



Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

21 Pieces of Career Advice No One Gives Attorneys

Summary: *Follow this important advice as an attorney and you will have a successful career.*

1. Your Attitude Is Just as Important as the Quality of Your Work

In most law firms, there are various people who have a negative impression of the firm or don't like the management. There are also people who may have no problem with the organization but who get angry or have a bad attitude when they are assigned additional tasks.

Most healthy legal employers will generally not advance these people and, in many cases, will try and force them out the door. The saying "one bad apple can spoil the bunch" is certainly true. If you have a bad attitude, the firm generally does not want you around.

Several years ago, there was a large law firm in Silicon Valley that suddenly lost almost all of its corporate/transactional-related work. They had over 100 corporate attorneys who were sitting around doing nothing, complaining about the lack of work and being quite negative. This law firm did the most interesting thing. It took all of these attorneys and moved them to a separate building because they were dragging down the morale of all of the other attorneys in the firm. They did not want these negative attorneys around their other attorneys. Ultimately morale improved after the negative attorneys were removed from the equation.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- **[A Message to Garcia and Your Career](#)**
- **[Are You a Critic?](#)**
- **[Sick Crows, Your Attitude and Being on the Winning Team](#)**
- **[See Your Job and the World from the Bright Side and Not the Dark Side](#)**

2. If You Spend Time with Negative People, Your Firm Will Assume You Have a Negative Attitude Too

When I was in high school, one of my best friends was suspended for a semester. He had upset



a teacher in the school greatly by his actions. For reasons that are unclear to me to this day, this same teacher sought me out and told me he really wanted to write my college recommendations for me. I agreed, thinking he had good intentions. He wrote me the worst possible recommendation he could. He also did the same thing to another one of my friends.

There was a bit of scandal because a few of the schools that I applied to ended up contacting my high school and asking why this teacher had written such remarks. I was called into a meeting where the teacher apologized to me and stated that he had been angry with my friend, and assumed that I was also a troublemaker. My school ended up fixing the situation. They had several teachers write glowing recommendations to the schools in which they pointed out why the one teacher had written such negative remarks.

You will not always get this lucky in your career. In most cases, if you spend time with negative people, your firm will also assume you are negative. Partners know the people who are gossiping and creating problems. They assume that if you are associating with these people, you too must be negative.

Additionally, surrounding yourself with positive people has huge benefits. You are generally going to be happier, do better in your job and enjoy yourself more when you are around positive people.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Surround Yourself With Positive People**](#)
- [**Plant Yourself in Good Soil**](#)
- [**Appreciate Those Around You**](#)
- [**Self-Image**](#)
- [**The People You Work and Associate with Can Either Make or Break You**](#)

3. Getting Promoted and Moving Up Often Depends on Doing Unassigned Work

Many people are under the impression that if they come to work every day and do their job, they will get promoted and do well. While it is important that you are consistent in your job, you also always need to do more than is asked of you. When you complete each assignment, you should do it as well as you possibly can. The more value you add and the more you help, the more you will succeed.



I run a legal recruiting firm. As part of my job, I have recruiters write various articles every few months. The point of these articles is for the recruiters to share what they know with attorneys, so the attorneys can find jobs they like. In the history of doing this, I have always noticed something: *The people who put the most effort and time into writing the articles are the ones who also experience the most success (i.e., placements) as recruiters.* The recruiters who do the best are the ones who write articles even when they are not asked.

I believe the people who put forth the most effort and are willing to take the most initiative do this in all aspects of their work. The extra effort they put in makes them stand out and be more effective.

In most law firms, there is always additional work that can be done. Choosing and completing these extra projects is something that can make a gigantic difference in your career. Taking on extra work shows your superiors and others in the firm that you care and can be trusted.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [Why You Should Work Weekends and Holidays](#)
- [Try as Hard as You Can](#)
- [Consistency Is More Important Than Brilliance](#)
- [Production Assistants and Assessing Your Employer's Needs](#)
- [Carpenters, Fancy French Restaurants, Backstage, and Your Career](#)

4. The People Who Leave Your Law Firm Are an Important Network

Many people think that once someone leaves their law firm there is no need to stay in touch with the person. This could not be further from the truth. The people who leave your firm will often be going to similar firms or [in-house jobs](#). If things change inside your existing firm or you find yourself looking for a job down the road, these people will often be able to help you. Staying in touch with people who have left your firm is something that can provide you with numerous opportunities throughout your career.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [Finding Jobs Through Contacts](#)



- **You Need Connections to Make the Most of Your Career**
- **Meg Whitman's Greatest Achievement, Networks and Your Career**
- **Informal Networks and Referrals**

5. Never Act Entitled

One of the biggest problems that lawyers experience in the workforce is having a sense of entitlement that a firm should be happy to have them, that their job will always be there tomorrow and that they should always get raises, larger offices, and promotions.

This is an incredibly dangerous attitude; I have seen it crater the careers of numerous attorneys—especially younger lawyers.

In general, partners look down on associates who act entitled. Before certain rewards come, you need to work hard and prove yourself. If you do not put in the time, you will not get the respect of your fellow associates, partners and clients, and rewards will be difficult to come by.

Titles, offices, and raises are generally earned with time. Your job in any firm or organization should be focused on your employer's and your clients' needs. It is not about you. You are hired to serve others. The more effectively you serve your clients and fellow attorneys, the better off you will be. The most-respected and best attorneys are those who come to work ready to do the job.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- **Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant**
- **Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome**
- **You Will Succeed in Your Job Search and Life When You Are Concerned with Giving and Not Taking**

6. Never Act Too Stressed at Work

If you act extremely stressed by your job, tell everyone how hard you work and make a big deal out of how much you do, it will not help you. Instead of thinking how hard you work, your superiors will think you have reached the limit of how much responsibility you can handle. This will hurt you.



When I was working in large law firms, I sometimes worked over 100 hours straight without sleep. I would work through the night. The next morning, I would take phone calls and go into meetings as if nothing had happened. I was by no means the only attorney who did this. When you work really long hours, or are under a lot of stress, you are expected to keep your cool. If you are complaining and making a big deal out of it, people will simply avoid giving you important assignments in the future.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**The Importance of Disconnecting from Your Work**](#)
- [**The Benefits of Being Unemployed and Doing Nothing**](#)
- [**How to Manage Crisis**](#)
- [**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**](#)
- [**What Can I Do to Deal with the Stress of Practicing Law?**](#)

7. Always Try to Accept Invitations to Spend Time Outside of Work with Colleagues

While it is never a good idea to let coworkers into your personal life too much, it is important that you make a habit of accepting invitations to spend time outside of work with your fellow associates and partners.

Lawyers generally want to work with other lawyers they like and feel connected to. It's important to be as connected with others at work as you can. If your fellow lawyers feel an affinity to you, they will be more likely to help you, give you the best assignments and promote you. At most law firms, some sort of favoritism is operating. It is important that you be on the right side of this.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Why You Should Never Miss a Company Holiday Party or Invitation to Your Boss's Home**](#)
- [**You Need to Be Connected with Others at Work**](#)
- [**Relationships, Commodities and Making Connections**](#)
- [**Take Small Actions and Meet Others**](#)



8. You Should Put Away Your Cell Phone in the Office

Many lawyers spend incredible amounts of time messing around with their cell phones in meetings and at the office. In fact, in many firms, there are people who appear to spend more time playing with their phones than working.

Years ago, I knew a guy who owned a telephone answering service. I expected him to tell me that the service got busier when the economy was good instead of when it was bad. At the time, we were in the middle of a recession, and I asked him how his business was doing.

“My business actually increases during recessions because bosses see their receptionists playing with their cell phones all day, and it is the first place they see they can save money. They let their secretaries go and use my service to answer their phones instead.”

When you are there to work, you are there to work. Attorneys who appear focused and on top of their jobs are the first ones to get promoted and the last to be let go. When you are playing with your cell phone in the office, it sends the message to the partners that something else besides work is important to you.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Why Aren't There More American Day Laborers, Doctors, Engineers and Textile Workers?**](#)
- [**The Importance of Productivity, Focus and Measurement**](#)
- [**Add Value at Every Turn**](#)
- [**Parking Benefits and Falling in Love with Your Job**](#)
- [**Play Each Day Like It Is Your Most Important**](#)

9. Your Law Firm May Be Monitoring Your Computer and Phones

While I wish people had better things to do with their time, many law firms monitor the computers of their employees. In the recruiting world, I have actually seen lawyers fired for personal things they said on the phone or in emails sent from their work computers.



In addition, many IT people inside of law firms amuse themselves by learning everyone's secrets by reading their emails on an ongoing basis. I was out to dinner once with an IT person, and he asked my advice about whether it would be illegal to blackmail his former boss about having an affair that he had learned about by reading his boss's emails.

Years ago, I was working with a group of partners at a major law firm who were interested in switching firms. The firm they were at learned they were considering leaving because they had installed screen recording software on their computers. Despite the fact the partners were communicating with one another using their personal email addresses, the law firm was recording their screens and was able to read everything.

While it may be tempting to communicate with others from your work computer or phone, it's never a good idea.

10. Always Help Others Even If There Is Not a Direct Benefit to You

I have never understood why so many people go into law firms with the idea that they are in competition with everyone around them. They withhold information, do not tell people when they are doing something wrong and play a variety of games. It takes very little effort to give referrals, answer questions and assist others.

When you help others and get a reputation for doing so, you will also become well-liked by the attorneys you work with. Being well-liked and getting a reputation for helping others will pay unexpected dividends in your career.

Additionally, if someone at work needs help, it means your firm needs help too. Helping others is simply part of your job and something you should always do.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Self Help Means Helping Others**](#)
- [**Share What You Know**](#)
- [**Being Nice Makes Good Business Sense**](#)
- [**The Importance of Being Well-Liked in Your Job**](#)



- **Get Security By Concentrating on the Needs of Your Employer**

11. Concentrate on Doing the Work You Enjoy and Are Best at, and Avoid the Areas Where You Don't Excel

Most attorneys have certain skills they are better at than others. You should always do the things you are best at and avoid the things that are weaknesses. Some people are good at management. Others are good at following directions. Some people are good with clients. Others are not. Regardless of your skill set, you will generally do better throughout your legal career if you focus on doing the tasks you are most skilled at and get the most positive reinforcement from.

I like to give the following example: Imagine Mike Tyson decided he wanted to be a neurosurgeon. While I do not know everything there is to know about Mike Tyson's intelligence, I think this would probably be a real uphill battle for him. Tyson is skilled as a boxer. He is far more likely to experience fame, admiration and financial success through being a boxer than anything else.

You need to do the work you are good at and have the most talent for. If your current legal employer isn't utilizing your strengths, it may make sense to switch jobs. Generally you will only advance when you are able to do the work you're best at.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- **[Try to Only Work in the Best Target Audiences for Your Skills](#)**
- **[Love What You Do](#)**
- **[Love Your Work and the People Who Give You Work](#)**
- **[You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)**

12. It Is Important to Take Care of Yourself and Look and Act Healthy

Very few people will tell you this, but how you look at work (your weight, health and dress) will have a direct impact on your success in any legal career. It sounds a bit cruel, and it sort of is, but it is true. For the most part, the most successful people at law firms and elsewhere are also the fittest. They take care of their bodies and look the best they can.



I am sometimes invited to CEO roundtables and other events. When I go to these events, I am always amazed that most of these men are very fit, slim and healthy-looking. For better or worse, I believe many people are advanced at least in part based on their fitness.

I spend my days looking at resumes. I often see attorney resumes that do not make a lot of sense. Someone may have gone to a less-than-stellar law school and not done that well there. Yet, they have had a succession of jobs at the very top law firms in the country. I would estimate that 95% of the time when I view these resumes, the person turns out to be extremely attractive and someone who has made a real effort to take care of themselves.

No one is going to tell you that being overweight and not taking care of yourself will hold you back, but it will. You need to take the best care of yourself as you can. Almost all of the most successful people do.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Supermodels, Your Body and Your Mind**](#)
- [**Weight Loss, Security Guards, Hard Work and Your Career**](#)
- [**Use Existing Resources**](#)

13. Your Career with a Given Law Firm May Depend on Having a Good Mentor There

In many law firms, you may have a very difficult time advancing unless you have a strong mentor. Mentors serve multiple purposes. They will lobby on your behalf, point you in the right direction, prevent you from going the wrong direction and can assist you in many other useful ways.

When you watch and observe your work environment, you may discover advancement is extremely difficult without a mentor. If you are in an environment where you cannot find a mentor, it often makes sense to leave.

When I was practicing law, I saw numerous attorneys who were advanced and made partner with the assistance of a good mentor. Similarly, I saw many other attorneys who were severely held back by not having good mentors. You should do everything you can to find a strong mentor.



See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**The Importance of and How to Find a Mentor**](#)
- [**Mentors, Attachment Disorders and Your Career**](#)

14. If You Behave Poorly Outside of Work, Your Superiors Will Generally Learn About It

Many lawyers think they can behave poorly outside of work and it will not affect their jobs. This could not be further from the truth. Your personal behavior outside of work, if it is offensive enough, will generally get back to your law firm and affect you at work.

I have seen many attorneys lose jobs because of their behavior outside of the office. In some cases, this behavior was not even that bad but ended up upsetting the wrong people. You are a representative of your firm when you're at work and when you're not. If you behave in a way that reflects poorly on your firm, it can affect your job negatively.

See the following article to read more about this topic:

- [**Protect Your Reputation at All Costs**](#)

15. Ask Your Superiors What They Think You Need to Improve at and Perfect It

Most lawyers are not great at every aspect of their jobs. You likely have some weaknesses. There is nothing wrong with having weaknesses. Everyone has them. If you have certain weaknesses, the smartest thing you can do is fix them.

When you address your weaknesses, you show your legal employer that you are interested in improving and taking your job seriously. Firms want people who are interested in improving and take their work extremely seriously.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Never Stop Growing**](#)
- [**Making Others Aware of Your Weaknesses Can Make You More Trusted**](#)
- [**Practice Makes Perfect**](#)



16. If You Are Not Engaged in Your Job, You Should Find a New One

You need to enjoy your work and what you are doing. If you do not enjoy your job, odds are good you are also not performing well. If you do not enjoy it, find a new job doing something you really like.

While many attorneys do their best at work even if they do not enjoy their jobs, you are rarely going to get ahead or have any sort of success doing work you do not like or enjoy. Lawyers have successful careers doing all sorts of things that no one would ever expect. You are going to be far better off doing something you really, truly enjoy rather than working at a job you are not happy doing.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing**](#)
- [**Never Abandon Work You Are Exceptional At**](#)
- [**8 Reasons You Are Not Motivated and Why You Need to Stay Motivated No Matter What**](#)

17. If Your Law Firm Is Going Downhill, You Should Find a New Job

There are certain firms and organizations that are simply in trouble. Perhaps they have been mismanaged, they're too heavily invested in a practice area that is shrinking, or they're going out of business for one reason or another. You need to remember that other firms out there are still growing and moving forward.

To protect your legal career, invest your time and effort with legal employers who are growing (and not retreating). There are generally more opportunities (and there is more job security) with employers who are growing than those that are shrinking.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Choose an Employer Marching Forward**](#)
- [**Plant Yourself in Good Soil**](#)
- [**Avoid Sophisticated and Saturated Markets**](#)

18. You Are Not a Fit for the Culture

You should always try and work in an environment where you fit in. If you do not fit in, you may



find yourself denied promotions and held back from advancement opportunities. Conversely, when you do fit in, you could be advanced up the chain quite effortlessly.

It is extremely important that you go to work inside of firms where you fit in. If you feel like you do not fit in with your firm, you should find a firm or organization where you do.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Organization Culture Matters Most**](#)
- [**The Importance of Fitting In**](#)
- [**Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About**](#)

19. You Need to Always Be Improving

You can literally do whatever you want in your life and become the person you want to be if you never stop improving. The idea of constant improvement, of always getting better and better at what you do, is something that can change your life.

There are countless people out there who are very successful, yet they have refused to stop where they are. They continue to learn and improve and grow. You need to get better and better at what you do. If you have lost a job, make sure your next job is an even better one. You own your future. The past has already happened, but you can make the future whatever you want it to be. Who are you going to be? What are you going to achieve?

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Never Stop Improving: The Secret to Career and Life Success**](#)
- [**The Dangers of Complacency**](#)

20. Face Time Is Very Important

While most legal employers will not tell you this, face time is very important. When you are hired to work somewhere, you are being hired to be part of a group that works together. Your presence is important to the employer, regardless of whether they say so. When you are in the office, you are available for questions, collaborating with others and working within a team.



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Many legal employers will also assume you might be “goofing off” or not being focused if they do not see you in the office. In most jobs, if you want to get ahead, you’ll generally be better off if you spend much more time in the office than the people you are working for.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Are You Here? The Importance of Being Present in Your Job and Job Search**](#)
- [**Be Committed to What You Do**](#)
- [**Show Up on Time**](#)
- [**Consistency Is More Important Than Brilliance**](#)

21. You Are a Product

Very few lawyers realize they are “products” that are bought, sold and used by employers. Because you are a product, you should always realize that you need to be the best possible product in the legal market. You are expendable and can generally be replaced. I have seen many firms let hordes of attorneys go because they wanted to replace them with better people.

You should always be aware that you can be replaced. You need to do your absolute best to stay on top of your job. You should never get complacent. If you do, your firm may choose to replace you.

See the following articles to read more about this topic:

- [**Your Job Search Is a Marketing Operation and You Are the Product**](#)
- [**You Need to Be Relevant to Your Employer**](#)
- [**Treating Your Career Like a Small Business**](#)

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