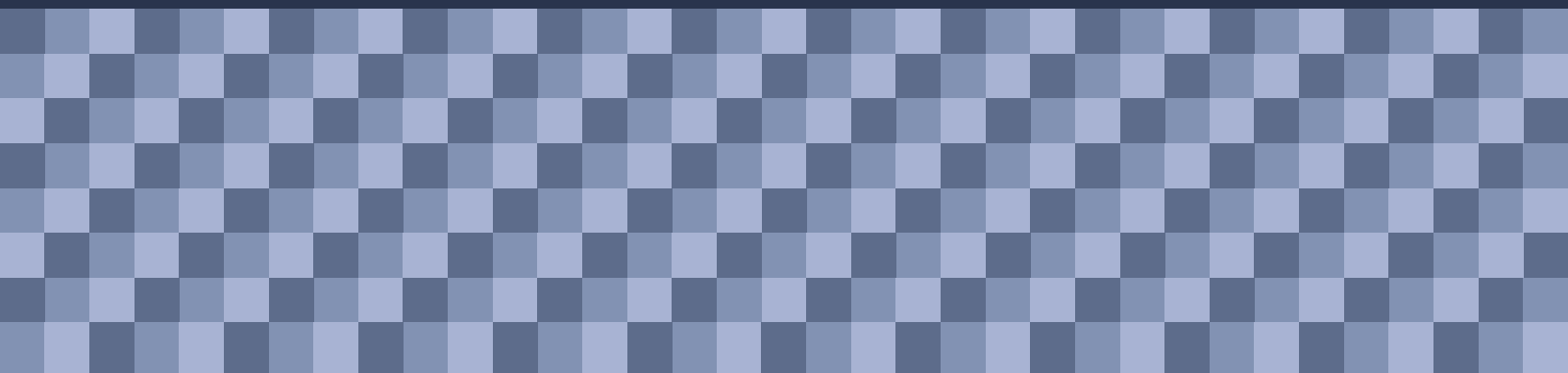




ATTORNEY SEARCH

ARTICLE OF THE WEEK

by Harrison Barnes, CEO of BCG





The Only Way to Be Happy Practicing Law

Summary: *Although it is often neglected by big law firms, this is the one thing you must focus on if you want to enjoy practicing law.*

For the majority of my career, I have spoken with multiple attorneys each day looking for new jobs. From these conversations, I have noticed a startling pattern: Attorneys who are happy practicing law all have something in common. What they have in common is client contact and a feeling of personal connection to their clients and their work that gives them a sense of satisfaction and control over their careers and lives.

I have conversations with attorneys each day from both large and small firms. When it comes to attorneys from large firms, for the most part they fit into one of five categories. They are attorneys who (1) no longer want to practice law, (2) want to [go in-house](#), (3) are unhappy and palpably miserable, (4) are just going through the motions, or (5) are looking for new positions for no apparent reason at all. These attorneys—often associates and service partners who lack client contact—are not happy.

However, I also have occasion to have conversations with large firm partners with large books of business and lots of client contact. These partners may want to switch firms for one reason or another but they are not unhappy with the practice of law. Unlike the large firm attorneys described above, these partners seem to be happy and to really enjoy their work.

I also speak with attorneys from smaller firms. They may be seeking a new firm for a variety of reasons, but they generally are not unhappy with practicing law. The conversations I have with lawyers from small firms do not revolve around leaving the practice of law, going in-house and so forth. In general, despite not making as much money as their large firm counterparts, attorneys in the smallest law firms are generally happier and the odds of them continuing to commit to the practice of law are generally very good. An attorney who goes to a smaller law firm and works directly with clients ends up sticking with the practice of law.

The only constant that I can find in terms of what makes people more likely than not to be happy practicing law is whether or not they have client contact and work closely with clients. Client contact gives attorneys a sense of personal connection to, and satisfaction with, the work and also gives them a feeling of control over their careers. The closer and more committed an attorney is to a client, the more likely that attorney is to be happy.

- Partners in large law firms with books of business are generally much happier than associates and others because they are working with clients directly.
- Attorneys in smaller law firms are likely to be happy because they are working with clients directly.



- Attorneys with a lot of client contact in larger law firms are far more likely to be happy than those who do not have this contact.

If someone is meant to be an attorney, but is feeling unhappy, a good solution is often to get the attorney into a different work situation where the attorney can start to work directly with clients. I have seen many more lives and careers turned around when an attorney starts getting lots of client contact than I can count. This is the only true solution for most attorneys really becoming successful and liking the practice of law.

For more information on whether someone is meant to be an attorney, please see the following article:

- [**Why You Should \(and Should Not\) Quit the Practice of Law**](#)
- [**Why You Should Quit Practicing Law**](#)
- [**Why Do So Many Attorneys Ask “What’s the Point?”**](#)

The reason client contact is so important is because without it an attorney feels useless. Legal work is fungible—many people can do it and in the abstract it is rather meaningless—but a bond with a client is personal and meaningful. When attorneys bond with clients they have the sense that they are doing something original for someone they understand and who understands them. Because people are driven by having personal bonds, caring for others and feeling connected, when an attorney has a personal bond with a client the attorney ceases to be a faceless drone doing meaningless work behind the scenes.

In addition, the bond with the client gives the attorney a sense of control over his or her life and career. Partners in large law firms with clients are happier and well-adjusted because they are speaking with clients all day. They feel committed to people other than themselves, feel that their clients are reciprocating their care by paying fees, and they therefore feel control over their careers. A partner with lots of clients can always switch firms, as they are not really under the control of anyone.

Unless an attorney has a lot of client contact and feels a genuine sense of control over what happens with those clients, the attorney is likely to become self-absorbed and unduly focused on him or herself. Often such self-absorption turns into negativity. Attorneys in this situation will begin to dwell on things such as:

- how much money they are being paid,
- how much other attorneys are being paid,
- how prestigious their firm is,
- what gossip sites have to say about their firm and others,



- how hard they have to work,
- the nature of the politics in their law office,
- getting another job,
- going in-house,
- not having a good enough title,
- how they appear to others (family, friends and others),
- how they are “treated” by their employer,
- the “quality” of work they receive,
- whether they are billing enough hours,
- whether they can support their family,
- whether they are living up to their idea of success,
- what is wrong about their firm; and,
- more unhealthy topics.

The majority of attorneys are not happy because they have so little client contact and do not feel like active participants in the results their clients get. For these attorneys, the practice of law is about something other than clients. With little client contact and impersonal assignments coming down to them from above, these attorneys are focused on themselves instead of their clients. In fact, if you go into any large law firm and start interviewing attorneys (and I interview attorneys all day long), they almost never talk about their passion for their clients and the law. It is always about them and their negativity and problems. Because they are so disconnected from what practicing law should be all about (helping others), they are unbalanced, neurotic, stressed out, drugged, divorced and unhappy. They feel no control over their work, their jobs and more.

For more information about why attorneys are often unhappy and angry, please see the following articles:

- [**Why Most Attorneys Are Angry**](#)
- [**Why Most Attorneys Are Unhappy**](#)

In many ways, they become like blue-collar worker drones instead of advocates for clients. I use the term “blue collar” because most large law firm associates, counsel, and even service partners share a lot in common with people who work on assembly lines, drive trucks, fix machines and other blue collar-related tasks. The typical blue-collar worker painting a home with a crew of other painters is simply doing the work because he or she knows how to paint and the work pays the bills. These workers do not have any major interest in the subject matter or connection to the structure they are painting. They are doing what they are told, going home at the end of the day, and there is very little connection to the client because they are just doing work. Passion



is completely absent from their work. Just like there is traditional tension between blue-collar workers and management (us versus them), the same tension exists between associates, counsel and service partners and the law firm and its management.

For more information on how the legal profession shares many attributes with blue-collar unions, please see the following article:

- [**Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About**](#)

People who are good at things and excel in the world have a passion for whatever it is they are doing. For attorneys, that passion is always dramatically increased when they have a level of connection to the client, care about the client and feel some level of control over their careers.

For more information about how attorneys need passion, energy and control to succeed and be happy, please see the following articles:

- [**The Similarities between Human Trafficking and Practicing Law: Why Control and Energy Are So Important to Your Life and Career**](#)
- [**Why Do So Many Attorneys Ask “What’s the Point?”**](#)
- [**Why the Best Actors and Attorneys Are Exactly Alike**](#)
- [**Two Fatal Deficiencies That Prevent 99% of Attorneys from Achieving Greatness**](#)

It is not the attorney’s fault that he or she becomes a drone with no passion for the client or the work. This result is to be expected when someone is constantly kept behind the scenes and not given the chance to develop meaningful connections with the work or people he or she is purportedly tasked with assisting. Becoming a drone is the inevitable result of being forced to work on giant matters for nameless and faceless clients.

However, in contrast to alienated and unhappy associates and service partners, partners who work directly with clients are passionate, happy, proud and invested in the work they do.

As a general rule, lawyers can be separated into two camps: Those who truly care about their work and clients and those who are principally focused on themselves, their own needs and their own desires. I would say that the ratio is more or less 50/50, although I cannot know for sure.

- In the largest law firms, the ratio is likely more skewed towards those who do not care about their clients.
- In the smallest law firms, the ratio is skewed far more towards those who do.

Attorneys who have a lot of contact with clients tend to be happier and better attorneys. In

general, attorneys who work in smaller law firms where they have a lot of contact with clients tend to stick with the practice of law and are happier people. Attorneys who are in the largest law firms (where they have little client contact and are working behind the scenes for those who do), tend to be unhappy and looking for an escape—whether it is going in-house or not practicing law at all. Associates in large law firms, counsel and service partners working for others with no client contact are more likely than not to be unhappy.

Please see the following article for more information on the pros and cons of working in different kinds and sizes of law firms:

- **Which Type of Law Firm Is Best for You and Your Career: Main Offices of Large National Firms, Branch Offices of Large National Firms, Midsized Firms, Boutiques, or Newer Fast-Growing Firms?**

The difference between how an attorney feels, behaves, looks and acts when that attorney is connected to clients as opposed to when that attorney is not connected to clients is often profound. I have known countless attorneys who became successful partners in large law firms. The difference in their self-confidence, presence, energy and more as a result of having more client contact was often profound and palpable. I could not believe the difference in the people I was seeing. Attorneys with a lot of client contact are more often than not happy and well-adjusted. They look better and appear more self-confident. They are more committed to the practice of law and being attorneys. They become real attorneys and not unhappy drones.

A typical conversation I might have is with an extremely talented attorney practicing in the Los Angeles office of a New York-based law firm. The attorney might have gone to a top 10-law school and done very well there. The attorney may have spent the past two years working on a huge matter for a partner in New York whom the attorney has never met (except for a few Facetime conversations). The attorney may have never spoken with the client. The attorney sees the best associates at the firm get senior, not make partner and then leave. The attorney realizes the firm represents giant institutional clients and that there is almost no chance that he or she will make partner unless he or she can bring in one of those giant clients. The attorney got as far as he or she did (getting good grades, job offers, etc.) by being in control, but now—in the attorney's current situation—the attorney realizes that he or she has almost no control whatsoever. This attorney is completely lost and out of control and very unhappy. It is almost like the attorney is working in an Orwellian Universe where his or her only contact is with his or her boss, infrequently, on Facetime and where, despite being a highly credentialed “advocate,” he or she has never even met the client he or she is supposedly advocating for.

This is not so unusual and it is very standard for what most attorneys go through in large law firms. Counsel-level attorneys also go through this. Partners without business go through this. Without meaningful client contact, attorneys feel lost, alone and out of control.



Please see the following article for more information about the importance of control in an attorney's career:

- **[The Real Reason Why Most Attorneys' Careers Are Out of Control](#)**

An attorney should be practicing law because the attorney has a passion for it. The attorney should feel invested in his or her work because the attorney cares about his or her clients and is inspired to help them, whether it is to help them solve a problem, get out of a predicament or seek justice in some way. This is what practicing law is all about for attorneys who have a lot of client contact. The passion at the root of practicing law enables the true practitioner to turn from an inward focus to a focus on another person. There is no happiness in worrying about oneself all the time. Happiness comes when you take the focus off of yourself and apply it towards helping others.

Please see the following article for more information about the positive aspects of practicing law:

- **[Top 20 Reasons Why There Is No Better Profession Than Practicing Law](#)**

I know of many attorneys who are very happy practicing law. When you speak with an attorney who is happy practicing law you can pretty quickly tell that the attorney has an intense interest in his or her clients and the work he or she does for them. Happy attorneys talk about their work all the time—at home, to people they have just met, to anyone who cares to listen. Attorneys who think like this can do extremely well in the practice of law and be happy doing it.

In order to command the respect of society, you need to have passion and commitment. People who are just going through the motions are flat, uninteresting and never go anywhere. Nobody respects them. People who are genuinely committed to what they do and take it seriously are the sort of people the world wants and rewards. If you were a client, it would be crystal clear to you that you would want an attorney who would care deeply about you and your matter.

That is the kind of attorney you need to be, and getting clients and having client contact will bring you closer to being that kind of attorney.

Attorneys who are suited to practicing law take great joy in working directly with clients. They are obsessed with getting good outcomes for their clients and do what it takes to make that happen. While there is nothing wrong with attorneys who work behind the scenes, the attorneys who are the happiest always want to have contact with clients. This contact gives them a sense of purpose and control over their careers. They will hire others to work behind the scenes while they are in the spotlight with the clients.



My advice for attorneys who are unhappy in large law firms is always the same: Get into a different work situation that will allow you to get clients and have client contact. You do not need to quit the practice of law—you just need to become a real lawyer again—which means a lawyer with real clients. Take the focus off of you and put it on the clients.

Please see the following articles about why you should focus on others instead of yourself at work:

- [Self-Help Means Helping Others](#)
- [Over Deliver Because It Is Not about You](#)

For many attorneys this can mean moving to a smaller firm, working for the government, or even [going in-house](#) to work directly for a client. In almost all instances when an attorney goes from being unhappy to happy they do so by getting into situations where they feel focused on the client and can bond with the client. For example, if an attorney expects to find happiness in-house, then that attorney is generally going to be much better off going to a small company as opposed to a large company. A small company will offer a better sense of assisting the client directly. Attorneys who are public defenders, prosecutors, solo practitioners and others most often report high levels of happiness with their work because they are in close contact with clients.

The reality is that for attorneys to be happy and successful they need to be “wired” to want to help others. This is so important, in fact, that being motivated to help others should be a requirement of becoming an attorney. Paradoxically, this one characteristic that is so important is something that is not nurtured at the largest and most successful law firms. The attorneys with the most promise and talent often find themselves at the largest law firms where the most important element for their happiness and success as attorneys is absent.

Conclusions

If you want to enjoy practicing law (and are suited for it), you are always going to be happier when you are closer to the client. You need to find an atmosphere where you are working directly with clients and feel control over their destinies and by extension yours. You do not need to switch firms for no reason, go in-house, or quit the practice of law. You need to either get clients or start working directly with them on matters you care about.

Contact Harrison

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