



An Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

The Only Three Questions Law Firms Evaluate Applicants By

Summary: A law firm is only concerned with three questions when they evaluate applicants. Learn what these three questions are below:

When a law firm evaluates your resume and [hopefully] interviews you they are only concerned with three things.

1. Can you do the job?
2. Do you want to do the job?
3. Will you commit to the job?

Ultimately, everything comes down to these three questions. If you convince an employer that the answer to these three questions is “**YES**”, then you can get any job that you apply for. If the answer to two of them is “**YES**”, you might get the job. Most attorneys never get all three answers as “**YES**”, and that is why it is so difficult to get jobs in competitive law firms. In fact, these three questions are really all that a law firm is asking when it reviews your resume and talks to you.

It **AMAZES ME** that so few attorneys understand the importance of these three questions. Very few attorneys understand just how important these three questions are, and they continually blow their job searches all the time because they do not understand them. If you are an unemployed attorney, you are unemployed because these questions are being answered improperly.

Regardless of your background, understanding how to frame yourself in response to these three questions is the key to succeeding in any job search. It is the key to longevity in the legal profession and getting started in the first place.

1. Can You Do The Job?

One of the most frustrating things for me in working with candidates is when I speak with people who have the skills to do a certain job, but I know will never be able to do the job.



Many people can do the work the job requires, but very few people can truly do the job. People come to me all the time stating they have the experience or skills to do a certain type of job. This does not mean that they can do the job.

Doing the job means you (a) fit in, (b) are willing to play by the rules of the employer, (c) have the background to do the work the firm needs done and (d) are willing to do everything the job requires.

A. You can only do the job if you fit in.

A few weeks ago, I was speaking with a very strong patent attorney who was unemployed. She was African-American from a poor, urban background, had an electrical engineering degree from a top engineering school, and had gone to an Ivy League law school. She was very monotone on the phone with me, not connecting in the conversation and not easy to speak with.

"Listen," I told her. "I'm sensing some hostility from you, and I am not sure why. I need to be able to represent that you are going to be able to go into a law firm and fit in and get along with people. I cannot do that if I cannot relate to you."

"I have the education and skills to do the work," she said. "That is all that matters. Your job is to speak with me and then forward my resume to the employer. That is it."

This attitude is a real career stopper and something I am seeing more and more of: People expect because they have the skills and qualifications to do a job they will be hired. I have some news: **THIS DOES NOT MATTER. THIS IS OFTEN THE LEAST IMPORTANT THING.** People hire people (1) they like, (2) can get along with, (3) bring positive energy to the office and more. They do not care what race you are. They care about how **YOU MAKE THEM FEEL** and whether they are comfortable around you. This is an incredibly important point and something I have seen stop numerous careers in their tracks again and again and again.

Just because you have the education and experience is meaningless. Being social, getting along with others and more is incredibly important. It is upsetting to me that this ends so many careers. I am 100% for the underdog and helping people. When I was in college I lived in the inner city of Detroit and started and ran a business where I employed poor people from the city who had never worked and had spent their lives on the streets doing drugs. I want to help people.



However, you cannot help people when they think it is all about the job and not getting along with others. ***The only people who cannot be helped are the people that just expect a job because they have the education or skills.*** It does not work that way at all.

I did not work with her because I knew that wherever this woman went, she would have a very difficult time getting a position. It is not just about the skills. It is about much, much more. Being able to do the job means getting along with co-workers, connecting with people, being pleasant in the office and more. It is not just about skills and experience.

I looked up the woman after our call and saw that she had sued her former law firm for racial discrimination (and lost) and filed several other questionable lawsuits, including one against a hair salon for racial discrimination because they served a white customer before her. The woman was angry and would most likely cause trouble. As much as I wanted to help her, I knew that she could not do the job.

A topic that has fascinated me for some time is discrimination in the legal profession. People that may not necessarily fit in all environments, whether it is because of their race, sexual orientation, or religion, often have a difficult time getting hired by large law firms. This is not always the case, but it often is, and I have often wondered why.

I have always wondered: "Is it really discrimination? Or is it something else?" Here are some things I have **OBSERVED**:

- If someone is an upper-middle class African-American who fits in well and makes friends wherever they go, then they actually have an **EASIER** time getting hired than a non-minority with similar qualifications. If they are from a lower-middle class background and are unable to connect with others, then they have an **IMPOSSIBLE** time getting hired.
- If someone is an upper-middle class ultra Orthodox Jew (with a beard and in traditional all black wardrobe with a top hat and so forth) who has a good personality and is easy to get along with, they will generally face some discrimination among various firms but may have an **EASIER** time getting a position with a firm that has several Jews in it. (They are, however, likely to face more discrimination than an African-American who is easy to get along with in most firms.) If the Orthodox Jew is very separatist and does not associate or want anything to do with non-Orthodox Jews, they have an impossible time getting hired.



- If someone is gay, is easy to get along with and does not make an issue of it, they generally have no specific issues with getting hired. If someone is flamboyantly gay and makes an issue of their gayness everywhere they go (and stands out with extreme dress and grooming habits), they will have an extremely difficult time getting hired.

When I have thought about it this way, the answer to the question “is there discrimination inside law firms?” becomes far less clear. Law firms are groups of people coming together for a common purpose. As a group of people, they want to surround themselves with people they like and who like them. They do not want any trouble.

They want:

- People with whom they are going to be able to work with but who also can potentially be their friends, acquaintances and others.
- People they are going to be able to trust.
- People that are not going to sue them or create problems.
- People that will be part of their social dynamic.
- People that are not going to spread negative news about them.

The most important component of being able to do the job means fitting in and getting along with your co-workers, regardless of your background.

The “fitting in” component goes even further than this, of course.

- Some firms are composed of conservatives. Other firms are composed of liberals.
- Some firms are composed of good-looking, slim people. Others—overweight people.
- Some firms are composed of people of one religion.
- Some firms are composed primarily of women and others men.
- Some firms are composed of people who like to cut corners and other firms people who would never cut corners.
- **See Firm Culture Matters Most for more information.**



Regardless of what “fitting in” means, you need to fit in to do the job. There is no question about it. In order to fit in, you need to find employers with similar values as you and who you identify with.

- **See [The Importance of Fitting In](#) for more information.**

B. You can only do the job if you are willing to play by the rules of the employer.

Different employers have different “games” they play. Whatever the game is you need to play by it.

Some law firms may demand incredible hours from the people that are working there. They want the job to be pretty much your only reason for existing. If this is the case, the law firm interviewing you or evaluating your resume will be looking for any sign whatsoever that you do not share this passion for the job.

- If you are a woman, and they sense you want to have kids and leave at some point, they will likely not be interested.
- If you are a man, and they see you have a lot of outside interests that consume your time, they will likely not be interested.
- If you seem head-strong and start talking about how “you are willing to work hard for the right compensation”, then they will likely not be interested.

Playing by the rules of the employer means many different things, but all employers are asking (1) can you be controlled, (2) will you follow, and (3) will you do what is required.

One of the most common sights in the legal world is the young male attorney who has gone to great schools, done well and received lots of accolades for his impressive accomplishments his entire life. These people go into law firms with high expectations for themselves and beliefs about the need for immediate advancement. I speak with people like this all the time.

One of the common types of attorneys I have been seeing a lot of lately are young white men from top law schools who spent a few years as litigators at major American law firms. They left these firms, declaring “there is not enough money and responsibility” and that they now want to be personal injury/mass tort attorneys making millions. They come to me expecting the doors of



law firms to open to them because of their stated ambition to be rich and powerful. They believe that having attended a great law school and worked in a good firm makes them a “catch”.

While I do not work with these attorneys, I counsel them often because, whether they realize it or not, **THEY ARE IN CRISIS** in the same way the African-American woman I discussed earlier was. I try and work them through this because they have gone off the rails. In many cases, they get interviews with various personal injury attorneys and are astonished to learn that the salaries in these firms are often one-third (if that) of what they would make in a large law firm. The law firms, however, rarely make offers because the full-of-themselves attorneys always say something along the lines of:

“I’m happy to go to work here, but I am going to need significant responsibility immediately, and I want to be paid commensurate with my contribution to each recovery.”

This person cannot do the job. The law firm has no interest in this nonsense. Instead, the person who gets hired (and who is likely to become successful) is going to be the person who puts their head down and works hard and does not have attitude and entitlement issues. The attorney with a big firm background is not a catch at all. They are a “problem”.

C. Is your background what the firm needs?

When an employer looks at your resume, they are looking to see whether you have the requisite education, skills and experience to do the work. Are you “qualified” to do the work that they have? If you have experience in a given practice area and look strong enough, then the odds are you can do the job.

However, being “qualified” for a job means different things to different employers. Being “qualified” to work in a neighborhood law office means something entirely different than being qualified to work in a major law firm, and no matter how you spin it you may not have the qualifications for certain jobs.

- Many law firms will not look at people from certain law schools.
- Other law firms will not look at people unless they have met certain grade cutoffs.
- Some law firms will not be interested in you unless you are coming from a certain law firm.
- Some law firms require you have very narrowly-defined experience.



While most of this is self-explanatory, it is important. With respect to the firm you are coming from, most law firms take this extremely seriously. Because they may have had a few good or bad experiences with people who were trained (and socialized) by a given firm, they often favor or disfavor people from certain firms.

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

Every legal employer wants to see whether you can do the job you are asked to do.

After all, if you have passed the bar and are working in a given practice area, then the odds are pretty good that you can do whatever the job is.

D. Are you willing to do everything the job requires?

I know an attorney that quit a job as a partner of a large law firm to go work in-house with a large company. The first few weeks he was at work, he was given some papers to file with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The documents were not accurate, and they were being filed to keep the firm's stock price up. When he spoke with his superiors in the legal department, he was told "This is what we have always done and what we have been asked to do."

He went to see the CEO of the company about it and ended up being fired. He filed a lawsuit and spent the next few years looking for a job before he finally landed something in a small law firm.

I am certainly not saying you need to break the law, but certain jobs have requirements built into them that you might not like.

- Some firms expect you to work every weekend.
- Other firms expect you to generate business quickly.
- Other firms require you to travel a lot.
- Other firms require you to go to client dinners each week.
- Some firms require you to go drinking with people from the firm frequently.
- **See [A Message to Garcia and Your Career](#) for more information.**



Whatever the requirements of the job are, you need to do them. Firms are evaluating whether you can do these requirements constantly.

One of the most frequent things that I see are law firms that have notoriously demanding, or difficult to get along with partners. These people are often impossible to handle and require a certain type of person to have the skill to work with the person. Thus, certain people need to be particularly strong-willed to work with certain types of people.

2. Do You Want to Do the Job?

Many, many people apply for jobs they do not want to do. It is exceedingly common for people to apply for jobs that they may be perfectly qualified for but do not want to do.

One of the most common calls that recruiters receive is from attorneys who may be 20+ years out of law school and not making a ton of money who are interested in going to work as first year associates in major law firms, for the first year salaries.

While the point of this article is not to digress into the numerous reasons this could never work, one of the main reasons is that no 20+ year attorney wants to do first-year grunt work and take orders from someone who is younger and less experienced than them. Regardless of what comes out of their mouth, they simply do not want to do that job, and every employer knows it.

Law firms are smart and they only want to hire people who want to do the job. When you start having conflicting things on your resume that suggest you do not want to do the job, law firms take notice and they want nothing to do with you:

- Extended time off
- Going in-house
- Going to work for the government
- Frequent moves on your resume

The list of things that suggest you might not want to do the job could be endless. The point is that anything that suggests you are not interested in the job is not good.

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



What demonstrates someone really wants to do the job is an interest and commitment to the subject matter and work that they are doing. Attorneys who generate a lot of business are generally interested in the subject matter. Attorneys who do a lot of writing, speaking and so forth are generally interested in the subject matter. Attorneys who have a good reputation among other attorneys for doing good work and trying hard are generally interested in the subject matter.

People who really, truly want a job will act much differently than someone who does not want the job. They go into interviews enthusiastic and fired up. They look and act the part. They make sure they are applying to numerous jobs, and not just a few. They prepare for interviews and say the right things. An interview is really a test to see how much you really want the job. If you go in and do not give 100% and convince the employer that is really where you want to be and what you want to do, then it is going to be difficult for you to get the job.

Attorneys quite often “slip up” when it comes to convincing employers that they really want the job. They say inappropriate things, or give employers the impression that they do not really want to work there.

One of the worst and most discouraging things that can happen to employers is for them to extend an offer to someone and have the person turn the offer down. Law firms do not like this at all. They want to believe that they are your first choice and that you are someone who truly wants to work for them.

Early in my recruiting career, I started noticing that the very best and most desirable candidates would often approach me for special help. Law firms were not eager to interview them. These were people in desirable practice areas, from top law schools, and working at top law firms. The law firms would often simply not respond favorably when I would try and get them interested in one of these stellar candidates. In contrast, there would be a virtual “feeding frenzy” for people with slightly lesser qualifications. Why the difference?

If someone has stellar qualifications, the law firms are all a little self-conscious and think to themselves: “Why would they be interested in us?” They think that the same attorney is more likely to be interested in another firm. The law firm needs to be convinced that the attorney wants the job and to work for them.



You always need to convince employers that you want to do the job. Anything less than showing full commitment to the work will harm your chances of getting the job. You have to want to do the job.

3. Will You Do the Job Long Term?

One of the most perplexing things about being a recruiter is my frequent encounters with graduates of [Yale Law School](#), and the cold reception so many of them receive in the market. This may seem counter-intuitive, because as everyone knows, [Yale](#) is the top law school in the United States and the people who come out of it are very, very smart. The cast of graduates who have come out of the school is nothing short of astonishing for how successful they have been, whether it is in politics, business, or academia.

And that is the problem. Most graduates of [Yale Law School](#), in my experience, do not want to practice law forever. They are interested in doing something else. Generally this might include politics, academics, business, writing, or a host of other areas. The problem is that most of them **ARE NOT** interested in working in a large law firm, and law firms can tell this from the variety of activities on their resume not related to practicing law. They may show up for interviews and carefully look over the employer to gauge their interest in the employer; however, more often than not, smart employers do not bite. The reason is because they know the person does not want to do the job for very long.

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

This is a huge question and an important one. Employers are looking to hire people that they believe will stay in the job and be there over the course of their career. If there is anything that suggests you are not likely to remain with the employer over the course of your career that the employer picks up on, you will harm your chances of getting a job.

It is risky for any employer to hire someone not likely to stick around.

- If someone lives in another area of the country, employers are always going to be nervous about whether the person will stay there “long term”. People who are from a given area of the country are more likely to be trusted to remain there than people relocating.



- If you give employers any indication that you have plans to do anything with your career other than continue to practice law, then they are unlikely to be interested in you. If you tell the employer that you hope to one day do something else, they are unlikely to be interested in you.
- If an employer believes you are extremely wealthy or come from a wealthy background, they often believe this is an indicator you will not do the job long term. Why would someone who is rich want to stick around for a long period of time in a grueling work environment?
- Women that look like they are going to leave to raise families are also a group that looks like they might not do the work long term.
- People who move between jobs frequently are also people who look like they will not do the work long term. There are often reasons for these moves that make perfect sense; however, employers know that if the person has several moves and/or does not stay in jobs long, they are likely to do this with them as well.
- People with outside interests that look like they could become “all consuming” are also people who do not look like they would be likely to stick around.
- People who want to switch practice areas look conflicted and like they would leave.
- People who have left law firms to go teach, to go in-house, or to work for the government. Anyone who has done anything other than work in a law firm does not look like they will be around for long.
- People who have taken an extended time off do not look like they will stick around.
- People that are on second careers and had a lot of power and responsibility in earlier positions may leave due to the lack of responsibility or change in title.
- People that could work in a better firm if the economy or something else was different will likely leave when things change.
- People that are only in a given area of the country due to a spouse, or other circumstances beyond their control may relocate again.
- People that were fired from their last job are more likely to “fire” their new employer because they often have some residual anger.
- People that could make more money with a different employer may not stick around.
- People that have personality or other problems will likely not last.



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- **See 6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from their Resumes ASAP if They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms for more information.**

There is a preference among law firms for hiring people they know are committed to working for them and are unlikely to go elsewhere. If the person has a home and mortgage, is committed to a given geographic area, and people know they are committed to practicing law in a law firm, then their odds of getting hired are greatly increased.

Law firms are risk averse, and they have no interest in hiring people that are just going to be there for the short term. They want every hire to hopefully work out for the long term. This is part of the game they are playing when interviewing people, and your job is to make employers think you will stay.

Conclusions

These three questions are the most important component of any job search, and your job is to convince employers that you are the right person for the job. Every job that someone gets or does not get can be traced back to whether these questions were answered properly or improperly.

See the following articles for more information:

- **How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question**
- **21 Pieces of Career Advice No One Ever Gives You**
- **Top 10 Characteristics of Superstar Associates Who Make Partner**

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