



Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

How Attorneys Destroy Their Careers by Choosing the Wrong Law Firms

Summary: *You should never join a law firm just for the prestige, benefits or compensation offered. Instead, look deeper at the firm's values when selecting a law firm.*

People across all cultures and societies have a need to belong and be part of a team. We feel like we belong when we are around others who share our values and beliefs. All of us need to feel like we are part of a group that will protect us. Countries, cities, schools, companies, law firms and other groups are all organized and have certain ways of doing things and thinking about issues that make the people that populate that group feel like they belong.

- **See [Seek Out and Work With People Who Share Your Beliefs](#) for more information.**

We choose our friends, employers and mates based on factors that we cannot necessarily define, but are relevant to how we come together with people as a group. When attorneys interview with law firms, or choose whom to associate with, there are things they pick up on that let them know how something “feels” and whether or not it is appropriate for them. You cannot explain why you are attracted to a certain person and feel comfortable with them in rational words. You may say that they are “interesting” or fun to be around, but it is more than that. It is a sense of feeling safe around the person and being accepted and protected by them.

These sorts of decisions come from the limbic brain and not the rational brain (the neocortex). Limbic decisions are based on your “gut” and rational decisions are based on logic and all sorts of other factors that you can talk about. You cannot necessarily verbalize what the limbic brain is telling you. It is the limbic decisions that typically will show you the best course and



the group you should be with and not the rational decisions.

When it comes to employment decisions, attorneys often get into trouble when they fail to trust their limbic brains and instead make a series of moves based on their rational brains. They join law firms based on prestige factors, on money factors and all sorts of other factors that are “rational” but will not necessarily make them happy.

There is a [pattern in how law firms grow, how they remain successful](#) and, of course, how they die. Law firms can grow quickly, die quickly – or something in between. Something very few attorneys understand, however, is why all of this happens.

- **See [The Law Firm Lifecycle: Why Some Firms Fail](#) for more information.**

In general, the cause of the growth, maintenance, and death of a law firm is all related to how effectively it functions as a “team.” Every law firm has a unique culture with its own set of values and beliefs. Because of these values and beliefs, there is trust. With trust, we feel like we can go to work and the people around us will look out for us. We feel comfortable investing our time in a law firm if we trust that we have the opportunity to grow as a consequence of being part of that law firm.

You associate with the sort of people who share your way of looking at the world. This is how all people are. Different cities and countries have different cultures. Being an attorney in New York City means something different than being an attorney in San Francisco or Chicago. Each city has a different culture and certain attorneys are better fits for one culture and not the other. Some attorneys might be enormously successful in Los Angeles but get eaten up alive if they worked in New York. Similarly, I have seen many attorneys from New York relocate to the Bay Area and get eaten up alive there as well. We join groups of people based on where we are most likely to fit in and be successful. Within each city there are countless law firms with different cultures you could be successful in – or not. You need to fit in with the right people.

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



It is not academic qualifications or even skills that necessarily bind attorneys together in a firm, it is the culture of the law firm. A well-run law firm has a unique culture that attracts a certain sort of person that fits in and expels those who do not fit in. The best run law firms hire people who share their beliefs and are like them. Law firms do not succeed because they hire people with the best resumes. They succeed because they have a culture and hire people who believe what they believe and will become part of that culture.

I have seen attorneys get jobs at the top law firms in the world who were like the people they were interviewing with – even without the best qualifications. I have seen the same law firms aggressively reject better-qualified attorneys because they did not share the firms' beliefs and culture. This happens all the time. The goal of every good law firm is to hire people that are like them and share their beliefs and unique ways of looking at the world. People are either motivated by a law firm's unique culture or they are not.

The best law firms seek to create the best teams and are able to maintain these teams over a long period of time. When the teams fall apart, the law firm does as well. Very few teams can function well over an extended period of time. Where you join a firm in this cycle will determine your level of success or failure as an attorney. You need to understand the team you are joining in order to get the best job and maintain your job. You need to understand whether or not the law firm has a unique culture and whether or not this culture is falling apart or getting stronger. You need to understand if this culture is a good fit for you.

If a law firm's unique culture is a good fit for you, you need to go "all out" and make sure that everyone you interview with and speak with understands why you feel comfortable in the law firm and with the people. You need to make this clear and evident to stand the best chance of being hired. People are much more likely to hire you if they truly feel you are a good fit than if you simply have good qualifications. A law firm that hires only on qualifications is a law firm that is on its way down. These sorts of law firms are generally in trouble. Qualifications should get you in the door, but they should not be the dominating criteria in getting you hired.

- **See [The Importance of Culture in Organizations](#) for more information.**



Simply paying an attorney a lot of money will not ensure you get the best attorneys. Getting together a group of people that share similar beliefs, however, will ensure they work together more effectively, share information more effectively and are all dedicated to the same purpose. These are the law firms that succeed.

For the longest time I have watched firms from the sidelines. I work with the majority of large and successful growing law firms in the country and I have always been fascinated by how they operated as businesses – their growth and their death and their survival. To know if a firm is a good fit for you, you need to understand the sort of firm it is, where it is in its lifecycle, and the factors that influence its culture one way or another.

Law firms are either (1) growing fast, (2) stable, or (3) at risk of dying. Where a law firm is in this process will generally determine your future there and the strength of its culture.

1. Fast Growing Law Firms

When a law firm is started and starts to grow it generally does so because the people are united about something. These law firms generally fall into the following categories:

a. The Kids Rebelling Against the Parents Law Firm

Most new law firms are united by the fact that the attorneys want to do things differently than the firms they came from. For example, they may want to be less formal, have fewer rules, or allow people more responsibility. They may want to staff deals differently. They may be rebelling against inefficiencies in the firms they came from and believe that things can be done differently.

This is a very, very common way that firms are started and grow. This works for a period of time. Initially, clients are told that cases and deals will be staffed more “leanly” and that the firm has big firm lawyers that are cheaper. They are able to recruit lawyers because they are “different” and seen as a “unique” and a “cool” alternative to other law firms.



These can be good firms to join. When they are young and growing they typically will hire and attract the sorts of people that might not get jobs in more established firms. These may include unpolished “misfits” who may have good educational qualifications but are not big firm types. They may also be the sorts of firms that are willing to make partners generously and are able to attract clients because they are “new” and less expensive.

The real reason these firms are such good places to join, however, is because they are united about “something”. In this case they are united about being “different” and “unique.” The fact that people are united, have a common enemy and want to grow and prove something makes them strong. It forges loyalty among the attorneys with each other and gives the group an identity. As they have successes and failures together the attorneys are further strengthened and so is the firm.

The drawbacks of these sorts of firms, and there are several, is that they typically will not be like this forever. At some point they will start to hire more “mainstream” attorneys, they may get rid of the people they brought on initially, management will start to put more demands on the attorneys and it will be more difficult to make partner. Moreover, the founders of the firm may decide they want more money and start cutting costs and getting greedy, hurting the people who joined later. Unprofitable practice groups that got away with low billings during the initiation of the firm will be let go. As economic climates change, the firm will begin to institute various procedures that make the firm just like the firms everyone was initially escaping.

Other times these fast-growing law firms are not up to the challenge of running a law firm and end up merging into a larger law firm.

b. Economic Cycle Driven Growth

There are countless law firms that experience aggressive growth during strong economic cycles. When the market for corporate attorneys is good, for example, law firms will generally grow like mad in the Bay Area and New York. Their hiring standards will fall and they will absorb as many attorneys as they can from as many places as possible.



This is incredibly common and something that goes on everywhere. Firms simply grow in response to client demands. These are good firms to join when the economy is growing, but you need to understand their history and how they grow and shrink in various economic cycles. What goes up rapidly almost always goes down the same way.

If you are hired by one of these firms during a “growth spurt,” the odds of you remaining employed for an extended period of time is pretty slim unless you are an outstanding employee. Even if you can get a job with one of these firms in a “boom” time, you may be better off going to a place where you can build a future instead of one where you are going to have a difficult time remaining for very long.

No practice group is immune from rapid growth and rapid shrinkage.

For example, when the corporate market shrinks in response to an economic cycle, law firms often start increasing the amount of work they are doing in litigation and start “working” litigation cases harder than they might normally do to keep profits up. This goes on for some time generally and then clients start getting “gun shy” in response to high bills and start settling cases. Litigators then start to lose their jobs.

Incredibly, some very well-known law firms have gone out of business when several large litigation cases settled in a short period of time. One of the greatest casualties of this was [Heller Ehrman](#), a firm that was started in the late 1800s. It collapsed 100+ years later after several large cases settled.

When the economic crisis of 2008 hit in the United States, corporate attorneys started to lose their jobs in droves. At the same time, law firms began putting more and more effort into litigation. Litigation often increases after an economic crisis because people start suing after having lost money. As litigation picked up after 2008 and clients started getting larger bills, cases started settling. By 2012, litigation was all but “dead” and it took until mid-2015 for it to pick up again. Simultaneously, corporate departments started growing again around 2011.



This sort of cycle is successfully navigated by many large, well run firms. They are able to rapidly hire and rapidly fire. I have seen many law firms do this over the past 25 years and they do it again and again. It is part of their business model and it works for them. Some law firms, though, are not able to make these sorts of cuts. They grow like crazy when times are good, but because they do not have the skills to handle moderate growth they decline and end up going out of business.

- **See [Issues Law Firms Should Consider in Slowing Business Climates](#) for more information.**

If a firm is in a growth spurt in a good economic climate, it often cares less about a team and your future than it does about its own short-term profits. These sorts of firms are somewhat dangerous to be a part of. They are not the best “teams” that are likely to protect you over the long run. You rarely see, for example, some of the most elite firms out there ([Sullivan & Cromwell](#), [Wachtell](#), etc.) suddenly “bulking up” when the economy gets strong. Instead, these sorts of firms maintain their hiring standards, team processes and value and cultivate the people there.

c. The Merged Firm

Merged firms are typically quite dangerous. Although they may be “growing,” they can often be disasters to join for a variety of reasons (at least in the first few years of a merger).

- **See [Should I Stay or Should I Go: What Should Partners Do When Their Firm Merges With Another Firm?](#) for more information.**

The first reason that merged firms are quite dangerous is due to the fact they often have “inefficiencies” that need to be ironed out and will be ironed out in the new merged firms. These inefficiencies are things like “over staffing” and redundancies that the new management will be continually analyzing and reviewing in an excited bid to cut costs and make more money. When you join one of these firms, you could be a victim of a committee



that is making various godlike decisions about your future.

In addition, the merged firm is two businesses merging into one business. They are often merging because there were problems with each business. When two businesses with problems get together, often what results is more problems and a failed merger. When two businesses come together with different ways of doing things, there are likely to be numerous disagreements about various issues and this creates all sorts of problems. There will be fighting, alliances that you are not aware of and other issues that create difficulties. Merged firms can work, of course, but they are dangerous.

- See [Law Firm Mergers: Why Law Firms Join Forces](#) for more information.

d. The Acquired Law Firm

Large law firms often acquire smaller law firms. They may do this to get a new practice area in their home territory, or they may want to have an office in a city where they currently do not have an office. Law firms that agree to be acquired often do so because they want to grow and view growth as positive. Many small law firms also are interested in being acquired because it may provide them a bigger name to capture more business and opportunities in the market.

Law firms that are acquired are often dangerous as well. While there appears to be growth occurring, numerous problems generally arise.

First, the larger law firm will often institute various procedures, reviews and other things that the acquiring law firm may not have had or had done differently. This will upset attorneys in the acquired firm and they may form factions and there will be fighting, departures and so forth.

Second, the acquiring firm will often cut loose the “dead weight” inside of the firm that is being acquired and this will create issues as well.



None of this is to say that there is anything wrong with a firm being acquired. But the reality is that this sort of growth often does not work because people are not on the same team all of the time. If the attorneys are not on the same team, they will start to undermine each other. The entire structure of the law firm will suffer until this is worked through. A law firm not functioning on the same team is dangerous.

2. The Stable Law Firms

Some law firms have been around for 100 or more years. These law firms generally have very well-defined cultures and you can feel this when you step off the elevator into the reception area and start meeting the attorneys. Law firms that are stable and have well-defined cultures are the best sorts of law firms to join if you feel comfortable with them. These law firms may be growing slowly, or they may be shrinking a bit from time to time, but they are generally not going one way or another too much.

These sorts of law firms are most concerned with finding the “right” people who share their beliefs. These law firms are almost “primitive” in that they know they need to hire people who are like them because they want people who are working for the “group” and who are not just inspired by individual performance incentives. The most long-standing law firms have cultures that produce trust in their attorneys. Trust is an important thing because it is something that allows attorneys to invest their time in matters without worrying about their jobs. It allows attorneys to share work in the same firm and not worry about people leaving and trying to steal their clients. It is the same sort of trust that allows communities and countries to work together because everyone trusts one another.

The stable law firm generally has a certain type of person they hire. I have been recruiting and studying law firms for so long that if I am sitting on an airplane and see an attorney working I can often narrow down where they are working to a few firms based on how they are dressed, how they carry themselves and their personality when I start interacting with them. Stable law firms hire certain “types” of attorneys, and this “type” is more about the attorney and their personality.



Attorneys who are part of a stable law firm generally share the cultural attributes and other characteristics of their peers. These sorts of law firms are generally not the most common, but they are good firms to join if you fit in.

When good law firms and other employers are hiring, they are asking: Will you be on the same team? Will you support the team? How much will you support the team?

Incredibly, most people talk themselves out of jobs and fail to rise in law firm environments simply because they do everything but communicate they want to be on the same team. They quite literally undermine their potential success by being more concerned about their needs than the needs of the team. If you are going to be successful in any law firm, you need to ask (1) “what does the team want?”; and, (2) “what does the team need?”

If you want to understand what brings people together and what tears them apart, you need to look no further than understanding the importance of teams. A good team can take the people in it to incredible heights of happiness and success, while a poor team can do the opposite.

- Every great company, law firm and country started out by creating a great team.
- Every company, law firm and country that has had serious problems failed due (at least in part) to no longer being a team.

Teams are what make people and groups successful and the absence of teams are what make people and groups fail. Very few attorneys and others truly understand the importance of teams. Instead, they often believe that they are in an “every man for themselves” race where teams do not matter and where it is all about them. They may give lip service to the idea of teamwork and contributing to the group, but it quickly becomes obvious based on their actions that they are not part of a team.

- **See [Sick Crows, Your Attitude, and Being on the Winning Team](#) for more information.**



If you are not part of a team, you are on your own, and teams do not like people on their own and who are not part of a team.

- If you are not part of a team, you cannot be trusted and you put the entire group at risk.
- If you are not part of a team, you are doing things just for yourself and not for the members of your group.

Humans are no different than ants. They come together in groups, and working together they accomplish far more than they ever could on their own.

Nothing undermines the benefits of teamwork and its importance more than an emphasis on money. Many law firms believe that it is money that creates the team. When money is the tool that is used to create a team everything eventually fails.

- **See [Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution](#) for more information.**

One of the most important things that brings groups to power and keeps them in power is being on the same team. Teams support one another and exist for the benefit of the group. When a team exists, a group can achieve much more than any individual would achieve alone.

Leni Riefenstahl's 1936 Nazi promotional film, *Triumph of the Will*, is widely considered one of the best promotional-documentary films ever made. The movie was a successful effort to bring the German people together under the Nazi party after Germany's defeat in World War I. What had at one time been a divided country broken up into various warring tribes was given an identity as a "German people" who were now on the same team. The enthusiasm for being on the same team and part of something significant is palpable in the film and shows women, children and men filled with more passion and enthusiasm than you would typically see in the eyes of fans after winning a national championship.



The movie shows hundreds of thousands of people standing at attention practically motionless as Hitler walks down an aisle seemingly hundreds of yards long cleared for him to give a speech on a giant stage. The film shows people cooperating in work and industry, leaders praising one another; it speaks of unity and success as a team. The movie shows a group of people united in ways that became inspirational to an entire nation.

- It was the identification and creation of a “team” that made Hitler and his Germany such a major force to be reckoned with and brought Germany very close to taking over the world.
- It was also the divisions made within this “team” that ultimately brought about its demise.

Teams and an attorney’s relationship to them are something that can make or break an attorney’s career: Choose the wrong team and your career could end prematurely. More importantly, not understanding how to be part of a team can end your career prematurely.

- **See [Relationships, Inefficiency, and Your Career](#) for more information.**

Any time there is a strong enough team, groups can rise from the ashes and become dominant. Any time a team is weakened and divided, it can be destroyed. Teams build law firms and the weakening of teams destroys them. The greatest law firms are what they are because they have created powerful teams. Law firms fall apart because they are no longer great teams. Attorneys who succeed do so by learning to be great members of teams. Attorneys who succeed at the highest levels generally do so because they can create and lead great teams.

3. The Dying Law Firms

Every time a law firm fails, it generally fails because people are not on the same team. How many law firms have attracted partners and kept people employed based on money alone? This is generally how every major law firm I am aware of has disintegrated and gone out of business. They made money and money alone was the glue that kept the law firm together,



and it had nothing to do with being part of a team. The list of firms that have done this is endless: [Finley Kumble](#), [Brobeck](#), [Dewey Ballantine](#) and others. When money becomes the glue for keeping things together, this creates disaster. Various fiefdoms develop within law firms, these fiefdoms compete with each other based on money and people come and go based on money and not being part of a team.

Every time an individual lawyer fails, the lawyer generally fails because the lawyer is not on the same team as his or her clients or the attorneys he or she is working with. While it is not an obvious fact to most attorneys—and even law firms—being on the same team is among the most important aspects of being an attorney and successful in the practice of law.

Teams have various qualifications for joining them. In order to be part of a team, you generally need certain qualifications – whether it is the school you went to, your grades or other factors. This qualifies you to play on the team, but does not mean the team will choose you. If you have certain stellar qualifications a law firm may be interested in you, but only if they think you are going to be someone who is going to contribute to the firm's effort and team. Teams want people around that make the group better than the individuals in it. Teams do not want people who will undermine them.

Law firms and the people in them fail when they use rationality, money, qualifications and other factors to bring attorneys together. What is more important? A resume or the way someone will fit in with the unique culture of a law firm? Clearly it is the latter. When law firms start to fail they do so because they lose the trust of their people and the law firm's culture falls apart through rational-based decision making. Attorneys will invest in a law firm when they feel they have the support of their law firm, much like a child trusts his or her parents. When an attorney feels supported on an emotional level, the attorney is more likely put in the effort and do the things necessary to benefit the group as a whole.

Law firms become successful because the attorneys within them feel protected. The culture creates a sense of belonging that attracts the right people and keeps the group feeling supported. Decisions are made that affect the long-term interests of the organization instead



of just the individuals within it. Lawyers are passionate when they feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Firm Culture Matters Most](#)**
- **[Zen, Gestalt & Law Firm Culture](#)**

Law firms become “political” and dangerous places to work when the attorneys start acting for their own interests to the detriment of their colleagues. If people do not trust the law firm to look out for them, then their primary motivation becomes self-interest. This weakens the law firm, which becomes all the worse because it feeds on itself and causes more weakness. Ultimately, the firm is likely to collapse.

Conclusions

One of the most common candidates I see in my recruiting practice is the “superstar candidate” with all of the right academics and qualifications. Qualifications can get you in the door, but that is not nearly enough. The candidate needs to understand that what the law firm is looking for is a team player, which is someone who shares the values of the team and will contribute to the team’s success. This is what makes a well-run organization, and it is important in all respects.

You cannot go into a job interview thinking that just because you have good qualifications you will get a job. You also cannot remain employed with any law firm for an extended period of time just because you work hard and have good qualifications. Beneath the surface in every good law firm and every organization is the requirement that you be part of the same team. People do not hire you simply because they want your skills. They hire you because you believe what they believe and you think the way they think. You identify with each other on a gut level (limbic brain) and this allows you to trust each other and to form a team with similar values and goals and to succeed as such.



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For your own success and happiness, you should want to assess if you are on the same team as the law firm you are considering joining. You should want to understand the quality and strength of that team. You should want to determine if it is a real team and if you will fit in on that team so you will be protected and able to grow as a lawyer. You are far better joining a less prestigious law firm where you feel comfortable (in most instances) than joining a law firm where you may be well compensated, but for reasons you do not understand feel uncomfortable.

See the following articles for more information:

- [**Never Stop Growing**](#)
- [**Concentrate Your Effort Where You Can Grow Roots**](#)

When it comes right down to it, we are all quite primal and come together and operate based on things like mutual trust and other “invisible factors” we cannot even verbalize. This is where your power will come from as an attorney and also your happiness. We all need to be supported, and this is far more important than being part of the highest paying and most prestigious law firm for most attorneys.

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