



Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Two Fatal Deficiencies That Prevent 99% of Attorneys From Achieving Greatness

Summary: If you possess these two attributes as an attorney, you will most likely end up being rich or famous in your career.

One of the more consistent patterns I see is attorneys who start out in large, prestigious law firms leaving the practice of law completely within one or two years. This is not just something I see now and then. ***I see it daily.***

- **See [25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy \(and What to Do About it\)](#) for more information.**

I have been reviewing hundreds of resumes a day for most of my career and this pattern is the exact opposite of what happens to attorneys who join smaller, less prestigious firms. Most attorneys who join smaller law firms end up practicing law for their entire careers.

They are committed to practicing and being attorneys: They are talking to clients all day, getting involved in their issues and when they sit down to work they see a connection with the work they are doing and their clients. There is a closer human connection that motivates them, makes them feel important and gives them control over their careers.

In contrast, many large law firm attorneys do not even know what an attorney is. They have spent years working long hours and never meeting a client. Their time has been dedicated to writing memos and doing other sorts of “ancillary” clerical work so far removed from what “normal” attorneys do that they are “quitting” a job that is not even remotely connected to being an attorney. Moreover, because large law firm attorneys often know they are going to lose their jobs eventually, many are quitting before they get fired so they do not lose their self-respect and esteem.



- **See Top 5 Ways to Know When it is Time to Quit Being a (Big Law) Attorney for more information.**

There is something that is “lost” for many attorneys who join large law firms once they enter these firms: They lose the “spark” that drove them to be good candidates for practicing law in the first place. Without interesting work to do, contact with clients, a feeling of meaning and purpose, and the prospect of a compelling future, their spirit is often so crushed they want nothing whatsoever to do with being an attorney.

Since this pattern is so widespread, there is clearly something going on that is far deeper than “people do not like large law firms” or “the practice of law.” What happens to these attorneys is they simply “run out of gas”. They have no more energy to continue pushing forward, no more interest in the subject matter whatsoever, and no more desire to play the game. Without the energy to keep going, these attorneys lose focus and would rather do anything than practice law again.

Prior to the assembly line being invented, craftsmen used to take great pride in spending weeks (or months) doing things like building a single car. As assembly lines and methods of business became more specialized, workers on assembly lines started being in charge of doing things like putting a wheel on the car and nothing more. What this meant, of course, is that the work became more monotonous, boring, simplistic and to some extent even meaningless. As the work became more meaningless, the workers enjoyed what they did less and less and were less attached to the work. They demanded higher wages, often sabotaged the machines, started organizing in unions and were angry with management.

There is no doubt the same sort of “anger towards management” in the law firm environment among associates and others today. This is the same sort of anger that exists among factory workers and others towards management. Instead of union halls, attorneys now “organize” on various websites where they gossip and take great joy in law firm partners (and law firms) experiencing problems. They all talk about “wages” and other money-related topics and are overly concerned with money. Like factory workers, they complain about working conditions,



sabotage their law firms by spreading gossip and spend their days doing a lot of meaningless work. Like the factory worker, they are valued for the number of hours they work and not much more. Attorneys (associates especially) have the same concerns as blue-collar factory workers (despite masquerading as white-collar workers).

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution](#)**
- **[Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About](#)**

Attorneys from most large law firms run out of energy because most are doing meaningless work where they are valued mainly for the hours they work and nothing more.

If you have any blue-collar relatives who work in factories, you know how tired they get at the end of the day. They come home and sit in front of the television with some beer and rest. They are very, very tired after work and do not want to do much. They fight with their wives when they get tired (and drunk) and get divorced. They look forward to retirement and not working. They do not look forward to work. Their concern is working less, getting as much money as possible and ending all of the nonsense. Many get sick and die when they are young. The only group of people I have ever encountered with more health problems, dislike of their jobs and anger towards their bosses than blue-collar factory workers are law firm attorneys.

- **[See Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young](#) for more information.**

Have you seen what being an attorney working years inside of a law firm and not advancing does to someone?

- Their skin starts to look bad
- They gain a lot of weight



- They lose the bounce to their step
- They start walking all hunched over
- Their enthusiasm for life disappears from their face and voice

While they may be wearing a business suit, they look no different than a factory worker who has been doing the same work for as many years as well. Their spirit is also gone! The only difference is that the factory worker is likely to be in better shape!

There are really only two things you are selling to legal employers: your “skills” as an attorney and “energy.” Very few attorneys have both of these (some have neither) and that is why there are so few good attorneys. Nothing is more common than an attorney (1) who is brilliant but passionless and out of energy or (2) does not have the “skills” to be a good attorney.

In contrast, nothing is more uncommon than an attorney with both energy and skills. In fact, the entire fabric of the legal profession has evolved—**masterfully so**—to concentrate those with **both energy and skills** at the very top. You might be an average attorney with skills or an average attorney with energy; however, the odds are you will never be someone who possesses both.

When you understand just how important these two components are, and how few attorneys have them, you very quickly come to understand why the attorneys at the very top of pyramid make millions of dollars a year inside of large law firms (or outside of them). Of course they do: They are rare and there are not a lot of attorneys like them.

- **What is Meant By “Skill”?**

What is meant by the word “skill”? There are a lot of markers of what makes a skilled attorney, and no list could possibly be fully comprehensive. These are the majority of the traits law firms use to evaluate the most skilled attorneys (and I do not spend a lot of time on them because most attorneys already know what they are):



1. Your Educational Qualifications

An attorney's paper qualifications consist of such things as where he or she went to school and how he or she did there. The thinking here is pretty simple: If you put 500 very smart people in a top law school class together and a few of them rise to the top, then you are going to identify people with a lot of aptitude for practicing law.

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

Legal employers, clients and others pay attention to an attorney's educational qualifications because this shows them how "smart" and "skilled" the attorney is likely to be. An attorney's educational qualifications also demonstrate, to some extent, if the attorney has the energy to work hard.

Intellectual horsepower is extremely important. I once knew an attorney who simply could not understand the difference between federal and state law (I'm not kidding). If an attorney does not have the ability to understand simple, basic concepts then that attorney is going to get run over by opposing counsel. In contrast, I have known some incredibly brilliant attorneys who were able to win every negotiation and turn everything they touched into gold because of the ability to masterfully interpret and process information in a way that worked in their clients' favor.

It is not difficult to get into most law schools, and there are a wide variety of law schools (and people in them) out there. Skill can generally be measured, to some extent, by your performance in law school, and the quality of the law school you went to. It is for this simple reason that many large and prestigious firms will not even bother with people from certain law schools, or people who were not at the top of their classes from various top law schools. These highly selective firms view law school performance as a measure of skill, and part of their "brand" is having the most "skilled" attorneys work on various matters. In this respect, they want to "show" potential clients (and others) that they have the most "smart" and "skilled" lawyers, as measured by law school rankings and academic honors, who have the intellectual strength to win against other attorneys.



See the following articles for more information:

- **Does Law School Rank Determine Success?**
- **Is It True That Attending Any but a Top-Tier Law School is a Personal and Financial Mistake?**

2. Your Prior Employment History

One of the greatest markers of an attorney's "skill" is his or her prior employment history.

If an attorney has worked for several years at a well-regarded law firm, the odds are good that the attorney has the skill. Skill is implied by the quality of the law firm the attorney has worked at, just as it is implied by the quality of the law school the attorney attended. If an attorney has worked at a great law firm, the presumption is that the attorney has done work at a skill level matching other highly skilled attorneys and he or she is also at this skill level (or else he or she would have been fired).

It is quite common for attorneys from great law schools to join top law firms and for it to quickly come to light that they do not have the skills to be practicing at the level of the other top attorneys in the firm. Whether it is missing important details, not caring enough to do various sorts of follow-through, or simply sloppy work product, attorneys without skills are discarded from top law firms like viruses.

Attorneys simply cannot stay around for long periods of time in major law firms if they are not at least somewhat skilled. This does not mean that they are going to rise inside of these law firms (or that they are very skilled attorneys), but it does mean that they have enough skills that they are able to stay employed. The longer an attorney is with a major law firm, the more skill he or she is presumed to have. If an attorney has been at a major law firm for more than a few years then the odds are that attorney has the skills other major law firms are looking for.



3. The Ability to See Things Other Attorneys Do Not

The most skilled attorneys do not just have intellectual abilities and “skill”. They also have the ability to cut through very complex facts and see ideas, concepts and interpretations of facts that other attorneys do not. This is one of the real skills of the best attorneys and something very few attorneys have. This allows them to be far more effective advocates for their clients.

This is a rare skill I would estimate less than 1 in 100 attorneys have. The most skilled attorneys can synthetically use wide amounts of information to reach very penetrating conclusions with facts that other attorneys simply do not see. This skill is generally not tested by most law schools and is something that is rarely developed in attorneys. When attorneys do have this skill, though, they become extremely valuable to both sophisticated clients and law firms.

4. The Ability to Get Along With Different Types of People

A “skill” in a legal environment is the ability to get along with a wide variety of people, especially those the attorney works with. If an attorney is not able to get along with people in the office, the odds are pretty good that he or she is going to have a difficult time succeeding in a law firm because the ability to relate to and get along with diverse types of people is so important.

For whatever reason, some attorneys get inside law firms and their minds start playing all sorts of tricks on them. They see conflict where there is no conflict and they see trouble where there is no trouble. They may get involved in various issues they should not and see the law firm and the people in it as more political than it actually is. The ability to stay employed in law firms (and most legal environments) for an extended period of time requires people skills.

- **See Abraham Lincoln, Bringing People Together, and Your Career for more information.**



5. The Ability to Not Stop Learning

The best attorneys do not stop learning and are able to continue learning indefinitely about what they do. They are not only interested in what they do, but they are continually hungry for more and more information. For example, you could give a book about depositions to a senior litigator and if he or she thought the book was good he or she would sit down and read it. The best attorneys are hungry for information and never stop learning and do not want to stop learning. Their interest in what they do and information about it means that they are continually getting better and better at what they do.

By continually learning new things an attorney becomes more and more skillful.

See the following articles for more information:

- **Never Stop Improving**
- **You Are Never Too Good to Stop Learning**
- **Never Stop Growing**

6. The Ability to Get the Best Result in Whatever You Are Representing Clients In

A skilled attorney is skilled precisely because they “win” a lot. They could win in negotiations, win in court, or just “win” in general more often than not. There are likely to be a wide variety of reasons for this. What is important to understand, though, is that the best attorneys succeed on behalf of their clients more than they fail. This is an issue of “skill” and the skill that makes this possible is something that makes a good attorney.

7. The Ability to Bring in Business

Some attorneys can bring in business and others cannot. This is also a skill. The skill of being able to bring in business helps make an attorney successful. If an attorney can bring in a sufficient amount of high-paying clients, that attorney can be successful just about anywhere.



See the following articles for more information:

- **The Importance of Portable Business**
- **Top 9 Ways for Any Attorney to Generate a Ton of Business**
- **What is Meant by “Energy”?**

“Access to energy” or spirit is arguably the most important component to remaining employed in any law firm or the legal profession. Without that “spark” and energy, attorneys are ineffective, inefficient and should be doing something different. More than a factory worker, attorneys really need “spirit” because they are supposed to be fighting for others.

A few years ago, one of my best friends, a best-selling business author and motivational speaker, was dying of leukemia and in a hospital undergoing all sorts of chemotherapy and other treatments. As I listened to the various diagnoses he was receiving, I quickly realized he was going to be dying in the near future. He had become skin and bones and very weak and even his voice was faint and trailing off. His muscles had deteriorated so much from being in bed that soon he could not even walk.

What amazed me about him was that until just days before he died he was writing long articles about his sickness, potential cures and various matters relevant to his profession. Despite being close to death, whatever was inside of him kept pouring out and he had the energy to keep going despite being very, very sick. He had been doing a job (motivational business training) that made him happy and he enjoyed his entire career. While he was confined to a hospital bed, he spent his days pouring forth ideas and holding various business-related meetings in his hospital room.

I went and met with him a couple of times and he had all sorts of business ideas that he shared with me. Because of the chemotherapy he would sweat all night and needed someone in his room to change his hospital gown. I stayed the entire night to help him once when his family could not do so. He was up until 2:30 am talking about business and I could scarcely



keep my eyes open. The amount of writing that was pouring out of him was so prolific that I did not have the time or energy to read many of his long essays. None of this was unusual for him, of course. The energy he had generated ideas even when he was so close to death. He had found purpose and passion in his job and was able to do this with everything that he touched. This purpose and passion made him more effective at his job and is one reason that he made it so far in life and in his profession.

- **See [Love What You Do](#) for more information.**

A good attorney who enjoys his or her job is like this with legal work while sick; however, most attorneys do not have anywhere near the passion necessary to be like this. Most large law firm attorneys, like most factory workers, want to be as far as possible from their work when they are ill.

There is a pattern I have seen among the most successful people out there. They just keep going. I recently found a job for an attorney in her late-60s and in her cover letter she wrote: “I’ve never billed less than 2,500 a year!” She was a former partner in a major US law firm who retired and found herself bored and missing the practice of law.

“I can’t pay you what you were making in a large law firm,” she was told.

“I’m not doing this for the money,” she said. “I’m doing this because I love doing this and all I think about is litigating.”

She was not kidding. She’s at work most days at 7:00 am and has a work ethic and level of energy that is just phenomenal. I heard that a few nights ago she nearly pulled an “all-nighter” working on a matter. She has had this level of energy all of her life and it is something that has made her successful. These are the types of people that will advance in the legal world.

- **See [Your Job is About the Transference Energy](#) for more information.**



She, like my friend, is tapped into something that makes her incredibly effective at what she does. At the end of their careers, or even the end of their lives, people with access to this energy and a love of their jobs just keep going. My grandfather was a well-known journalist who used to give speeches **WEEKLY** until his mid-90s. You cannot make this up: If someone loves what he or she does and is energized by it, the only way he or she will stop is by dying. ***The work does not kill this person, the work keeps this person energized and alive.***

In contrast, someone who does not enjoy practicing law is just doing a job. This unhappy attorney watches the clock, focuses on compensation, writes negative messages on message boards, spends time plotting escape and, in general, does not care about what he or she is doing. These types of attorneys do a bad job and will never succeed because they do not realize that advancement comes from loving what you do and being energized and empowered by it. Without passion for something there is nothing.

Energy and passion is something you absolutely, positively need to be tapped into in order to be happiest and most effective as an attorney. If you are not, you need to find it. Nothing is more important than [having access to energy](#) for being effective and good at what you do.

- You find that passion by finding an area of law you are connected with—a different practice area.
- You find that passion by getting access to the sort of responsibility in your job that energizes you—perhaps in a smaller firm.
- You find that passion by representing individuals and not just businesses.
- You find that passion by working with people like you and who you feel comfortable with, and not just serious lawyers in a giant law firm.

There are countless ways to find that passion, but there is no doubt that you need to do this. If you do not have this then you are in crisis and a lack of passion will permeate every level of your life, from your health to your relationships. Not enjoying or having passion for what you do can and will kill you. What is the point of living if you hate what you do?



See the following articles for more information:

- **You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing**
- **Parking Benefits and Falling in Love with Your Job**

I know attorneys from giant law firms who have done things like become a criminal attorney in a storefront law firm and found happiness. I know attorneys from large law firms who left the law and became nature guides. Whatever makes you happy and energizes you is what you should be doing. If you do not have access to energy you have nothing.

It takes energy to be a good attorney or to be good at anything. Whether the person is a motivational speaker, author, attorney, politician, or a musician, the best people out there at everything have a ton of energy and pour this energy into everything they do.

It is this energy that carries them through ups and downs and makes them successful when others are not. You need to be tapped into this energy. If you are not finding it in your job you need to find a new job or a different career entirely. Whatever you do needs to drive you forward, excite you and make you want to grow.

Energy, and access to it, is the most important component necessary to long-term success in the practice of law. Energy is a sign you are happy and enjoying your job. A lack of it is a sign you are not enjoying your job.

A less common pattern, but one that is a joy to watch, comes in the form of attorneys who started out at lesser law firms and may have lesser qualifications, but have the energy to propel them forward and become successful. These attorneys don't burn out; they burn more brightly over time. They work hard, improve themselves and their skills, are persistent and do not give up, and get very excited by their work and what they are doing. These sorts of attorneys just keep doing better and better and, ultimately, go very far. They do well and continue improving because they have access to energy.



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

Conclusions

The reason so many attorneys who join large firms leave the practice of law is because they run out of energy. The law firm puts them on a treadmill, and after so many years of this the attorney simply loses the ability to go on and wants to “escape” to something less taxing.

While getting into a large law firm takes “skill” and working there requires “energy,” staying employed there requires even more energy. An attorney who stays employed in a large law firm needs to continually keep pushing forward and not give up. He or she needs consistent energy. If this goes away, then so will his or her job.

Avoiding burn out is a special skill and not something all attorneys can do. In order to stay employed as long as possible, an attorney needs to remain excited and enthusiastic about what he or she is doing. If the attorney cannot remain enthusiastic then that attorney will have a difficult time getting clients and others excited. Enthusiasm is a form of “energy” and other attorneys (and clients) want to be around attorneys that are enthusiastic and excited about what they are doing.

- **See Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law for more information.**

An attorney is skilled to the extent he or she has the ability to persevere through whatever it is he or she is working on and remain interested in it. It takes a special kind of person to stay interested in work and not give up. A good attorney is rare because the combination of sustained energy and skill is rare.

If you know of an attorney with both skills and energy, the odds are that attorney is famous, is rich, or will be one or the other shortly.



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- If you have the skills, you should do everything within your power to get the energy.
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There is something to the best attorneys that go the farthest in this profession and their connection with energy. They take care of themselves and do things that give them energy, whether it is vacations, exercise, time with friends and family, or reading and absorbing information they are interested in. The best attorneys are masters at conserving energy, building up energy and continually remaining “charged” and ready to work. If an attorney understands the importance of being connected to energy, then he or she will be able to keep going and succeeding.

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