



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by A. Harrison Barnes, Esq.

## Why Networking is Essential to Your Success as an Attorney

One thing that many attorneys do not know is that the most successful attorneys are “networked.” Attorneys who do not network often fail over time because of this fact alone.

By “networked,” I mean these attorneys have developed a very large circle of people with whom they can (1) access information they would not otherwise have and (2) make themselves known to a pool of people to whom they otherwise would not be known. Having access to information about jobs, developments within your firm, happenings in the legal market, clients with business they can give you and your firm, and more is essential to your success as an attorney. Moreover, being known to sources of information relevant to your career is even more important. What others outside your immediate circle of influence know is arguably just as important as what people inside your immediate circle of influence know.

This article examines the importance of networking to your legal career. First, this article discusses the value of networking in finding a job inside a law firm; second, it discusses the importance of networking to keeping a job inside a law firm; and, third, it discusses why the failure to network can be fatal to your career.

As this article will demonstrate, few things are as important to your legal career as the ability to effectively network.

### A. The Importance of Networking in Finding a Job Inside a Law Firm

#### 1. Most people learn about jobs from people other than their close friend

Studies have shown that most people find out about their jobs through other people. In the late 1960s, a graduate student at Harvard, Mark Granovetter did a study of how people find out about their jobs. Granovetter subsequently published a book on this and other findings in the mid-1990s that offers many important findings about how people learn about their jobs.

(Granovetter, Mark. *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.)

Granovetter interviewed numerous people and asked them to identify the five people they spent the most time with and draw a diagram as to how those people were connected with each other. At the time, it was a well-known fact that most people learn about jobs through other people rather than through advertising. Accordingly, Granovetter also asked the individuals he interviewed to identify the person who referred them to their last job.

The interesting part about this study was that the person who was identified was never one of the five close

friends. When Granovetter asked them to tell him about the person who did refer them to the job, the people almost always responded that the person was an “acquaintance” and not a friend. Granovetter interviewed 282 technical, managerial, and professional workers for his study and found that of the 56% of the people who found their jobs through personal contacts, only 17% learned about their last positions from close friends.

The lesson behind Granovetter’s findings seems to be that most people learn about jobs through people who are outside of their immediate networks. People whom you are closest to are likely to have access to the same information you do. Conversely, people outside of your close group are likely to be exposed to information you are not exposed to. Therefore, if you want to learn about a job, it is important that you have access to people outside of your existing network of close friends. There is no reason to suspect this logic would not apply to attorneys, either. In fact, in my experience, the logic is even more apropos: I would estimate that less than 5% of all attorneys get positions through people inside their immediate circle of influence.

One of the most interesting things I ever heard when I was practicing law was when an individual who is considered one of the more successful attorneys in America said to me and a group of other first-year associates: “One of the biggest mistakes of my life was not making more friends and getting closer with people in law school.” At the time, this statement amazed me because I saw this individual as someone quite remarkable in his own right. I did not understand what the person was talking about because in my eyes, I had a hard time believing the person could be even more successful. What I did not understand at the time was that this attorney believed that if he had properly networked, even at that early stage, he could have been far, far more successful than he was.

Regardless of how well you networked in law school, when you commence the practice of law and throughout your career, networking is something that is profoundly important to your present or future job search. Networking beyond your immediate social ties is something that is necessary for you to be successful when and if you are ever seeking a position.

In large law firms, the emphasis on billable hours, the meticulousness of the work, and the stress and demands of the practice of law will often undermine the importance of networking. Many attorneys may feel that once they have joined a large law firm, their number-one task is to do the absolute best work they are capable of, and, if they do that and nothing more, they will be successful. This could not be further from the truth. While most young attorneys are ignorant of this fact, the odds are overwhelmingly strong that they will not be at the firms they joined out of law school for more than 2 or 3 years. If the next firm they join is a large firm as well, the odds are also very good that they will not be there more than 2-3 years, either.

If a young attorney goes to a large law firm and closes the door or puts on blinders and works as hard as he or she can, he or she is making a mistake if he or she is not networking as well. There is a fallacy in thinking that if you just work as hard as you can and exclude external stimuli you will have long-term success. When an associate looks around him or her and sees groups of partners and imagines the success these individuals are experiencing, he or she often does not grasp what it was that made these partners successful. In most cases, it was networking.

It goes without saying that you need to be good at your job. However, the work you are doing inside a law firm has to come from somewhere. Work almost always comes from partners who have managed to make contacts somewhere outside the law firm. These partners have gotten involved in the community and met people outside of their immediate group of attorneys and these people have (1) given them business, or (2) spread the word about the attorney and their good work. This networking is why most attorneys have jobs to begin with.

Your ability to get a legal job through networking is a subtle thing. You need to have a large circle of people with whom you associate both inside and outside of the law. I also believe that you are far more likely to get a

position from someone outside the immediate group of lawyers you know inside your law firm than lawyers you may know well at your own firm or as close friends. If you know a few people and stay close to them, you are likely to only benefit from the information they have, and you will almost always know what this information is. If you know numerous people as “acquaintances” outside this immediate sphere, you will be exposed to a great deal more information. The number may be 10 or 20 times as much information.

## **2. The most successful attorneys are frequently the most networked**

As a recruiter, part of my job is to make telephone calls and speak with attorneys about job openings. When I recruit, I have often noticed that the best attorneys are the ones who are often the most open to speaking with me. In fact, when I first started recruiting successful partners several years ago, I was surprised how friendly they were. They were many times friendlier than young associates. Back then I wondered why this was. As I will explain below, I now know why this was the case.

First and foremost, I believe that these attorneys who get on these various lists do so because they are good at networking in the first place. However they do it, they are able to get the attention of individuals in the media and other attorneys in their firm and at other firms, since members of the public nominate them for such lists. The ability of these attorneys to get themselves media acknowledgement is meaningful because many attorneys who are much better attorneys are not even singled out like this because no one knows about them. Whenever I read such lists, knowing what I do about the legal market, I am almost always intrigued because I know full well that there are many attorneys that are not on these lists that are much better attorneys than the attorneys that are mentioned on these lists. The reason they are not on the lists and the other attorneys are on these lists is because the one group of attorneys is “networked” and the other is not.

In my conversations with the attorneys on these lists, the reason they take my phone calls and speak with me as long as they do is that they as individuals highly value setting up networks. My telephone call, while it would be annoying to less savvy attorneys, is welcomed by networkers who will put down their work to network and learn some information from me. More importantly, when you look back on the Granovetter study, a very good explanation for the reason these attorneys take my calls so seriously is due to the fact that they value networks beyond their immediate spheres of influence. When you look at how most individuals learn about jobs, they are learning about them through networks outside their immediate spheres of influence.

## **3. How to network yourself into an attorney job**

There are several ways you can network to find an attorney job. I have listed most of these below.

At the outset, though, I would like to mention that I have known numerous attorneys who have networked extensively and not found a job. When I hear this, I often sit down with these attorneys, and it becomes immediately evident to me why they have not located positions through networking. The answer is a very basic psychological one: these attorneys did not want a job. For me, such attorneys are easy to spot because they lack the sort of enthusiasm, engagement, and interest of someone who is going after something they want. Simply going to events and meeting all sorts of people will not help you if you really do not want a job. If you really want a job, your enthusiasm will come through when you are networking with people, and your enthusiasm will be contagious.

First, you need to understand that with networking everything counts. How you act in the legal community and among friends, what you say and what you do-it all counts. There are plenty of people who have done things wrong as law students or as attorneys and believe this does not matter. Everything counts. When you develop a good reputation for yourself, help others, work hard, are honest, and even volunteer to attend events that seem meaningless, it counts.

The reason I am so adamant about everything counting is due to the fact that most of what you do and have done is known by someone. When you become a topic of conversation or if someone is interested in passing along your name to someone looking for an attorney, there will typically be a general opinion expressed about you. You

want that opinion to be positive, and you want people to think you are the sort of person to be recommended. Accordingly, my first recommendation is that everything you do counts in the final calculus of how networking can help you.

Second, it is extremely important to make yourself known to lots of people. The reason that companies (and often people) hire advertising agencies, public relations firms, and so forth is that they want to make themselves known to large audiences of people and, more importantly, get the attention of these people. Attorneys use recruiters because recruiters have the ability to make you known to large groups of people and get their attention. A product cannot sell unless it is known to large groups of people. This should be self evident, but you need to take a moment to think about it. If people do not know who you are, how can you get a job?

It is a well-known fact in the legal community that certain types of attorneys are easier to place than others. One reason for the use of recruiters is that many groups of attorneys and types of attorneys are not well networked. In large cities, networks are extremely difficult to form and maintain because there are so many people. In smaller cities, recruiters are rarely used because everyone knows each other. Even in large cities, there are some networks that are very highly developed among attorneys from certain practice groups, as opposed to other practice groups.

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One example of a tightly knit group of attorneys is bankruptcy attorneys in Silicon Valley. During the heyday of the dot-com boom, many of these attorneys had very little to do. They met in practice group meetings every few months (and most went because they were not that busy) and had a good idea of what everyone else was working on. When the legal market in Silicon Valley went south in late 2000, many of these dot coms all of a sudden went bankrupt. The law firms in Silicon Valley, where the need for a bankruptcy attorney had once been nonexistent, suddenly boomed and needed lots of bankruptcy attorneys. Recruiters were very excited by this news, and, combined with the economic downturn, they saw a real opportunity to capitalize on a poor marketplace.

I was one of the recruiters who fell under this spell. Each time I would call a practicing bankruptcy attorney, the attorney would say something to the effect of (even if they had as little as one year of experience): "Oh, yeah, I already spoke with Partner X, the practice group leader at X firm the other day. He sure is busy. I told him I am happy but would give him a buzz in any event if I wanted to leave. He got some of that work from Y company's bankruptcy, you know. I know he is interviewing Marge from Z firm next week."

I was very surprised by the first couple of calls I made because they all went like this. After 20 or 30 phone calls, I realized that, with limited exceptions, all the bankruptcy attorneys in Silicon Valley already knew each other. Moreover, they also knew most of the bankruptcy attorneys in San Francisco and even knew a lot of the bankruptcy attorneys in Los Angeles-an area that is hundreds of miles away. In all my years of legal recruiting, I had come across a network this widespread only this once.

What this said to me is that the bankruptcy attorneys in the Silicon Valley had a very highly developed network. Whether this was due to the lack of bankruptcy work during the dot-com boom, which gave them time to socialize, the fact that there were so few bankruptcy attorneys in the area, or otherwise, it was an interesting phenomenon. Due to the highly developed network in Silicon Valley, these bankruptcy attorneys had no use for recruiters. If they needed a job with another Silicon Valley firm, the chances are they already knew about it or knew someone that did.

Most of the legal world in larger cities is not like the bankruptcy practice group was in Silicon Valley during this time. In fact, in most major cities, there are hundreds of large law firms, and very few attorneys know each other. In addition, there are so many social networks in these legal communities that there is very little crossover and a real information vacuum. It is very difficult for attorneys to make their marks and develop networks of any substance in such legal markets. Few do. However, there are a few select attorneys who really realize the importance

of all this networking. For them, there are more than enough organizations and other outside activities for them to get involved in.

In most large cities there is a virtual panoply of events and organizations that attorneys can get involved in. Beyond getting involved in the bar association, there are tons of groups that deal with issues regarding certain practice areas and numerous other issues, such as lawyers who are interested in human rights, lawyers who are interested in animals, or lawyers who are interested in the arts. In fact, the list is almost endless. There are so many such groups that they are very difficult to count.

I used to wonder when I saw the massive amounts of groups for attorneys in various large cities why attorneys possibly could have so much interest in all these groups. My thought was that if an attorney was interested in developments in contract law, for example, he would be better picking up a treatise when and if he needed information about these developments, or doing a quick LEXIS search to uncover this information, rather than going to some event. This, after all, would get you the same information you could get at the “conference.” Furthermore, if you go to such a meeting or conference, you will have to take time off from work and billing, drive there, pay for parking, and sit around with a bunch of boring attorneys who are scoping each other out trying to find out who is who.

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That is exactly the point of these conferences and meetings! When you go to meetings like this, you are taking the time to meet people. In addition, you are watching and listening to other attorneys outside your work and social circles and learning what they do. When you meet people you are learning of people they too might know and what they have in common. You are developing opportunities to add to the discussions that occur. You are developing the opportunity to speak personally about an issue. You are spreading your name around to others you otherwise might not meet, and you are developing a reputation based on your behavior. This is extremely important. The more you go to these meetings, the more familiar the people will become to you there and the more familiar you will become to them.

If you participate in networking events in more than a passing manner, you will soon be known by numerous attorneys and others throughout your city and outside your immediate circle. When this many people know you, they will also to some extent know about how things are going for you at work, and whether or not you might be interested in a new job. They will mention you to the myriad of people they know when one of these people might be looking for someone to fill a position. They may mention your name to companies and others that need someone with your skills to do legal work.

You will also have the opportunity to do people favors when you participate in groups and networking activities. When you have the opportunity to do people favors, they will want the opportunity to return the gestures. This too will increase the potential opportunities you have over time.

When you keep in touch with your law school and go to events, this increases your networking possibilities. When you keep in touch with people you have known in the past, this increases your networking possibilities. When you take an interest in certain causes, sit on a board unrelated to law, or write books and papers (related to the law or not), this too increases your networking possibilities. In fact, everything you do that involves interacting with other people increases your networking possibilities.

### **C. Why Unnetworked Legal Careers Die**

Networking is extremely important to both getting a job and keeping a job inside a law firm. While an entire treatise could be written about the value of networking, I think it is useful to examine how an inability to network can kill your legal career. Of the many things that can kill your legal career, or even prevent it from taking off, the inability to network is one of the strongest.

When I was in college, I was a very good student and knew all of the other 10 or so really good students in my class because we were all nominated by the school for Rhodes Scholarships, Fulbright Scholarships, and other sorts of things, and the school had a few meetings where they got all of us together to discuss this and other stuff. None of us in this little group got Rhodes Scholarships that year, and so most of us applied to law school. Then most of us waited until March or whenever the results of our applications rolled in.

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One of those students was particularly close with one our professors, and I remember thinking that this woman was somewhat of a brown noser and did not understand why one student would spend so much time chatting with this particular professor. This professor was also someone who was quite well known in the national academic community. At some point in their professional relationship, this woman had told the professor that a certain law school (which at the time was the number-one law school in the United States) was her first choice. She told me this one evening when we were at some event or another discussing where we were applying to law school.

A couple of days before the deadline for law school applications were due, she sent hers in. Something quite remarkable then happened. Within five days of sending her application across the country to this law school, she had received an acceptance letter from the law school back in the mail. She was accepted at the top law school in the United States the very same day it had received her application. The rest of us mortals had to wait for months. This was a lesson for me in the value of networks and their importance even at this early stage in my exposure to the legal profession. Not only had this woman done an exceptional job networking with her professor, the professor had obviously done an even better job networking with some people inside the number-one law school. He did such an outstanding job, in fact, that I doubt they even needed to read her application. I saw something similar to this again a couple of years later.

When I was in my second year of law school, I was sitting outside the office of a law professor who is quite famous nationally. I was waiting to speak with him about a paper I was writing for his class. During my time at the law school, I had noticed that he spent a lot of time chatting with another law student in the halls and that this student was often present on one or two occasions when I had stopped by this professor's office to chat about the same paper. The two of them were always debating about some intellectual topic or another. Once again, I pegged the woman talking to the professor as a brown noser. I remember thinking, at the time, that she was wasting her time talking about all this intellectual gobbly gook with the professor, and if she were smart she would spend more time studying. I had some mutual acquaintances of this law student and knew she was an average, but not stellar, student. What I heard on that particular day was quite astonishing to me and something I will likely never forget.

The professor was talking to a law firm and said something like the following:

"Grades are fine. She will work hard. I have already talked to X firm and Y firm, and they are not making her an offer. She belongs with you, and if you make her an offer, she will accept it. She's perfect for you guys. I already spoke to Z in your firm, and he told me that he would make an exception on the grades for me."

I had no idea this sort of thing went on. Needless to say, the student ended up at one of the top law firms in the United States. In fact, some people might say it is the top law firm in the United States.

What is so interesting about all of this is that this sort of thing happens every day. Somewhere in your midst there is a powerful person who can get you started—as these two people got their boost—from powerful, networked and well-known professors. If these students had not taken the time to get networked with these professors as they did, the results they achieved might not have occurred. Here, these students did an exceptional job networking with simply one person. Imagine the results you can get over the course of your legal career if you network and put yourself in the corner of 10, 20, 50, or 100+ people like that. You would be very surprised. It is possible.

How does a man from a blue-collar family in Arkansas become President of the United States? How does a Hollywood actor become President of the United States? I once heard somewhere that Bill Clinton never forgot a face of anyone he met. While I am not sure that is true, I am sure there is some element of truth. I have heard numerous stories of Bill Clinton walking up to people he met only for a moment 20 or 30 years previously and saying hello and asking about particulars of the person's life such as their family from that time in the past.

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All over the United States there are well-networked attorneys whose careers are in the stratosphere. People like Johnnie Cochran, Jeffrey Fieger, Greta Van Susteren, and others. None of these people would likely be considered a good attorney by many big firm litigators. They are considered good attorneys by most of the public, and they are the people that Americans look to when they are interested in knowing about the law. I would argue that whatever you say about these attorneys' education or big firm experience, they would not care. They are more influential, more connected, more known, and make more money than probably 99.5% of all big firm attorneys. These are all people with a great deal of power because they are networked and connected to the American people.

In the large firm arena, aside from the media, there are thousands of attorneys who are very well networked both inside and outside their law firms. They are so well networked that their firms would likely never risk losing them. These are the law school classmates who call you every six months to see how you are doing. These are the people you meet that know tons of people all around the country. These are also the sorts of attorneys who have the most business and the most power inside their law firms. These are the sorts of people that really succeed in the practice of law. They succeed because of their ability to connect all over the place and with numerous types of people.

If you fail to network with associates or partners inside your firm, you will eventually run into problems inside your own firm. If you fail to network outside of your firm, you will have more difficulty getting a job and will likely have a difficult time ever getting business and therefore having security within your firm. Attorneys who fail in the practice of law and many of those who leave the practice of law do so because they are don't network.

One of the more typical things I see in my job as a legal recruiter are partners from major law firms who have no business. These partners rose through the associate ranks based upon their hard work, dedication, and demonstrated skill set. They also rose because some partner within their firm had enough work to support them at the partner level. They would not have risen had someone not had a lot of business.

This is a very precarious position to be in. When a partner does not have a substantial book of portable business, he or she will be let go and asked to look for a job if the work the firm is doing dries up. It cannot be any other way. A partner needs to be self sustaining in terms of his or her work for his or her survival. If the partner sits in his/her office all day and night and does nothing but churn out legal work, his or her contribution is limited to that. If he/she tries to bring in his own work and work that others can do, his or her contribution is far greater. The firm wants to keep him or her around.

Without networking outside the law firm, the partner has nothing but their skills to offer and may eventually lose

their job. They will certainly never likely have the high standing within their firm that those who bring in the work do. I have seen partners from AmLaw 100 law firms hang up their own shingle and do divorces after they were let go because they had no clients and the firm stopped giving them work. In some extreme cases, I have seen partners like this do things like open a diner in a small town and make less than \$20,000 a year. Regardless of whether they are happy in their new job, these partners would have been on a far different track had they learned how to network.

You need to understand that your entire career is dependent upon networking, and longevity is not possible without it. If you do not network, and do so consistently, you will likely eventually be in trouble.

#### **E. Conclusions**

Networking is one of the most fundamental necessities for long-term success in the practice of law. Your legal career depends on networking from the time you are in law school until the time you retire.

One of the greatest tragedies of the law school education and the practice of law is that the importance of networking is barely emphasized (if at all). With the advent of mega law firms over the past 50 years, the importance of networking is still there-and more important than ever-but many attorneys do not realize it because they are insulated by mounds of work. With great amounts of work coming from partners, a young attorney's superiors will not necessarily tell their subordinates the importance of networking either.

The way to succeed in the practice of law is to form networks and go out and use those networks.

When I first started practicing law, one of my good friends who made partner that same year told me: "You do not have to work all the time and need to realize that no partner in this firm is ever going to tell you that. It is not in their best interest. You need to make time for yourself on your own. If you work all the time, you'll never have time to do the things you want to do for yourself."

How true. The same logic applies to networking. No one is going to tell you to network. It is not in their best interest. You need to network because if you do not do this, you will not have anywhere near the legal career you could have if you did network.