

# THE ATLANTA LAWYER

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## *LOVE & LAW*

HOW TO BALANCE LAW SCHOOL AND LOVE

COURTHOUSE I DO'S

ATLANTA BAR AUTHORS WRITE BOOKS ON LOVE

# THE ATLANTA LAWYER

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# The Curious Question of How to Love the Law

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**W**e are indeed fortunate to live in this, the golden age of the legal profession.”

These were the opening remarks of attorney Eugene Angert when he delivered an address to the State Bar of Georgia in February of 1927. The almost-tangible confidence of this man, a Harvard graduate who lived and practiced a century ago, inspires mixed feelings:

humor, and perhaps pity, but also curiosity. What is it that made this man (who unknowingly occupied the interlude between two world wars in the midst of pivotal times for the great struggles of innumerable peoples and causes) declare that this must be the golden age of law? In a word: distance. In his speech, Angert proclaims a love for the law. But, he denounces that inexorable obsession often summarized by the phrase, “The law

is a jealous mistress,” in which a lawyer only finds safety in “unwavering devotion” to his profession to the detriment of everything and everyone else. Or as Angert puts it, “I do believe that the American lawyer, like the American businessman, makes work the sole purpose of his life, because he has adopted the false standard that life is only for work.”

The intervening century provided at least some reasons to think Angert’s beliefs were well founded. In 1958, the American Bar Association formally recommended that lawyers bill 1,300 hours per year. By the 1980s, a target of 1,750 to 1,800 hours was described as “commonplace.” The 2002 ABA Commission on Billable Hours Report recommended that 1,900 hours should be the standard. Per the National Association for Law Placement, among “big law” firms, that number has ballooned to an average of 2,208 billable hours per year.

The effects on lawyers are understood by every practicing attorney in America. The recent efforts to improve mental health in the profession are admirable. Mental health issues have been gradually de-stigmatized, and lawyers speak more openly with each other about the challenges the profession can pose. However, the numbers alone would say that the law is a bigger and more taxing part of many lawyers’ lives than ever before. This is what makes it so curious, then, that lawyers appear to be more hopeful and optimistic about the future of the law than they have in years. The reasons why have yet to be fully briefed, but a few key statistics suggest that younger lawyers are meaningfully changing the way that they see and interact with the law, with implications that may reverberate further still.

### **Lawyers are getting happier**

Here’s a shocking statistic: Lawyers are reporting higher levels of job satisfaction now than in prior decades.

Between November of 2022 and January of 2023, the NALP Foundation surveyed almost 2,000 lawyers from the Class of 2019. 47% reported they are “extremely satisfied” with their jobs, a 5% increase from the year before. Another 38% said they were “somewhat satisfied.”

One factor that Angert could never have imagined? Remote and hybrid positions. The NALP found that 88% of members of the Class of 2017 who had remote jobs

reported they were extremely or somewhat satisfied, significantly higher than the average.

Another factor? Attorneys are leaving the jobs they do not like at a higher rate than ever before. The number of associates switching firms grew 149% between 2020 and 2021, along with a 43% increase in partners making lateral maneuvers. Both of these figures are the largest in NALP history.

The primary reason for those lawyers moving, according to a 2023 survey by Realm Recruit, is money. But the other two most popular reasons? “Unhappiness or disengagement in their current role” and “greater flexibility.”

### **Lawyers are more likely to marry people who understand them (i.e., other lawyers)**

It is a good thing lawyers are getting happier, because if you, dear reader, are married, then statistically speaking it is to another lawyer. CNBC reports that that is true of both male and female attorneys and judges.

The statistic is interesting, but the far more engaging question is why. Some reasons are obvious - most lawyers spend three or more years in law school during their formative years, when their class (and hence, their dating pool) is mostly would-be attorneys. Others are less clear. As one anonymous commenter wrote in an online forum on this subject three years ago, “There’s no one in the world who understands exactly what a lawyer does except for another lawyer.”

This, too, dovetails with satisfaction and happiness among lawyers. The ability to express, discuss, and “vent” about the daily challenges of law is essential for mental health. The feeling of being able to solve problems, or even simply to gripe about them, with others who understand and empathize is irreplaceable. The unique challenges that come with being an attorney make it near impossible at times for outsiders to truly empathize, no matter how sympathetic or thoughtful they may be.

### **Americans (including lawyers) are getting married later (if they get married at all)**

Under 50% of American adults are married, and 37% of American adults are not in a romantic relationship

at all, according to the American Family Survey. A large factor is that group that encompasses most young lawyers: millennials. 47% of Gen-Xers were married by the age of 32, but only 29% of millennials were as of 2015. In 2023, it was reported that 25% of American 40-year-olds have never been married, a record per Pew Research.

Is it just a lack of interest? No, most likely not. Per CNBC, a whopping 75% of Gen Z and millennial couples say it is too expensive to get married – no surprise here. A study by The Knot, a wedding planning organization, found that the average cost of a wedding in 2022 was \$30,000, a \$2,000 increase from the year before.

The divorce rate has also sharply declined among all Americans. The legal industry actually rates very well among the industries with the lowest divorce rate, coming in at 10th best. (And, if you are curious for the highs and lows, the industry-wide data indicates that architects and engineers are the least likely to get divorced, while casino managers, bartenders, and flight attendants have the highest divorce rates.)

What does this mean for lawyers and law students? All people, including lawyers, are putting more effort into planning out their lives and do not feel constrained by the same traditions and standards that were not merely norms but rites of passage in the past. The priorities of



Atlanta-based television show, “Cutler Court,” features trial attorneys Dana and Keith Cutler who hear real-life relationship cases.

Just going by the numbers, that delay might be for the best. Per the Center for Disease Control, couples who get married at 25 are actually 50% less likely to divorce, compared to couples who get married at 20. Interestingly, divorce rates increase among those who are wed after the age of 32, which, at least from a statistical standpoint, results in a “sweet spot” for marriage between the ages of 28 and 32. That is right in line with data that shows the median age of marriage was 32 for men and 30 for women. That same data showed the 2012 median age was 26 for women and 28 for men.

young people have been radically realigned, in part by choice and in part by the circumstances the world has thrust upon them. The mechanisms and means by which they deal with that change have, at least according to the numbers, had some effect on the ability and willingness of people to make both short- and long-term changes, which have altered the way they view what were once thought of as immutable duties, including their relationship to the law.

What does it all mean?