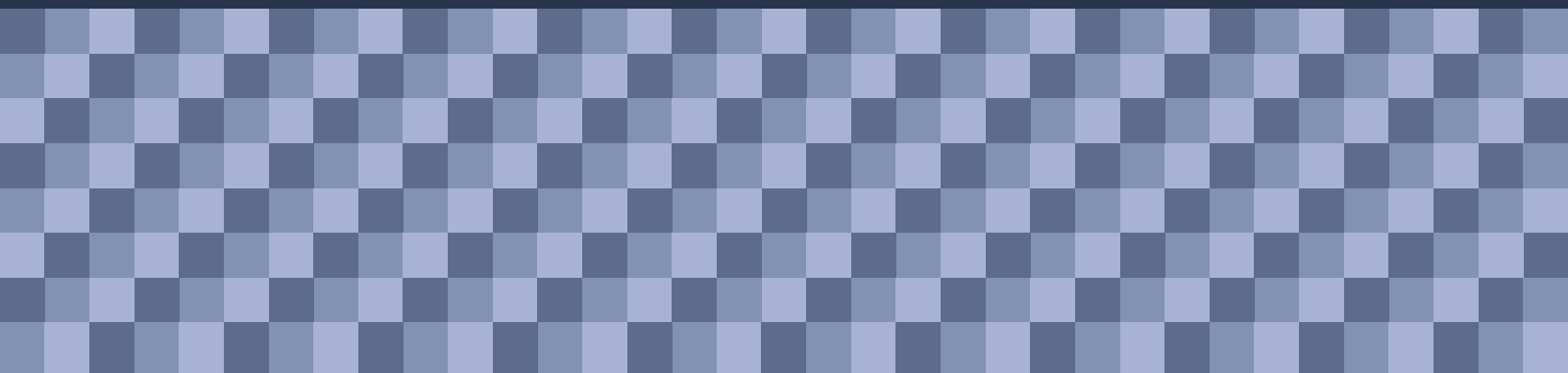


ATTORNEY SEARCH

ARTICLE OF THE WEEK

by Harrison Barnes, CEO of BCG





Why You Should Find Your “Tribe” and Not Just Focus on Money in Making Law Firm Job Decisions

Summary: *Learn how identifying your “tribe” will help you achieve greater career satisfaction and financial security in a law firm.*

As part of my job, I have daily discussions with attorneys at all stages of their careers about what kinds of law firm job offers to accept. I have come to witness attorneys make both good and bad decisions. Sadly, one mistake I have seen attorneys make all too often—and which in the long run ends up overwhelmingly detrimental to them—is placing too great of a focus on money above all else. More often than not, a narrow focus on money destroys careers and even lives.

On the other hand, sometimes I see attorneys make good choices that result in long-term career stability and fulfillment. These attorneys are able to effectuate good outcomes for themselves because they are able to see the “big picture” and how their decisions will play out over time. These attorneys understand the importance of finding their “tribes” within the world of law firms. They realize that joining a firm where they can be part of a tribe will offer far more rewards (including financial rewards) over the long run than simply joining the firm that offers them the biggest short-term salary.

I am not saying that money is irrelevant in making job decisions; that would be ridiculous. But I am saying that it is almost always wiser to place greater weight on the “tribe” factors discussed in this article—of fitting in and of feeling protected—than on salary. Finding your tribe will enable you to feel happier on a daily basis and more fulfilled with your career. It will also often enable you to earn more money over time, or at least enable you to earn a very comfortable income steadily and securely over time.

This is because while some firms (the ones that emphasize money) view attorneys as short-term commodities to be used up and tossed aside when their productivity wanes, other firms (the ones that emphasize the value of the tribe) view attorneys as members of a group in whose careers they must invest for the ultimate good of the group. When a firm views you as a member of its tribe, the firm does not want to toss you aside. In fact, the firm wants to do everything it can to help you thrive and remain productive for years to come.

To maximize your chances of finding career satisfaction and financial security in the legal profession, you should always strive to find your tribe.



The Positive Aspects of a Fulfilling Career

As a starting point, let's consider the many positive aspects of a fulfilling career—any career—not just law:

- Enjoying the work you do on a daily basis
- Caring about and valuing the work you do
- Finding a greater purpose in your career
- Looking forward to getting to the office each day
- Making a contribution to a cause or profession
- Being productive and helping others
- Having job security, advancement and potential
- Liking and respecting the people you work with
- Maintaining your health and sanity
- Earning a good income and comfortable lifestyle
- Having a family and a life outside of work
- Being happy and not feeling threatened all the time

While some of these positive aspects have financial implications, they are not primarily about money. Attorneys make detrimental career choices when they disregard all these other factors and just look at short-term financial gain. If you make your legal career choices with an eye towards finding your tribe, you will generally increase your chances of being able to enjoy all of these many positive aspects of practicing law.

See the following articles for more information:

- [Love What You Do](#)
- [You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)
- [Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution](#)
- [Top 20 Reasons Why There Is No Better Profession Than Practicing Law](#)

The Importance of Finding Your Tribe in Job Selection

The idea of a “tribe” is one I have [discussed before](#). It is rooted in the idea that humans are tribal creatures who want and need to be part of tribes of like-minded people to ensure long-term survival.



There are many firms around the country that are composed of people of different “tribes”—religions, ethnic groups, common socioeconomic backgrounds and so forth. In some cities, particularly in the South, many of the attorneys went to the same high schools. In markets like Los Angeles, there are firms composed of mainly one ethnic or religious group, such as Jews, Mormons and others. Some firms are composed of people with conservative political viewpoints, while others favor liberals. Some firms are composed of people who predominantly went to the same law schools or of people who now live in the same parts of town.

Because humans are tribal animals, you are always going to be better off when you join a law firm that is composed of people from your same “tribe.” Tribes are protective of their members and loyal to them. The firm will need to think very hard if it wants to fire you, or lay you off, because the firm knows that if it does so the other members of the tribe will want to stick up for you and will constantly be reminding each other of how inappropriately you were treated. Tribes protect their own and you want to surround yourself with tribe members every chance that you get—regardless of money issues.

Many law firms maintain a certain level of diversity and most firms have members of various tribes within it. If you are hired by and receive work from someone who goes to your church and socializes with your family, or who went to the same schools you went to and with whom you have bonded, this is an excellent source of insurance and something that is likely to benefit you in your career. You generally want to choose this sort of insurance over money because it is going to be more likely to help you in the long run.

See the following articles for more information:

- **[Seek Out and Work with People Who Share Your Beliefs](#)**
- **[The People You Work and Associate with Can Either Make or Break You](#)**

Finding Your Tribe in Developed Versus Less-Developed Markets

One thing I have noticed is that people are more likely to find their tribes in less developed markets like Sacramento or Detroit than they are in major markets like New York or San Francisco. If you join a major law firm in a market like New York, the odds are you will not be working there after a few years. The firm may merge or consolidate with other firms, or simply dissolve altogether. There will be a high level of attrition and turnover, and very few older partners. People will get fired or suffer from layoffs or just leave on their own. Some attorneys will be lured away for money and others will [go in-house](#), to other law firms or into other careers.

If there is a market slowdown, firms in New York will let droves of attorneys go. These firms are run like well-oiled machines and hire and fire very quickly. The human toll is meaningless to

them; it is all about the money. When you sign up to work for large firms in any major city you are making this tradeoff. When things get tough, and they always do, you will be cast out on the street and have no one to protect you or help shepherd you through. Countless careers come to an end in these major market firms when the market slows. It does not matter if you are a partner or an associate or counsel. When the gravy train stops so does your job—and often your career.

Conversely, if you join one of the firms in a market like Sacramento, things will be far different. Sacramento is not a giant legal market and firms there do not traditionally hire too many people. Because it is a smaller market, the salaries are not competitive with major San Francisco or Palo Alto law firms. Attorneys who go to work at Sacramento firms hunker down and generally plan on staying with the same firm for their entire careers if they can. They aspire to become part of the tribe—and many of them do. There is more loyalty, more emphasis on cooperating with peers, more emphasis on training, and more emphasis on not burning bridges. These firms are structured to help and not hurt their own. They do not over-hire during excellent economies and then lay off a bunch of people when the economy slows down.

Because these law firms protect their own, their partners and associates are typically safe from layoffs during recessions. Many partners are allowed to continue practicing into their late 70s—they are given titles like Of Counsel and others, but they still have a home. They have an office to go to, where they can keep their minds active and where younger members of the tribe can look to them as valued resources and mentors. For the most part, people who join these kinds of firms settle down, start families, buy houses, do not work crazy hours and live pretty normal lives. They might not make major market salaries, but they feel safe, the environment protects them, the cost of living is cheaper, they make good money, and everyone works together to protect one another.

This is how attorneys have long-term careers and stay happy and sane. They find their tribe and stick with it. Meanwhile, other attorneys who look only at the highest salary and highest prestige (often associated with major markets), never see the “big picture” of how being a member of a tribe can be instrumental over the trajectory of an entire career.

The sad reality is that most attorneys never understand this because they are influenced by money to the point of indoctrination; they believe that making the most amount of money is always the best course of action to take. They do not understand the profound tradeoff they make when they exchange security and happiness for the fattest paycheck. Everything comes with a price.

See the following articles for more information:

- [**How Attorneys Choose Law Firms**](#)
- [**How Attorneys Destroy Their Careers by Choosing the Wrong Law Firms**](#)



Money-Driven Firms View Attorneys as Commodities and Not Tribe Members

Law firms that are based on the bonds of money are not, by any stretch of the imagination, “tribes.” These kinds of money-driven firms are autonomous groups of people, bound together for short periods of time by financial goals. Self-interest rules. There is no connection to the group, no loyalty and once the money stops the people leave. If the money slows down, law firm management will let anyone and everyone go in their quest to keep more money for themselves. Families, connection to the community and so forth do not matter; these people are simply out for themselves.

When you join a law firm that is based on money—as opposed to a firm based on shared values and common interests—you are becoming part of an organization where people do not really matter. Associates and partners face profound problems in these kinds of firms because nobody is looking out for them. They are vulnerable to all kinds of threats, including changes in the business and economic climate, inability to hold onto clients, competition for business, political infighting, threats from fellow attorneys, layoffs, not making partner, getting bad performance reviews, demotions and more. Fear and danger pervades their daily lives.

Whether you are an associate or a partner, these kinds of firms fundamentally view you as a commodity and they will throw you away when your usefulness diminishes. This could happen because you have been worked to the bone and have nothing left to give, or because you lost a major client. Unlike tribe members, commodities are fungible and easily replaceable.

- **See [Two Fatal Deficiencies That Prevent 99% of Attorneys from Achieving Greatness](#) for more information.**

Why Being Part of a Tribe Is Useful at Any Point during an Attorney’s Career

Whatever stage of your career you are at—whether you are an associate or a partner or something in between—you should consider tribe factors in making job decisions. Take young associates, for example. Many law students who have the opportunity (top schools, top grades, etc.) to work for top firms in major markets will readily do so. They are unduly impressed by the high salaries and bonuses paid by these firms and fail to appreciate the real costs involved in becoming a commodity in a major market firm. Blinded by money and prestige, these “lucky” law graduates disappear into a bleak, hostile and exhausting world where they have nobody to look out for them, protect them, help advance them or care about them.

I am not exaggerating; I talk to associates in this situation all the time. They enter the profession with all the promise in the world and then find themselves disillusioned and all used up—having faced abuse and hostility at every turn. By the time I talk with them, when they are trying to pick up the pieces of their lives, they have endured inhumane hours, sabotage by other attorneys,

a complete lack of job security and appreciation for their work, and a 24/7 grind permeated by distrust, despair, anger and negativity. Many are addicted to substances (or trying to overcome addiction). They are unhealthy, unhappy and out of touch with people and even with reality. Some never recover and many end up giving up the practice of law altogether.

See the following articles for more information:

- [**25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy \(and What to Do About it\)**](#)
- [**Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young**](#)

At the same time, other young associates (ironically, those not considered fortunate enough to make it into major market firms) found their tribes in less demanding markets and have a totally different experience. They made the best of things and generally crafted relatively happy and healthy lives and careers. They worked hard, developed bonds, honed practice areas, got married, raised families and settled in. They committed to the experience with gratitude and became members of a tribe.

Senior associates and young partners with no business also can benefit from finding their places in a tribe. What these attorneys need more than anything—especially more than an extra \$15,000 or \$25,000 in salary—is consistent access to work over time. These attorneys need to find a place where they are valued and where there are other people (rainmakers) who will take an interest in them and in making sure they have access to work over the long haul. If you are a senior attorney with no book of business, it is imperative that you find a place where people are interested in you and in your long-term potential. These considerations are more important than money.

See the following articles for more information:

- [**Why Attorneys With 5+ Years of Law Firm Experience Are in Serious Trouble \(and Seven Steps they Need to Take to Save Their Legal Careers\)**](#)
- [**Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead**](#)

Even partners with business need to be concerned with finding their tribe. On the whole, partners with business will do better in firms where they are protected and valued as opposed to firms with “den of wolves” atmospheres—where there is a lack of loyalty, where compensation systems can be changed on a whim, and where there is no assurance that the partner will get the resources and cooperation he or she needs to service his or her clients and remain valuable. If you are a partner with business making a career move, you should feel that you are taking your clients to a group of people who will support and value you and the work you bring. You should feel like you are working with a group of people who are there to help you and not just take from you.



See the following articles for more information:

- [**The Top Reasons Why Money Is the Dumbest Thing Any Attorney Should Focus on When Joining a Law Firm**](#)
- [**BCG's Comprehensive Guide for Law Firm Partners: The Must-Have Resource for All Law Firm Partners and Future Partners**](#)

Conclusions

In order to have the most successful and fulfilling career possible, you should generally try to find your tribe. This means finding a place with like-minded individuals who want to protect and advance you. You want to join a firm where you have supportive co-workers and superiors who will give you interesting work, help you generate business, be friendly with your family, be there for you in both up and down times, and make you feel like a part of their own families. When you work at that kind of firm, with a group of like-minded people, you wake up each day feeling confident and good about yourself, your common mission and your prospects.

These qualities are very important and their significance cannot be underestimated. It is important for people to feel valued, protected and safe. Attorneys who work in these kinds of firms enjoy the practice of law, are happier at work and outside of work, look and feel better, are healthier, live longer, and have better and more satisfying careers all-around. They also have far fewer psychological problems than attorneys grinding away at other firms where money is the ultimate and only motivating force.

Attorneys should always factor in "tribe" considerations in making career decisions. Whatever the stage of your legal career, you are more likely to find fulfillment, happiness and long-term financial success if you shift your focus away from money and towards being part of a tribe. You want to make job choices based on where you will be valued, protected, nurtured and allowed to advance and thrive.

[**Contact Harrison**](#)

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