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# THE PERILS OF PERFECTIONISM:

## WHY LAWYERS NEED TO RETHINK THEIR “BADGE OF HONOR”

By Patrick Krill, Jordana Confino, and Jens Näsström

In the high-stakes world of law, perfectionism is often celebrated as a virtue — a driving force behind meticulous briefs, airtight arguments, and victorious outcomes. Lawyers wear it as a badge of honor, a testament to their commitment to excellence in a profession where the margin for error is often razor-thin. But what if this cherished trait is also a double-edged sword, undermining mental health and professional longevity as much as it elevates performance? [Our recent pilot study](#) of 764 private-practice lawyers suggests just that, revealing a troubling link between maladaptive perfectionism and a host of negative outcomes including stress, depression, burnout, and even career stagnation. For



reasons on which we'll elaborate, it is time for the legal profession to stop romanticizing perfectionism and start acknowledging its costs.

The results of the *Lawyer Perfectionism & Well-Being Survey*, an exploratory effort to document perfectionism's impact on lawyers, paint a stark picture. Lawyers with high perfectionistic tendencies — those who equate mistakes with personal failure — reported stress levels twice as high as their less perfection-driven peers (3.01 vs. 1.51 on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale). Depression followed a similar pattern, with 50% of high-perfectionism lawyers showing elevated symptoms compared to just 7% of low-perfectionists. These numbers aren't just statistics; they're also arrows pointing the way to improvement. The legal profession has long grappled with elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance misuse. A culture that glorifies an unattainable ideal may only be exacerbating those problems.

### Why Does Perfectionism Hit Lawyers so Hard?

The answer often lies in the profession itself. Law demands precision — miss a deadline, misinterpret a statute, or overlook a precedent, and the consequences can be catastrophic. Clients expect excellent service, ethical standards loom large, and competition for

business and prestige is fierce. Technology, too, has raised the bar, with tools like e-discovery amplifying expectations for fast, error-free results. Many lawyers also enter the field with perfectionistic tendencies already in place, and they are further honed by the grueling gauntlet of law school and reinforced by a culture that equates success with flawlessness.

To be clear, not all perfectionism is harmful. Adaptive perfectionism is flexible and fueled by a growth mindset. It allows for high standards without compromising self-worth or resilience. When perfectionism is purpose-driven and flexible, it becomes a tool — not a trap. Maladaptive perfectionism, by contrast, is rigid, identity-defining, and fear-driven — it equates mistakes with personal failings and deploys self-criticism as motivation. And when perfectionism becomes maladaptive, when it's driven by a need for approval and fear of failure rather than a pursuit of excellence — it turns toxic.

### The Mental Health Toll is Steep

Our study aligns with broader research outside of law linking perfectionism to anxiety, depression, and burnout — conditions all too familiar to lawyers. High-perfectionism lawyers don't just feel stressed, they're also trapped in a cycle of self-criticism and unrealistic expectations. A mistake isn't just a misstep — it's felt as a personal indictment. And this

chronic distress doesn't stop at the mind, it spills over into physical health, with numerous stress-related issues like migraines, weakened immune systems, and cardiovascular problems lurking as silent threats. For a profession that prides itself on resilience, this vulnerability is a bitter irony.

Perfectionists, the study found, are trapped in a cycle of self-imposed pressure and chronic self-criticism. They set impossibly high standards, then beat themselves up when they inevitably fall short. This isn't just stressful, it's exhausting. High-perfectionism lawyers scored higher on workaholism and struggled more with work-life balance, painting a picture of professionals who can't switch off even when pushing forward is no longer fruitful.

### The Damage Isn't Limited to Well-Being

Perfectionism also undermines the very performance it's supposed to enhance. Our study found that high-perfectionism lawyers struggle with procrastination, workload management, and delegation — habits that erode efficiency. This aligns with what psychologists call "perfectionist paralysis" — a fear of failure so intense it leads to procrastination or spending excessive time worrying about a task without actually getting started. Instead of working smarter, perfectionists drown in details, micro-manage, and resist delegating, convinced no one else can meet their standards.



Our survey suggests they're also less bold, scoring lower on willingness to tackle challenges, and more disengaged. Perfectionists' fear of feedback — both giving and receiving — stifles growth and collaboration, while a "win at any cost" mentality hints at potential ethical risks. Far from being the secret to success, perfectionism can paralyze lawyers, locking them into a fixed mindset where learning takes a backseat to appearances.

Also noteworthy is the impact on retention. High-perfectionism lawyers in our study averaged just 5.3 years at their firms, compared to 8.4 years for their low-perfectionism counterparts. Their intention to quit is also markedly higher, especially among younger lawyers and women, who report elevated perfectionism and stress. In some cases, this turnover isn't just a personal loss, it's an organizational loss, as well, draining institutional knowledge and hiking recruitment costs. It is unfortunate that those most obsessed with proving their worth may be the first to flame out.

### Here's the Silver Lining

Unlike innate traits, maladaptive perfectionism is malleable. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) offers proven tools — reframing self-criticism, building self-compassion, and setting realistic goals, that can dial back its worst effects. Coaching, too, shows promise.

It is our belief, backed by significant research outside of law, that lawyers can shed these harmful tendencies without losing their edge. Imagine lawyers who strive for excellence but don't crumble under self-doubt, who take risks without fearing failure, who collaborate without controlling. That's not a pipe dream — it's a possibility grounded in science.

Of course, individual fixes alone won't cut it. The profession's perfectionist culture, often including unrelenting expectations and a sink-or-swim ethos, fuels the problem. The legal culture that glorifies perfectionism needs an overhaul. Firms must stop rewarding workaholism and start training leaders to foster psychological safety — spaces where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities,

not career-enders — and model growth over flawlessness. These changes won't happen overnight, but they are worthy pursuits deserving of attention.

Critics might argue that perfectionism is non-negotiable in a field where the stakes are sky-high. Clients won't tolerate errors, and firms can't afford to loosen standards. But our study challenges this logic and suggests that perfectionists aren't inherently better performers, they're just more stressed and less adaptable. Excellence doesn't demand self-flagellation, and clinging to this perfectionist myth creates more risk than benefit.

To be clear, our pilot study is neither perfect nor conclusive. Its findings highlight the need

for additional research to further explore and confirm the trends we observed, investigate causality, and test interventions designed to help lawyers make improvements in this realm. At the same time, however, our findings echo decades of research on perfectionism outside of law and suggest that the more universally observed lessons about the perils of perfectionism apply equally to lawyers.

For now, the message seems obvious: Perfectionism isn't the superpower lawyers think it is. In fact, it's sometimes a liability masquerading as a strength, exacting a steep toll on our minds, bodies, and careers. Rather than continuing to polish this tarnished badge, it's time to trade it for resilience, flexibility, and a healthier path to success.+



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