



Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Why Do So Many Attorneys Ask “What’s the Point?”

Summary: *Why is it that so many attorneys feel helpless and unfulfilled?*

Lately I have heard many attorneys ask “What’s the point?” This generally comes up in connection with depressing conversations and leads to uncomfortable silences and existential questions. I often feel forced to agree with such sentiments and find myself commiserating with responses like “That’s awful!” and “That sucks” and “I know how you feel!”

- See **[Why You Should \(and Should Not\) Quit the Practice of Law](#)** for more information.

Have you ever asked “What’s the point?” Here are a few examples of attorneys who have recently asked this sad question:

- **An attorney from a top-five law school, on his third job in three years (law firm, to in-house, to law firm), now in a slow practice area, making very little money, stuck in a firm in the Midwest where he is not from and knows no one, making \$55,000 a year, and cannot even afford his student loans.**
 - *“I’m down to eating macaroni and cheese just to get by.”*
 - *“I’m taking the bus to work because I want to save gas money.”*
- **An attorney in an important role in a major American company, working 3,000 to 3,500 hours a year for the past 20 years, commuting two hours to work each way, and never having had the time to get married or have children, but supporting her parents (who live with her).**



- *"I make close to \$900,000 a year but would like to work closer to home."*
- *"I'm rarely home before midnight."*
- **An attorney who moved to California from New York to get the "good life" and has now discovered that despite making \$300,000 a year all she can afford for her family is an apartment because even a two-bedroom "fixer upper" costs over \$2-million.**
 - *"You should see our apartment. It's not very nice. It's all I can afford. I never thought I'd be living like this after making this much money."*
 - *"I'm not sure what is worse: The fact that I hate my job and am working for nothing, or the fact that I never see my son."*
- **An attorney with excellent qualifications who was a partner at two major American law firms but now has no business. Despite numerous interviews he has been unable to get anything for over a year and wants to give up completely.**
 - *"I'm thinking about just giving up. I do not know what to do. Is it completely hopeless for a partner without business?"*
 - *"Every time I get an interview my wife gets all excited and starts looking at where we could live, but then nothing works out."*
- **An attorney who had an important role in a government agency that was tarnished in a scandal. Because he was at the agency during the scandal, his name comes up when people search for him online and he is not getting any interest from law firms even though he was formerly getting called and recruited weekly.**
 - *"I'm not sure if my career is over, but with a law firm it certainly is. I'm so depressed I do not know what to do."*



- **An attorney from a major American law firm who moved to another state to take care of her daughter. After 12 years of working for the same law firm, she was let go because the firm did not want to establish an office in another state. Due to her age, she had an impossible time finding something new.**
 - *"I never thought I would not be able to get a job. I was months from making partner at my firm and needed to be near my daughter. Now no one has any interest in me at all."*
- **A Harvard Law School graduate who lost his job with a major law firm and is now working in insurance defense and unable to get interest from large law firms, because he is in insurance defense and large law firms will not touch him.**
 - *"Half of my department lost their jobs after we settled a large case. I took the first job I could get because I needed a job. Now no one will hire me because I do not have the 'right job'."*
- **A woman who went to a top law school, spent five years at a top law firm, worked for a small company for a year and now wants to go back to a law firm, but cannot find a job because she is in a practice area that is unique.**
 - *"I'm pretty sure I'm going to give up and do something else. It does not make any sense to spend the next year looking for a job. There are no openings."*
 - *"I never thought my career would be destroyed and stopped by simply going in house."*
- **A woman who is extremely motivated, intelligent and working in a large law firm she finds "too confining" and wants to either leave the job or get a job as a "CEO" of a technology company. She is the sole breadwinner of her family.**
 - *"I cannot do this anymore. Do you know of any companies that need a CEO?"*



- *“Maybe there is a law firm that will let me open an international office for them. I’m sick of it here.”*
- **A patent attorney who lives on the opposite side of the country from his wife and has been unable to find a position in the same market for the past five years.**
- *“It is really hard having a marriage like this. I see her on holidays which is good.”*
- **An attorney who lost his job after 20 years, has three children with disabilities and is the only breadwinner in his family and cannot find another job.**
- *“Do you know of any contract jobs?”*

What is striking about each of these conversations is that they all occurred over the past few weeks, and a new one occurs virtually each day. Attorneys work very hard their entire lives and careers and reach a point where they simply ask “What’s the point” and want to give up. But give up for what? What is there to give up for when they have nothing else they can do—or at least it may seem that way to them?

The system has been too hard on them and sapped the life out of them. They feel alone and unsupported. Their families may not appreciate them. They have worked hard their entire lives and even if the brass ring is there they feel it is meaningless. They feel trapped, stretched thin, not stretched at all, unappreciated, unwanted, overworked, underpaid and exhausted.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law](#)**
- **[Seven Reasons Why Practicing Law Might Be More Stressful than Spending 18 Months in a POW Camp](#)**
- **[Why You Should Quit Practicing Law](#)**



But by the time most attorneys want to give up they cannot. They have families to support, student loans to pay and, in most instances, they do not have any other skills to speak of. They are trapped in lives and careers where they feel like failures with no other options, or even if they are successful they still feel like hostages without options.

Attorneys wonder what the point is and want to give up for a variety of reasons.

- They feel undercompensated and unappreciated;
- It is too difficult getting hired;
- They do not enjoy their jobs;
- They feel trapped and do not have anything else they can do.

When you are asking “what’s the point,” however, you should ask yourself why you are asking this question. In many cases, in order to answer this question you need to engage in self-examination. You need to ask hard questions and get to the bottom of who you are and what you want and need. Only then can you begin the process of crafting a career and life that has a point and is meaningful for you.

Here are some questions to ponder when you ask “what’s the point?”

1. Am I Asking “What’s the Point” Due to Social Pressure?

Many attorneys I speak with feel they should be making more money, be at more prestigious law firms and have better lifestyles. This is quite common, especially among attorneys who went to great law schools, got jobs (initially) in major law firms and are living in major American cities.

These attorneys believe that they should be working in a law firm of a certain status, or making a certain amount of money due to past accomplishments. They primarily feel this way because they compare themselves to others who are experiencing a certain level of success.



This tendency to compare oneself to others is a recipe for attorneys to feel bad about themselves throughout their entire careers and lives. I cannot tell you how common this is; especially among men.

There are countless outside influences that drive the way we think about ourselves, including seeing our peers on LinkedIn, reading about [attorney salaries online](#), and hearing about law school and firm peers rising in the legal world. All these influences distract us from ourselves. They create intense social pressure that surrounds us at all times. Because we hear and see so much about other attorneys all the time, we have an intense feeling of “lack” when we realize that others who were once our peers are so much more successful than us.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Never Measure Yourself against Perfection](#)**
- **[Ships, Relativity and Your Happiness](#)**
- **[Why The Grass is Not Greener on the Other Side of the Fence](#)**

When attorneys complain to me about their salaries and the prestige levels of their law firms, in most cases what is driving it is that they themselves went to prestigious schools or formerly worked in prestigious firms and feel that they should be compensated like their peers and be working in law firms that are as prestigious as their [former] peers. While this may be true, compensation and prestige must also be earned and not all attorneys want to put in the work and make the sacrifices necessary to earn them.

- You need to work hard to get these sorts of jobs, whether it is your grades or the work you put in at the firm you went to out of school.
- You need to stay where you are to get the compensation level you are seeking, and not be lured away by [in-house or other opportunities](#) where the grass seems greener.



- You need to commit and not give up when your peers are dropping out of the race.

There is also a bit of luck involved. For example, you need to be in the right practice area, you need to be in the right city, you need to be in the right firm and you need to be in the right environment to reach the level of success you want.

It is generally more than luck that is involved. Luck is often seen as something which attorneys do not have a lot of control over. However, as the Founder of McDonald's Ray Kroc once said: "the more you sweat, the luckier you get." What this means is that the people who commit and work the hardest are generally the ones who generate the "luck" needed to succeed. If you want to have the same success and status as your peers then you likely are going to need to pay the same price.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Working on Sundays and Concentrating on Your Work](#)**
- **[Weight Loss, Security Guards, Hard Work and Your Career](#)**
- **[Try as Hard as You Can](#)**

Ultimately, however, social status is never going to make you happy. You are not the same person as other people and do not necessarily have the same internal needs and motivations. You may be in the situation you are in not because of "bad luck" but because (at some level at least) you wanted to be in that situation. We take a variety of small actions on an ongoing basis (many not even conscious) that put us where we are.

You should not worry about social pressures. You need to do what makes you happy and fulfilled. The attorneys who live the best lives and are ultimately the happiest are the ones who allow themselves to be and act as the people they want to be without worrying about others.



See the following articles for more information:

- **Never Worry About What Others Think**
- **Learn Something From the Upper and Lower Class: Do Not Be Paralyzed by Others' Opinions**

2. Am I Letting Others Control My Career and My Time?

When we do not choose where to focus our efforts, other people (our superiors, our firm, our family, our peers) will choose where to focus our efforts for us and pretty soon we will be puppets in someone else's game. Our choices are to either control our lives or let other people and their priorities control our lives for us.

One of the most well-adjusted attorneys I know retired from a major American law firm when he was in his mid-40s. He was an easygoing guy who worked long hours, but never crazy hours. Over the last 15 years or so we have gone different directions: He stuck with practicing law and putting his head down and I went another direction.

What I have always admired about this attorney was his ability to maintain calm and keep it together when others around him were not able to do so. He always had a lot of friends and was happy. He always, also, was very committed to his job. This ability to have a work-life balance was interesting on many levels because it worked for him.

He never had any substantial business but he did very well financially. He made partner in a major firm at a young age and had a stretch of 15+ years where we was making several millions of dollars a year. When he was both a partner and an associate he never worried about how difficult the work was and he never complained. He just made the most of it and made (and saved) millions and millions of dollars along the way. Now he lives on the beach and spends his days surfing, investing and living the life he wants.

If you asked him if it was worth it he would say "yes", but he was also the sort of person



who was never swayed by others questioning whether it was worth it. His secret was a very simple one: He was able to manage his life.

Something I remember him saying to me, again and again, was *“No one is ever going to tell you to stop working. You need to do that on your own.”*

What he meant, I now see, is that you need to create priorities in your life yourself because the system is never going to give that to you. You need to make sure that you look out for yourself because no one is going to look out for you. If you do not look out for yourself then you are going to be in trouble. You need to balance your own needs with the needs of the system you are part of.

- **See [Finding Work/Life Balance](#) for more information.**

One of the most interesting things that I see again and again among attorneys is that the pursuit of success can actually be something that causes failure. The pursuit of success and other peoples' goals can cause us to lose focus on what matters to us. You need to make your own success the priority. This is a difficult distinction to make, but it is important and profoundly necessary for your happiness.

Attorneys who are stressed out, overworked and unfulfilled often find themselves making a variety of choices and decisions that may actually end up doing them long-term harm. They are living for someone else and not controlling their own minds.

3. Is It True I Have No Choice?

The biggest stress that most attorneys bear on a daily basis is an apparent lack of choice. On the one hand they have the belief that “I can’t do this” and, on the other hand, they believe “I have to do this.” They feel like they have to do something but do not really want to. This is the largest stress that most attorneys feel.



The important thing for every attorney to understand is that you do have choices. You can be enslaved by social pressures and other self-imposed prisons, but your ability to choose can never be taken from you.

One of the worst things that happens to attorneys is that they come to believe everything is “helpless” and resign themselves to lives and careers that they do not want. The most important thing to learn is that you really do have a choice. If you want to make more money, work in a more prestigious law firm, find a better job, or get a job, then you can. You are never helpless.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[The Milgram Experiment, Submission to Authority, Your Life, and Career](#)**
- **[Do Not Allow Others to Be in Control of Your Career and Life](#)**
- **[Your Strength is Your Ability to Control Your Internal World](#)**

For example, I work with attorneys all the time who are concerned about their inability to find a better job. Every attorney always gets a better job when he or she does not give up. Whatever you want you can always get, but you must pay the price. You need to either work harder on your job search, or buckle down to get where you want to go.

I’ve known attorneys who were interested in becoming partners in major, major law firms that required a certain amount of business—often more than \$5-million. They worked for a decade or more, moved firms to get access to more sophisticated work and better opportunities, and did everything it took to build up the book of business they needed to accomplish their goals, but they ultimately achieved them.

I’ve seen associates who were being underutilized and undercompensated in their existing firms who wanted to change the situation and they did so by putting their heads down and improving themselves. Eventually, as a result of their hard work, they doubled their incomes by getting positions in major law firms.



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Moreover, I've seen countless attorneys conclude that it is not worth it for them and go into another career and do something else entirely. This is often a good choice. They do it because they have a choice.

None of these stories is better or worse. They are simply examples of the way different people asked themselves the hard question of what they truly wanted from their lives and careers and then did the equally hard work of following through on the steps necessary to get there.

You always have a choice, and the mistake attorneys make is in believing they do not have a choice when they do. Your choice is to step up to get where you want to be, or go in another direction. You always have a choice. The greatest weakness of attorneys is allowing themselves to believe they have no choice.

Conclusions

When an attorney asks, "What's the point," what is really occurring is that the attorney is looking for an excuse and reason not to be accountable for his or her own decisions. The only person who is responsible for your happiness and not being enslaved is you. The point of all of this is for you to realize that you are in control and always have been. In your ignorance you have believed yourself bound to someone (or something else) and this ignorance has made your supposed bondage exist.

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