

How Do You Define Success? Four Women Lawyers Share Their Thoughts

While understanding that success looks very different to each individual woman, we examine what aided these women in achieving their definition of success and what obstacles and barriers still exist. When the ultimate goal is helping each woman lawyer achieve her definition of success—the entire legal profession succeeds.

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By Josie A. Scanlan

What does success look like in 2024 for women lawyers? Through interviews with a variety of women lawyers from different fields, including a government attorney at the DOJ, a law professor, an in-house attorney, and the famous former prosecutor who gave closing arguments at Bill Cosby's trial, this article examines the question from four differing perspectives.

Does success look like prioritizing family time and a flexible work schedule? Is it having time to pursue other interests like running a nonprofit? Is it making partner before 40 and having multiple trials under the belt? While understanding that success looks very different to each individual woman, we examine what aided these women in achieving their definition of success and what obstacles and barriers still exist. When the ultimate goal is helping each woman lawyer achieve her definition of success—the entire legal profession succeeds.

Kristen Gibbons Feden Shareholder, Anapol Weiss

How do you define success?

I define success in multiple ways. I'm a mom, and one of the ways I define success is making sure I'm able to be there for my kids whenever they need me and want me, but still be someone they look up to. I also define success as being an attorney that serves my clients to the best of my abilities. I want to make sure my clients are happy with my representation. Another way I would define success is external recognition that I would perceive as achievements. In civil cases, that may be verdict values or, as a judicial clerk, that would be having the opinion I write be affirmed. At the district attorneys office, it meant making sure the people who were victims of crimes feel justice did really happen. It meant making sure justice was served and the victims were treated with dignity and respect. Success, to me, means being fair, cordial, and professional—and having the respect of the bench and opposing counsel.

What are some barriers that you see affecting women achieving their definition of success?

Some of the barriers that I have experienced are less a result of individual persons, and more as a result of society. Some in society view a woman's role differently if she has children. Women with children are not getting certain opportunities because it's perceived that they can't accomplish certain things because they have children. Similarly, single women with no children often feel like all the work is dumped on them. You don't hear the same from men with children or from single men. So the obstacles women have are that they have to also navigate these societal issues—societal perceptions of what a female is, what a female is capable of doing, what a female should be doing, and what a female should be.

A lot of my female friends suffer from imposter syndrome. This barrier is often based on the culture of the law firm. A lot of the men I work with have partners who are able to or want to stay at home, which is great. But those male partners should not have that leg up because of that; neither should working moms suffer the detriment. In litigation, work must get done, because it is deadline-based. And if a person is able to competently do the work, they should be given the opportunity.

I do feel like I have to prove myself. It's almost like I'm presumed incompetent. People will talk over me until I prove myself. Then, they'll listen. I don't see the same with my male counterparts. When I worked on the prosecution team for the Bill Cosby case, people questioned why I was put on the case and assumed it was because I'm

Black and female. Nobody asked the two other white men why they were put on the case. It was presumed that my white male colleagues knew what they were doing, even though none of us had faced a case of this magnitude against a person of his resources and, in fact, I had vast trial experience and a great conviction rate.

Erin Lindgren Assistant U.S. Attorney at U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania

How do you define success?

My definition of success has shifted over the years to be so much more about doing work that's interesting and meaningful to me. Success is not necessarily working on the most high-impact or newsworthy cases. I like to have a clear picture of what the case looks like and develop it in a way that keeps me interested and engaged. So, success now for me is finding the interesting hook and the meaning in the case. It's about being able to have a challenge and stretching myself in new areas to grow for my own development.

How do you think society defines success for women lawyers?

It's different for women than men. Generally speaking, I have found in litigation with women attorneys on the other side, we're better able to get to the crux of what is worth fighting about, instead of pushing and pulling on everything. With many male attorneys, victory can be an all out war, scorched earth, and absolute defeat of the other side. With women attorneys, many

understand they succeed when they're able to achieve the best result for their client. That can often be attained with a more reasonable approach.

In the legal field, have you found that there are pressures to conform to a certain stereotype of what it means to be a successful woman?

There is often an expectation with the court and many opposing counsel that women should stay nice and polite. They need to speak with more deference in their voice and submissiveness than male attorneys. This doesn't come naturally. Women often can't just be themselves. I often tell a story about a deposition where I deposed a plaintiff and firmly questioned him on his version of events. I demonstrated he wasn't credible. Instead of his attorney acknowledging that I did well at my job, the attorney said, "I'd hate to come home late and drunk to you"—indicating that he saw me in a "wife" role rather than a competent adversary, and that I was nagging and difficult to deal with.

What are some ways that we can help women achieve their definition of success?

Allies in the work place are so important. Having coworkers and managers cognizant of the types of micro-aggressions women face and proactively raising their voices to amplify women's voices helps women succeed. For example, I've been in meetings where I express a great idea and then a man follows up right after with the same idea. I have a boss who will call it out and say "Yes, that was Erin's idea" and won't let the man take credit. Women need to feel that their contributions and ideas are acknowledged even if a man says it louder. Also, having

other people trumpet your achievements for you helps women succeed. I find that men are often good at letting others know about their achievements. Women often find it hard to do it themselves, but getting recognition is important.

Anything else you can think of that can aid women in achieving their success?

Back-up care. My job added it about two years ago. It's called "Life Care" and we get ten days a year of back-up child care for when your child gets sick or has the day off from school. They contract with a nanny network and if you need the back-up care they'll send someone to your home to watch your children. Women are usually the default person when kids gets sick. We want to meet our responsibilities at work and have a lot of tasks we're planning to get done. Back-up care has been super helpful and more workplaces should provide it.

**Elizabeth Dietz
Staff Counsel for AmTrust North
America
Padovani, Farinella & Addezio**

How do you define success?

Success to me is more about doing what I'm passionate about, and also finding that work-life balance. In my current position, I have time to be on the board of NJ Women's Lawyers and the Women's Network at AmTrust. I'm able to do these things in addition to lawyering without sacrificing my mental health or time for myself. It's also about being respected and looked up to for what I do. It's about having a good reputa-

tion for being honest, trustworthy, and good at what I do. For example, success to me was being asked by the Supervising Judge to speak at the Law Day Presentation in the Newark Workers Compensation Court this year. It's when one of my colleagues reached out and asked if I could be her "LinkedIn Coach" because she admires how I've been able to bridge the gap between professional and personal communications on that platform. It's also when other attorneys reach out to me for advice on case strategies.

What are some ways that we can remove obstacles for women lawyers to help them achieve their version of success?

Remote work has made it easier for women lawyers, but it's still not easy. Because of my type-A personality, I feel more productive at home. But, I'm also more tired because I take fewer breaks, and the breaks I take are to do laundry or the dishes rather than talk to colleagues or relax at lunch. My down time is doing things that are productive around the house, and I find female colleagues do the same, more than men.

At a lot of firms, the female mentorship piece is missing. There is a loss of talent because of this. Men still go golfing together and they have informal events. But it's not as prevalent for women in this field to do things together. For me in my current job, being able to talk to female mentors and learn from their experiences has been valuable in knowing what I want to do and where I want to go. It's important to find organizations that are women-centered, so you have the camaraderie and companionship to share ideas. As women attorneys, we have to make sure we're mentoring too. We have a responsibility.

Leadership training can be important for women. It has boosted my confidence to attain the results that I want to attain. I am more confident and assertive. Women are often labeled as over-reactive or overly aggressive. I've become more comfortable to advocate for myself and be a strong woman attorney.

Katrin Rowan
Legal Writing Professor, Assistant Dean for International and Graduate Programs, University at Buffalo School of Law

How do you define success?

I have a rewarding job. Success, to me, is doing good work and helping people. While I no longer practice law myself, I love working with students and training future lawyers, so I find my career very gratifying.

How do you think society views women lawyers? What are some of the challenges?

All lawyers have a professional obligation to advocate for our clients, to be zealous and assertive. Women lawyers are sometimes expected to act in ways that interfere with these goals—to be polite, deferential, quiet. Women lawyers face workplace discrimination, harassment, and micro-aggressions. They are typically expected to shoulder greater family care responsibilities than men. For these reasons it's important that women support each other to create better workplace environments and a more equitable profession.

Do you think there is a "motherhood penalty" in the legal profession?

While society expects more from male parents than in previous generations, men are still much more likely to become law firm partners than women. It's therefore important for workplaces to help mothers continue developing their careers while being the parents they want to be.

Flexibility is key, whether it comes to working hours or remote opportunities. These

measures can help keep women in the workplace. Otherwise, employers will lose this talent.



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