The Top Three Qualities Warren Buffett Looks for When Hiring Attorneys, Managers, and Others-and Why This Is All You Need to Know to Hire, Get Hired, and Be a Great Employee

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

SUMMARY
When hiring people, Warren Buffett recommends three main qualities to look for in a person - Intelligence, energy, and integrity. Integrity being the highest of the three. These are qualities we would all want in an attorney if were to hire one for ourselves. Do attorneys have these three essential qualities innate in them? If yes, how do we identify them in our day to day dealings with legal professionals? Read on to find out.

One of Warren Buffett's most memorable quotes relates to hiring the right people. I have heard it passed around and spoken about by many business leaders throughout the years, including the former head of Disney, Michael Eisner, and the current head of Disney, Bob Iger.

"You're looking for three things, generally, in a person," says Buffett. "Intelligence, energy, and integrity. And if they don't have the last one, don't even bother with the first two. I tell them, 'Everyone here has the intelligence and energy--you wouldn't be here otherwise. But the integrity is up to you. You weren't born with it, you can't learn it in school."

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When I think about these three qualities--intelligence, energy, and integrity--I am reminded of the people that I know who have been the most successful in the practice of law. When I think about the most successful attorneys I have ever encountered, the ones who survived and persevered, they had all three. When I think of the people who have failed, most were missing at least one of the three.

To succeed as an attorney at the highest level possible, you are going to need all three of these vital qualities in your life and your career.

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The Best Attorneys Need Intelligence

Being an attorney requires intelligence. But intelligence does not necessarily mean going to the best law school, being at the top of your class, scoring well on standardized tests, or having the highest IQ. Intelligence comes in many different forms.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge that the practice of law--like many professions--has a certain amount of elitism associated with it. The highest-paying law firms, in the largest cities, with the largest clients, do hire for book intelligence. These firms expect you to have traditional signs of intelligence, such as attending the best schools, doing as well as possible, and looking very intelligent on paper. They are looking
for people who likely test very well, study hard, and have the natural intelligence associated with a birth-given high IQ.

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It is not just about being intelligent—it is about applying that intelligence. I would estimate that less than 20% of people with IQs in the top 5% of the population work their hardest and apply their intelligence to school, work, achievement, and doing the very best they can. What makes the best attorneys so extraordinary is that they are not just smart; they apply those smarts and make good decisions. That is why they command the highest salaries right out of school and do so well throughout their career.

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If an attorney is thrown in the ring with a group of very intelligent attorneys and does not have the requisite IQ or the ability to grasp complex concepts quickly, synthesize them, and apply them in both predictable and unpredictable ways, they will be blown out of the water. If you have ever seen an extremely intelligent attorney face one who is lacking in intelligence, it is not pretty. The more intelligent attorney will run circles around the less intelligent attorney and literally leave them mumbling in the dust.

Again, this is why the best attorneys, in the largest firms, command the highest salaries.

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I was once represented by an average attorney in a case before the Court of Appeals. The attorney for the other side was so intelligent that they were running circles around everyone, even the panel of appellate judges. They were out-thinking, out-reasoning, and turning any arguments by the judges that supported by side on their head. When my attorney took the podium, they were so lost that they did not even understand most of the arguments my opponent had made. It was an embarrassment. However, the party opposing my appeal was so wrong that the court went ahead and ruled on my behalf eventually—something that probably never would have happened if I had not been so clearly in the right.

**Find the Practice Area That Suits Your Smarts**

Specific practice areas do not require a very high level of intelligence, but require other important skills. Personal injury, for example, relies on the fact that someone was hurt. Regardless of how intelligent the other side's attorneys are or what complex arguments they try to make, most personal injury attorneys can get their case to trial and before a jury if the person was hurt. This enables them to make emotional and other persuasive arguments. Personal injury relies on other skills such as negotiation ability, persistence, selling a jury, and more. These are essential skills, but the average personal injury attorney would be blown away in a complex commercial litigation case representing a large corporation.

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If you have ever looked at the bar for family law—even in the largest cities—you would be hard-pressed to find more than a handful of attorneys who went to even a Top 100 law school. This practice area also makes use of skills other than raw intelligence. Notwithstanding the intelligence required to practice family law or personal injury law, many of these attorneys rely on equally rare talents. In the end, they can make far more money than the average attorney in a significant firm if they stick with it. However, they may still be limited in their ability to catch on to complex arguments quickly and turn these arguments back on the other side—this is just the way it is.
When Intelligence Is Vital

When law firms hire attorneys without the requisite intellectual firepower, they get run over by partners, associates, clients, and others. I hate to say it, but intelligence can make a difference in some places. When you are competing with a group of super-intelligent attorneys, everything just functions at a different level. If you are running a company or hiring an attorney, the more intelligent the attorney you hire, the better--an attorney without a lot of intelligence will consistently be defeated by the other side.

To give you an illustration of how vital intelligence is, I have hired two super-intelligent attorneys in my career. One of the attorneys I hired was the youngest graduate ever out of his Top 10 law school and had gotten into every Ivy League law school he applied to. Because he was so young (the age when most people are just entering college), no one would hire him and he was recommended to me by a rabbi I was close with. The other attorney I hired graduated from a Top 10 law school at a typical age but was one of the top three students in his graduating class (the school would not name a valedictorian and would only say if the student was #1, #2, or #3 in their class). This particular attorney did not want to join a large law firm -- he wanted to work regular hours and play video games with his girlfriend whenever he was not working.

When I was practicing in one major firm--Quinn Emanuel--they had a few attorneys (one from Yale Law School and the other from Harvard Law School) who were so intelligent that they often came up with arguments to put the other side to rest very quickly. I saw this on a few occasions and was amazed. These attorneys were so intelligent that they made other attorneys in their firm look like people riding around on donkeys while they showed up in Lamborghinis to the astonishment of everyone around them. There was no comparison. Incredibly, they were so intelligent that many of the attorneys they out-thought did not even realize why their arguments were so good.

When I was a summer associate in a major law firm in New York, I worked in a firm with a genius tax partner as well. I spent the summer working with a few associates and another partner on a tax problem. Two weeks in, we were stumped and spent hundreds of hours for the next several weeks researching, debating, and
trying to come up with a solution. Towards the end of the summer, I was speaking with the genius tax partner about an unrelated matter—he asked me what I was working on, so I briefly explained my tax issue to him. He asked me to get part of the file for him and spent about 10 minutes reviewing it in front of me. He then sat silently, thought for a few minutes, and blurted out a solution that saved the client several million dollars. The time he spent thinking about the problem cost the client about $500. The time the other partner and my associates had spent writing memos, researching, and debating the issue all summer probably cost the client hundreds of thousands of dollars—and we were ready to give up. Without his help, we may never have come up with a solution. Sometimes, intelligence is hugely important.

Where Do You Fit In?

Trying to practice law and compete with and against the most intelligent attorneys is no different than a club basketball player trying to step onto the court with a bunch of NBA stars. It makes no sense. You will almost always lose, unless something happens and you get lucky.

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Ensure you hire stars

What this means for your job search and career is pretty simple—you are going to be better off working with a group of attorneys and in a practice area that emphasizes the same skills and intelligence you already have. You can still succeed and do great things, but you need to make use of your best skills.

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Why Relocating to a Different Market Is the Greatest (But Little Known) Way for a Law Firm Attorney to Get Ahead in the Legal Profession

The most challenging practice areas in the largest and most selective law firms require the highest intelligence. While I’m certainly not making a eugenics argument here, in most cases you will find the most intelligent attorneys in practice areas that are not consumer-facing (corporate, commercial litigation, patent prosecution, insurance coverage, bankruptcy, tax, ERISA, antitrust) and less intelligent attorneys in practice areas that are consumer-facing (personal injury, labor and employment, most forms of insurance defense, immigration, consumer litigation, consumer bankruptcy, criminal law that is not white-collar) and so forth. If you are a great student who tests well, then you will likely have the most opportunities in practice areas where you work on behalf of large corporations. If not, you will often do best in practice areas where you work on behalf of individuals.

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How Much Do Practice Areas Vary from State to State? A Guide for Attorneys Looking for the Best Markets for their Practice Area

Why is this the case? Intelligence in consumer-facing practice areas often involves other intangible skills that the most intelligent attorneys in other practice areas may not have. These include the ability to intimidate and play elaborate games with the other side, make emotional arguments, be persistent, wear the other side down, follow the rules, make an excellent personal presentation, and more. These skills are more valued in consumer-facing practice areas than they may be in corporate-related practice areas.

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The Best Attorneys Need Energy

The problem with the two extremely intelligent attorneys I hired to work for me was that they were brilliant, but had no energy. Both wanted to use their astonishing intelligence for a certain number of hours per day and then go home. This was the main reason why one of them never wanted to work in a major law firm, and they both would have been a terrible fit if they had.

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There is a prejudice in the legal market in favor of younger attorneys. The most marketable that attorneys will ever be in their careers is when they are law students, and then again when they have 1-5 years of experience. Unless an older attorney gets a great deal of business, they are not going to be very marketable as they age. There are a lot of systematic reasons for this--however, younger attorneys tend to have more enthusiasm for their futures, be willing to work very hard, no families to get home to yet, and a ton of passion and energy. At some point, many attorneys lose this energy and enthusiasm--and consequently, they become less marketable.

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While an attorney is undoubtedly selling their intelligence in the market, they are also selling their energy, enthusiasm, vibrancy, drive to get things done, and ability to get results. These are the essential components of what makes the most successful attorneys--without them, something significant is missing. Think about what you would want and expect if you were trying to hire an attorney yourself. You would want someone who believes in you and your case, who will try their best to get things done for you. You would not want someone who doesn't try their hardest, doesn't put in the extra time when necessary, or cuts corners.

Keep Your Energy Up

Energy is an intangible thing. Certain people have natural energy and others who do not. As an attorney, if you want to be hired and get ahead in your career, you must have a lot of energy, enthusiasm, and drive--regardless of where you are working. It is your responsibility to take care of yourself and do what you have to do to keep your energy up.

No one in most law firms is going to tell you to:
Avoid drinking too much or abusing drugs or other substances
Exercise, meditate, take time off (when you can), and do other types of self-care
Watch your weight and avoid eating unhealthy foods
Get enough sleep on a consistent basis
Socialize with people outside of work, form close family relationships, and find people who support you emotionally

However, if you do not follow this advice, it will affect your energy and make you weaker, less promotable, and a worse attorney over time.

The best attorneys have energy. They have energy when they are young, and they keep it when they are older. They may do it through some of the methods listed above, or they may do it in other ways. Nevertheless, these attorneys find ways to consistently maintain high amounts of energy, and this energy is what they are selling in the market--not just their experience.
The number of hours you bill shows how much energy you have. The number and size of the clients you have show how much energy you have.

Your goal as an attorney needs to be to maintain your energy and keep as much of it as you can. Attorneys can have energy and be enthusiastic until they are in their 80s--many of the leading politicians in the United States are in their 70s or 80s for example, and so are many attorneys.

The key to maintaining your energy, however, is not just the physical and emotional aspects of taking care of yourself--it is believing in and being enthusiastic about the work you are doing. You need to love what you are doing and be charged to get up each day and do this sort of work. If you do not like what you are doing, you are not going to have energy. It will not come across in your interviews, and you will always be looking for something else to do that energizes you.

Energy means a lot of different things. Most importantly, it implies enthusiasm for what you are doing. If you show up without any energy, you will most generally lose the fight. Law firms and their clients are interested in hiring people with the energy to get things done. While intelligence matters, intelligence without energy rarely works.

**Rise to the Challenge**

It is difficult for attorneys to keep their energy up. Attorneys may be overworked, criticized, lose many cases, or just feel attacked and put down in general. Practicing law can sap their spirit and energy. Over time, things generally get worse instead of better. The challenge for attorneys is to find ways to maintain and increase their energy--you are selling energy, and it is extremely important.

**Every job is about energy.** My job is about energy. If an attorney comes to me looking for a job and they do not have energy--they will not get hired. No one wants to hire attorneys without energy.

Years ago, I wanted to hire a recent graduate from UCLA Law School to assist me with some work. I called the school and asked them to send me some resumes to review. I decided to interview a recent graduate who had passed the bar exam and graduated Order of the Coif at the very top of his class. When this attorney arrived, his handshake was lifeless, he spoke extremely softly, and I could barely understand him. He had no energy. Despite being extremely intelligent and possibly even hardworking, his apparent lack of energy made him virtually unemployable--who knows how many interviews he had before he was hired somewhere.

While I should not share this story with you, I will anyway. The highest-performing attorneys in the United States maintain a lot of energy, and they do so in whatever way they can because they understand how vital energy is.

An attorney I know was once on a case with one of the most well-known attorneys in the United States, and they were getting ready to go into a trial that morning. They were sitting at breakfast, and the renowned attorney opened a plastic pill organizer and asked the other attorney about his energy level. When my friend looked at him quizzically, the attorney began pointing at each small collection of pills in the plastic container.

"Take your pick. This one is good if you have not had enough sleep the night before. This one works best if you have not had enough sleep for several days. This one is good if you have had enough sleep but need to be sharper than normal. This one is good if nothing else is working."

My friend could not believe what he was hearing. The attorney then asked, "You do not think I could be expected to perform at this level for years on end without some outside stimulus, do you?"

Dave Asprey, a man who is well-known for biohacking and has created numerous books, seminars, articles,
podcasts, and videos that promote maintaining peak energy, regularly talks about how he uses a prescription stimulant (Provigil) to support his energy. He may be the founder of Bulletproof Coffee and multiple vitamins to keep himself going--however, when it comes right down to it, he also relies on a prescription stimulant for energy.

**Find Energy the Right Way**

My personal opinion is that none of these stimulants are worth even close to the cost. People who use them look bad--and most die early. Several attorneys I know who used them died in their thirties and forties of heart attacks, and several got cancer. You can obtain energy in lots of other, healthier ways. For example, Anthony Robbins does not even drink coffee, but he has energy all figured out. He regularly stands on stage, jumping up and down, and talking for 18+ hours at a time for days on end.

The secret to long-lasting energy is taking care of yourself and finding work that gives you energy. If the job you are doing does not empower you, you need to address the problem.

Often a lack of energy is a sign that something else is wrong. You may be in a bad marriage. You may have depression that needs to be medicated. You may have something wrong with your thyroid or other medical issues. Regardless of what is causing your lack of energy, you need to fix it if you want to be successful in practicing law.

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To get energy, I try my best to only surround myself with positive people. I try to take time each day to help others outside of my job. I exercise daily, do yoga, and meditate several times a week. I do not drink alcohol. I am a vegetarian and try to eat raw most of the time. I try to do the work I enjoy the most and avoid what I do not. I write articles like this. I take time off from work regularly to recharge.

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Despite all of this, I still do not have as much energy as I would like. I have more energy than I had 20 years ago when I did not do these things, but I should still have more--and I need more. For me, entering the world of legal recruiting was a way to find more energy, achieve more, and be happier. Energy is something that everyone needs, and the more of it that you can bring into your life and career, the happier you will be.

**The Best Attorneys Need Integrity**

One of the most significant issues with the practice of law is that many attorneys do not have integrity. In fact, the practice of law is set up to all but encourage a lack of integrity, which creates all sorts of problems. Many attorneys get away with a lack of integrity for their entire careers, while others do not.

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I recently spoke with someone who has been in the business of supervising finance people for over 30 years. He told me something quite interesting. He said that if a bookkeeper is not monitored and there are no checks and balances to watch what they are doing, almost all of them end up stealing—even if they start out honestly. The temptation is just too high. They may start out borrowing $500, pay it back, and then realize they were not caught. Something else will come up, they borrow $1,000, and since no one even noticed $500 the first time, they do not pay it back. As they have expenses in their personal lives, they continue to "borrow" from the company with the rationale that they will pay it back at some point in the future--however, most never will. At some point, many of these people do something that raises suspicion and they finally get caught. In other cases, they may steal for years without ever being caught.

**Is Your Billing Accurate?**
The legal environment encourages billing, and attorneys only make money when they are billing. When I have hired attorneys, many of them find endless reasons to continue billing on matters. Solving one issue leads to reasons to bill for another issue, and so on. When I worked in law firms, I saw countless attorneys pad their bills. For many attorneys, how many hours you worked on a given matter is not how many hours you worked--it is how many hours you said you worked.

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During my entire legal career inside of law firms, I was always told to bill lots of hours, even once instructed to bill something even if I thought about it in the shower--but I never had a single one of my bills questioned. Attorneys are fired and not given bonuses for not billing enough hours. I have never in my entire career as an attorney or a legal recruiter heard of an attorney being asked if they billed as many hours as they reported they did.

What this means is that the legal profession encourages a certain amount of dishonesty. Attorneys often work matters as long as they can and as much as they can to generate lots of billable hours. Attorneys will often write down far more hours than they worked. When I was practicing, I knew several attorneys who would write down the hours they believed they worked at the end of the month and reconstruct their hours by listening to voicemails in an attempt to remember what they did on given days. Yes, it is that insane. But this is how the profession works.

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Honesty and Trust

Despite all of this, some attorneys are honest. Clients do not want to use dishonest attorneys. Attorneys do not want to have dishonest attorneys working for them--and they do not want to work with unethical attorneys either. The problem with dishonesty is that it is like cancer. It will infect one person or area and then proceed to infect another. An attorney may pad their hours, or dishonestly overwork a matter, and then be dishonest in another area and then another and another. Pretty soon, this dishonesty will catch up with the attorney, and they will be in trouble.

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I was once on a case with a junior partner, and we were at the beginning stages of the case. I discovered that we could get the case dismissed by filing a motion on a few simple procedural and substantive grounds--one being the case was barred by the statute of limitations. This was a slam dunk. I wrote the motion, and the partner said he did not need me in court and would argue it himself. At the time, I lived within walking distance of the Downtown Los Angeles Courthouse and decided to walk over to watch the hearing. When I listened to his argument, I realized he had removed the statute of limitations argument--and, consequently, he lost the motion. I realized right away that he intended to lose the motion! He wanted to keep the case going. He had also removed the argument from the papers at the last moment.

I did not trust this attorney going forward, nor would I refer him business in the future. I do not trust the attorneys I know who padded their hours either. There are many attorneys I do not trust--and if I do not trust them, others do not either. While the practice of law and many swimming in it are in a dark cesspool, the majority of attorneys are honest. Honesty generally trumps dishonesty. Dishonesty is a sign of fear--fear that you cannot get ahead by playing by the rules, fear that you are not good enough, and fear that must take advantage of every opportunity to cut corners and gain an advantage. People who are dishonest get caught.
When unethical attorneys are exposed, no one wants to have anything to do with them.

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Most of the dishonest attorneys I have encountered in the past are from small law firms where they do not have as many opportunities to make money as in large law firms. You are much more likely, as a general rule, to be taken advantage of by someone who does not have a lot of opportunities to get ahead. That is one reason why so many consumer-facing practice areas, such as family law, have bad reputations in the legal community.

Dishonest attorneys often eat themselves up inside by being dishonest. I would not feel good about myself if I was writing down false hours every day. It would make my life feel like a scam, and I would feel like a criminal. I would certainly not feel right if I was charging companies and people more money than they should be charged by overworking and extending their legal matters.

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Dishonesty is something that you need to avoid. If you are honest, your colleagues, clients, and others will respect you. You will go further in your career. You will not be plagued with guilt that may eat you up inside and cause health issues or substance abuse problems. As the saying goes, honesty truly is the best policy.

Conclusions

Ultimately, intelligence, energy, and integrity are the three qualities we would all want in an attorney if we were to hire one for ourselves. The absence of any one of these qualities would likely be fatal. It is important for everyone to work toward cultivating all three. The bottom line: the attorney who has these three qualities is the most hirable and the most referable, both to other attorneys and clients.

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