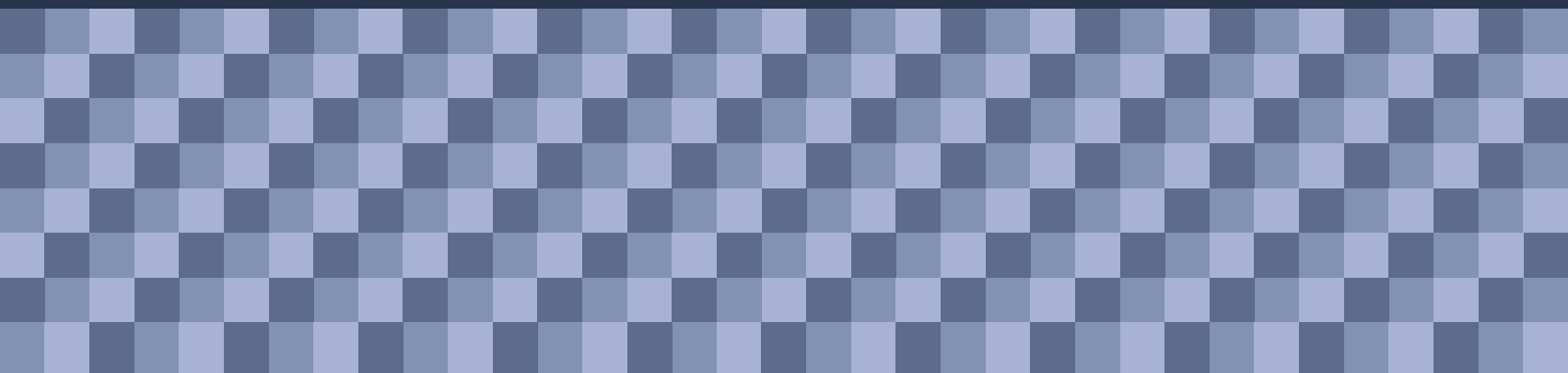


ATTORNEY SEARCH

ARTICLE OF THE WEEK

by Harrison Barnes, CEO of BCG





The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught

Summary: *Learn about this devastating career killer that attorneys are never taught in law school. Don't let your career suffer the same fate as many other former attorneys.*

An attorney in New York was telling me a story the other day about him joining a law firm with 35 other first-year associates several years ago. He told me that on his first day, he and the new attorneys were all assembled around a conference table and were informed by a partner in the firm that within five years most—if not all of them—would be gone.

No explanation was given for why. The partner simply was telling them a pattern that he had observed during his decades at the firm. Very few make it.

What sort of welcome is this? It is almost as if the new attorneys are being asked to pack their bags and start looking for a new job the moment they arrive.

Why on earth would a law firm go to such lengths to make people feel so unwelcome?

More on this in a moment...

The attorney relating the story to me—a candidate of mine now looking for a job—was very proud that this prediction had come true, and five years later, he and one other associate were left in the firm of that original group.

Like most attorneys, he was talking about “lifestyle” and the other things that simply do not make a lot of sense for attorneys to be talking about, unless they are not working for actual clients and really do not want to be attorneys. Most attorneys that tell you they are concerned with their “lifestyle” and “balance”, their work life balance – never really amount to much in the law, and that is okay, because not everyone has the career commitment or they just aren't cut out for practicing law in a high pressure environment.

But it is also important to think a little bit about why various legal jobs are so high pressure. Why are people tested in their ability to pay attention to small details, work incredible hours and continue this day after day, week after week? When I was practicing law in a large law firm, I remember that the majority of the firm was there one year on the Fourth of July. Of course they were! That's commitment. They took their jobs incredibly seriously, and just because the Fourth of July fell in the middle of the week, this was no excuse to stop working.



- If you had a serious legal problem, would you want an attorney that was concerned about their “lifestyle” when push came to shove?
- Would you want an attorney who needed weekends off when you were in a big trial, or had an important deposition scheduled?
- If you were taking your company public, would you want an attorney who needed to leave the office by 6:00 each day and needed weekends off?
- If you wanted information about a lawyer, wouldn’t you want to know how hard they’d work for you—day in and day out?
- If you had just gotten run over by a car, would you want a doctor concerned about their “quality of life” and unable to work on you until Monday?

While certain legal practices are more demanding than others, if you want to be a professional with the profound responsibility of handling other peoples’ problems and affecting how their lives end up – ***you sure as hell better be committed to what you are doing.*** If you want a career as a lawyer, you must have 100% career commitment.

What law firm is going to want to keep people around who are not committed to what they are doing? What every large law firm is doing day in and day out is testing the commitment of the people working there. If you show lack of commitment, you are showing weakness, and you will be gone. What do attorneys do—all through the day and week and month and year? Show their commitment to the firm and especially to their clients.

The second you show a lack of commitment, the game is generally over in a competitive firm (or in any competitive legal environment). No one ever tells you this is one of the most important facts about lawyers, of course. However, this is the trap that is out there for the unwary. You can sometimes coast for a while if the legal market is very good, but you are generally going to lose if you show a lack of commitment. If you are not the most committed, you will not get the best assignments, you will not advance and you will be the first one gone when things get slow – and they always do. An attorney job description is this: stay busy, work hard, and be committed.

When you are given any assignment, your only option is to act like it is the most important thing in the world and give it your all. Every piece of work is incredibly important and needs to be done in the best possible way. One error in one assignment can ruin your career. I’ve seen it happen. When I visit with people about lawyer career information, they always think I’m going to focus on education and networking. They are often surprised when I share the information about lawyers who are supremely successful. The answer is and always will be: they are committed.

You need to have a massive and profound commitment to continue practicing law at a high level – no question about it.

There is little doubt that it is difficult to remain employed for a long period of time in a large law firm. However, it is not impossible. People do it all the time. The firm, of course, wants some people to leave, because it shares profits with attorneys that are higher up in the firm. There is widespread age discrimination that favors the young because younger peoples' commitment has not been tested yet. They still have the drive and ambition in them to go without question.

Law firms and the partners in them desperately want to keep people around who are committed and willing to work hard. Your commitment matters. Anything that shows a lack of commitment is discarded like a virus in the most competitive firms.

I receive phone calls from attorneys daily who have had a good run. They may have made \$250,000 in a large firm by the time they were five years out of law school and then thought it was OK to leave the practice of law for several months to a year and do something else.

- One woman from a large Chicago firm who went to the [University of Pennsylvania](#) for law school became a contractor.
- Another guy who practiced securities law at a huge firm decided to write a book about his life.
- Another person from a massive firm in Los Angeles worked in legal aid in the rural South.
- One woman who graduated from [Berkeley](#) and practiced with a huge Palo Alto firm started a soap company.
- Another guy worked at [Fried Frank](#) after graduating from [Harvard Law School](#) and then went to work in his dad's business for a few years.
- Another woman started a clothing line in New York after finishing in the top of her law school class at [NYU](#) and working at a huge Wall Street law firm.
- One guy thought he was really smart because he went to [Yale Law School](#) and wanted to come back to a law firm after teaching for a few years.

ARE YOU KIDDING ME? Game over. Good bye. HAVE A NICE LIFE! (See my article "[Taking a Hiatus from the Practice of Law](#)")

These people NEVER, NEVER, NEVER are likely to be hired by a large law firm ever again. No matter how well it is spun. It does not, will not, and cannot possibly work. This advice is critical information for attorneys. NEVER leave your position. You'll look like a slacker.

It's not because the above attorneys are not brilliant and interesting. It is simply because they were not 115% committed to working in a large law firm and practicing law.

Law firms have tons of choices of people they can hire. Lots and lots and lots of committed people want to work there. Anything that shows a lack of commitment is very bad.



Why would a law firm take a risk? Why would they want their clients to take this risk with this person? The person is not committed.

Law firms take their chances on people like this from time to time, but it is a bad idea. They almost always get burned. These free spirits come back to the law firm and, within a few months, start looking for something else to do again. The law firm is too constraining, they need a smaller firm, or it is not the life they want.

I often hear this line from attorneys that leave a big law firm: “I looked at the lives the partners were leading and did not want to be like them. That is why I left.”

GREAT DECISION! Now you are living in a small apartment, do not make enough money to support a family and do not have a job. Meanwhile ... that partner you did not want to be like is doing important work, has a job and is providing for her family and at least working and contributing to society. You stuck by that decision and how brilliant and smart it was!

- See **Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead** for more information.

When an attorney starts work, they are surrounded by enormously competitive people inside a law firm. All sorts of games are occurring where people are psyching one another out, such as people in the firm starting rumors and much more.

Everyone is trying to break your sense of commitment, but your job is to stay focused and committed.

Most people give up. I see people give up all the time.

- People give up practicing law.
- They give up trying to be a musician.
- They give up trying to be an actor.
- They give up trying to be a writer.

They give up on their dreams and what they were meant to do.

People give up for a variety of reasons, and most of the problems that people experience in their lives are a result of having given up.

What have you given up on?



When you give up, there is a tremendous sense of frustration and regret that follows you throughout your life. When you give up and choose a life and career that is less fulfilling, your days are filled with regret and thoughts about what could have been. You feel that you could have or should have done something differently that you did not do. You stop trying and, consequently, you sell out for something that is less than you are capable of being and doing.

Most of the world—and the legal profession—is full of people who gave up. You can drive through any city and find where the people live who gave up and where the people live who did not give up. The homes of the people who did not give up are generally much nicer.

In everything we do, we are faced with significant resistance the higher we attempt to climb. If you want to be the best at anything, you are going to come across people who attempt to push you down to get you out of the way so they can rise. You will face numerous obstacles. Some are psychological and, more than often, obstacles are put in your way by yourself and others. There are great and massive rewards on the other side for attorneys who do not give up. The rewards at the top are significant, but only available to those who do not give up.

Many of your obstacles will, in fact, be imagined and not obstacles at all. You will create obstacles to give yourself an excuse for not carrying on and getting better. More than 95% of attorneys out there end up giving up.

When an attorney gets laid off, they generally have a very difficult time finding a new job. The reasons for this are numerous; however, for the most part it is because firms know that when a firm decides to lay people off, it never lays off everyone. Some people manage to work so hard and track down tons of work that they never get laid off.

If an attorney is laid off—even if they have first-rate qualifications and experience—their odds of getting a new position with a big firm are very slim indeed.

“Why did you get laid off?” I asked one attorney. He had worked at a major law firm and has been looking for a new job for over a year.

“Because I did not make my hours,” he told me. “The way the assignment system worked was you had to basically beg for work. I was there to work, not beg. I did not make my hours.”

I review hundreds of attorneys’ resumes for several hours a day. I have been doing this for most of my career. Very few of these resumes show commitment. Anyone that shows a lack of commitment is stamped out and unwelcome. You can see people start off strong and then they fall off the map. Very few attorneys have the stamina and the willpower to keep going and not give up.

The pattern never changes. An attorney goes to great schools, works incredibly hard in them, gets a great job and their career ends because they did not have the commitment. Your commitment needs to be constant and never ending. You need to never stop being committed even for a moment.

The funny thing is, however, that every attorney knows the importance of commitment. Something I have noticed again and again is that:

- If someone attended a very good preparatory high school, they are proud of it and put it on their resume. You do not see people doing this with public high schools.
- If someone was in the armed services, they put this on their resume. You do not see people advertising the fact that they worked in a McDonalds for two years before or after college, but they always put the armed services on there.
- If a Mormon man was a missionary, he puts this on his resume. You do not see people advertising that they are a particular religion on their resumes, but if they were a missionary, they always write this.
- If someone played a college sport, this almost always goes on their resume. People never put the fact that they did intramural sports in college on their resumes.
- If someone has run a marathon, they often put it on their resume. People never put the fact they have run a 5K on their resume.

People put this information on their resumes because it typically shows a high level of commitment and follow through for an extended period of time. People are proud of when they have committed to something and accomplished it. It is not easy to move into an army barracks and live there a few years, ride a bicycle around a foreign country trying to convert people to your religion, move away from your parents when you are 13 and go stay in a dormitory and work hard, run a marathon, or play a college sport.

All of these things are events in peoples' lives they are proud of and show a lot of commitment. They did something they were proud of and pushed through and completed it. People become defined by what they commit to and complete.

Many of these people may go their entire lives without completing something and succeeding at it ever again. The feeling they got from completing something when they were younger—that not everyone is able to do—is something that defines them for the rest of their lives.

The benefit of being in the military, going to a prep school, being a missionary, running a marathon or playing a college sport is that it helps you prove to yourself that you are able to commit to (1) doing and (2) being something. These experiences push everyone to accomplish something.



Being the best you can be at something will require you to work the hardest and commit to it. There is no other way. While being with a group of people doing the same thing will require you to commit, the most difficult thing is committing on your own and having faith in yourself to continue and do something no matter what resistance you face.

- **See [Be Committed to What You Do](#) for more information.**

Your mind and ability to focus and not give up is what is required. You need stamina and perseverance.

- **See [Ferraris Crashing into Poles and the Importance of Focus in Your Life and Career](#) for more information.**

When I was in a public elementary school, I remember a kid in our class left to go to a prestigious private school in the area. The following year, he came back and sat in on our class for the day. The teacher asked him to describe the difference between the private school and what it had been like in the public school. He said that the work was basically the same; however, in the private school there was several hours of homework required each night: “Just a lot more work,” was all he said.

The secret of good schools is that they typically pile work on people so they are used to working hard. They give more work than necessary to build perseverance and the ability to work hard all the time. They are building commitment.

They push people as hard as they can be pushed with the expectation that they will be more successful with these good work habits than without them. It is (partly) for this reason that people from outstanding high schools often do much better than people from public schools. They have developed better work habits and commitment. The real world is about more than just being smart. It is about commitment as well. You need to be enormously committed and work very, very hard when you get out in the real world.

Law firms, like the real world, test your commitment. They test the commitment of associates and partners.

The worst thing that can happen to you is to get pushed off a path that you were meant to be on by not being committed. There is no job that will pay substantial rewards that is easy to do and does not require commitment.

The next time you think about not committing and getting off the bus, remember that being on the bus can lead to great things you may never see if you decide to get off. The path of least resistance always looks the most attractive. There will always be an easy path visible for you



to follow. The road to success and power is never easy. The road to mediocrity is always the easier path, and you will have lots of company. Most of the world is there envying the people who committed.

Here are some other articles I have written about the importance of commitment you might appreciate:

Be Committed to What You Do

This article discusses the power of commitment. It is important to commit to your career, to a single employer or to anything for that matter. Not being committed to your career can have enormous ramifications. Commitment is key to any form of success. You should not do any sort of job that your heart is not in and that you cannot be committed to. Without a strong commitment you will not have the success you desire.

The Only Thing That Matters Is Commitment

There is a huge difference between being interested in something and being committed to it. Commitment requires accepting no excuses and only accepting results. If you want something and are not motivated to do the work to get it, the odds are very good that you will fail.

A Message to Garcia and Your Career

People owe their success to concentrating their energies and taking prompt action; they understand the importance of maintaining a positive attitude. People notice and gravitate towards those with a positive approach to their work, just as they notice – and do not respect – indifference and half-hearted work. A positive attitude, therefore, is your greatest asset.

Contact Harrison

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