



ATTORNEY SEARCH

*The Standard in Attorney
Search and Placement*

An Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead

Summary: Most attorneys don't understand the number one factor that will ensure their career survival. Do you know what is? Are you sure? Find out in this article.

The most important factor attorneys need to survive is having access to work.

- If you do not have work to do, you are unemployed.
- If you do not have access to work that you are trained to do, you are underemployed.

At the outset, I cannot tell you how many legal careers I have seen stopped in their tracks when the work suddenly dries up, and it generally dries up (and will dry up at some point in time in your career). When work dries up ... you sure as hell better know what to do. When work dries up, or stops, attorneys generally become unemployed or underemployed.

The reason all of this is so dangerous is an unemployed attorney has an extremely difficult time finding another position. An unemployed attorney is like a cancerous leper to large law firms. Small law firms, in-house employers and others even fear them.

Your goal as an attorney is to keep gaps off of your resume, and if they are there, fix them promptly and quickly. You need access to work at all times!

I have no idea why this is, but I suspect the reasons the legal hiring world treats unemployed and underemployed attorneys so poorly is because they believe there is something wrong with the unemployed attorney:

The way they see it, if an attorney was serious about being an attorney they never would have left their job without securing a new one. Here is how the thought process goes ...

- If the attorney left their job without a new job, they must have been fired.



- If the attorney left their job without a new one, they must have been doing bad work.
- If the attorney left their job without a new one, they must not be able to get along with others.
- If the attorney was laid off, they must not have made friends with the right people who would have protected them.
- If the attorney does not have a big book of business, they must not be that desirable or good at what they do.
- If the attorney has been unemployed longer than a few months, there is something seriously wrong with them. They are either being blackballed by their former firm, or they are lazy and do not care about looking for a new job.

The legal profession is **SAVAGE**. You need to have access to work at all times. If you do not have this, you are going to be screwed. I hate to be the messenger here, but that is the fact. If you are unemployed and do not have any work, you need to go balls out to get a new job as fast as possible. Not tomorrow and not next week. **NOW**.

I know tons of 40+ year old attorneys who went to top law schools and formerly practiced law in great law firms who were laid off, lost their jobs and so forth and now live with their parents. I speak to attorneys in situations like this daily. It is avoidable, unfortunate and stupid. If these attorneys knew what to do, they would never be in this situation. Many were divorced after a spouse figured out that what they signed up for (an attorney who could support a family) no longer existed after the person stopped working. Many of these same attorneys become very depressed, bitter and angry people. None of this needs to happen. Far too much stress, heartache and problems happen in attorneys' lives due to a lack of work.

I know attorneys from top New York, Los Angeles and other law firms who are underemployed and are now working as contract attorneys reviewing documents, truck drivers, waitresses, bartenders and other jobs that make very little sense for someone with their intellect or experience. This is the reality that awaits countless attorneys now practicing at major law firms unless they understand how to get access to work.

I SEE THIS SORT OF THING EVERY DAY, and I'm sick of it because I hate seeing wasted potential.



Another risky choice for keeping access to work open is going in-house. When many attorneys go in-house, their skills often diminish, and they end up doing work that is more generalist in nature. They do this for some time, and then they get older, and then their company lays them off when things get slow or the business is sold. Then they have an impossible time finding a new position. (Attorneys in house are **COST CENTERS** and not profit centers, like in law firms.) Law firms do not want attorneys from in-house almost ever, and companies want younger people with more immediate, relevant experience (bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and coming directly from a law firm). When the in-house work is gone and the attorney is left with no work and unemployed, many give up completely.

- **See [The Dark Side of Going In-house](#) for more information.**

I have been a recruiter the majority of my career. I love what I do and being able to help and advise people, because I can get them work and shift their attitude in a way that will get them work. It just is so wrong that people keep falling on their ass because they do not know how to get access to work, or understand the importance of it.

Many of the attorneys this happens to are the same ones who spent their time (when they were employed) griping on blogs, reading and spreading negative information and complaining about work. You should not hate the people and organizations who give you work because work is what gives your career purpose and life.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Builders and Destroyers](#)**
- **[Focus on Doing and Stop Talking About Those Who Are Doing](#)**
- **[You Will Succeed in Your Job Search and Life When You Are Concerned With Giving and Not Taking](#)**

There are steps you need to follow in your career (and things you need to do) in order to ensure you always have access to work. Why do so many people have a hard time getting access to work? There are a lot of reasons for this, but when it comes right down to it many people have issues with (1) their identity, (2) attitudes towards work, (3) they wait for things to happen instead of doing something about it and (4) they do not know what to do in order to keep access to work.



1. Identity Problems Preventing Attorneys from Getting Access to Work

When I was in law school, I wrote a book about personal injury attorneys. I drove all over the country to various small towns and interviewed these attorneys. I also went into some large cities to do my interviews.

- **See [The Life and Career of Phil Corboy Personal Injury Attorney](#) to read one of these interviews.**

When I drove into small towns to interview these attorneys, I would often see billboards on the highway advertising the various personal injury attorneys I was about to meet. I would also see these attorneys advertising on television and hear them on the radio. In most small- to mid-sized towns, the most successful attorneys are personal injury attorneys. These attorneys all do one thing very well: They know how to get access to work. They are very good at getting access to work.

- **See [You Need to Sell, Sell, Sell](#) for more information.**

This is the entire name of the game: Who cares how you get the work? You need work!

Attorneys with large, prestigious law firms would often never think for a minute about doing this sort of advertisement, and they make fun of personal injury attorneys. But these personal injury attorneys all understand something very well: They know how to get work. This is an important skill to learn. The people who are not afraid to do whatever it takes to get work are the people that survive in the legal profession. More so than the school you went to, or your previous experience, nothing is more important than knowing how to get work.

I have conversations with unemployed attorneys daily. They could be people that were formerly partners at major law firms, associates who lost their jobs (or quit) and so forth. These attorneys are so caught up in prestige, their “image” and brand, that they are afraid to apply to any job that is not at a prestigious, well-thought of firm. Meanwhile ... they are unemployed!

YOU ARE UNEMPLOYED. YOU NEED TO WORK YOU IDIOT!

This is so ridiculous to me. People will spend months or years on the couch, trying to get meetings and doing nothing because they think they have such a great personal brand that they



cannot possibly consider working at a less prestigious firm. **A FIRM LIKE THE ONE THAT DOES NOT WANT YOU ANYMORE.**

In my experience: If an attorney starts out their career in a major, important law firm (pick the most prestigious ones you can think of), ***the odds are generally much less that the attorney will be practicing law several years out of law school than an attorney who may have started their career at a lesser law firm and likely gone to a lesser law school.***

I keep seeing this again and again from attorneys from major law firms:

- *"I'm going to work inside a company in HR."*
- *"I'm going to be a Lexis representative."*
- *"I'm going to take some time to travel and figure out what to do."*
- *"I'm going to work in a small insurance company as a claims adjuster."*

Nothing wrong with any of that, of course: **But none of these people are practicing law anymore.** In contrast, people from lesser law firms and lesser law schools generally keep going and do not drop out so easily. Attorneys willing to accept something less than the best possible firm also end up just fine. Why quit completely? You got into a great law firm because you have serious aptitude for what you are doing and promise. Stick with it!

When I speak with the attorneys making these legal-career ending decisions (and they are most often legal-career ending decisions), they generally say things to me like:

- *"If I cannot get a job with a top firm, what is the point of practicing law anymore?"*
- *"I made \$200,000 last year. I am not going to take a salary cut to go to a less prestigious firm."*
- *"I'm sick of the hours of practicing law and want to do something different."*

First, the attorneys from the top law firms drop out of practicing law (I think) because their identity is wrapped up with practicing law at a major law firm. They believe they are a certain "caste" or "class" and drop out of practicing law completely rather than be associated with a "lesser" class/legal environment. **CONGRATULATIONS!** You worked at [Kirkland & Ellis](#) until you were 28! Use that to define you for the rest of your 30+ year career.



And this is what happens. They define themselves by the level of status or “class” they believe they fit into and “keep living this identity” for decades and never do anything else with their careers. Attorneys call me all the time: “I worked at [Weil Gotshal](#) in the early 1990s. Do you think you could get me a job practicing corporate law at a major law firm again?”

“What have you been doing the past 20 years?”

“A little of this and that.”

What all of these attorneys that are hung up on prestige are missing is that caring about prestige has cut them out of the legal profession entirely. That is like saying you would rather walk than not drive a brand new Ferrari, or would rather spend your life alone if you cannot date a supermodel or gorgeous actor. You get the idea. Staying in a large law firm is not the only option.

Practicing law is generally a very middle class profession, and attorneys are generally very middle class people. Lots of professions are considered middle class (being a doctor is also one of them). I say this not as an insult but as a fact. It is what attorneys are. As members of the middle class, attorneys are concerned with how they look to each other, what other people will think of them and so forth. Some are often not secure enough with themselves to feel that they can drop down a rung on the law firm ladder. They are very careful to do everything within their power not to stick out or be seen as different. Their identity often comes from the group they are associated with, whether it is in schools, neighborhoods, or employers. Their sense of self and security is most often not internal, but controlled by how they look with respect to “external” factors.

Not all attorneys are like this, of course, but many are. But what is more important? Not practicing law at all if you cannot practice at a top law firm, or practicing with a less prestigious law firm? I would say that being an attorney and doing what you have trained to do is more important, if you like it.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant](#)**
- **[The Most Valuable Work is Work That Repeats Itself](#)**



Second, many attorneys from top law firms expect that the compensation they are receiving in major law firms should continue wherever they end up going, even if it is to a less prestigious or smaller law firm. They believe (wrongly so) that they should not be forced to take a salary cut if they move to a smaller law firm. They believe that their “worth” in the market was/is established by their last job. They give no thought to the reasons large law firms pay so much.

I see attorneys relocating to upstate New York (where they are from) all the time from New York City. The salaries there are less than 50% of what a midlevel associate makes in New York City. Many refuse to practice law at all there believing that their value has already been set by the market in New York City. There are a ton of problems with this logic.

- Money means different things in different places. You can buy a really nice house in upstate New York for less than \$200,000 (and cannot get a decent apartment in New York City for less than \$2,000,000).
- A firm job in upstate New York is not a “flash in the pan” job that is likely to go away after a few years. **Most jobs in large law firms pay what they do because of the fact that you have no future there.**

It is very difficult for attorneys to stay employed in large, mega law firms for an extended period of time. This is just how it works. They are well-oiled institutions that make a “deal with the devil” with young attorneys:

“Come to work here now ... he, he, he ... We will pay you a lot of money while you are young and have a lot to give. We will give you the benefit of association with a prestigious, well-thought of group of attorneys. We will push you as hard as we can. When we are done with you, we will ask you to leave ...”

This is how it works. The message of smaller and less-prestigious firms is not always the same. Smaller firms will pay you far less, and they do not have the prestige associated with big firms, but attorneys are most often able to stay employed there for longer, sometimes even their entire careers.

Third, many attorneys believe that wherever they go to practice law, in a law firm the hours and lifestyle will be insane. While attorneys need to work hard wherever they go, large law firms generally demand more work and hours because they are profit machines for the people at the top.



More labor = more money.

In addition, the clients of top law firms are generally the largest businesses and willing to spend a lot of money, and not protest massive hours, or unnecessary work. In contrast, smaller law firms work for smaller clients, with smaller budgets and do not overwork cases.

There is never going to be perfect “work life balance” in most law firms; however, smaller law firms generally do not have the work or the types of clients that can support massive hours. Therefore, if you move down to a less prestigious and smaller firm, there is a good chance that your hours are going to be less.

Additionally, smaller law firms are often small enough that they “protect their own”. There are more personal relationships at stake and the attorneys are often more cohesive than in larger law firms. In smaller markets, attorneys often work more closely together to cultivate client relationships.

More importantly: The attorney is still working as an attorney. You are surviving, have access to work and are doing what you were trained to do.

2. Attitudes Towards Work

Many of the most talented attorneys, the ones who do the best academically, often have some bad attitudes towards work. They do not understand that work is what keeps them employed and that there are tons of people willing to do the work that they do.

When a law firm or any legal employer needs to hire someone, they can generally find a good number of qualified candidates within about 24 hours. If an attorney starts to cause problems, complain about hours and make trouble, law firms can always replace them quite quickly. There are generally 100+ applicants for every position a major law firm has.

Why, then, are law firms so careful about who they hire?

As a recruiter, I can tell you that law firms are most concerned with your attitude toward work. My job as a recruiter is to make sure I find candidates that have a good attitude towards work. Law firms need people who take work seriously and want to be part of the system. They want people



who understand that work is a gift and something to be taken seriously. No one teaches attorneys this, and the ones who understand this almost always do well.

Most law schools are populated by professors who make well into the six figure range teaching future attorneys about the law. Most of them have not practiced law and have spent the majority of their career living off the money that their students are borrowing from the government (that goes right back to them in the form of outrageously expensive tuition).

While I would not go so far as to say these law professors are not working (**THEY HAVE FIGURED OUT HOW TO GET ACCESS TO WORK. GOOD FOR THEM!**), they are surely not teaching you how to get access to work. In fact, more often than not, their view of the world is that law firms and businesses are exploiting workers, and we should all be suspicious of them and tax them some more. These same professors are paid by you, and out of government guaranteed student loans, that you took out and will need to have access to work to repay.

Work is not evil. Work is what supports you and something you need to have access to at all times.

- If you go into interviews not taking work seriously, you will not get hired.
- If you get a reputation for not taking work incredibly seriously, you will not get hired.
- If you do not work hard in your job, you will not advance.

When I speak with law firm partners, who call me all the time because they know I understand what they are looking for, they tell me that they are interested in one of two types of attorneys: (1) partners with business (i.e., work) and (2) associates who want to make partner and are willing to do what it takes to make partner.

- **See [Parking Benefits and Falling in Love With Your Job](#) for more information.**

They are interested in (1) people with work and (2) people willing to work hard. Everything, and I mean everything, is about the work. It needs to be priority #1 and is the most important point, and the only point of what you are doing.

Having work to do is important, extremely important. You presumably went to law school to work



at something involving the law, and therefore you generally should want to work. It is nonsensical to spend years in college and law school to come out and not have access to work. It is even more nonsensical to get jobs at the top of the legal profession (in the very best firms), spend a few years doing this, and then never work as an attorney ever again.

Most people will go to great lengths to get work. They do all over the world.

- People work on fishing boats in Alaska,
- in the desert drilling for oil,
- in the military in war zones being shot at,
- they clean sewers,
- spend months or years away from their families; or,
- risk their lives fighting fires.

You, for example, went to school for decades in order to be qualified to work as an attorney.

People do all sorts of things to get work. You or your relatives probably came to this country so that you could have access to work. Work is why you have worked as hard as you have, why your relatives worked so hard to get to this country (maybe even to send you to school), and something that is an extremely important component of everything that you do.

A final point about access to work is that you need to commit to whatever you are doing. If law firms see that you hop from job to job, they are going to suspect that you will do the same thing with them. If you have had several jobs within a few years, then law firms know the odds are pretty good you will do the same with them.

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

These people have a difficult time getting new jobs. You really need to commit to whatever you are doing. Your ability to stay employed in one place for an extended length of time also says something about the quality of your work and ability to get along with others. The idea being that you are likely to stay employed a longer period of time in one place (1) if your work is good and (2) if you get along well with others.



- **See [Be Someone Who is Engaged with Work, Not Someone Who Avoids Work](#) for more information.**

3. They Wait for Things to Happen Instead of Doing Something About It

From the time I was 18 years old until I was around 27, I was an asphalt contractor during the summer. When I started doing this, I did what everyone else did: I put ads in the paper advertising my services and dropped off flyers in mailboxes. This was a difficult way to get work. I spent most of my time sitting on my ass not working.

I wanted to work and became sick of this. Pretty soon, I decided to simply go purchase a bunch of materials and go door-to-door telling people I would do the work **right now** if they hired me. No one had ever seen anything like this before, but it worked. I was making thousands of dollars a day when I was in college and built up the largest asphalt business in the town I worked in. I wanted to work and was unwilling to wait for work to come to me.

When I started practicing law, I saw the same thing: Young attorneys sitting on their ass waiting for work. Some 20 years ago, when I was clerking for a federal judge in the Detroit area of Michigan, I watched several of the co-clerks I was working with struggling to find employment in Detroit. Most had gone to top law schools, but the economy in Detroit was not in good shape (at all). I went on a few interviews there myself, and it was a depressing experience that was largely filled with long multi-week gaps of time after interviews and neither rejection or commitment.

I'm from Detroit and honestly thought it would be great to work there. I wanted to work in the area of the country I was from and where I had connections, relationships and familiarity with the area. It was depressing, though. After clerking for a federal judge, I could not believe that so many people were having such a hard time getting jobs. One guy I knew who went to the [University of Michigan](#) for law school went to work as a clerk in the local social security office. It took one girl I knew who got an offer four or five months after she finished her clerkship to get a job, and many never got jobs at all. The firms did not have the work.

I was not about to wait around and become another victim of this nonsense in a declining rustbelt city. I sent my resume to every firm I could find in Los Angeles and New York and got lots of interviews and had a good job within a few weeks. I'd never even been to California and got two job offers within 24 hours of landing in Los Angeles.



I felt like a rock star. I had to turn down interviews and did not even go to callbacks with a few major firms because I was getting offers in first interviews. I got a \$10,000 clerkship bonus, a bar stipend and a salary paying more than 50% more than I would have made in Detroit. Had I stayed around Detroit, I have no doubt the market would have been far less welcoming.

My family was in Detroit and I was from Detroit. I was just not willing to stick around and wait for more bad news in this market. I was proactive and unwilling to wait.

If you want to work, you cannot wait for stuff to happen to you. You need to be proactive. You need to look at every location possible and do whatever it takes to get and stay employed. The key is having access to work.

I find it **SHOCKING** that people with the skills and motivation to get a job at a major law firm and spend years there just blow it when the work dries up. You need to get out there and do everything within your power to get work, wherever it might take you.

If you want to be an attorney (and a good one), you are going to need access to work. This is the name of the game and what it is all about.

One of the stupidest things attorneys do is to not put themselves out there and find work. You need to always have work. The more work the better.

OBSERVATION: Work is not a right. It is a privilege. There was a point, of course, after World War II and for several decades thereafter when the American economy was expanding. There were more jobs than there were workers. At that point in time, attorneys and others had the upper hand and could all demand better pay and working conditions and expect their jobs to always be there. This time no longer exists and has not for some time. While law school professors and your parents may have grown up with these beliefs and expectations about access to work, that ship has long since sailed.

Work is very, very good. Work is what supports you, keeps your career going, provides you a professional identity and supports you and your family. If you are good at what you do, the work you do also helps other people and businesses.



4. They Do Not Know What to Do in Order to Keep Access to Work

There are many ways to keep access to work.

First of all, wherever you are working, you need to keep the gravy train rolling. You need to make sure that you get as much work as you can and that the work does not dry up. You need to network with the partners and others with the work, create work and get all the business you can possibly get. You need to generate work and create work.

- **See To Succeed in Any Job You Need to Make Work for more information.**

Second, if there is not work at your current firm for an extended period of time then you need to move. No question about it. You need to move to a different firm in your city, you need to pick up and move geographically, you need to move to a smaller firm, or wherever there is work. I got out of Detroit. You may need to get out of Wisconsin or New York. Whatever the situation, you need to keep moving to get access to work. Do not underestimate the seriousness of a lack of work in your current firm. While fluctuations in workloads are perfectly normal, a long term drought can be a disaster and something that will claim your job. It is dangerous.

- **See Choose an Employer Marching Forward for more information.**

Third, you need to know how to find a job. This is where people have a lot of trouble. Finding a legal job means contacting every single employer you could possibly get a position with. It does not mean just contacting all of the employers that you find through a legal recruiter, or on a public job site, or contacting just the major employers in a given city. It means contacting everyone.

For example, when I contacted firms in Los Angeles and New York when I was clerking, I sent a letter to every single law firm I could find. This is what it takes to get a job and no one is above this. Just because I was working for a federal judge did not mean I did not have to market myself.

Years ago I started a site, www.LawCrossing.com, which researches every legal job out there. This is a good way to find a job because it checks every single law firm website, company website and more, looking for legal jobs. It is the most popular legal job site in the world, but because it is a research service, it requires subscribers to pay a small monthly fee. When I tell attorneys about it, they often say “I would never pay to look for a job.”



GREAT! You are unemployed and do not want to know about jobs. **GREAT DECISION!** The site works, though. There are tens of thousands of jobs you will not find on public websites that you are qualified for.

- **See [Police Chases, Foreclosures and Access to Information](#) for more information.**

More importantly, if you have the right qualifications, the [best legal recruiters](#) know how to find the jobs out there and market you effectively. In fact, using a [top legal recruiter](#) can transform your career, because law firms pay attention when a well-respected recruiter is involved and when the recruiter has the ability to show the firm your strengths and desire to work. A good legal recruiter will also coach you through the interview process and tell you what you need to do. I have had more candidates than I can count get interviews through me that had no success on their own, often with the very same firms.

Conclusions

Once an attorney starts practicing law, the worst thing that they can do is stop practicing law for any extended period of time. This could mean the game is over, and the game does not have to end.

Law firms and other legal hiring organizations are never that enthusiastic about hiring any attorney that has not practiced law for some time. Attorneys need access to work constantly in order to survive in the legal profession. Regardless of what it takes, you always need access to work.

- **See [21 Pieces of Career Advice No One Ever Gives You](#) for more information.**

[Click here to contact Harrison](#)