

Luck alone is not enough

Today I have decided not to lay down a roadmap about how to be a super lawyer, to succeed in life, to be happy or rich or successful. Anyway, you are all too bright to need to hear that from me.

But there are one or two things that I am senior enough to talk about.

First of all, we are lucky to live in a country where, like few others, anyone can be successful.

My parents were refugees. They were not able to speak much English. I attended government schools. My family had no connections with the law before I started practice. Still, I was able to do well in my professional life.

To be fair, good timing and a dose of good luck also helped. By the time I was ready for judicial appointment I was lucky enough that my master at the Bar [Michael Black] had become the Chief Justice of the Federal Court.

Like I said, luck helps and it is always good to be at the right place at the right time.

But in this country, so far as your career is concerned, merit and nothing else can be your path to success.

My second point is that being a lawyer is a privilege, but it is a privilege that carries with it certain obligations. As our society becomes more complex and challenging, our obligations as lawyers also become more complex and challenging.

I want to mention three such obligations:

OBLIGATION 1

Few people outside the law understand its ways. It is a mystery to them. Your job is to unravel the mystery and help people understand how the law works and what it does.

OBLIGATION 2

One of the basic precepts of the common law is “access to justice for all”. But it is an unfortunate fact that the poor and underprivileged do not have access to our courts. Legal costs are ever increasing. Legal aid is in decline. I want to encourage you to do what you can, whenever you can, even if it involves personal sacrifice, to use your skills to help the poor and the underprivileged.

OBLIGATION 3

Having completed your studies, you understand the law. Now you must advance it. A good lawyer is open to new thoughts and ideas. A great lawyer puts them into practice.

I also have a couple of practical hints that you could use:

- Overall, lawyers are not stupid people. So, when you go for a job interview, do not wear your graduation gown. Your parents and grandparents will want you to wear it all the time. Employers will think you are weird.



JUSTICE RAY FINKELSTEIN OF THE FEDERAL COURT GAVE SOME CANDID AND VALUABLE ADVICE TO MONASH UNIVERSITY LAW STUDENTS AT THEIR GRADUATION CEREMONY. THIS IS AN EDITED VERSION OF THE SECOND HALF OF HIS SPEECH.



- Don't look shocked when your first client pays you for your advice. Think of it this way: in a few years' time it will probably be worth it.
- Every weekend leave your mobile phone in a drawer and disconnect your computer. Most lawyers leave them switched on 24/7. For your psychological well-being make it 24/5.
- If you are still on good terms with your parents and they have any money left over after contributing toward the cost of your university education, ask them to pay for one last overseas trip – a trip that will last for at least six months. Once you start a job you are not going to have a holiday for many years to come. It took me over a decade before a client paid me to travel overseas. Take the opportunity now to have one last fling at someone else's expense.
- If you are going to be a solicitor, don't be pompous. If you are going to be a barrister, don't be either pompous or arrogant. If your career is outside the law, don't criticise lawyers for being pompous or arrogant.

So much for the tips. Whether you follow them or not, I hope you thoroughly enjoy your chosen career. The legal profession can be very rewarding. You can look back with pride at what you have achieved to this point and look forward to a new passage in your life, to open the doors that the degree you receive today have brought within your reach.

Make the most of it. To all of you go my congratulations. Have a great career. ●