



An Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

10 Factors That Matter to Big Firms More Than Where You Went to Law School: Why the Law School You Went to Ultimately Does Not Matter as Much as You Think It Does to Major Law Firms

Summary: There are far more important factors law firms look at if you want to practice law for a long period of time with a good firm than the law school you went to.

The law school you went to matters surprisingly little the longer you are out of law school. In fact, better law schools are often a detriment to attorneys practicing law for an extended length of time. Many attorneys who went to great law schools think that they will get special treatment due to having attended top law schools. They are quickly disabused of this notion after the cold, hard facts of practicing in the real world wear off. This is a competitive game and there are far more important things than top law school credentials at stake. In fact, if you think your law school matters—and act like it around people higher up who went to lesser law schools—they will quickly crush you with poor reviews, no assignments and so forth. Your law school will quickly become something that becomes your demise and not something that helps you.

Do not get me wrong, the law school you went to matters – but it does not matter forever. The law school is simply a way to distinguish you from the tens of thousands of people graduating from law school each year. After that, no one cares for the most part.

There are far more important factors law firms look at if you want to practice law for a long period of time with a good firm (actually, any firm!) than the law school you went to. I cannot tell you how little law school matters in the real world. There are numerous things that matter far more.

The point of this article is to give you some hard-hitting advice so that you can stay employed for an extended period of time in the largest and most prestigious law firm possible and get a job with the best law firms even if you did not go to a top law school.



Law schools are important when you are in law school applying for jobs, because this is really the only basis the hiring law firm has for comparison. The idea they have is that someone from [Harvard](#) is better than someone from another lower-ranked school such as the [University of Kentucky](#). There is no other basis for comparison this early on in someone's legal career. As time passes, factors other than the law school you went to become far more important.

What does the law school you went to show? Not much in the long run ...

If you went to a top tier law school, it generally shows that you are very smart and likely did quite well on the LSAT and had good grades, wherever you went to college. Those things are important, and being a good student is a very important component of being a good attorney. Attorneys sit behind desks all day and look at papers, analyze various matters and are paid to reach conclusions.

But being a good student where? You could major in some unrelated discipline like advertising or fashion design at Florida State, or wherever, and do well on the LSAT and still get into an awesome law school. Law schools care where you went to school, but when it comes down to it, you get into a good law school based on how you did in college and your LSAT scores.

I have seen **TONS** of people go to a community college for a few years—get a 4.0—then transfer to a big state school and continue to get good grades taking various easy classes, ace the LSAT and go to [HARVARD LAW SCHOOL](#)! Congratulations. No extracurricular activities needed! Just good grades and an LSAT score. You can do that with Michigan, Columbia and a variety of law schools. You cracked the code. All you need to do is get the best grades possible and a good LSAT score.

- In my experience, the smartest attorneys are generally the best at figuring out complex problems that win cases, get deals done and so forth. That is why the LSAT tests your ability to do puzzles, for example. Fact pattern puzzles are an important part of practicing law and being an attorney. If you were smart enough to get into a good law school, the odds are pretty good that you have the ability to sift through information and figure stuff out.
- Attorneys are also paid to read a lot of stuff – the LSAT makes a big deal out of reading because of that.



- And attorneys are also paid to figure out who is bullshitting and not bullshitting – and that is why the LSAT tests your ability to sort out arguments.

So ... the LSAT is important – maybe more so than your grades in an unrelated major.

If you went to a top tier school and did well there, the odds are pretty good you have a serious aptitude for practicing law and can work very hard as well. You generally deserve to get a job in a good firm because the odds are you could do quite well there. That is why the best students from the top law schools get jobs with the best firms. Even if you went to a lousy law school and were at the top of your class, this still shows a lot of aptitude and you are likely to get a job with a very good firm—if you try hard enough.

- **See [Top 10 Ways Attorneys Can Move to a Better Law Firm and Get a Better Attorney Job](#) for more information.**

However, the best attorneys from the best law schools often are unemployable after several years out of law school. Just going to a good law school is not enough to get and keep a job with a large law firm. Here are 10 factors far more important than where you went to law school:

1. Your Previous (On the Job) Training

Certain firms have a reputation for training people very well—and everyone knows that they have high expectations for the people there. If you get a good job right out of law school—or thereafter (with a major law firm)—law firms no longer really care about where you went to law school.

CONGRATULATIONS! You are now part of the club.

If you worked at a major firm for three or four years, you have proven yourself enough that whatever law school you went to is relatively unimportant and no longer matters. If someone is working at **Latham & Watkins**, **Skadden Arps** and so forth they become more defined by that than the law school they went to.

While working in a major law firm is important, being trained by someone who is well known is also very important. If you are trained by an attorney with good qualifications, who also had major law firm training, this is also seen as a very positive thing by law firms. I have placed numerous



attorneys from small law firms, even those trained by solo practitioners, who were well trained and had good experience. The training you get is important. Even training outside a law firm is often highly valued:

- Clerkships with federal judges are a form of training and thought of highly by law firms.
- Work in the patent and trademark office is a form of training and thought of highly by law firms.
- Work in a prosecutor's office, working for the US Attorney's office and so forth is often very highly valued.

2. How You Did in Law School

If you did well in law school—were at the top of your class—the actual law school you went to generally starts to matter very little after you have been out a while. People see you were one of the top few students in your graduating class and your excellence is assumed.

- **See [Law School Grades and Your Career](#) for more information.**

If you did well in law school, within reason, law firms do not care as much about where you went to law school.

3. Your Practice Area

I spoke with an attorney from [Cravath Swaine & Moore](#) the other day who went to a top law school and has been practicing corporate law for three years. This attorney is not interested in being a corporate attorney anymore. According to him, being a corporate attorney is “like being a glorified clerk. It is not interesting, is a bunch of busy work and completely unenjoyable.”

He wants to switch to litigation – and believes that will be more interesting.

- **See [Choosing Between Corporate and Litigation Practice Areas: Which is the Better Choice for Your Legal Career?](#) for more information.**

Unfortunately, this sort of thing does not go over well, especially in New York. This attorney's odds of getting a job in litigation with a large law firm are essentially zero.



Firms are not interested in people who want to switch practice areas. This lack of commitment is generally the first stop on an attorney's choice to ultimately leave the practice of law. What law firm wants to experiment with that?

- **See [The #1 Attorney Career Killer that Attorneys Are Never Taught](#) for more information.**

The practice you are in matters a great deal. There are certain practice areas that you cannot have a long-term future in unless you have a lot of business. Litigation is one of them. When litigators without a lot of business become senior there is not much they can do to stay employed in a large law firm. It is very, very difficult. The corporate attorney from [Cravath](#) could get a job anywhere — just not in litigation.

There are litigators everywhere. Litigators are essentially coming out of the walls. There are so many litigators that law firms, recruiters and others are literally overwhelmed with them every time there is an opening. More than the law school the attorney goes to, the practice area matters. Here is some information about various practice areas that are strong enough that law firms do not care that much about where you went to law school:

- **Anything Related to Patent Law.** Most attorneys go to law school and major in English, political science, anthropology and other majors that have very little use and certainly do not tax the mind that much. Very few major in difficult sciences like physics, computer science, electrical engineering, chemistry and so forth. Patent attorneys, therefore, are quite rare and law firms will almost always look at them, regardless of where they went to law school.
- **ERISA/Executive Compensation.** Attorneys in these practice areas are also quite rare. There are just not a lot of them. Even senior attorneys without business can get jobs in this practice area. If an attorney has solid experience in this, firms are really not all that concerned about where the person went to school.
- **Corporate.** When the market is very active, corporate attorneys can get tons of jobs, as there is a huge demand for them. However, the market can also dry up and close very quickly. In this case corporate is not a very hot practice area and is a huge detriment. School matters very little in this practice area.



- **Real Estate.** This practice area, when active, can also be an extremely good practice area to be in. When the market is strong for real estate attorneys, law firms care very little about schools.
- **Healthcare.** This market also heats up from time to time and can be a very good market for attorneys. When this market is active, law firms care very little about your law school.
- **Immigration.** There are very few good immigration attorneys out there. Most of them get their start in small law firms and do not come from the best law schools. When a large law firm needs immigration attorneys, it frequently draws from this pool of people. It needs to because it is the only option. Law school matters very little for immigration attorneys.
- **Trust and Estates.** This is a practice area that is also very specialized, so law firms care very little about the law school you went to. If you have good experience and training, this is generally enough.

4. How Long You Stay in Your Legal Jobs and Stability

Law firms want people who are likely to stay employed with them for a long period of time. Some people come into organizations and get along fabulously and are always happy and productive, while others come into law firms and have the opposite experience.

- **See [Builders and Destroyers](#) for more information.**

If you consistently go into a position and stay there a long time, this is thought of highly and means that you are likely to stay in your next job as well. This is highly thought of by law firms, and showing stability is valuable, if other factors (practice area, training, etc.) fall into place. People that stay in jobs a long time are generally thought of as people who are likely to go into their next job and stay there as well.

- **See [In Defense of Long-Term Employment with a Single Employer](#) for more information.**

5. The Amount of Business You Have

When you get five or six years out of law school, if you get enough business at a high enough billing rate, your law school becomes unimportant again.



- **See Why Attorneys with 5+ Years of Law Firm Experience Are in Serious Trouble (and Seven Steps they Need to Take to Save Their Legal Careers) for more information.**

While the point of this article is not to reinforce how important business is, it is far more important than your law school after a few years out.

6. Your Reputation

If you work hard and have a good reputation in your practice area, and other attorneys around town know you are very smart, willing to work hard and committed to what you do, then your law school matters less and less.

I've had numerous instances where I called a law firm about someone and they said something like the following: "Our partners are already familiar with her and would love to meet with her about joining us." This has happened with the very best law firms and with people from not the best law schools. If you do good work and have an excellent reputation, you practically can have a job waiting when you get out.

I once knew an attorney who came out of a lousy law school that was hired by an attorney from a major law firm, right after a trial against the attorney from the major law firm. The partner was so impressed with his performance that he offered him a job right after the trial.

Your reputation becomes hugely important the longer you are out of school. If you work hard, are fair and are considered a formidable opponent in all that you do, then your law school will matter less and less and not even be part of the conversation. The best attorneys respect and want to work with other strong attorneys.

See the following articles for more information:

- **Protecting Your Reputation at All Costs**
- **The Importance of Endorsements, References and Getting Others to Cheer for You**

7. Your Interest in Your Practice Area and Involvement in the Community

Related to your reputation is your interest in your practice area and the community involvement



you have after you have been practicing for some time. Many attorneys will do things like try and get involved with their bar association, teach classes, speak at seminars, write papers and other things. If you do enough of this, you can start to become relatively well known among other attorneys, and this will help you a great deal. At the same time, it will start to make law school not really part of the equation anymore.

The resumes of many of the best attorneys are littered with various papers, speeches and other things that they have done which help them a great deal if they want to look for a new job at a more prestigious firm. If you were hiring an attorney, who would you want: An attorney who is constantly out there and very active in their practice area, or one who is not?

Your involvement in the community and interest in your practice area are both things that show your COMMITMENT to practicing law. This shows that you are not likely to go anywhere and are likely to stick with it. This separates you from the variety of flakes that are part of the mass of graduates coming out of top law schools that have no idea what they are interested in doing in the long term, or think they are above practicing law in a law firm. The world is full of people who do not know what they want to do, and anything that shows you do know what you want to do is highly valued.

- **See Cheap Beer, Overpriced Chocolate, and Being Visible and Approachable for more information.**

8. Your Looks, Dress and Personality

If I see an attorney who went to a lower-ranking law school, especially women, practicing at a major law firm, I almost always know the person is going to be quite/extremely attractive and have a great personality even before seeing what they look like. Is this always the case? No. But more often than not it is.

Am I bad for saying this? I have been a legal recruiter for just about my entire career and simply cannot deny that there is a strong correlation. I am an observer of this and not the cause. There is an undeniable correlation, and I see it on a daily basis.

Am I saying that law firms are hiring people without regard to whether they can do the work? Of course not. But taking care of your appearance and having some natural good looks certainly



helps with getting into major law firms. I know it does because I have seen this happen far too many times. The “batting average” (interviews to offers) is simply much, much greater for attractive women and men (with a good personality) than it is for people without a good personality.

I had a woman 15+ years out of law school in a relatively dull practice area get several job offers in the South recently. I did not know what she looked like before I began marketing her (I was more concerned with the quality of her resume and experience).

“Is it OK to take off my wedding ring and not talk about my husband and family in the interviews?” she asked me after she had started to get interviews, each of which I was not expecting. Her law school was not great, she was at an average firm, she had a decent amount of business and her practice area was busy, but not hot enough that I expected so many interviews.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, well, the thing is ... I think that I am getting all of these interviews based on how I look. I do not want to spoil it.”

Was she right about this? I had at least two men with qualifications that were slightly better than her, and at a more appropriate experience level, not get interviews with the same firms.

On another level, I’ve seen **NUMEROUS** very attractive attorneys from great law schools not be able to get jobs because they have very bad personalities. They are not likeable, seem defensive and judgmental in interviews and just rub people the wrong way on numerous levels. It is not just about looks—**PERSONALITY MATTERS** a great deal. If you are going to work for someone, you sure as hell better connect with them and get them to like you.

See the following articles for more information:

- **Communicate with Relevance and Connect with Your Audience**
- **Your Job is About the Transference Energy**

I’m a recruiter—I’ve seen this sort of thing over and over again (with both men and women). If you are very well put together and impressive looking, then law firms are more likely to hire you



and overlook what law school you went to. I am sorry to point this out, but here are some facts I cannot help but have observed (I underline observed because I am an observer and not the cause):

- Thin people are more likely to get hired than fat people
- Attractive people (especially very attractive people) are more likely to get hired than unattractive people
- Young people are more likely to get hired than old people
- Sharp dressed people are more likely to get hired than frumpy people (**See [What is the Appropriate Way to Dress for an Interview for more information](#)**)
- Tall people are more likely to get hired than short people
- Socially withdrawn nerds are less likely to get hired than social types

Personality matters a great deal. I see people from [Harvard Law School](#), [Yale](#) and other schools all the time who cannot get jobs. They are just too nerdy and have poor personalities. They cannot connect with people and this messes them up. It is important for people to be outgoing, likeable and so forth (and look good while doing this).

When I was practicing law in a large New York law firm. I remember an associate lecturing the other associates about dress, the sort of tie they wore and so forth. The attorney said that when an attorney walks into a room and is billing a client an outrageous amount of money per hour, he better be the most impressive - looking and sounding person in the room. If you look and sound good and have a pleasing personality, clients like this. This is what clients want to see, and it is what you need to get ahead in the legal profession. This is also something that law firms expect and want to see.

9. Your Racial and Social Background

There is discrimination inside of law firms, and there is reverse discrimination as well.

- A law firm composed of Catholic men is more likely to hire Catholic men than Orthodox Jewish men.
- A law firm composed of black women is more likely to hire black women than white men.



- A law firm composed of Hispanic males is more likely to hire Hispanic males than Arab males.
- A law firm composed of white feminist women is more likely to hire white feminist women than white males.
- A law firm composed of Jews is more likely to hire Jews than non-Jews.
- **See Your Career and Life is About Getting Let In for more information.**

No one will admit to this, of course, but in my role and in my position I am **AN OBSERVER** and see this sort of thing on a daily basis. Do law firms intentionally discriminate? NO, I honestly believe the majority of them do not. What they do, though, is hire people they are most comfortable with, and this generally means they are going to hire people from similar backgrounds that are like them.

- **See Find an Employer with Similar Values for more information.**
- People from an area are more likely to get hired than people not from that area
- People who went to local schools are (often) more likely to get hired than people from similarly ranked schools outside of the area
- People from important (upper class/well-known) families are more likely to get hired than middle class people from average families

Here are some stereotypes that I have **OBSERVED**:

- People without handicaps are more likely to be hired than people with handicaps
- Women of a Middle Eastern background are more likely to get hired than white women
- White males are more likely to get hired than black males
- Asian males are more likely to get hired than white males
- White females are less likely to get hired than Indian females
- Former college athletes are more likely to get hired than non-athletes

While you can make of this what you want (and shoot the messenger for delivering these **OBSERVANCES**), it is what it is. What this means is that whatever your position is, you need to



use this to your advantage and make sure that you go after the people and groups that are most likely to be interested in you.

10. Your Commitment to Working in a Law Firm

If you take time off, go in-house, or do something else, this is not a good thing. You generally need to continue working in a law firm pretty much permanently if you expect law firms to disregard your law school. Anything that suggests a lack of commitment to law firm life is not welcome in the law firm world.

See the following articles for more information:

- **10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Firm Attorneys Make: 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm**
- **The #1 Attorney Career Killer that Attorneys Are Never Taught**
- **Taking a Hiatus from Practicing Law**

Conclusions

A legal career is a race. Your objective is to join the race and stay in it as long as possible. If you want to work in a large law firm and stay employed there for an extended period of time, there are far more important factors than where you went to law school.

I talk to attorneys on a daily basis that expect law firms to open up to them because they attended [Yale](#), [Stanford](#), or some other great law school. **NO ONE CARES!** Just because you went to a good law school does not mean you are going to fit into the law firm, do the work, stay around, contribute more than you take and be fun to work with. Work ethic, commitment and other factors are far more important than other factors that you may think are important.

I see attorneys go out on interviews all the time with great educational qualifications and go into interviews talking about what they want, including good hours, high pay, and no deadlines, and expecting law firms to roll over and give them whatever they want because they managed to get into a good law school. There are countless attorneys out there in the market like this who are unemployed and doing nothing because they do not have anything to offer other than a school.



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- **See Don't Be Dead Weight—Contribute More than You Take** for more information.

This is ludicrous. You need to get in and play the game. The sad thing is (and I see this far too often) is that the people with the best schools and other qualifications are generally the ones who are the worst at playing the game and staying employed in law firms for a long period of time. They think the rules do not apply to them. If you understand the rules above, you can have a long and successful legal career.