

Three Simple Ways to Tell If You Should Work (or Continue to Work) in a Law Firm

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

Why do you think you are equipped to work at a law firm?

Before sending out resumes, applications and interviewing, you should make sure you are law firm material.

Keep reading to learn three important questions you should ask yourself as you embark further in your law career.

Summary: *Do you belong in a law firm? Ask yourself these three important questions to find out.*

When I was in my last year of law school, a law school professor of mine (who had been told he was not getting tenure from the law school, was leaving, and thus had nothing to lose) offered me some shocking advice. "You should not practice law," he told me. "You need to do something else."

I was stunned. I had good grades, had the best grade in his class, had been a summer associate at a prestigious [New York law firm](#), and was getting ready to go do a federal clerkship. I figured if anyone was primed for practicing law, surely I was that person.

"What do you mean?" I asked him, quite shocked and also angered by this advice.

"Look at these kids with their study groups and poring over details. They love it. You are nothing like them. I bet you have never been in a study group, have you?"

"No, I prefer to study on my own," I told him.

"Right," he said. "Other kids do better and get charged up from working in teams. You probably also hate little details. This is where most of the other kids you are working with also get charged up. I bet you find these details an annoyance. Kids who go to [decades later and in my role as a legal recruiter, I do the same thing with attorneys who](#) love these details."

He concluded that I should stop doing anything law-related right now.

"What should I do?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "You got the best grade in my class writing about the Internet. Maybe you should write, or do something entrepreneurial with the Internet. I have no idea. You will never be happy in a law firm. You like the law, though, so you might have some role in the legal world, but not in a law firm."

I did not listen to him, however. I went headfirst into the legal field and learned the ropes. What I also learned was that he was correct: I did not like working in a law firm at all. I was not alone in this experience. Many young attorneys make the same mistake--they go work in a law firm, realize they are not at all suited to it, and yet never escape like I did.

That professor had the ability to look at someone and, based on a few simple factors, very quickly figure out if he or she was suited to the practice of law. He understood the personalities of his students--and how they interacted with others and with the material he was teaching--and could assess (correctly) whether the

practice of law was right for them.

Now, decades later and in my role as a [legal recruiter](#), I do the same thing with attorneys who call me. The majority of attorneys with whom I speak are graduates of top law schools and are working at [top law firms](#). Some are associates and some are partners. Some have books of business and some do not. But each one is looking for a position and trying to figure out what to do. I can help some of these attorneys with positions, but others I cannot help because I can tell right away they are not suited to practicing law in a law firm environment.

Like the professor who told me to run for the hills a few decades before, I have come to understand who belongs in a law firm and who does not. It is based on the answers to three simple questions. I explore this topic in this article so you can assess for yourself whether you are an attorney who belongs in a law firm (and in the practice of law) and, if so, [to help you understand how to maximize the opportunity you have to convey this to law firms during interviews so you will get more offers and have a better chance for a fulfilling and productive legal career](#).

Please note that whether or not you are suited to working in a law firm is not a judgment about you as a person or as a professional. It is simply an observation about whether or not you are suited to a particular career in a particular environment. If you are not suited to working in a law firm, despite your credentials, coming to terms with that reality sooner rather than later can save you years of pain and frustration and motivate you to explore a more fulfilling path.

See the following articles for more information:

- [Why You Should \(and Should Not\) Quit the Practice of Law](#)
- [Why You Should Quit Practicing Law](#)
- [The Practice of Law: To Stay or Go](#)

There are some very easy ways for you to determine whether or not you belong in a law firm--regardless of whether or not you are a partner or an associate. To introduce this discussion, let me begin by describing the sort of candidate I am seeing more and more. This is the type of candidate who is not suited to working in a law firm environment and in my opinion should be doing something else.

Typical Candidate Not Suited to a Law Firm Despite Great Credentials

Recently, I saw a very talented attorney finally get a position after spending over a year looking. At first glance, she seemed like an excellent candidate. She went to a top ten-law school, was at a top law firm, and had very good experience. Yet she still had to go through at least 30 interviews with law firms before one made her an offer. In my belief, it was a mistake for the law firm to make her an offer and I am pretty certain she will not be at that law firm for too long. In fact, I would be very surprised if she was practicing law in a law firm a few years from now.

This attorney had excellent credentials, but, ironically, those credentials put her at a disadvantage in her job search. Going to a top law school and working for a top law firm is often a "detriment" for many attorneys looking for positions. In addition, having a lot of business can also be a detriment for many partners looking for jobs. In both cases, the problem comes when an associate with great credentials or a partner with lots of business feels entitled to special treatment based on those credentials or that business.

See the following articles for more information:

- [Narcissistic Entitlement Syndrome](#)

• You Are Not Entitled to Anything

Anytime you have any reason to believe you are "special" and "unique" and better than others, you are going to immediately put others on the defensive. If you have any sense that you are better than your colleagues, you are always going to have issues with any firm you are seeking to be part of and with working in a law firm in general. Law firms (if they are smart) will expel you like a virus.

With this in mind, let's go back to the attorney candidate who finally got an offer after 30 interviews. **Her main problem was that she had a sense of entitlement that has no place in a law firm environment.** She was interviewing employers rather than the other way around. She would show up in interviews and say things like the following:

- She had no problem working in the office, but expected to be able to take off Fridays if she wanted to now and then and work at home.
- Was "face time" important to the law firm? If so, she was not interested in working for them.
- Was the law firm "flexible" on compensation? She had a house, supported her husband and children, and needed a minimum amount of compensation of \$250,000/year and also expected a good bonus. She made it clear to most law firms that compensation was the most important thing to her.
- Did the law firm have "reasonable" billable hour requirements? If the law firm had too much work, or was considered a sweatshop, she did not want to be involved.
- Would the small law firm mind if she "looked at the books?" They seem like nice people, but she needed to make sure they were financially stable.
- She expected to be continually promoted at the law firm. How soon could she be expected to be promoted at the law firm?

This is how interview after interview went and--no surprise--law firms were so eager to reject her that they often called to let me know they were taking a pass before she had even finished her interviews. The woman was smart, attractive, well spoken, intelligent, had great qualifications and more. After her first few flops, I informed her *that law firms did not care where she worked or went to law school and that this was only something that got her in the door with them.*

This sort of information is very shocking to talented attorneys who have built their egos up on a history of high-level achievement. Hearing that anything other than their backgrounds will make them successful is very upsetting to them. In fact, hearing this sort of information is something that literally drives many attorneys off the psychological deep end. "What do you mean no one cares I went to [Yale Law School](#)?"

- **See [10 Factors That Matter to Big Firms More Than Where You Went to Law School: Why the Law School You Went to Ultimately Does Not Matter as Much as You Think It Does to Major Law Firms](#) for more information.**

The Three Important Questions

There are three important questions every law firm is asking when they interview you. These are questions the firm uses to decide whether or not they want to hire you. You also can use these questions to decide whether or not you should be in a law firm:

Can you do the job?

Can you be managed?

Will you do the job long-term?

While firms generally cannot figure out the answers to these questions when they are interviewing you while you are in law school, or even while you are in your first year or so of practice, they can quickly find out the answers if you have been out in the workforce for even a short time.

When we evaluate these three questions in the context of the attorney candidate we have been discussing, it is readily apparent why she had so much difficulty getting an [offer from](#) a law firm (and why I anticipate that she will not stay in the law firm environment for much longer).

Could she do the job? Yes, of course she could do the job. Her educational and firm pedigree made her "capable" of doing the work. But that was all she had going for her. Just about every attorney with decent qualifications could do the job.

[Law firms can generally tell whether or not an attorney "can do the job" by how long the attorney has been at his or her previous law firm, how often the attorney has moved, and by how many hours the attorney says that he or she is billing.](#) Generally, attorneys who cannot "do the job" find themselves out of work within two or three years of starting practice. They get bad reviews, "details" overwhelm them, they turn in poor work product and it is all over.

Yet there is more to answering the question of whether an attorney "can do the job" than just assessing his or her baseline qualifications and intellectual capacity. Does the attorney care about the law and the job at hand? Attorneys who go into interviews with a passion for the area of law they are in, and with a genuine interest in a firm and its contributions to that area of law and to the legal profession generally always do well. Firms realize and appreciate that such attorneys not only can do the job, but also are enthusiastic about doing the job and what it involves. If you are going to be an attorney (regardless whether you practice in a law firm), you need to be enthusiastic and excited about the area of law you are in and what it involves.

How does a firm assess whether an attorney has this level of interest and enthusiasm? By the questions they ask and the way they talk about their work. One reason the attorney candidate we have been discussing was such a turn off to employers was because she did not appear to have any interest in the work. All her questions revolved around herself and her schedule. She had questions about hours, time off, and other matters--but she never had any questions about the work itself.

When I speak with attorneys who do well in interviews and get lots of job offers, they generally come out of interviews and say things like:

- "Wow! That is so cool. One of the attorneys I interviewed knew all about a case that I had worked on."
- "I've done a lot of similar transactions to the attorneys I talked with and we really connected on that."

Doing a job means that you also like the job and what it involves. You actually like the work and you want to talk about it. If this is the case, the law firms do not need to look at just your qualifications to know you can do the job, they know you can because of the way you talk about your work.

See the following for more information:

- [Love What You Do](#)
- [Parking Benefits and Falling in Love with Your Job](#)
- [You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)

The woman who did not get any offers had very little interest in the work. It was as if the work was there, and she would do it, but she was not at all interested in doing it--she would just do it because it was there. If you think about this for a moment, would you hire this attorney? Why would other attorneys excited about their cases, transactions, and so forth want to have her around? If you were a client, would you want to hire someone with such a dry approach towards his or her work? She asked no questions about the work. Her only questions related to her.

See also:

- [How to Answer the "Do You Have Any Questions for Me?" Interview Question](#)
- [How to Answer the "Tell Me about Yourself" Interview Question](#)

If you do not care about the work and are not interested in the work, you should not be working in a law firm. The only way to have longevity in anything is to like it and be passionate about it. If you really do not feel a sense of enthusiasm about your work, you may not belong in a law firm. You may need to switch your practice area or join another profession completely.

The second key question firms ask during interviews is whether an attorney can be managed. This is where the attorney candidate we have been discussing really fell short. In her case--like in the case of many attorneys (partners and associates alike)--the main issue was that she could not be managed. Can you imagine how difficult it would be for a firm to manage this attorney? She was seeking promises and commitments in her interviews--for low hours, weekdays off, the ability to not be required to have "face time" and more--which no law firm could meet. Once she started work, the first thing she would do, of course, would be to point out every time the law firm did not honor its "commitments" to her for low hours and the "cluster" of semi-commitments she was seeking.

- [See The Five Things Employers Really Want to Know During a Law Firm Interview](#) for more information.

This attorney is not manageable. Are you manageable? If not, as discussed below, you should not be working in a law firm (unless it is your own).

Finally, our attorney candidate also left a lot to be desired when it came to the third question. Would she "do the job long-term?" Nope. Firms could rightfully assume that she would be out looking for a new job in fairly short order--after deciding that the firm was not honoring its commitments to her. Everything about her candidacy pointed to her not doing the job for the long-term. In fact, this attorney displayed such a sense of unmanageability and entitlement that it is entirely likely that she would always be looking for other opportunities even if her firm met all her demands. Attorneys who feel entitled and who cannot be managed are very often the same ones who will not be [practicing law](#) for the long term, or in any event who will not be sticking with the same firm for any significant length of time.

- [See The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught](#) for more information.

This sort of attorney is in no way a team player. In fact, this attorney is the exact opposite of a team player. Not

only would she be at work as little as possible, she would undermine the team by her need for special treatment. She would demand to be treated like a princess, never fully commit to her job, likely talk negatively about the firm to other attorneys, and undermine the entire institution where she was working. What law firm needs that?

Lots of law firms make the mistake of hiring people who cannot be managed and who will not stay around long-term. It is one of the most common hiring mistakes law firms make. The law firm gets blinded by the attorney's qualifications, business, or experience and hires the attorney even though it is clear to anyone who looks that the attorney is one who cannot be managed, who will leave, and who should not be hired by a law firm because he or she cannot be counted on in that particular environment. This is always very expensive for law firms and undercuts the morale of the individual law firms and the profession as a whole. Law firms that go out of business are often those that hire attorneys who are not manageable.

The worst law firm hires are partners with business. While finding (and being) a manageable associate is difficult, partners with business have their own set of challenges. After a career of being "manageable," a partner with business may emerge like a dormant butterfly from a cocoon and suddenly be unmanageable. It is as if the partner kept his or her demands and other requirements in hibernation for an extended period of time before emerging and becoming uncontrollable.

Partners with a lot of business will often make all sorts of demands when they are being offered a position. They will demand fixed compensation, certain levels of support and as little accountability on their end as possible. What ends up frequently happening is that these partners do not meet their end of the bargain and end up leaving, or the law firms keeps paying them and giving them what they want. The law firm is almost always damaged when this happens. Partners who fall under this rubric may end up moving firms several times over the balance of their careers.

Attorneys who are "not manageable" types should be doing other things. If you are one of them--and you may very well be--you should [start your own practice](#), or leave and do something entrepreneurial. It is perfectly acceptable to be not manageable, but you do not belong in a law firm. Law firms can only be productive if they can manage the attorneys in their ranks.

- **See [Law Firm Management for Peak Performance](#) for more information.**

If you are of this "not manageable" ilk, you should find another sort of job and you should do so immediately. There is nothing wrong with not being manageable. People who start law firms are often unmanageable. Most of our cultural icons and most successful people are not manageable. On the other hand, most homeless people, unsuccessful people, and the majority of the chronically unemployed and underemployed are not manageable either.

The manageable attorney is someone who wants consistency and wants to be paid for working and following orders. The manageable attorney is someone who wants to be part of a team and sees his or her existence as being part of a team. Manageable attorneys feel more comfortable around others and are often risk-averse. They prefer to put their heads down and work and are generally not all that interested in themselves and are very interested in the success of their group. They want to be part of a team and that is important to them. They feel motivated and get strength from being part of a cohesive team as opposed to what they can achieve and get individually. They want what is best for their group and are willing to sacrifice for the group.

It is genetic. Certain people are wired to be individualists and others are wired to be parts of groups. You cannot change who you are. The only thing to realize is that you are never going to succeed in a law firm (that is not your own) if you are not motivated to be part of a group. You need to feel that the group and people in it are very important to your happiness. Group oriented people feel for others in their group and

care about others. In contrast, the individualist is likely to feel that everyone should be out for his or her own self-interest. They will not feel disappointment when one of their group members leaves, or be particularly concerned about the cohesiveness or well-being of their group.

Smart law firms hire people who want to be parts of teams and not individualists who cannot be managed. In contrast, when law firms hire people who are interested in and want to put their own needs first this rarely works. It does not work because law firms are about teams and not individuals. People with strong individualistic tendencies never last long in law firms. Law firms are places where the need to be part of a group is emphasized over the desire for individual reward.

At this point you may be wondering to yourself: "Does that mean I cannot be an individual if I am working in a law firm and concerned about what type of work I am getting, my compensation, and my potential advancement?"

The answer to this is "Of course not!" Nevertheless, the need of the team should always dominate individual needs for an attorney who wants to work in a law firm. This is just something that needs to be there in order for it to work for you inside of a law firm.

- See [The One Simple Rule for Succeeding in a Law Firm](#) for more information.

Conclusions

Whether an attorney is young or old, the one mistake the attorney can make (if he or she is suited to a law firm and wants to get a job in one) is give off the impression that the attorney is entitled and should get the job based on what the attorney wants as opposed to what the firm wants (and needs). An employer is not concerned with your past accomplishments, current accomplishments, personality or otherwise--an employer is concerned with what the employer wants.

To determine if you are suited to a law firm, and to understand what a law firm will be basing its hiring decision on when it comes to you, you need to be someone who can be managed, likes the work, and is likely to be part of a law firm for the long term. If you are not, you do not have a future in a law firm.

See the following articles for more legal career advice for attorneys:

- [The Worst Piece of Attorney Job Search Advice Ever](#)
- [When Is the Best Time of Year for Attorneys to Look for New Positions?](#)
- [10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Law Firm Attorneys Make \(and 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm\)](#)
- [How to Rapidly Get Law Firm Offers \(Even When Firms Have No Openings\)](#)