



Article of the Week from Harrison Barnes

Why an Attorney Should Never Give Up after Being Rejected from a Few (or Many) Law Firms

Summary: *Never let your ego get in the way of your legal career. You need to learn how to not take rejection personally in your legal job search to be successful.*

When you hear about the histories of people who are household names in the entertainment industry, you quickly learn that the ones who succeed are resilient and do not give up even in the face of rejection and disappointment. Attorneys can learn something from this type of determination because just like entertainers, attorneys also have to endure rejection and disappointment during their careers and job searches.

Very few attorneys are prepared for the amount of rejection that often comes along with finding the right job—just as most aspiring actors are not prepared for the amount of rejection it takes to make it in Hollywood. This is the reason that the majority of actors never succeed and it is also the reason the majority of attorneys never reach their full potential: Both simply cannot take any more rejection.

But the good news is that there is light at the end of the tunnel for those who persevere in the face of rejection and refuse to let their egos get in the way of ultimate success and happiness. I've been helping attorneys get jobs for my entire career and I know that the quality that separates successful attorneys from unsuccessful ones is persistence. High-achievers simply do not give up!

Why the Road to Becoming a Successful Actor is Like the Road to Becoming a Successful Attorney

The road to becoming a successful actor is filled with relentless rejection. Most actors and actresses who become successful go on hundreds of auditions before they land even a small, inconsequential part. In between all of this, they are waiting tables, taking acting lessons, working on their voice, their body, their wardrobe, their appearance and more. An aspiring actor may drive two hours to an audition, wait an hour in a waiting room, read a few lines for thirty seconds and



then be shown the door. An actor may travel to another city only to be told “no” and then get up the next day and do the same thing again.

Over and over they are rejected and they just keep coming back for more. The ones who succeed are generally the ones who keep trying and do not give up. They do not take it personally, and when they fail at something, they just get up and keep going. They may be rejected over 1,000 times before they get even a small break—and then they may be rejected 500 times again. Those who succeed do not let their egos get in the way of everything and they just realize they are not right for the job. It is like this with being an attorney as well: The ones who make it never stop going after jobs because they believe in themselves and know if they keep trying they are going to succeed.

- Just about every famous star you have ever heard of got rejected hundreds of times before anything opened up. They likely spent years getting rejected and just kept going.
- Just about every actor and actress you have not heard of let their egos get in the way and after several rejections—or just a few—ended up giving up. They did not have the strength to continue and felt that the rejection was just too much.
- Just about every attorney who could have been something but fizzled out probably gave up because he or she got too many rejections.
- See [Why the Best Actors and Attorneys Are Exactly Alike](#) for more information.

Why You Must Not Take Rejection Personally or Let Your Ego Get in the Way

The biggest mistake that attorneys make in their careers is letting their egos get in the way and then giving up—due to not succeeding in their job search right away, due to a bad experience, or something similar. When I represent candidates I never give up on them and they always succeed in the long run—more often than not, though, people give up on themselves. You should never give up on yourself.

When I start representing a candidate I do so because I believe in that candidate and am in it for the long haul. I work with my candidates, fine tune them with feedback, and keep representing them as long as it takes for them to find the right home. I believe in the people I work with and it is important that you believe in yourself as well. You should never give up on yourself because of



a few, or even a bunch of rejections. The rejections have nothing to do with you. If you believe in your worth as an attorney and keep moving forward it is only a matter of time before you will land in the right place. The key is not to throw in the towel before you get there.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Never Give Up](#)**
- **[Frustration, Rejection, Sylvester Stallone, and Rocky](#)**

Attorneys have very sensitive egos and they get into emotional trouble when they let their egos get all tied up with the job search process. This is what you need to remember when you embark on a job search:

- Your ego has nothing to do with it: You are a “tool” and “commodity” for a law firm seeking a certain tool to do work.
- Hiring decisions are driven by external market forces that have nothing to do with you.
- Whether or not any particular firm gives you an offer or an interview has nothing to do with your actual worth and it should have nothing to do with how you feel about yourself.
- Your feelings about your self-worth should be completely independent of whether or not you are having success in your job search.

If you are a well-rounded attorney coming out of a good law school at the right time and searching in the right market, you may get a strong sense of self-worth early in your career as law firms jump at you. But this can change very quickly:

- You are marketable to firms your first five years out of law school—if you are in a hot practice area.
- If your practice area turns “cold,” you may not be marketable virtually anywhere for a period of time.
- Beyond five years out, unless you are in a hot practice area, you are generally not going to be all that marketable without substantial portable business.

If you are feeling down because you have suffered a slew of rejections, the thing to remember is



that it is the market's fault and not yours. Whatever you do, do not blame yourself, because it is not your fault. Your ego should not be dependent upon a complex legal market that is controlled by an unknown number of market forces not under your control. An actor or actress who finds success knows that all he or she needs is to find the "right part" and it is the same for you. If you find the right part you will succeed. You cannot under any circumstances give up.

- **See [Why Every Attorney Needs to Apply to a Lot of Places \(and Not Give Up\) When Rejected](#) for more information.**

Why You Should Follow the Work and Not Your Ego

I know some professional actors who are not famous. They go all over the world to get work. They are in plays in New York, commercials in Canada, movies in England—it does not matter. They go where the work is and they try out for who knows how many parts until they get something. Professional actors do not get psyched out or give up when something does not work out, when they lose a part, or when they audition and people do not jump at them. They simply try something else (wherever it is). It is not about them and their egos and has more to do with finding the right part. The ones who succeed know that the harder you try the more likely you are to succeed.

A problem that many attorneys (especially male attorneys, it seems) have is that their egos are too closely wrapped up in how they are perceived by the market. When the market does not appreciate them or give them the positive feedback they desire, they become very depressed and often give up. They stop searching for a job, change careers and go through all sorts of life changes that are often unnecessary but are being created by the needs of their egos.

How the Attorney Ego Influences the Attorney Job Search Process

Attorneys often have mental images of who they are based on how they view themselves due to their tribal (the people they work with, went to school with, and family expectations), cultural (what is valued in the culture) and personal conditioning (what success means to them)—this is their ego. The ego means different things to different people, of course, but here I mean the attorney's identity and "artificial self" that has been created by a series of accomplishments, praises, significance, being better (or lesser) than others and how the attorney perceives himself or herself in relation to others.



Attorneys (more so than most people) have a need to feel significant, valued, sought out and worthy of others' praise and they are more likely to base these feelings on their sense of professional accomplishment than other factors. When attorneys start overly emphasizing their egos for how they feel about themselves, they are basing their self-worth on a legal market that will generally disappoint them. An attorney's ego will eventually be disappointed when it cannot live up to what it needs, and then the attorney starts to feel separated from others. Attorneys start to feel conflicted inside about who they are and even start viewing the legal market suspiciously—because it is no longer validating them. When an attorney feels he or she is not validated by the market, the attorney may do something else completely, go off the rails, suffer massive depression and become very confused about life and the attorney's place in it.

- See **Do Not Be Controlled By Your Need to Feel Significant** for more information.

One of the more interesting observations I have experienced in my career is this: ***An attorney who went to a lower ranked law school and starts out practicing law in a smaller market is much more likely to be practicing law five or more years later than an attorney who went to a great law school and starts out in a major market, working in a major law firm.***

In large markets like New York City, attorneys have a profound knowledge of where they stand in the pecking order in terms of the prestige of the firm they work in, the law schools of the attorneys they are practicing with and the competitiveness of the jobs they are doing. New York City—which is the epitome of capitalism more so than other markets—also creates an intense ego-centered existence where attorneys and others judge themselves based on criteria that are all primarily exterior to who the attorneys are. In a market where the ego is overly emphasized and people are constantly aware of exteriors, attorneys leave and do something completely different where they can protect their egos' needs to feel significant. Attorneys at large New York and big city law firms are often so "ego centered" they do not want to put themselves in a job that would be considered less prestigious and diminish their egos. Paradoxically, the ego is something that prevents an attorney's ongoing success and may even lead to the attorney completely leaving the practice of law when the job market does not validate their egos.

The ego is a defining and ever-present companion in every job search, including partners, associates and even law students (who are not even attorneys yet).



- It is common for me to send a partner or associate out on an interview with a major firm. If he or she does not get the job, or invited back for a second interview, he or she often gives up the job search completely, crawls under a rock and continues doing a job he or she hates—or stays unemployed.
- If an attorney does not immediately get interviews with firms after approaching them, the attorney often calls off his or her job search completely, crawls under a rock and continues doing a job he or she hates—or stays unemployed.

Can you imagine if a professional entertainer did this?

Why do attorneys act like this? There are many reasons, but in my experience most attorneys behave like this because their self-worth is too closely tied to how they are perceived in the market and they want to believe they are desirable to everyone (or by firms at a certain level). This is crazy—no one is desirable to everyone—but attorneys need to feel this way because they have so much invested in their sense of self-worth from their jobs.

If attorneys are not perceived and welcomed with open arms they get extremely frustrated. The more your ego and identity are tied to your job the harder time you will have. Getting a position, staying employed, plowing through difficult times and being good at what you do all require persistence. Persistence cannot be dependent upon your ego needing to be massaged and reassured by everyone you come in contact with. Attorneys should be most concerned with finding an environment where they can work for as long as possible, with people they like and be happy doing so.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[You Need to Be in the Right Environment](#)**
- **[Control Your Environment](#)**
- **[Seek Out Environments, Conditions, and People That Create Positive Beliefs in Yourself](#)**
- **[Plant Yourself in Good Soil](#)**

The reasons attorneys get so frustrated and give up are predictable and make sense. Attorneys are generally extremely motivated—so much so that they typically do very well in college, law

school and work the sort of hours that are nonsensical and difficult to believe for the rest of society. Because they are smart, hard-working and successful, most attorneys are used to constant praise – and have gotten it for their whole lives from teachers, parents and society. This constant positive feedback creates an identity of feeling successful, worthy and valued by society. Getting a position with a prestigious law firm is yet another mark in these attorneys' caps and they work the hours and do what is expected of them—and more—to keep the praise and accolades coming.

When an attorney joins a large law firm and starts working there, though, keeping the praise and accolades coming is no easy task. The only way to do that is to generally bill a lot of hours while doing error-free work. This is often a confusing treadmill that has changed the rules of assured success and praise from genetically-assisted high achievement on standardized tests and academic achievement—whether it is in math, science, history, or some other subject. None of this is to say that attorneys do not have to work hard to become attorneys—they do. The difference is that the ego-boosting feedback is much different (and harder to come by) in a law firm than it is scholastically.

- Many attorneys give up when they are confronted with these conditions early on because there is simply not enough positive feedback to prime their egos—this is one reason so many attorneys leave large law firms within a few years of starting their jobs.
- Other attorneys decide that they will work hard for the ultimate reward—partnership—and continue on this treadmill; however, this is only possible as long as market forces and the economy cooperate—at the attorney's firm and also outside of the attorney's firm.
- If the work slows down then everything is at risk for both partners (especially service partners) and associates.
- For many attorneys, the only verification they have that they “matter” and are doing well often comes from the “brand name” and “prestige level” of the law firm they are with. They enter a vicious process where they join firms based on this and nothing more—regardless of their happiness level.

It is insane, but there are so many market forces operating on a macro and micro level on the careers of attorneys that survival is extremely difficult, especially in large law firms. This is one reason why it is harmful for attorneys to tie their egos to their jobs and the reception they receive in the market.



Lately, I have been working with young, motivated counsel level attorneys in major New York City law firms. These counsel level attorneys have typically risen through the ranks and survived and been promoted again and again without a lot of—or any—business. These attorneys are exceptional attorneys and the market rewards them. Most of these attorneys may be in their mid 30s to early 40s and making \$500,000 to \$700,000 a year in major firms. Many of them are depressed because they feel that there is no upward mobility for them and they know they will never make partner in their firms. But there is no reason to be depressed:

“How many attorneys were in your class when you joined your first firm?” I might ask them.

“About 80.”

“Are any of them still practicing in major law firms?”

“No.”

Staying employed in any large law firm for an extended period of time is an astonishing achievement. Making counsel in a major law firm with no business is an astonishing achievement. There are so many forces operating in the law firm world that staying employed in a major law firm is amazing and just having a job is a cause for pride and gratitude. Someone who is *of counsel* in a major New York City firm would without a doubt generally be a full equity partner at a law firm in most smaller markets—the level and quality of work they need to do in order to get to that level is exceptional in most cases.

Because they have worked so hard academically and professionally, a great deal of how attorneys feel about themselves comes through their success and performance at work instead of from the sorts of things that most of society gets positive reinforcement from such as family, friends, hobbies, religion and similar pursuits.

When I joined my first law firm out of law school, I was amazed that just about every male partner in the law firm had been divorced at least once. “How is this possible?” I asked myself when I was still very green. It is not only possible, it is to be expected when your entire life is wrapped in your work and it is all you think about and you are completely focused on it—and that was what this firm was about. The last thing many very motivated attorneys want to do is go home and spend time nurturing a relationship—they are tired, stressed out and need to get back to work!



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

Because attorneys put so much of themselves into their jobs and their entire identities become wrapped up in their jobs, they are crushed when things do not go as expected. They simply cannot believe that after all they have done, after all they have given, after all they have suffered personally (divorce, health problems, substance abuse and more) that they are not getting a better reception in the market. They find it terrifying and frustrating. They are confused and upset and rightly so.

I have similar conversations with attorneys all over the country when their practice areas are not doing well due to various market forces:

- Gas prices may be low and affecting the overall health of many practice areas in the Texas legal market.
- The stock market may have crashed and there are no [corporate jobs in Silicon Valley](#) or [New York City](#).
- There may be new a new statute that is affecting intellectual property litigation that has slowed down the filing of new cases and law firms may be hemorrhaging intellectual property litigators.

Whatever the reason, various practice areas simply “stop in their tracks” at certain points in time. This has a profound effect on the attorney’s marketability and it is not the attorney’s fault and it should have nothing to do with their egos.

- **See [Why Every Big Firm Practice Area Eventually “Self-Destructs” at Least Once Every Eight Years](#) for more information.**

What do actors do when a play closes? They look for another acting job—and they generally do not care where it is. They will go to England, Canada, wherever. Can you imagine if a professional actor like [Sean Penn](#) suddenly declared he would only work in Chicago? He would severely limit his options and might have a difficult time getting movie deals because not a ton of films are done there. But this is exactly what many attorneys do when they lose jobs—whether it is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or New York. They decide that the jobs should come to them and if there are no jobs in their markets they should not be expected to move.



Alternatively, the attorney may be 8+ years out of law school—with no business—and there may be few jobs in the city for the attorney with that level of experience because the law firms do not have enough work for more senior attorneys. The attorney has likely been at a prestigious law firm working ridiculous hours for years with very little social life and has been completely dedicated to his or her job. The attorney wants to believe that all of this work and hustle has been for something.

When I explain to these attorneys that the markets they are in (with large law firms) have “seized up” and there are not many jobs right now they become very upset. It is not uncommon for these attorneys to start crying. They may have only looked at a few law firms with openings, but the competition for openings in a “seized up” market is incredibly fierce. Attorneys who have put so much of themselves into their jobs and see nothing out there become incredibly despondent and upset. I have these sorts of conversations regularly and almost daily with attorneys who call into our firm.

But take heart – here are the facts:

- It is never the attorney’s fault—it is generally outside forces.
- It should not affect the attorney’s self-esteem—it is the market.
- It is fixable—the attorney generally needs to look at different markets or firms (which always works).

What is depressing, of course, is to realize that the effort you have put into your job and the work you are doing—to learn a skill, to help a firm and its clients—has not given you much “capital” that can translate into something elsewhere. If everything dries up where you are, or you want to leave, then you are going to have a difficult time. You are either “stuck” or, as is often the case, unemployable at the same level in the same city.

Yesterday I was perusing the profile of a litigator who had been laid off from a major Boston firm and had been doing nothing for the past six months or so. He told me that about forty other litigators had been let go from the same firm over a period of months when a bunch of mortgage-related work they were doing for [Bank of America](#) started drying up. The firm was very prestigious and the attorneys had all come from the best law schools and had stellar pedigrees. What I found amazed me:



- A substantial majority of the attorneys were no longer practicing law—one became a self-styled “professional traveler,” some took administrative roles inside of law firms, one was selling insurance and one was even a “career counselor” inside of a law school (presumably to warn attorneys about the dangers of practicing law).
- A few of the attorneys had opened their own law offices doing small matters like DUIs, divorces and other small matters.

There is nothing wrong with any of these career choices—and many may be superior lifestyle choices to practicing law; however, what I do not like is to see people make these choices for the wrong reasons, such as when they:

- Go to college and get some sort of ridiculously high grade point average,
- Go to a top 10 law school and do very well there (or other law school and are in the top 5 students in their class),
- Have the interviewing skills and charisma to get hired by a major law firm and then go work there ridiculously hard for five years, and then
- Give up completely when they lose a job.

In fact, the backgrounds of these attorneys may not have made them employable at a major firm with no work in Boston; however, in other areas of the United States they certainly would have been employable. This is the problem when attorneys connect their ego to their job searches—they give up when things do not go their way. *If I was working with any of these attorneys I could have found them a job in smaller firm, or in a large firm in a different location. I always find people something when their ego is not involved.*

If their egos get involved, though, they give up and do something else. They do something that protects their egos and isolates them from the constant rejection that is coming their way. That rejection, though, is always driven by market forces the same way that a lack of rejection and success is driven by market forces.

Market forces are extreme. In a good market all sorts of people are marketable. For example, at this point in time real estate and corporate are very marketable practice areas and these attorneys are getting jobs:



- I recently placed a sixth-year real estate attorney in a position paying \$300,000 a year in a state the attorney was not even licensed in even though he had been unemployed for the past five years doing odd jobs paying \$20 an hour.
- I've recently placed countless corporate attorneys from [in-house jobs](#) with 10+ years of experience in major firms because the corporate market has been very good.
- Incredibly, I've been able to place several patent attorneys (electrical engineers) who have been out of school for several years without passing/or taking the bar exam in major law firms because the market has also been very good.

The market can work for you, or it can work against you, and your ego should have nothing to do with any of it.

One of the more grounded people I have ever met once explained to me why he believed he was so successful: "Everyone always involves their ego in everything and thinks it is all about them. It is never about them."

All day, every day, this man who has taken his ego out of everything deals with people who insult him, blow him off, argue with him and play all sorts of games with him. He takes himself out of the equation and realizes that getting himself personally wrapped up and involved in everything does him no good because it is not about him. He is in the middle of the market—the jungle—and the forces operating are market forces and do not involve him at all. This particular guy makes over \$20-million a year doing a relatively simple job that does not even require a high school education to do (he sells residential real estate and is the most successful real estate agent in the country).

The problem with a great number of attorneys is that they make the market about them and it has nothing to do with them at all. The market is what it is and you cannot control whether it likes or does not like you. When an attorney is not doing well in the market it is not the attorney's fault and the attorney's ego should not be part of the equation.

Conclusions

The biggest mistake that any attorney can make in his or her job search is tying his or her ego to the process. You simply cannot involve your ego in any job search because your ego has nothing



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to do with it. Rejection is also par for the course. You should never worry about rejection. The worst thing you can do is get upset in the face of rejection and give up. Don't quit! If you want to be a successful attorney take your ego out of it and keep on going. It's only a matter of time until you find the right part.

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