime diagnosis of a mental health disorder composed about half of the 10% who didn't receive feedback or feel valued by their employers. Perceived value and health outcomes were also associated with gender, race and ethnicity, and time in the profession. Women were more likely to feel valued for financial worth than men, who were more likely to feel valued for their skill. Nonwhite lawyers were more likely to say that their employers didn't provide meaningful feedback or value them. And younger lawyers were more likely to feel valued financially rather than for their skills.

The status of mental health in the legal profession hasn't improved since Krill collected his data two years ago. According to the [ALM Mental Health & Substance Abuse Survey](#), nearly 1 in 5 respondents said they had contemplated suicide, and 67% said they were anxious. About 35% of the lawyers said they felt depressed, while 44% of those said they weren't feeling depressed before the pandemic. Isolation remains a problem, too, with 44% of respondents identifying as such.

Krill, who also educates law firm leadership about mental health, said he hopes his research doesn't feel daunting—even to firms with high expectations for billable hours. He urges firm leaders to examine every touch point at which the firm has an opportunity to genuinely convey their value of the attorney as an individual and make incremental progress.

"I've had this conversation with a handful of firm leaders over the last couple of weeks: How do we make people feel more valued for their skill and humanity and also ensure they're hitting their billable targets?" Krill said. "That's going to take some creativity, but I'd caution firms to not view it in binary terms—either billables as paramount or we make them feel good as lawyers and people too. You can do both effectively."

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