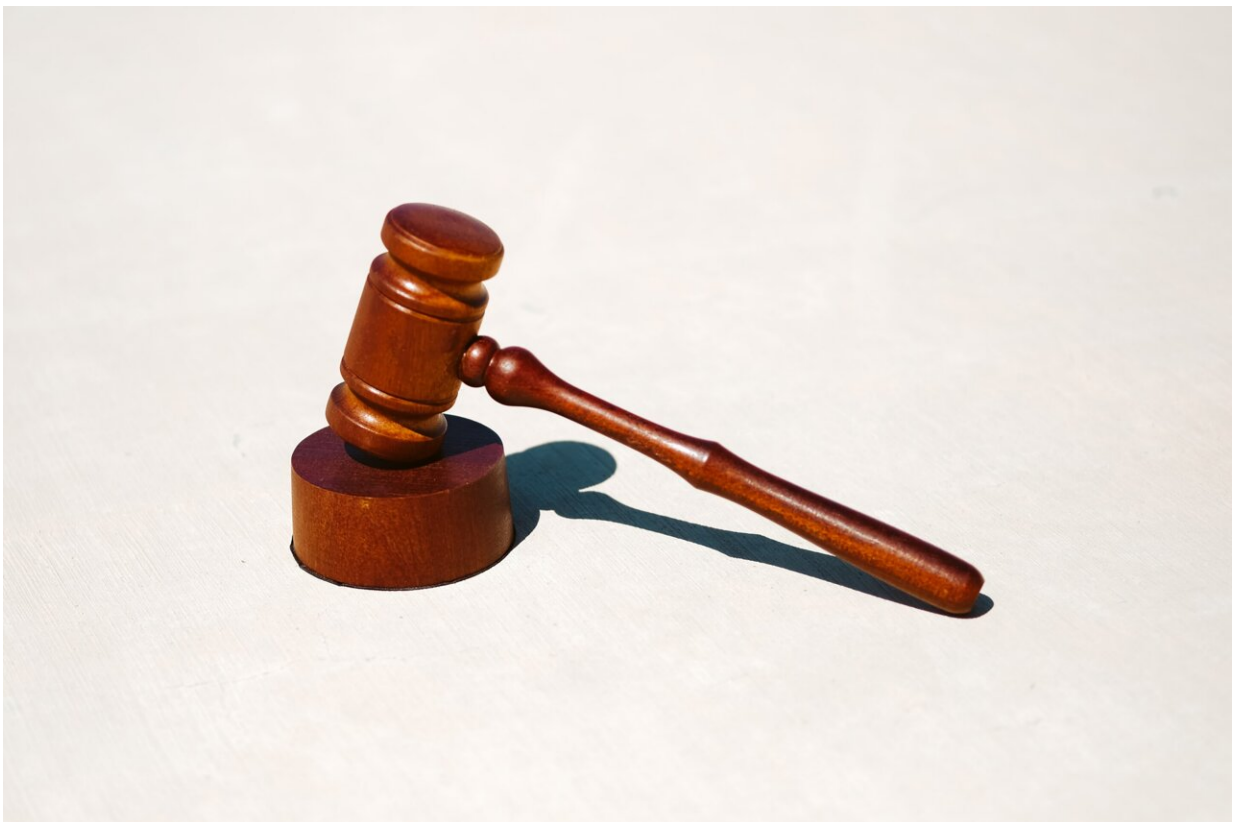


From excitement to disillusionment—new research identifies 4 emotional stages of professional careers

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Lawyers progress through four distinct emotional stages in their fight to get to the top and secure a coveted partnership role, according to new

research from the University of Bath's School of Management.

The study of UK legal professionals showed they progressed from excitement and anticipation at the start of their career, followed by fear and anxiety as they pursue promotion, to pride and joy at securing a senior post, and finally experiencing disillusionment and disappointment at the lack of further change.

The research team said the experience of lawyers offered an emotionally rich, structured environment to study. The study notes that, in law firms, career progression is the core organizing principle, structuring legal professionals' working lives. Additionally, emotions are prevalent, shared, and complex—partners have strong bonds with each other and their junior protégés, and great significance is attached to partnership as the pinnacle of career success.

"There is a lot of literature around individual career management strategies and organizational promotion practices, but we were interested in the 'felt' experiences and exploring the emotional aspects of employment. Professionals' careers are suffused with emotions—some of the lawyers we interviewed used phrases like 'love' when talking about partnership and felt great pride when being promoted," said Dr. Stefanie Gustafsson of the University's School of Management.

"Our research focused on lawyers but we believe the learnings could apply equally to any top professions. Such employees go through a rollercoaster of challenging emotions, positive and negative that HR and line managers should consider and understand, particularly to develop coping skills and provide support in cultures where success is celebrated but failure is frequently stigmatized," she said.

The [research paper](#)—"[Emotions careers: The interplay between careers and emotions in professional organisation](#)", co-authored by Dan

Kärreman of Copenhagen Business School, recommends that HR practitioners and line managers develop a greater awareness of the emotional dynamics associated with careers and give greater weight to employee well-being.

"Career conversations such as appraisals or reviews should create a space for talking not just about nuts-and-bolts performance but also about emotions and finding meaningful ways forward, particularly when employees suffer career setbacks when they are emotionally invested," Dr. Gustafsson said.

"One encouraging development is that we are increasingly seeing people openly discuss their career setbacks on social media and it may be helpful to create a culture and safe space where this is common and accepted," she added.

The research also revealed how the unquestioning value and shared emotional investment attached to achieving a partnership role in a law firm—a principle embedded in the system from the very start—meant an employee wanting to take an [alternative route](#) would not be as well regarded as those who strove to reach the top.

"Managers should challenge the negative perceptions around [alternative career](#) paths and engage in positive cultural change to create more diverse and accepting thinking about careers outside the defined train tracks. People should be given options and not feel devalued for taking them," Dr. Gustafsson said.

The work is [published](#) in the *Human Resource Management Journal*.

More information: Stefanie Gustafsson et al, Emotions careers: The interplay between careers and emotions in professional organisations, *Human Resource Management Journal* (2023). [DOI:](#)

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