



An Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Seven Reasons Why Practicing Law Might Be More Stressful than Spending 18 Months in a POW Camp

Summary: If you are going to practice law, you need to be prepared for stress. Practicing law in a law firm requires a certain type of person to be successful.

After a long day at the office the other day talking to attorneys about their jobs who did not seem the least bit excited about practicing law, I had a refreshing phone call with a woman practicing law overseas. The woman is an American but has never practiced with a US law firm. She is the only American attorney in her law firm.

During our conversation, she seemed quite simply to be the happiest attorney I had ever spoken with. She made jokes, laughed and talked about how much she enjoyed being an attorney. She had even attached a funny image to her Skype handle.

“The weather is so nice here today!” she gushed. “I cannot wait to go outside for lunch and take in some sunshine! It’s also my secretary’s anniversary here today! I ordered her flowers. She is going to be so excited!”

I’ve been a legal recruiter most of my career. Did this woman know what was going on and how tough being an attorney really was? Had she discovered some unknown antidepressant that was making her immune to the horrors of practicing law?

I was not even sure I was talking to an attorney. I thought the conversation and the entire thing might be a joke. Was a prank being played on me by a radio show? I found myself sitting up in my chair and becoming very serious: “What was wrong here?”

As a legal recruiter, I spend my days talking to attorneys. What I have noticed is that almost no lawyers are happy – at least no lawyers working for big prestigious law firms in the United States.

The situation is so dire that I personally know two lawyers who committed suicide and three



lawyers who died from heart attacks, two in their early 40's. **(See [Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young for more information.](#))** One attorney was dead for over a week in his bathroom and had blown up like a giant balloon before the law firm he worked for even noticed he was gone. His anonymous life working in an office in a large skyscraper meant that no one noticed he was gone until the time sheets stopped being entered into the system.

Two other attorneys I worked **DIRECTLY** with are now facing prison – one for murdering his wife and another for committing a massive financial crime. **(See [Local Attorney Back in Court for Allegedly Killing His Wife on a Cruise and Two Indicted in \\$275 Million Investment Fraud Scheme Involving the Sale of Medical Accounts Receivable to Hedge Funds and Other Investors for more information.](#))** Another attorney I worked **DIRECTLY** with was charged with attempted murder for stabbing his girlfriend repeatedly with a bread knife (thankfully, she lived). **(See [Accused of knife attack on woman, Secaucus attorney arrested for more information.](#))** I've lived and worked in the inner city of Detroit around some pretty bad people when I was a contractor (a former life) and never met murderers, or people capable of such heinous crimes. It took putting on a suit and working in a competitive law firm to meet people like this.

In one heartbreaking case, I helped place a highly talented young lawyer from an Ivy League school at one of Los Angeles' most prestigious firms. Almost immediately upon traversing that firm's hallowed doors, her connection with the outside world was severed. When she emerged months later her life had deteriorated. She was in the midst of a divorce and her car was being repossessed. She was addicted to crystal meth and dating a member of a Latin gang.

"I have not talked to her in weeks," her husband lamented. "She was working these crazy hours at the firm and someone at the office introduced her to crystal meth. Then she started working about 96 hours at a stretch and sleeping for 24 hours. Now she's got this boyfriend and is giving him all her money and she has even sold her wedding ring. I do not know what to do."

When I finally managed a meeting with the once-promising and now unemployed lawyer, she explained: "This job has destroyed me. I never imagined how difficult working in a law firm would be. I was raped when I was younger, and the trauma from working in a law firm was worse than that."

As a legal recruiter, I have often pondered the reason for such grave discontent among so many of our "best and brightest" legal talents. Why do so many lawyers find practicing law to be so horrible? How can this profession mess people up so badly?



I recently had the occasion to talk with an attorney who had served in combat and spent 18 months in a POW camp where he was tortured. He was now a practicing lawyer and looking for another job.

“The pressure here is just too much,” he said about his current job. “I was hospitalized for a few weeks at the beginning of this year. I just cannot handle it here anymore. I was chewing my nails so much that my fingertips were bleeding all the time. I got home from work one day and my wife showed me the pillow I had slept on the night before: It was covered in blood. She told me I need help.”

“Why is the work so stressful?” I asked.

“I’m only given a certain amount of time to work on each patent and if I do not finish each patent in the time allotted, I do not get credit for my time. It is nonsensical. No one can complete the patents in the time allotted. I worked 2,600 hours last year but only got credit for 1,800. I did not get a bonus.”

“I just do not understand how people do it. The people I am working with are competitive with each other and not my friends. The attorneys I work for are demanding and unpleasant. I bought a small condominium and have a family I need to support, but it always looks like I could lose my job at any second, and if I do I know it will not be easy. The examiners in the patent office are rude to me. I do not even get to talk to or interact with clients. I’m just expected to sit in a small office all day and night with a bunch of people who are rude to me and do not appreciate anything I do. Then I come home at night and my wife is upset I am not home earlier or seeing my kids grow up.”

“It sounds worse than being a POW,” I told him.

“At least there you can look forward to being rescued and a better life. At least there you are locked up with people who are your friends. At least there you know who your enemies are. Even some of the guards were nicer than the people in this law firm. At least there you do not have to look forward to your wife divorcing you because she never sees you.”

As I reflected upon this sad conversation, and on countless similar conversations I have had with disillusioned, end-of-their-rope lawyers, I realized that in at least seven ways practicing law might be more stressful for some attorneys than being in combat or spending time in a POW camp.



1. You Have Nothing to Look Forward to

A very common thing I have seen throughout my career is attorneys working ridiculous hours for 10 or more years and then losing their jobs. **BOOM.** Only billed 2,900 hours and not 3,400 hours last year? See you later! In most large law firms, it is exceedingly rare for any of the people who join the firm out of school to ever advance. Most will leave, take a hint and leave, or simply be told to leave. The reward for massive sacrifice of the best years of your life is often just not there. Associates see people losing their jobs and they get very depressed about the fate that awaits them.

When I was practicing law I started to see all sorts of partners and others losing their jobs. This was sad to me and made very little sense. I started on a hallway with around seven or eight partners, and I remember one year later only two were left. It was a frightening place to be.

They had all been asked to leave. One partner I was working with was “de-equitized” and left to become a judge. It is a hard career when there is not much to look forward to.

What is there to look forward to? If you are really, really good at your job you might make more money. If you make more money, you can buy more stuff. If you get a better title, you will have more respect. But how important is this stuff? You will still have to work incredible hours, may never see your family and will deal with all sorts of unpleasant stress and issues. Many attorneys look around them and realize there is nothing to look forward to.

Even worse, the more senior an attorney gets the less marketable he or she becomes. If an attorney has more than five or so years of experience, law firms start “clamming up” and want nothing to do with them. Their billing rate becomes too high and partners would prefer to do the work themselves instead of assigning it to the associate. It is not a good situation.

- **See [The Seven Most Important Choices Every Attorney without a Lot of Business](#) Makes for more information.**

There are very few other professions where the shelf life is just a few years, and then you are used up and expected to find something else to do.

At least in a POW camp, or war zone, you can certainly look forward to everything ending and getting better. You cannot look forward to this in a law firm.



2. No One is Your Friend

Your co-workers are your competitors and, generally, they are interested in seeing you fail, because that means they will advance. If you share something personal with someone in your firm, the odds are very good it will be used against you later. You are in a competitive environment and make “friends” at your own risk.

If you are a litigator, for example, you face a whole host of enemies:

- **The Client** - They are looking for you to slip up. They expect you to win more than you lose. They may be angry about money they are spending and more.
- **The Other Associates** - They are competing with you for the best assignments, trying to look better than you, undermining you.
- **The Partners You Are Working for** - They have all sorts of demands, and are constantly evaluating you and watching over you very closely. They too are looking for you to screw up, for something to happen. Many of these partners may never appreciate anything you do, or thank you for it at all.
- **The Court** - The Court is generally not your friend. They will yell at attorneys, sanction attorneys and are always going to be in a situation where they pick one side over another.
- **The Opposing Counsel** - They are out to destroy you and see you slip up as well. They are always out to get you. There is no question about it.

The cast of characters out to get the average attorney is nothing short of astonishing. Literally no one is on the attorney's side. Threats are everywhere.

At least the POW, or soldier, is working with comrades that are trying to save their life. In a law firm, the perception many attorneys have is that everyone is out to destroy you.

3. You Are an Easily Replaceable Commodity

A law firm can generally replace an associate within 24 hours. If the firm needs work done at the partner level and needs partners without business, they can generally find someone in about 1 to 2 hours, and could probably find someone in the middle of the night, too.



“Hi, sorry to call you in the middle of the night. I know it is 3:00 a.m., but we have an opening for a litigator with 10 years of experience. “

“Great. I will be there by 9:00 tomorrow morning! I just need to stop by my old job, pick up some pictures from my office and tell them I am leaving. Thank you for the opportunity!”

Attorneys are not very hard to replace. I have never seen any law firm have an opening more than a few months. It does not matter where the opening is. Attorneys will move to Alaska, Russia, small islands in the middle of the Pacific ... it does not matter. I’ve even worked with firms in Afghanistan. There are attorneys for everyone! Every law firm gets an attorney who wants one.

In markets like New York, there are so many attorneys clawing around that the firms become ridiculously demanding:

“We’re looking for an attorney from either [Skadden](#), [Wachtel](#), or [Sullivan & Cromwell](#) with between 18 and 25 months of experience doing corporate finance on behalf of large, institutional private equity firms.”

BOOM! Within 45 minutes the firm starts receiving resumes. Twenty-four hours later, the law firm receives the resumes from 10 of the 30 eligible attorneys matching those qualifications, all working at the target firms with top qualifications.

I know an attorney who had worked in a small law firm for several years who asked for a raise. The attorney was told “probably at the beginning of next year.” The attorney responded, “That’s fine, but would you mind putting that in writing and sending me an email or something?”

The attorney’s boss looked down for a few seconds and then said:

“I’ll tell you what I am going to do. I’m going to send you down the hall to accounting and have them give you a final check. Then I am going to have IT remove you from the website. Then I am going to call one of the hundreds of resumes I have and get someone else to start here right away.”

The attorney looked on the website a few days later and his replacement had already been hired.



If you are a POW, you are not easily replaced. You are protected because you are very valuable to your captors! If you are in a war, you are doing something valuable servicing your country. You'll probably even get a medal! Not so in a law firm!

- **See [Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead](#) for more information.**

4. Death is Slow and Not Instantaneous

In a law firm, you are generally just working there until you lose your job. You know you are likely to lose it at some point. You just do not know when. This is a real mind screw, and not something any attorney enjoys. At least in most jobs, you have a good idea whether you have a future.

I know people that make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year selling cars in dealerships. I also know people who make millions selling stocks and bonds to people. In each of these jobs, the people can leave and go anywhere they want at any time they want. They have a skill that is valued in the market, and it is almost impossible to lose a job there.

I was in a Cadillac dealership a few months ago looking at trucks. The salesman was in his late 80's and kept wiping drool from his face with a handkerchief. He had worked at auto dealerships since the 1940s and has tons of people that return to see him and buy cars each year. There are some jobs where you can just keep doing them and get better and better. Other jobs, you are sure to end up unemployed.

It would be hard to overstate the crisis and pain that attorneys experience after spending three years going to law school and then ten years doing good work and working hard inside of a law firm only to be told they need to leave. Then these same attorneys are unemployed and no one is interested in them any longer. They feel their lives have been wasted and the stress they experience and sense of worthlessness is profound.

In many cases, these people have wives and husbands and families and it all comes crashing down when their careers stop like this. It is savage, unpleasant and very, very sad. I feel very sorry for these people, and I speak to them each day. They come to a point where they have been used for all they can give and then are no longer valued. This creates tremendous pain and is difficult for people to handle.



If you are in a war, or a POW, the odds are pretty good that if you die, someone is going to shoot you or cut off your head, and you will be dead instantly. In a law firm, you never know when you are going to lose your job.

- **See The Seven Most Important Choices Every Attorney without a Lot of Business Makes** for more information.

5. There is Very Little Positive Feedback in Law Firms

Law firms will generally give pretty harsh reviews to junior associates to get them to improve. They will then start giving them very good reviews when they are profitable to the firm (between two and five years), and then, all of a sudden, the reviews will become negative again. This “roller coaster” is par for the course. You are hit, then someone is nice to you, then you are hit again. This is how it works and has always worked, and there is nothing pleasant about it. No wonder people die and go crazy.

I worked in the Los Angeles office of a New York law firm when I was a third year associate. The reviews used to be done by partners who traveled out from New York to conduct the reviews of the Los Angeles associates. They were partners no one in the LA office knew. One day, two of these New York partners I’d never seen in my life showed up in my office and started giving me a horrible review. I had no idea what was going on. They were telling me no one liked me, that I should start looking for a new job, that no one had confidence in me.

Then they mentioned a partner I had never worked with and said: “We are not even going to talk about what happened with him.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “I’ve never worked with him.”

They looked at each other and started conferring.

“Actually, we were giving you someone else’s review. We need to find your evaluations and we will be back.”

I never saw them again. It was a strange, odd experience. No one ever apologized or said they were sorry. I practically had a heart attack during the review. I am pretty sure I knew who the



review was for, however, and it was someone who was very good at his job in my opinion. After that review I thought to myself: “If this is what is going to be waiting for me after six more years here, that is not a good situation.”

In a war zone, you are surrounded by comrades and others who have your back and want you to survive. If you are a POW, there are people trying to rescue you. Not so in a law firm. You are in an environment that may eventually try and expel you like a virus.

6. Your Career Could End at Any Second

Entire litigation departments often lose their jobs when a few major cases settle. When the corporate market slows down, and it always does, corporate attorneys lose their jobs in droves. A mistake an attorney made years ago could suddenly come back to haunt them in a malpractice lawsuit and their career could suddenly be over.

There are all sorts of threats to an attorney’s career inside of a law firm that are incredibly stressful. Even a simple mistake an attorney makes can end his career.

One attorney that I know was going to be made a partner in a major American law firm. I know because a partner I was working with told me that they had already agreed to elect him to partner in a few weeks. He had been working 2,500+ hours a year for several years in the law firm and was doing good work. One day he got to work and was asked by a partner if he had sent a simple letter that had little consequence to an opposing counsel in a case he was working on.

“Yes, I did last night,” he said.

When he got back to his office he realized that he had written the letter but forgotten to email it. He had been in the office past midnight the day before and had been working crazy hours for weeks and was just out of it.

He emailed it immediately. Opposing counsel responded to the email and cc’d the partner he had told he had done it the night before. The attorney was immediately fired – **BOOM** – just like that. Not only that, but the firm blackballed him and said terrible things to anyone who wanted to check his references. They said he was a “liar” and “untrustworthy” and a “major disappointment”.



He was so tainted he could not get a job in the entire state of California and ended up leaving the state of California and returning to a small town his parents lived in on the East Coast. He was days from becoming an equity partner and lost it all due to one simple mistake.

If you are in a war zone and make a mistake, you will generally not lose your job. You may get a mark on your record, or a lecture, but your job is not continually under threat. Soldiers do not lose their jobs when the market slows down, or they forget to do something simple.

- **See [The Only Three Questions Law Firms Evaluate Applicants By](#) for more information.**

7. You Do Not Have Any Control Over Your Time

If you are a lawyer in a large law firm, you can forget having any control over your time. Your personal life is out the window. The firm simply owns you and that's it. Weekends, evenings and so forth are not something you can plan on. You are expected to drop everything and start work at a moment's notice when you need to.

When I was practicing law, one time I came into work on a Thursday morning and did not return from the office until Sunday morning at 6:00 am. I emailed the project I was working on to a partner at 6:00 am on Easter Sunday and went home. It took me a few hours to get to sleep because I was so charged up after working for 72 hours straight. I finally got to sleep around 8:00 am and, at 8:30 am, my phone rang. It was the partner I was working for. I did not hear the phone ring. I had gone into such a deep sleep that my wife had to physically shake me to wake me up.

"I did not receive the memo yet," the partner said. She was calling from the car on the way to Easter Sunday services.

"I emailed it to you a few hours ago," I said.

She demanded I go into the office and resend it again. I was so pissed that when I got off the phone I slammed my arm into a wall so hard I did some nerve damage. With one arm operational, I drove into the office. When I got to the office, I checked and it was in my outbox. I sent it again and called the IT people in our New York office.



“Oh, that makes sense. We reboot our servers every Sunday night and emails do not go out during that time for a few hours.”

Despite this, the partner was still upset with me. There were no apologies for this. You worked 72 hours straight? I don't care! I want that memo when I get out of church! Have a nice Easter!

When I started my first legal job, I remember taking a one-week vacation one summer. Before I left, a partner I had never worked with called me on the phone at home the night before I was leaving for vacation:

“I just wanted to let you know that we all hope you have a nice vacation.”

The message of this was clear. I should not be taking a vacation. Attorneys rarely take vacations and have little control over their time.

In the military there is something called “R&R”. Between battles and other service, soldiers get time off. If you are being tortured, you at least get to rest when your captors sleep. Not so in a law firm. There is very little control (if any) over your time.

- See [Working Weekends and Holidays](#) for more information.

Conclusions

What is the meaning of all of this? If practicing law is so stressful and difficult, what is the point?

The point is that this life is for some people. There are certain people that are very good at it and thrive under this sort of pressure: In fact, it makes them happy. There are certain people that are ready-made to be warriors and assassins and fight in wars. There are others who have the skill and fortitude to be attorneys.

If you are going to do this, you need to love it, commit to it and thrive under these conditions. The point of this is that there are people who are meant to do this and who thrive on the challenge, the fight and the ups and downs. There are people who come out of this and win. Those, of course, are the type of people I make my living looking for. It also is why it is difficult to be



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exceptional at legal recruiting, because it is not easy to find an attorney who is truly cut out to excel at a large law firm.

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

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