

# The Only 3 Reasons Anyone Should Work in a Large Law Firm

By A. Harrison Barnes

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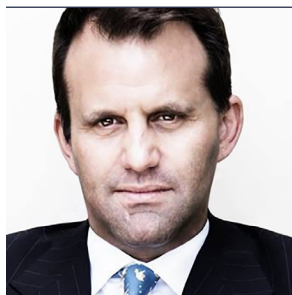
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# *The Only 3 Reasons Anyone Should Work in a Large Law Firm*

By A. Harrison Barnes

## Summary

Why are you working in a large law firm? If it's not for these 3 reasons, you should re-evaluate your situation.

Regardless of the stage of your legal career, there are only three reasons you should work in a law firm:

- (1) To learn a marketable skill that is in demand in the business world and that you can later use to get clients;
- (2) To utilize the law firm as an entrepreneurial platform to solve problems encountered by businesses; and
- (3) To learn how to run a business and sell your services to businesses willing to pay law firm prices for those services.

Working in a large law firm for any other reason is insanity. However—incredibly—most attorneys are working inside of law firms for other reasons.

### **The Wrong Reasons to Work in a Large Law Firm**

Many attorneys work in major law firms for money. Far too many attorneys are under the strange impression that working in a law firm

is a good path to wealth. They apparently do not realize that anyone motivated enough to work the sorts of hours demanded of a law firm associate, counsel, or income partner would make far more money doing something else like being a real estate agent or starting a restaurant. At least in those cases the person would be building something, cultivating a skill, and have returning clients—and not sitting anonymously behind a desk all day, facing the pressure of making mistakes, and worrying constantly about losing his or her job.

Another reason many attorneys work in large law firms is because they think it gives them security. This is another misguided notion. Which is more attractive to you? Begging attorneys in your own firm for work and getting paid what they decide to pay you, or having businesses constantly call you on the phone with “new matters” and give you work to do and to dole out to others?

Many attorneys think they belong in large law firms because they are smart, got good grades in law school, and got hired by

prestigious law firms. They falsely think this assures their long-term success in the law firm world. They are wrong. It is simply not enough to be smart, to show up, to do good work, and have a “job” in a law firm. At the end of several years this nets next to nothing. Attorneys who go this route do not build anything. They may or may not end up with marketable skills, and in the meantime they likely have wasted years of their lives working incredibly hard at something they did not particularly enjoy.

This is insanity. Yet it is unfortunately what most attorneys are doing and it is probably what you are doing too. What do you think will happen to you after six or eight years when your “quality” mind and credentials and no longer so fresh? You will most likely be replaced with someone hungrier and with a fresher quality mind. You will need to go to work somewhere that does not rely on your ability to bring in business for your survival—a corporation, the government, or perhaps you will leave the law completely.

The practice of law is not just about doing the work—and it has never been about this. Lawyers are only supported by the market to the extent they provide marketable skills. If you are looking to be supported by other lawyers and not the market you will generally have an unsatisfying career marked by anxiety, periodic layoffs, begging for work from other attorneys, moving across

the country for a job, and generally always worrying about if you are going to have a job next year. This is a frightening life and something that is the future for attorneys who do not treat themselves like businesses.

### **The Right (and Sane) Way to Approach Working in a Large Law Firm Is as a Means of Building a Business**

***"The only reason you should be working in a large law firm is because you are using it as a means of building a business. If you are not working in a law firm as a means of building a business, you should leave."***

You are a business. Let me say this again loud and clear: **You are a business!**

**The only reason you should be working in a large law firm is because you are using it as a**

**means of building a business. If you are not working in a law firm as a means of building a business, you should leave.**

If you think of your law firm role in any other way you will be in trouble. You can coast for some time, but almost always you will get blown out of the water, lose your job, have an extremely difficult time finding a new one, and never reach your full potential. I realize this may be hard to accept, but it is the truth. Law firms only function when there are people who bring in work. People who do not bring in work are “dead weight” and eventually discarded when the work slows down, or they can find someone younger, hungrier, and cheaper to do the work.

Law firms pay the people who do the work far less than the people who bring in the work.

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People who just “do the work” are fungible commodities who are easily replaceable. People who just “do the work” also must deal with other issues—they must always be on their best behavior, they must not upset anyone important, and they must not make any mistakes. People who just “do the work” are constantly “on probation” and the only way to get off of probation is to bring in work.

- People who bring in work have skills the market wants.
- People who bring in work are in demand from law firms.
- People who bring in work know how to manage clients.
- People who bring in work know how to run a business.

To be truly successful in the practice of law, you must be more than merely “smart” in an academic sense. You must be savvy and have business skills and sensibilities. Some of the most successful lawyers are not the smartest (in the sense of book smarts), did not go to the best law schools, and did not get the best grades or test scores. On the other hand, there are countless attorneys who are not successful or making money who went to the best law schools and on paper appeared to have the best credentials.

Successful attorneys bring in work—it does not matter where they went to law school or how they did there. **Successful attorneys use the large law firm experience as a training ground to become entrepreneurs and build businesses.** Here is what successful lawyers know:

- The law firm will pay you a lot of money while it trains you.
- Once you learn a marketable skill, the law firm will provide you with a platform to market yourself and get business.
- Once you get business, the law firm will hire and fire people to work for you, get you office space, and even give you a percentage of the profits of the entire enterprise.
- If you do not like what the law firm is giving you in terms of support, compensation, or profit percentage, you can simply move your business to one of many other firms that will gladly treat you better.

Law can be an amazing business! This is what the people who become the most successful law firm partners do—they cultivate a skill and then sell it. When you are a successful law firm partner you are running a business. If you learn how to do this, you can in short order—regardless of the stage of your career—make millions of dollars a year in a large law firm and have a lot of career stability.

If you do not learn how to do this, you are playing an incredibly risky game of Russian roulette with your career. You will likely never have much employment stability in a law firm. You will never have much control over your life. You will never feel truly safe buying a home. You will always be on pins and needles with your career and life.

There is no other reason to be working inside a law firm unless you want to have your own business. If you have no interest in learning a skill and starting a business, then you should not spend much time inside of a

law firm. At its heart, a law firm is about the most entrepreneurial business environment imaginable. The real success, stability, power, and money come when you have the ability to sell your skills to high-paying law firm clients. This is what every attorney should aspire to. If you do not aspire to this then you should not be working in a law firm. If this is the case, you should learn as much as you can and get on with your life and find another practice setting or profession.

Most attorneys never succeed inside large law firms because they do not understand these rules:

***"Attorneys should try and get into the very best law firm they can so that they can get the best possible training."***

an even better one. If you are being trained, it is important that you have some continuity to your training. That is why it is advisable to remain with a single firm as long as you can. If you start moving firms (unless it is to a better firm), it will look like you cannot handle whatever environment you are in or are not taking to the training.

Attorneys should try and get into the very best law firm they can so that they can get the best possible training. There is no other reason to work such long hours and put up with so many demands, except as a means to getting the best possible training.

## A. You Need to Learn a Marketable Skill

To be marketable, you need to have a skill that people want and that the market values. Since this first part of your career is so important, you need to get the best possible training. You cannot afford to screw around when getting a skill and you cannot afford to get a skill that is not marketable.

### 1. The Only Point of Going to the Best Firm Is So You Can Get the Best Possible Training

In the first part of your career, you need to be trained by the best possible people and by the best possible firm. This is why you need to go to the best possible law school and do as well as you can there—so you can get an offer from a great firm that can launch your career. Ideally, you should stay at a great law firm during these training years, or move to

If you realize that all of this work, emphasis on detail, dealing with multiple personalities and so forth during your “training years” is not a job but a “gift” then it all begins to make sense. It is the gift that will enable you to create your business down the road and be successful.

The pain and rigor of large law firm training makes attorneys more detail oriented, thorough, and plodding. It makes them better lawyers. Some attorneys never get this gift and they miss out on many opportunities as a result. This is why the quality of the law firm you join is so important.

### 2. You Need to Be Trained in Something Marketable

Since your goal in the law firm world is ultimately to get clients, you generally want

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to be trained in the most marketable skill possible. The more specialized you are, the better off you are always going to be.

In business, the product that is the most marketable generally has some sort of “edge” that makes it different. When you are trained, your product needs to be unique and something that is not readily available in the market. Most attorneys do not have this and throughout the country most attorneys are “generalists” as opposed to “specialists.” Large law firms create “specialists” and this gives you the unique skills that businesses are more likely to pay for. A large business only pays for specialists because specialists know what they are doing, get to the heart of a matter more quickly, and can work more rapidly.

The more unique your specialty, the more likely you are going to be able to find people in the market willing to pay for that specialty. If there are not a lot of people doing the work that you do then you become the most obvious choice. There are tons of litigators, for example, but not a lot of them who went to **Harvard Law School**, were on law review, and did Circuit or Supreme Court Clerkships. There are a lot of general corporate attorneys, but not a lot of attorneys that have an expertise in securitizing auto leases, for example.

When you are choosing a practice area, you always need to think in terms of what will make you unique among the hundreds of thousands of attorneys with whom you will be competing for work. You need to have something unique to offer that you can sell the world. Everyone who hires a lawyer, doctor, or service professional—especially if they have a lot of money to spend—wants to think that

they are hiring the best person in the world for whatever it is they are doing. You need to think in a long-term manner about what you can learn early in your career that will make you the best and most sought-after person in the field down the road.

The same rules apply to more senior attorneys who have been practicing for some time. The trick for more senior attorneys is to refine and re-characterize their skill set to make them unique and attractive to clients. **It is never too late for an attorney to reinvent him or herself.**

Whatever you do, please do not make the common mistake of cultivating a skill that is not marketable or in demand. The skills that you need are the skills that people will pay you for. If you have skills that people are not interested in or willing to pay for, then you have unmarketable skills that will hinder your career success.

It is worth noting that if at your current firm you are not getting training in the kinds of skills you know are marketable and will help your career down the road, then you should consider switching firms and going to a firm that can train you in those skills. You need to become an expert and have a skill that the market wants to pay for. You need to look like you are the best in the world at something. People with money (the clients you want) will only pay for people who look like they are the best in the world.

### **3. You Need to Get Out of the Employee Mindset**

The number one mistake that attorneys make is adopting an “employee mindset” in

the course of their time working at large law firms. The employee mindset drags you down and keeps you in the rank of a commodity and drone-worker. Someone who has an employee mindset does not see the big picture at all—they see only the minutiae in front of them on a day-to-day basis. Someone with an employee mindset always looks for the most money, becomes overly-concerned about working too hard, gossips about employers, gets involved in spats and in doing so takes the side of employees as opposed to the people who are true “owners” of the firm, and generally does not do everything possible to make his or her employer look good.

The employee mindset is something that the majority of attorneys subscribe to and it is why so few attorneys make partner in major law firms. They just do not get it. They think that it is about them and have an “us versus them” attitude that does them great damage. If you are going to succeed in a major law firm, you need to start thinking like someone who wants to take over a business, learn a trade, and succeed that way. An employee does things much differently than someone who wants to run a business.

Someone who wants to run a business...

- **Commits for the Long Run.** There is nothing more important for the survival of an attorney in a major law firm than committing to the practice of law and working in a law firm for the long run. Scores of young attorneys join major law firms each year with the idea that they are going to “try it out and see how they like it” for a few years, or something along those lines. This is crazy. Attorneys who are not

committed do not make it. Law firms are set up to weed out attorneys who are not committed. No major client is ever going to hire an attorney who is not committed and no major law firm is ever going to advance an attorney who is not committed.

- **Get Close to Attorneys with the Most Work.** The attorneys with the most work are the ones you should be learning from. Not only can their work keep you secure while you are learning your trade, but you will learn about client management while you watch these attorneys interact with clients. You will be learning how they operate and picking up their skills without even knowing it.
- **Be Consistent and Always Improving.** A business needs to provide a consistent level of service to do well in the market. You need to be consistent and you must not be inconsistent.
- **Do the Best Work You Possibly Can.** In order to get more and more work, you need to treat each assignment like it is the most important thing in the world. If you do this you will gradually get a reputation among other attorneys and also clients as an outstanding attorney. Far too many young attorneys do not apply themselves fully and this is one of the largest mistakes any young attorney can make.
- **Bill for Everything You Can and as Much as You Can.** When you are a worker, your objective is to contribute as much as you possibly can to the bottom line of the law firm. This means billing as many hours as you possibly can.
- **Do Not Get Involved and Take Sides in Office Politics.** As someone who wants to



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be a business owner, you do not want to upset anyone who could possibly have a say in whether you will get a percentage of the business down the line. You do not want to have anything to do with office politics. You are in your firm to take over a business and not to make enemies.

- **Be Friendly and Close with Everyone.** A business owner wants everyone they work with—secretaries and other staff—to like them and support them. Everyone speaks to each other and your objective is to build goodwill with every single person in the firm.
- **Do Not Go Crazy; Do Keep Yourself Balanced; and Do Take Care of Yourself.** A business that is unbalanced, or run down, does not flourish. When a client hires you, you are the client's representative and someone who reflects on that client. It is the same thing when the law firm introduces you to clients. You need to look your best, behave your best, and be someone who looks like a business you would want to hire.
- **Impress Every Firm Client You Are Exposed to.** You need to learn how to get along with clients, impress them, and inspire them to give you work. If you form close, trusting relationships with firm clients you will have more value to the firm. This is how business people and not employees think.

## B. You Need to Start Marketing Those Skills

In order to start getting business, you need to start marketing the skills that you have cultivated. This means that you need to do things like give talks, get out in the public and

meet people, write articles, and be seen by the people whom you want to hire you. No law firm is going to tell you how to do these things, however. When you are an associate, counsel, or income partner, your value to the law firm is simply the billable hours you are providing. You need to market yourself.

Law firms are alternatively places with a lot of opportunity and places that are built to exploit their workers. This is also, of course, how the world works—the world is a place of opportunity and also a place of exploitation. **You are the only one who can pull yourself out of being an exploited worker!** No one is going to do it for you. You need to pull yourself out.

In order to pull yourself out, however, you need to get business. You are not going to get business by just sitting there doing what you always do. You need to be seen in the market. The only way to develop a large book of business is to “be seen” in the market. You are only going to be seen to the extent that you are “reaching out” and getting in touch with your prospects and also making a name for yourself among outside counsel and others in the market.

This means that you need to devote at least an hour or two a day to developing business and work. This will be some of the most valuable time you ever spend and it will lead to huge dividends. This means you need to do whatever you can each day to be seen outside of the confines of your office by the people who are most likely to hire you. You need to develop a personal brand, refine how you look to others, and bring in business. The only way to bring in business is to be seen,



and you need to get out in the market and make yourself seen.

You also need to be seen as a solution to the problems businesses are having. People will start seeing you as part of the solution if you are writing articles and giving speeches about your “niche” and the solutions you can provide. In fact, if your niche is significant and small enough and you have chosen well, you will be seen as the only solution. Remember: One major client can keep you busy for years and make you very successful. One major client could lead to more major clients and so forth.

If you are not out being seen by potential clients, then the only people you are being seen by are your law firm captors. You are a commodity to them and they will exploit you and do whatever they want with you for their own benefit and not for your benefit. **Ultimately, the powers-that-be in your law firm will only ever truly respect you if you are one of them, and the only way to be one of them is to have business and have work to do of your own.** You need to make time to be seen in the market and give talks and put work out there that reflects on you.

### C. You Need to Start Selling Your Business to More and More Businesses

I know attorneys with \$50,000,000 in business. This amount of business is actually not uncommon and there are several

attorneys in every large city with this sort of book of business. This is possible if you position yourself correctly and are constantly out in the market developing your brand. It is not a difficult thing to do.

Once you start bringing in business, you need to learn how to get more referrals, keep clients happy, not charge people too much money, make sure you and the people below you are doing good work, and develop all of the skills that successful businesses develop

to be as effective as possible. This is an entirely different world than being a worker bee: This is running a business. The firm provides you the support, the brand and so forth

for you to operate. In return, the firm takes a percentage of the work you bring in.

As a general matter, most attorneys running a business inside of a law firm realize about a 30% profit margin. That is, they generally end up clearing about 30% of the collections they bring in. Sometimes it is a bit more and sometimes it is less. I have seen firms pay as little as 20% and as high as 50%. It just depends on the law firm.

In the world of business, a 30% profit margin is very good and a 50% profit margin is almost unheard of. There are very few businesses where you can realize this sort of profit margin. Practicing law is a very good business. In fact, at the highest levels there are few uses of your time that are better than practicing law. It is very difficult to start a

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multimillion-dollar business. Most businesses fail, and if you start a business other than practicing law, you are likely to fail.

When you start bringing in business you often have a very good source of recurring revenue.

- If you are a corporate attorney, clients need work done all the time.
- Real estate attorneys have clients that are buying and selling property all the time.
- Litigators often have clients that are getting sued and suing all the time.

In fact, in virtually every practice area, if you play your cards right, you will often have more than enough work to keep you busy and make you very wealthy for your entire career.

It is much more fun and exciting being a business owner than it is an employee. You never want to be an employee. Regardless of what stage of your career you are in, your objective needs to be to spend as little time as an employee as possible.

## CONCLUSIONS

The only reason you should be working in a large law firm is so that you can learn a skill that you can sell to businesses with lots of

money to spend. You are working in a large law firm because it can train you and because it has a brand that you can use to attract larger and more significant clients to your business. The large law firm also provides support for you and gives you a percentage of the amount you collect as profit.

That's it.

That is the only reason you are working in a large law firm.

You are not there for the money and you should never be there for just a job—people who think of large law firms as their “job” get killed. They lose and become unhappy. They always do. A large law firm should never be a “job” to you. A large law firm is simply a place where you learn a marketable skill so you can market that skill and build your business.

If you want a “job” you should **go in-house**, go to **work for the government**, or find something else to do. You do not belong in a law firm, because all it is going to do is make you unhappy. Law firms are not built for the happiness and success of people interested in being employees. Law firms are only a worthwhile investment of your time if you are interested in starting and running a business within them.

### Share Your Thoughts

- What is the biggest reason you chose to work in a law firm?
- Have you ever considered leaving a law firm? If so, why?

...at [bcgattorneysearch.com](http://bcgattorneysearch.com)

- What happens when an attorney focuses on money in a law firm instead of practicing law?

## Additional Article & Book Resources

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Please 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*

*Treating Your Legal Career Like a Small Business*

*Top 9 Ways for Any Attorney to Generate a Ton of Business*

*Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead*

*How to Easily Determine the Best Attorneys and Law Firms: The Five Prestige Levels of Attorneys and Law Firms*

*How a Good Legal Recruiter Finds the Best in You and Communicates It to Employers: How to Define Your Unique Selling Proposition*

*BCG Attorney Search's Quick Reference Guide to Legal Practice Areas*

*The Only Thing That Matters Is Commitment*

*The Importance of Trust and Access to Information*

*Never Stop Improving*

*You Must Produce and Do Quality Work*

*To Succeed in Any Job You Need to Create Work*

*The Importance of Being Well-Liked in Your Job*

*25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy (And What to Do about It)*

*What Law Firm Titles Mean: Of Counsel, Non-Equity Partner, Equity Partner Explained*

*Marketing Yourself—Who, What, and How*