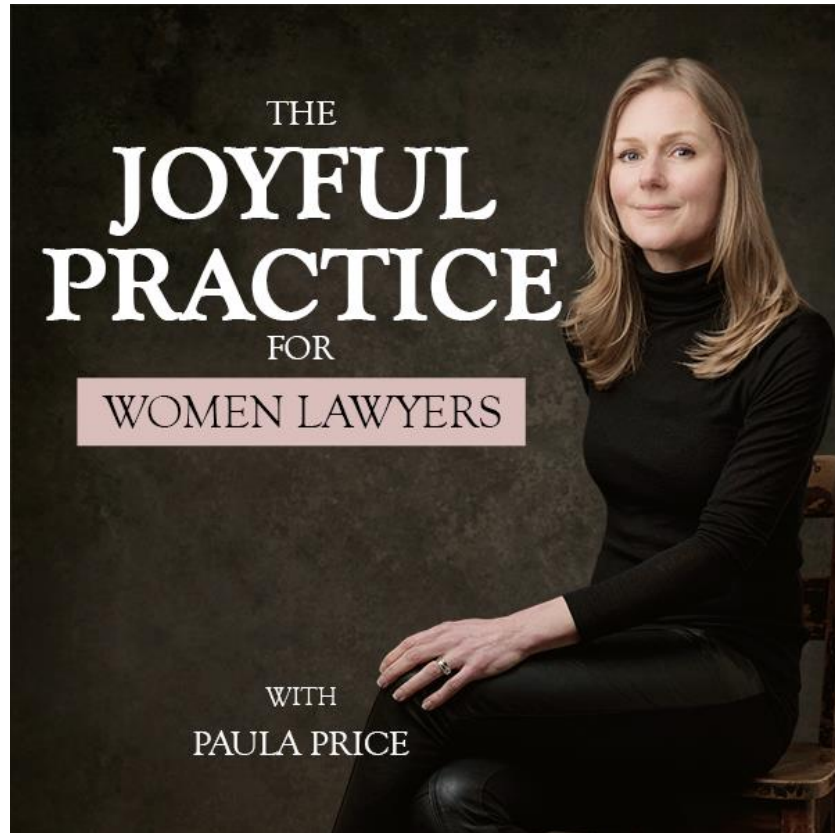


Ep #61: Happy Lawyers at Work with Sara Forte



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Paula Price

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You're listening to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast episode number 61.

Welcome to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast. I'm your host Paula Price, lawyer turned certified executive coach. This podcast was created to empower women lawyers just like you to create a life and practice you love. Join me every week for a break from the hustle so we can focus on you, what you truly want, and how you can create it.

If you're over the overwhelm, done with putting out fires, and ready to create a life and practice that brings you more joy, you're in the right place. Ready for today's episode? Let's dive in.

Paula: Hi, everybody. Welcome back to the podcast. It is Paula here, and I'm so very excited to be introducing you to this week's guest. If you do not know Sarah Forte then you are in for such a treat. If you know her, you're, of course, also in for such a treat. Sarah is an employment lawyer who has founded her own firm. It is called Forte Law. She is also a founder of a very special project called Not Your Average Law Job. Sarah is going to tell us all about what that entails. I think you're going to love it. So welcome Sarah to the podcast. It is such a treat to have you on.

Sarah: Thank you, Paula. It is such an honor to be here. I've been following your podcast and very excited to be part of it.

Paula: I'm so delighted. We had your colleague, Catalina Rodriguez, in I think a couple months back now talking about difficult conversations in the workplace. She, of course, is amazing like you and your team. So delighted to have you here as well. To kick off our conversation, Sarah, I would love for you to tell our listeners a little bit about yourself in terms of who you are and the current work that you do.

Sarah: Sure, it's a big question.

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Paula: Yes. It's a big answer.

Sarah: You know when you fill up a glass, and you fill it up to the very top. I certainly see my kids do this a lot. Then they try to pick it up and drink it and a little bit spills out. It's very hard to manage that without a bit spilling out. That's really the analogy of my life. My cup is very, very full. It is a little bit spilly at times, that's part of the fun.

I have three kids, as they're age nine to 15. I have an awesome engineer husband who keeps everything working at home. He also helps out here to keep everything working in the office, and has his own full time job. His cup is also he's also full to the brim. We didn't get a puppy in the pandemic, but we got chickens instead. Backyard chickens. So we have five backyard chickens

Paula: Love it. Fresh eggs for breakfast.

Sarah: Fresh eggs for breakfast, and just like a new and interesting thing to learn about as a family, which is pretty cool. I am currently watching *Only Murders in the Building* with my older kids, emphasis on the older because there's a lot of our language in that show. So I told them that I was going to be on a podcast because *Only Murders in the Building* is a show about making a podcast, and they were very excited. I think they'd be very disappointed if they listened to this podcast and heard it was just about me.

Paula: You never know. They might learn how amazing—Well, they already know how amazing their mother is but.

Sarah: For sure, but they do hear and see a lot about me. So that's on our currently watching list. I'm the president of the board of Sources Community Wellness Society, which is a large provincial not for profit organization that does wraparound services to those in need in our

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communities, including people living in poverty or experiencing homelessness or domestic violence or addiction.

We have wraparound services that include food banks, women's centers, advocacy services, trauma counseling, employment support. You name it, we do it. So that's a really big and important part of my life that I get a lot of good out of I would say.

I also am a lawyer. I guess that's why I'm here. So I own a firm called Forte Workplace Law. We are a firm of 13 now. I always have to think about that for a sec. Our offices or are in Alberta and BC. I do client facing work. So I'm a labor and employment lawyer. I also do a lot of human rights law. I'm also workplace investigator and most recently a mediator. So do all of those things working with clients, and then, of course, I also run the firm. Within that really try to focus my time on mentoring, marketing, and strategy which are my three favorite parts of the business.

I'm also a facilitator for our Stand Up Teams program. Stand Up Teams is a respectful workplace training program that we developed that includes bystander training. I am also chief happiness officer, my favorite title at Not Your Average Law Job. So yeah. Every day for me is a big mix of all of those things I just talked about, and everyday looks a little bit different.

Paula: Love it. I can just imagine the spilly cup, right? There's all these different roles that you play and hats you're wearing from chicken looker after to the other areas of your life, the professional work, your firm. I remember, I think it was back in 2017, when I saw you at an in person event, and you handed me your business card and told me you were setting up shop. It has grown so much since then. It's just such a pleasure to be able to witness that and to have the chance to connect with you along the way and hear how things are progressing for you.

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One of the things I'd love for you to talk about is how you got to where you are. Because I talk to a lot of lawyers who are kind of struggling with where they are in relation to where they think they want to be. They're concerned sometimes. They know they want to make a move, but they don't know if the next move is the right move.

What I admire about your path, number one, is just the number of different interests that you have and how you seem to be able to balance all of them. But also the way that your path doesn't seem to be a linear one way road. It's got some pivots in there. So I'd love for you to share how you got to where you are from the beginning to where you are now.

Sarah: Yeah, I think you sort of nailed it with the balancing all the things I'm doing. I think that's a big part of what people see in me now. It wasn't always that way from the beginning. I think that when I have young lawyers come and talk to me, and they're just maybe just starting to practice. They're thinking about starting their own firm, and they're wondering sort of how I do it all. That's the most commonly asked question.

I always say like I didn't do it all at once. Like now I'm really active on LinkedIn, and I write articles, and I do presentations, but I didn't do all of that my whole career. My career has had seasons to it that have reflected my life, and what my needs were and what I needed from work and what I had to give to work over those periods of time, which is different. When I was at BLG starting out, I always remember this lunch that I had with the managing partner who was a woman at the time, which was quite unusual back way back then.

Paula: It's not that way back when.

Sarah: She had children. I think maybe this was after I had one child, or maybe I was pregnant at the time. But it was definitely on my mind. I was

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so excited for this lunch. So I thought I'm going to ask her how she does it all. The question is.

Paula: Of course. Of course. The magical question.

Sarah: So I said, because she was the managing partner and she had kids. I was like how do you do it all? She said she looks at her career as a 40 year career, and she doesn't have to do everything at once. Just because she's not doing something right now doesn't mean it's not important to her doesn't mean it's not going to happen. It's just now's not the time. If you try to do everything at once, you won't succeed. Because you just can't do all the things at one time going full bore on all of them.

That was really mind blowing to me. Like I think when you're starting out in your career, like do you ever stop and think like I've got like three or four decades to do this? You kind of have this sense of urgency, right? Like I have to do this now. I have to move now. I have to volunteer now. I have to figure out how to land clients now. I have to learn the law now.

For me, I really took it one step at a time. So for my first six years when I was at BLG, I was only a junior. That worked really well for me at that time because I was, at the same time, having two babies, taking two full year mat leaves. When I came back, I didn't have a whole bunch of clients I had to re-introduce myself to. I had the three partners that I worked with who knew me, and were frankly just so happy to have me. So it worked very well for me at that time. It let me get a really solid grounding in the law, and really understand employment law at that time and labor law.

Then the next phase of my career was, I guess just to pause there. Like when I started to look at where I was and think okay this doesn't seem to be a long term fit for me. I think a big part of that was looking around and not seeing anyone who had a life I wanted. Great lawyers, great people,

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continued to be great friends, but it wasn't where I saw my life going along the paths of the people around me.

So I just poked my head up and thought at that point I'd been at a big firm for six years. Pretty much all my friends were doing the same thing as me because I'd lost contact with people who weren't. So I intentionally got out and met people who are doing things that were interesting or different in a very open ended way just to kind of like hear about what they were doing. I did a lot of lunches. Then I would ask them like who else do you think I should meet?

Very quickly in that exercise, one, I realized, there's like a whole world of legal careers out here that I didn't even know existed. Themes started to emerge as I was talking to people and listening to them. A lot of them were you have to go talk to Nicole Howell, which is what I ended up doing.

I ended up at that point going to HHBG Lawyers. I was ready to have my own files. At that point, I wasn't junioring anymore. I switched sides to do the employee and union side predominantly. It was a contract job, which was perfect for someone in my stage. I had two little kids. I ended up having another baby while I was there. I was able to do meaningful work on a contract basis, which meant I didn't have any non-billable obligations. This was like way before remote work from home was a thing. I was working remotely most of the time. It worked really, really well for me at that point in my life.

Then again, I, sort of six years into that, started thinking okay, I've got a little more energy to put towards work now. Kind of feeling like I've learned what I have to learn here. What's next? Then went through a very similar process of talking to different people thinking about different things. In the end, for me, it was I read this blog that said if you if you're thinking about a bunch of different options and they all have pros and cons, choose the one

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that's biggest. For me, that was the smallest option, which was starting off as a sole practitioner.

Paula: Beautiful, beautiful, I love that story. I think what I love especially is that you started with the big firm then you went into a smaller firm where you were able to work remotely before everybody was working remotely. Then you made that transition to where you are now. I wonder what it is that prompted you at each of the different stages.

I love that you explain too how you went about those changes, reaching out to different lawyers, figuring out what other people were doing. I think that's such an important step when we start evaluating our career and where we want to go, what can we learn from others who have taken different paths? It's not all linear, as we're talking about. How did you know that it was time for you to make a switch?

Sarah: I think part of it was just gut feel, like listening to yourself. But, for me, it was my career timeline followed my family timeline. I think, for me, I needed, like I said, I had different things to put into work and different things to get out of work at those phases. I think if you don't pay attention to those, it's just like seasons of the year. Like you'll end up on today, this beautiful, sunny summer day wearing your winter jacket because you have missed that the season has changed, and you're still doing the same thing.

So I think in that same way is like my life changed, and my needs changed. Like my husband and I always think back to the good old days when we were at the big firm, and we'd go to all the concerts in the Box, and we lived downtown. It's like that all was like really fun and great at the time for us.

That's a small point, but like those kinds of perks and good things that come along with that kind of job weren't really accessible to us anymore when we had small children and moved farther out. So it's just I think about, for me, was about listening to myself. I also think there's something

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about the six year for me, the six year itch maybe? Although I've just passed—

Paula: Oh dear. We're getting close.

Sarah: I'm very close to it, but more on that later. Yeah, it's just for me, like I said, different needs, different things to give. Just recognizing that like either you need to, at that point, be in a workplace where you can make those kinds of changes that's going to be adaptable, or it might be time to make a change.

Paula: Absolutely. What was it like when you decided to go solo? I mean did you expect that Forte Workplace Law would become a firm of 13 lawyers at the time? Or what was it that you anticipated when you went big?

Sarah: Well, Paula, I know you have a big firm background too. So I distinctly remember when I was a young lawyer at BLG getting letters on letterhead—it was faxes those days, right—from solo practitioners in Surrey, and thinking oh, they must be incompetent and can't get along well with others and probably aren't making any money. It was just like completely looking down on that. If you would have said, Sarah one day you're going to be a sole practitioner in Surrey, I would have thought it was an insult.

Paula: Interesting.

Sarah: Thanks. So it's been quite the journey down the corporate ladder for me for sure. I never, ever would have imagined that I was going to be a sole practitioner. But when I started out on my own, I intended to be just that. Like I have no growth plans. I wrote up a business plan that had me billing four hours a day four days a week, keeping my overhead really low,

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and making a reasonable income without working that much and just sort of continuing to keep my focus at home with my family.

But what I discovered was I had been really like sitting on this box full of my ambition for a long time. I turned 40 when I started my law firm, it was like within a few weeks, and I decided to open the box. It was just everything flew out of there. I haven't been able to get it back in at all since then.

I think I learned that I love marketing, I love building relationships. I love business. I never would have thought that. Like the business of law is so interesting. Yeah. So it has not at all been what I thought it would be. The first few hires I had were definitely very like my assistant was like I'm starting to lose track of things. I remember looking at my "to be filed" pile, and it was like two feet tall. I thought I'm never gonna file that. Like okay, I need someone to help me here.

Paula: Yeah.

Sarah: Then I hired my first associates who was someone I met who lived in the community out in South Surrey, where I am. We were introduced by a friend, and she was looking to sort of move her practice from Vancouver to a local law firm. So I got busy, of course, introducing her to everyone I know and talking about all the different firms and where she could work and sort of realized how amazing she was and how busy I was and then threw my hat in the ring. She said, "I was hoping you would do that."

Paula: Amazing.

Sarah: We just grew organically. Then we hit a point though where the infrastructure started falling apart. I realized that if you don't plan to grow, you're going to come up against bumps. So when I purchased our space that we moved into a year ago and started really investing with infrastructure, seeing that we have grown as much as we can have, and

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that we likely will continue to grow to make sure that we have the things in place we need to support more people.

Paula: Beautiful, good for you. I remember when you initially brought on your first lawyer. Seeing you and her together at different social events, and I just thought it was so neat to see you as a team, and to see how much your team has grown over the last few years.

Sarah: That's been one of the most rewarding parts Paula. Like when I talk to a client and I help them, and I give them information and empower them to make confident decisions going forward, that feels amazing.

But what feels even more amazing is when I see a client review of one of my team and realize that reach is so much broader than I ever could have done myself. That I've created a workplace that's allowed people who might not have otherwise stayed in law to have nontraditional or individualized work arrangements that have kept these amazing people in and then allowed them to help all these other people. So it's got a lot of layers of goodness that I think staying a sole practitioner wouldn't have been the same.

Paula: I love it. It's really expanding the scope of what you're able to do and what you're able to empower other lawyers to do. I just love that. In terms of being intentional. What are the values that have guided you as you've grown your practice and your firm?

Sarah: One of the big ones is individualization and talking to each person who's joining our firm about what they want and need out of work and what they have to give to work. Then designing work arrangements that are going to meet those needs so that you don't end up in this place where so many lawyers are where your work and your life are in conflict. So that has been very rewarding, and, to be honest, like you not that difficult.

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Like it really just sort of make sense. Like we don't have a set compensation. Like this year a call makes this much money and has to bill this much and do this many non-billable hours. It's like what do you want to do? How much do you want to work? What kinds of things do you want to work on? Then coming up with a compensation package and work conditions that make that person be able to maximize the value that they have to add, and feel good about their work. So that's been, I would say, like huge from the beginning. In the start, I did that for myself. Then I expanded it to be able to do it for others.

Experimentation. So when I started the firm, I was doing everything the way I had done it before. So like everything billed by the hour, sort of just same kind of retainer letter terms. Like everything kind of looked the same 'cause I'd only ever really experienced sort of a traditional model.

As I got into it, I really wanted to, for instance, start doing flat rate consultations with clients because I really didn't like when someone's been fired, and they bring you their severance package. When you're billing them by the hour, every question they ask costs them more money. So sometimes you don't get all the information you need. Even I'm trying to kind of rush them along because I don't want to have to charge them more than I need to.

So when I was thinking about it, I talked to my dad who was doing my books at the time. I was like I don't know about this. He said, "Well, why don't you just try it? Like you can always go back." I was like right. I sort of realized that the only things I have to comply with are the Law Society rules and like CRA rules, but like other than that you can kind of structure things however you want.

Moving to those flat rate consultations, we're still doing them today, was completely transformational in the amount that I enjoyed that work. Because I like people. I like talking to people. I like hearing about what they

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do. I like building relationships. I want them to feel good about the experience. That matters to me, and it makes me feel good.

So now we can chat at the beginning. I can hear a little bit about their life and their job and their goals, and that's all actually really relevant. But if you were on like okay you're paying me for every extra six minutes, you probably wouldn't get to all of that. So am I making a little bit less money? Maybe. But my enjoyment of the work and the quality of the work I'm providing has really gone through the roof.

So we do experiment a lot. We're a firm full of love. I always tell people that if they're considering joining the firm. It's like okay we kind of just like splashing around in a big puddle of love here. We really love each other. We really care about each other. We really love our clients. We love our community. Like it's really a central feature, and that's not everybody's jam. Some people just kind of want to go into work and check in and check out. So that's also really central.

We recently, as a group, defined their values, and they're heart, courage, and kindness. Those are our firm values. So you can see how that lines up with everything that we've been doing all along.

Paula: Amazing. I love that approach of sitting down with each lawyer and asking them what they want. Not just from the sort of compensation and how are we going to structure this perspective, but also, for that lawyer, it's an opportunity for them to actually step back and think about that question, right?

Because I think a lot of the time we go okay well, I'll be an employment lawyer. I'll do what an employment lawyer does. Versus being thoughtful and intentional about okay but what is it really that I'm looking to do here? What is the optimal balance between my work life and my non-work life? So creating an opportunity to have that conversation, I think, is probably

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very impactful for not just structuring that, but for that lawyer being decisive about what they're looking for out of their work.

Sarah: I totally agree. I find that people struggle with it. It's a hard question.

Paula: It's a very hard question.

Sarah: It is a hard question. I agree with that, especially if you have never had that experience before where you've just always had to do the work that was given to you, and you never really have an opportunity to think about what it is that I would like.

So we had a team coach come in and work with us last year, which was really great. It was not that anything was going wrong with our team. It was more about like we're growing. We're going to continue growing. Things are awesome. What is it that's going awesome, and how do we intentionally hold on to those things?

Sustainability was one of them. I was approaching sustainability thinking it's like number of hours of work. But right away in this discussion with our whole group, it pivoted to that is part of it, but it's also what you're doing and how it makes you feel. Because you can spend the same number of hours of things doing different things and it feels completely different. Right?

Paula: Absolutely.

Sarah: So that wasn't coming from me. That was coming from the group as a whole. We have that discussion every month. I sit down every month with every lawyer and say like how's it going, really? How's your workload? Do you want more of something? Do you want less of something? We set goals, which are like a huge range of things. Like sometimes it'll be like I want to get engaged with a community organization. Sometimes it's I want

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to write an article on sexual harassment in the legal profession and publish it. Or I want to start doing more labor law, or I want to get more proficient in workplace investigations. So it's like a big range of things.

So we're discussing these things every single month. So it's not one and done. Even within the range of month to month, but certainly within year to year, know what is going to work for people and what they want, what their goals are to change of it and become more refined as their life changes.

Paula: Good for you. I think there's that idea of spending 80% in your practice, and 20% on your practice, or whatever ratio works for the lawyer. I think for you to be building that infrastructure into the way that you engage with your team so that you are committing your time, and they are committing their time to that intentional goal setting, to thinking about what is it that I want to go forward, I think that's a great way to create that space for them and also to model it that you think it's important, right? It's nice to see from leadership that you're supportive of each lawyer going after what matters to them.

Sarah: Well, and I think it's interesting that you use the term in your practice and on your practice. Because I think in a traditional law firm model, that would be in my practice, giving legal advice to clients, and on my practice, maybe like CPD. Like learning more about the law.

But what we're doing here in terms of our work and our professional experience is so much broader than the substantive issues and delivery of employment law. So those goals and the things that people want to work on might be developing like an innovative tech tool that's related to our work like. So it gives a much broader opportunity. For me, as an employer, I'm able to access the most and best value out of each person that works for me by letting them engage in whatever it is they want to add value in.

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I'll give an example. My assistant, longtime assistant, and assistant is like totally the wrong word for her. When we moved into this space, we're building it out, she's really interested in construction and really good at it. So it's like great. Like you can be my right hand person in this project and like gave her a lot of authority and respect.

She often says at big firms like no one ever asked her what she thought, or if they did, they didn't really actually care about it. I'm like what a missed opportunity that was for them because I get all this extra amazing support from her that she just wouldn't have been able to do. I think it's a real win, win. Again, it's like not that hard.

Paula: No. It's a great example. I mean you can see that too in the structure of a very regimented organization where there're silos and boxes. I'm thinking of the picture of a flowchart, of an org chart. That's what I'm thinking of where there's each roll, and there's the bullet points that go along with each of them.

So when you open up those boxes and allow people to bring to light the talents and the interest that they have outside of that box and you foster that, I just imagine that leads to the most interesting developments. Like you said, so much value because everyone's able to perform to their own individual capacity. It's great.

Sarah: Yeah, and it's fun.

Paula: Yeah. Oh, totally. Question for you, which is, what do you love about being a lawyer?

Sarah: I would say my answer to that has changed over time. Like I went into law school. I didn't have any lawyers in my family. I went into law school wanting to help people and sort of having an interest in HR issues, even from the outset. I worked for a couple years before law school. So I

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really wanted to help people and in a meaningful way. I feel like I've been able to do that throughout my career consistently.

But it also has been really, I find it's been very flexible in terms of how I can do that. Like how that meaningful helping of people can be packaged up. There's just so many different ways to do that. For me, I've done it a bunch of different ways, like in a very traditional model of a big firm then working part time at that big firm then moving to this contract model like fee split contractor arrangement where I was working remotely. Now starting my own firm and running my own business.

That's definitely been the common thread. So I love with law that there's lots of different ways you can do it flexibly. I think that law is sort of really well set up for that.

I love that it has entrepreneurial opportunities, I would say. So starting your own law firm, as compared to starting other kinds of businesses, and I have an entrepreneurial streak. So before I did this, I looked at starting other businesses like a florist or a bookstore or a microbrewery. We got quite far into business plan for that. They all need like tons of capital. Like sort of starting another kind of business is way more complicated.

Like when I started Forte Workplace Law it was just like me and my computer at sort of a rental office. Like I didn't need too much more than that. So I love the ease at which you can sort of hang your own shingle or the opportunity to hang your own shingle. I think that's been really cool as well.

I would say like more recently, what I've loved about it is just the chance to try new things. So in my client facing practice a couple years ago, we started doing workplace investigations. Just this year, I've started mediating as a mediator. So at 18 years in, like I'm still able to sort of find these new

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paths, even within a very niche practice, to try new things and keep developing so it doesn't get stale.

Paula: Amazing. One of the initiatives that you've started up in the last few years is your project called Not Your Average Law Job. I would love for you to share a bit about how that came to be what it is, and how that fits in with the other pieces of your work.

Sarah: Not Your Average Law Job was born in 2010 when I was thinking about my first transition. So when I was thinking if I probably wasn't going to stay at a big firm and sort of what else might be out there. I was Googling and just finding nothing. Like finding a lot about leaving law and kinds of jobs you could have after you left law, but not a lot about staying in law, and particularly about other private practice structures. It was just a big black hole on the internet. I really didn't find anything.

I was able to go out and, as I described, like meet people and talk to them. I was able to do that because I'm very privileged and because of all my privileges. Like I had a spouse with a regular income so the financial risks. So people will say, I'm sure you hear this Paula, like oh I can't go talk to other people because what if the firm finds out and I lose my job? That kind of risk was something that I was less of an issue to me, financially, at least.

I speak English well. I was born in Canada. I am Caucasian. Like tons of things that make it easier for me to get out there in the legal community, and put myself in front of other lawyers. I'm also just like a super outgoing person. So I'm not shy about cold calling people to set things up.

But I thought like people that don't have all those privileges and all those things going for them, like how are they going to find information? That's when I started thinking about an online project. Myself and another friend that was at that firm with me would kind of talk about it and kick it around.

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Like oh, we should totally do this. Then it just kind of kept falling off the side of my desk, frankly.

So that was the origin story. I really wanted lawyers who were unhappy, and I saw many of them around me in a big firm, who were maybe at their desk at midnight crying, hating their job, Googling I hate my law job. I just wanted them to have something to bind, to give them some hope, and some different role models than what they were seeing around them. So that was how it started.

I eventually connected with Sarah Ewart, who was a law student who just connected with me for a sort of informational interview, get to know you meeting, and I saw right away that she had additional marketing background and had experience profiling lawyers for a project that she worked on. I said, "Hey, do you want to do this for the summer?" She jumped at it, and she was really the one that got it out into the world and breathed life into it from the shell that I had created.

Yeah, so that's where Not Your Average Law Job came from. Like where are we at today is really interesting because I've had three law students now working on it. Right away how they saw it was we're redefining what it is to be a lawyer. This has pipeline impacts on law students who are kind of like, I don't know, like weirdly trudging towards their deaths. They're like oh, law is gonna be miserable, but I'm gonna do it anyway. Sort of give them different examples from what they're exposed to in law school.

Paula: Yeah. I think it's so interesting the way that the project has unfolded. I think lawyers each have their own path in terms of what's going to make them happy. For some people, the big firm model is exactly what they want. For some lawyers, having their own practice is exactly what they want. For some lawyers, it's something that is completely out of the box. What I think is so neat about your project is that you're giving a very visible platform to different types of lawyers.

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When lawyers reach out to me, and they ask me what else can I do with my law degree besides private practice at a law firm? I love sending them to your site because it puts a face and a story next to it. Like you're saying you're profiling lawyers who are happy in different types of environments.

From there, lawyers are able to then see themselves either doing something different. Maybe they realized actually where I am is better suited to me. Maybe I just need to make some changes. But I think you're giving access to that information. I love it. I didn't realize that Sarah Ewart had experience doing lawyer profiles. It sounds quite a niche skill. A niche skill to have.

Sarah: It was definitely serendipity. She is amazing at it, as have actually the other two law students we've hired. So we're now at 75 lawyers that we've profiled in the project. The goal, we keep stats on diversity in every possible sense of that. So we have lawyers from every province, every territory. We're looking at racial diversity. We're looking at lawyers with disabilities. We're looking at indigenous lawyers.

Like my goal was to, at that point, like have someone on the website and it could resonate for anyone who is there looking. That's one of the pipeline impacts of the project that I didn't really anticipate was it's also giving law students or people who are thinking about going to law school like hey, there's someone like me who is a happy lawyer. That's super cool. Like I'm really, really proud of that.

Paula: I love that. What have you learned? In profiling 75 lawyers, 75 happy lawyers, what have you learned about what makes lawyers happy?

Sarah: So we had not intended to look at themes. Like we just kind of started off calling people, interviewing them, writing profiles. But I would say about halfway through that first summer, Sarah said to me like there are themes emerging. They've really continued to sort of crystallize and

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firm up. There's five that we often talk about that are sort of the really main themes that have emerged from all these different lawyers doing all these disparate and interesting things.

One is intention. So lawyers that are happy have often intentionally designed their practice. Like it hasn't just happened by accident. It's people who have taken the time to say like what is it that I want, or tried a few different things until they found the thing that works for them.

One of my pet peeves I've written about personally is reactionary career planning where people change jobs because they get a call from a recruiter, and they're not happy where they are. They're like well, anything would be better than here. Then guess what? They're not that happy in that other job either. I think taking that intention, and really thinking about that is important for happiness.

Flexibility is another one. So lawyers who have all kinds of different flexibility, and it could include and it does include lawyers at big firms. Like we have a huge range of. Flexibility is one of the keys. Staying connected. So being connected with people, whether that's coworkers or colleagues or others in a community, and getting support when they need it. We hear a lot about happy lawyers and the mentorship or support they've been able to access.

Taking chances, taking some risks. If you stay on sort of the straight and narrow path, you might be happy. But if you take some chances and try some different things and move off that, that's something that tends to be a fate factor of the happy lawyers we've interviewed.

Then finally innovation, which I think is related to that. So that doesn't necessarily mean like being up on all the latest time or tech driven innovation. It can just mean like if something about traditional law practice

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or law practice isn't serving you anymore. Having the courage to sort of look at different ways of doing things and innovating.

Paula: Yeah.

Sarah: Those are sort of the five. Yeah.

Paula: Love each of these. I think they're all so important. Going back to your point about intention and that reactionary career planning. It's like that expression you don't want to fix your roof when it's raining, right? You want to do it while it's sunny outside so that you're not operating from that sort of knee jerk reaction, but really being intentional about it. I think everything that you mentioned, like finding flexible work arrangements that work for you. Connection is huge, right?

Being a part of a community and feeling like you're part of something, it goes back. You mentioned earlier about the number of hours worked and the quality of those hours worked, and that the quality is really what's driving your overall satisfaction. You can spend X number of hours doing something you love, and it feels great. Versus X number of hours doing something that just like grinds against your soul. You're going to have a completely different outcomes. So I think that will--

Sarah: Right. It's like asking your kid like if they've played an hour of video game versus if they've cleaned their room for an hour. How does that hour feel?

Paula: Exactly. Unless your kids really like cleaning their rooms.

Sarah: I don't have those.

Paula: Yeah, I don't either. I love your other two points to is taking that risk. So like you said when you were talking about your story, which I love,

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about do you open your own firm? Like that was the bigger option relative to what else you were looking at. It was a risk.

By taking that risk, you've now taken more risks. That has unfolded. I think that is something that, especially for lawyers, is so hard because we're used to that lockstep. We're used to the system of you do X, Y, Z and then you get to that place. So when you're inviting to take on that risk, and it goes against that feeling of oh but risk is a bad thing. We're trying to mitigate against risk. Sometimes it's the doorway to exactly what you want.

Then finally, your point about innovation. Absolutely. Especially now I think we all learned, particularly over the pandemic, that we're all capable of innovating. Even in a very traditional profession, like law, you can innovate. It doesn't have to be like your suggestion with the consult, right? That's an innovation in itself. It's one that turns out really works for you.

So having that ability to look at what you're doing. You may not need to overhaul everything. It may be tweaks here and there. So I love that you've pinpointed these. I think there's an article that you wrote about this in the show notes to this episode. We'll put links to--

Sarah: Awesome, yeah. We wrote an article in BarTalk magazine very recently on that that talks a bit more those.

Paula: Beautiful. So we'll link to that so people can read it because it really is amazing to see what other people are experiencing and how that's helping them. I'm just looking at the time, Sarah, because I know your time is limited.

Sarah: We could talk for hours. We could talk for hours about this stuff.

Paula: But the reality is we have some time left. I would love to know. You mentioned that there are students who come to you, high school students,

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people who haven't yet even entered the profession. What advice would you give to them about how they can become lawyers who are happy in their jobs?

Sarah: I think redefining what it is to be a lawyer to expect happiness is the key to that. You remember that? I don't know if you've ever heard this one, Paula, but I remember a lawyer saying this to me early in my practice. Like do you love the law Paula? I love the law that she's a harsh mistress. This idea that law is like demanding and like sort of a badge you wear with honor, and you fight through.

So I think changing that perception is really, really important portent. Looking at different role models if the role models aren't in front of you. I have so many young lawyers, not even lawyers, but like law students and high school students who will come to me and say like basically from what I've learned in law school or at my law class at school, or what I've seen online, I don't think you can be a lawyer and a mother.

They're only seeing one sort of narrow image of what it is to be a lawyer and what a law practice looks like. So finding those role models, whether it's your Not Your Average Law Job, or having discussions with different people, I think is really the key. Because if you can't see it being done, how can you do it?

Paula: Absolutely. What about lawyers who are a little bit further on? So you have the students who are just starting out. What about lawyers who are say, I don't know 5/10, 10 years or further into their practice, and they're not happy. They have a certain lifestyle that they are committed to. Do you think It's too late for someone like that to make a change? Or do you think that there's a possibility out there that they could recreate their practice and create something that truly makes them happy?

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Sarah: Well, I think you already know the answer to that because I personally changed at five years of practice. Then again another six years after that. I didn't change my practice area, but I completely changed the style and conditions of how I practiced. So for sure. I started my firm when I turned 40.

Paula: Yeah. I love that you're an example of that. I think a lot of lawyers would love to see those examples. In Not Your Average Law Job on your website, you have profiles. What other resources are available? If you're a lawyer who's looking to think about how they might be more intentional about the career path going forward, what else can they find on your site?

Sarah: Well, the central content of Not Your Average Law Job is the profiles. So that, to me, is where you find the role models, where you find the hope, where you see that it's possible, or it might be possible. Then we have a resources tab and a news tab, which include books, articles, all kinds of different. Then we have job postings.

So my idea was like someone could, it could be sort of a one stop shop in the best ideal scenario where you come on, you're thinking about leaving law, you're unhappy, you read some profiles. You're like wow like there's actually some different ways to do this. You look on our resources tab. You maybe read a couple of the books that we recommend, or some of the online articles. Then you go on the job board, and you find a job that matches the kinds of things that you're looking for. Like it could literally be a one stop shop.

Paula: Amazing.

Sarah: Maybe not all in one visit.

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Paula: It would be a very productive visit. But I do love that you profile different lawyers, and you have links to different jobs that are available for people who are looking for that.

Sarah: We've had 65,000 website visits this year.

Paula: Amazing.

Sarah: So that's probably a few people that are coming back more than once.

Paula: Amazing.

Sarah: I think you need to come back more than once to our website.

Paula: Yeah, absolutely. What kind of feedback are you receiving from the legal community in relation to your project?

Sarah: We just get a lot of, I mean it's all positive. We get people saying just what a gap this is filled. I recently won the CBABC Innovation Award for 2022.

Paula: Congratulations. Yes.

Sarah: Thank you, which was in part because of my firm and how I'm running that innovative way, but also in large part because of Not Your Average Law Job. So CBABC is like a pretty traditional institution. I think when you're getting recognized by those kinds of organizations, it really means a lot about the impact that the project is having.

Paula: Absolutely.

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Sarah: We hear a lot from the lawyers who we profile too, which is really interesting. So it's not just like in the legal community at large. But we had one lawyer who had overcome a lot of obstacles in her life. When we reached out to her to profile, I don't think she really saw herself. Like she wouldn't be someone who would get profiled through another kind of project. She said it was the first time she really was able to sort of really see the success that she had had was by being profiled through our project, which is pretty cool.

Paula: That's amazing. I love that. How can we support the Not Your Average Law Job?

Sarah: Yeah, please do. We have nearly 2,500 followers on LinkedIn, but our goal is to get to 5,000. So please follow us on LinkedIn. You can also follow us on Twitter. We're at about 1,500 on Twitter, and we're also on Facebook and Instagram. So literally anywhere you are on social media, you can follow us. That really helps. Like having more followers helps because that's the information we're using when we try to get sponsorship or other kinds of things.

So just by clicking follow one, you'll get lots of happy lawyer profiles, and two, it'll help. Sharing our content or commenting on it is also free and extremely helpful for the visibility of our project. You sharing one of the profiles to your network might then get that in front of someone who needed to see it.

So following, engaging, sharing the content, and then finally we are looking for sponsors and supporters. So financially that's something that you can support. We are about to launch our limited run of Not Your Average Lawyer mugs.

Paula: Oh fabulous.

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Sarah: That we're about to launch, and they will be the most expensive month you'll ever buy because it's \$250 for a mug, but really what you're doing is supporting our project and getting an awesome mug.

Paula: Beautiful, love it. We'll have links to all the LinkedIn and the other social platforms. For anybody who wants to pop on to the to the podcast website where the show notes are, they can do it that way.

Sarah: Great.

Paula: Another question for you, Sarah, is okay so if you were to go back in time and kind of meet yourself at your high school graduation knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Sarah: I have a mantra that I use pretty regularly when I am about to do something hard. I tell myself you are gonna rock this, and you're gonna have fun.

Paula: Love it.

Sarah: You're gonna rock this and it's going to be fun. You're gonna rock it, and it's going to be fun. I think that would be what I would tell myself.

Paula: Amazing.

Sarah: It's gonna be fun.

Paula: Is it a self-fulfilling prophecy? I mean we know—

Sarah: It really helps.

Paula: Are you having fun?

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Sarah: I am. I am having a ton of fun. Like I mean it has been exhausting. It has been a ton of work. But it's been the most fulfilling, interesting, successful thing I've ever done. That's like the combination of all of these projects together. So that is what I would tell her because I think enjoying the ride and sort of focusing on the fun is key.

Paula: I love it. It's been such a treat having you on the podcast today, Sarah. It really truly is. So thank you so much for coming and spending the time with us. Thank you to everybody who has tuned in to listen to this episode. I know you're all loving it and would love, frankly, for this conversation to continue. For anyone who would like to reach out to you, Sarah, what's the best way to do that? We can put the information in the show notes as well.

Sarah: Yeah, I would say LinkedIn is probably the—I spend a lot of time there. If you're interested in any of the things I'm doing, I'm posting about them regularly. So I would say that's probably the number one place is look me up on LinkedIn. You can give me a follow. You can connect with me, and you can also follow and connect with Not Your Average Law Job. That would be that the best way.

Paula: Beautiful. Love it. Well, thank you again, Sarah. It has been such a pleasure. Thank you everybody for joining us, and we look forward to connecting with you again next week. Bye for now.

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