

How Law Firms and Other Hiring Organizations Can Determine if an Attorney Can Be Managed

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

If you are part of a law firm or company looking to hire an attorney, you need to know whether the attorney can be managed. Here is how law firms and other companies can make that determination.

Law firms contain soldiers and generals.

Soldiers follow orders, support the larger cause, support each other and the general(s). Soldiers also take their responsibilities seriously. Soldiers hope to one day be generals, but they will do what the generals tell them until they are of higher rank. When you have bad soldiers, there are all sorts of problems. They will gossip and undermine other soldiers and generals. They will be lazy, deserters and leave. They will complain about orders. They will often be out for themselves and not their (country or firm). They will not want to improve and become better at their jobs. They will always be considering defecting or leaving. Bad soldiers do not expect to be generals before it is time and assume and take more responsibility than they should.

Generals, in contrast, also need to be loyal. They need to be capable of taking orders and supporting their firm. They need to be able to inspire their troops. They need to keep their troops busy, occupied, and engaged. Generals need to be able to execute the mission of their employer. Generals should be flexible and get along with other partners. They need to disregard personal feelings and continue fighting even when the going gets tough.

Learn More About This Video

Regardless of whether the attorney is a partner or associate, [law firms cannot function if they cannot manage the](#) Being managed means many different things depending on the firm; however, the most important aspects of being managed are that:

- The attorney's long-term goal is to work for other people.

- Want promotion and recognition from the group.

- They respect and talk enthusiastically about the people above and around them.

- They are ideally motivated by something besides money and prestige.

- Will leave their politics out of the office.

The Manageable Attorney's Long-Term Goal Is to Work for Others

The best attorneys want to work for others. Even the top-ranking attorney at [a major law firm](#) is working for others. If you are an attorney, you need to want to work for others. The best law firm attorneys would never think of having their own business. They need the support of the group. They need the brand of the firm. They do not understand business (nor do they want to). They want someone to manage attorneys, staff, and others around them and make decisions for them.

I have seen very few attorneys in my career who had experience starting and running real businesses before going to law school. Attorneys that have had their own businesses like making their own rules. They have a sense of [self-confidence](#) that the average attorney does not have; therefore, they are almost always bad hires.

Older attorneys that have had their firms can sometimes be hired, of course, but that does not work most of the time. At one point in my career, I know of numerous attorneys who worked in private practice then went to work for existing law firms. I kept several clients on the side as they could make a lot more money that way. Typically, it does not work unless the attorney with their law firm is a significant player in the legal market.

I once hired an attorney with his practice to come work for me and be in-house counsel. He had an outstanding record at good law schools and appeared to have solid experience. He interviewed very well, seemed quite confident, and I was very impressed with him. Nevertheless, there were warning signs. However, during the latter part of the interview, he had to get going because he left his dog in the car. I should have taken that as a warning sign but did not. I should have checked his references and prior employment experience but did not.

He told me that he had "wound down" his independent law firm and was ready to work for me full time. When he started, he rearranged his desk in the office so no one could see his computer and demanded multiple locking file cabinets in his office. After a few weeks on the job, he started coming into the office late, and it got later and later--often as late as 12:30. I refused to give him a written weekly report on the matters he was working on. I started noticing all sorts of other problems. He brought his dog to work even though he was forbidden to and was asked to stop doing this multiple times. After at least ten warnings for coming in late, he kept coming in late again and again. Eventually, I got fed up when I heard him at 12:30 that day. Despite hosting 50 people from around the country for a company conference 30 minutes from the office, I drove back to the office during lunch, fired him, and escorted him out of the building. When my assistant was cleared later, she noticed tons of case files from his law firm--some relatively recent. He went into court to argue motions during the mornings and worked on them during the company's time.

During his time working for me, he worked on all sorts of stuff I did not ask him to. For example, he spent a full day with some salespeople from a company called "LifeLock" who wanted me to sell identity theft to attorneys seeking jobs. He was unmanageable. He did whatever he wanted. After I fired him, he sued me to extract a settlement because I fired him without providing a written warning. The attorney proceeded to get a position with one of the most prestigious private schools in the United States as their general counsel. He then lost that job when they discovered he was running a practice on the side. Then, he did the same thing with another employer after that one. Eventually, he almost lost his bar license, was suspended, and had all sorts of issues.

The main problem with attorneys who do not want to work for others is that they will ordinarily leave when they figure out how to work independently. However, a larger problem is that these people will still be questioning the structure of the firm around them. They will believe your firm is inefficient, paying people too little or too much, not assigning work properly, not giving enough freedom to attorneys, and more. They will undermine management and tell them they know better. They will analyze how you work and what you are doing wrong and using this information as a basis to start their own, new law business down the line. They will decide--most often--that they can do it better and will create new firms.

The worst part of hiring these people is that they will not be invested in your firm, growing your firm, your clients, or your business. They will give less than 100% and be inefficient with your clients, not connect with other attorneys the way they should, undermine morale, and create all sorts of other issues as well.

One of my worst hires ever was an attorney who graduated one of the top five students in his class from a top 15 law school. For reasons I did not understand, he had never worked as a summer associate or in a law firm and, instead, was only allowed to work for a company owned by a friend when I met him--this is all he had ever done. He also was teaching at night school. A few years out of law school, he lived close to my office, and I thought he would be an excellent hire for my firm.

The first day he started work, he turned in an assignment littered with typos and had many errors. I met with him the next afternoon and explained that the work was not good and why. He seemed very upset by this. The next day he came to the office and quit. I was fine with that because his work was not high quality, and he had an attitude problem.

A few days later, he contacted me and apologized, and said he wanted his position back. He told me he would for

directions and proof stuff more carefully and do a better job. He also told me that he liked working at home a lot and watching the television and was more productive working like this. He asked me if this would be okay for him to frequently work from home. I told him that I was not comfortable with this, but he was welcome to work in the office if he wanted to return.

Over the next few months, his work did improve, but he avoided all forms of feedback. He would settle matters for himself without asking my feedback, and I got upset with him about this several times. He consistently failed to provide me with weekly reports of what he was working on. He avoided any circumstance where he would face criticism. When I hired other attorneys to work for me, he took them under his wing and tried to prevent me from communicating with them. He spent a lot of time with them outside of the office and became close with them. When one of the attorneys left, they wrote him a note and left it on his desk that said something like: "I know you will be very successful when you have your firm. I'm going to be joining you."

No one could manage the attorney.

When he left me, he ended up starting his firm doing automobile accidents. However, it did not end at that. He caused other problems even after leaving. For example, when I hired a replacement for him, he called up the replacement and tried to undermine the new attorney. He said things like: "Is Harrison still requiring a lot of facetime over there?" He spoke negatively about the experience of working for me and tried to undermine her in her new position. In addition to doing this, he got me to pay his bar dues months before they were due a few days before leaving.

He was too independent, wanted to do his own thing, did not want to follow directions, and was a liability.

Many attorneys are like this, and I have encountered and hired several of them throughout my career. Here were some signs with this type of attorney:

Quitting (or threatening to quit) very quickly when confronted with performance (or other) issues. Attorneys who are not manageable will consistently threaten to leave if they do not get what they want. Once someone threatens to quit, they always will in short order. These sorts of attorneys will never be happy in your firm and will leave again.

They are quitting and then coming back. If someone quits once, the attorney will almost always quit again if you rehired them. I have never rehired anyone that has come back and stayed more than a few years. They always quit again, and when they come back at your firm will drag down morale, complain and be unhappy.

They have not worked or gotten jobs in formal, hierarchical environments despite having the qualifications to do so. If someone has not worked in a law firm, there are likely reasons for this. The attorney probably does not like working in a law firm or want to be accountable or criticized.

They are teaching in a law school at night. Teaching is most often a career decision that is at odds with working in a law firm. Typically, people who do this are not interested in practicing law and want to be in a position where they feel like they are in control. There is nothing wrong with this, but an early career decision in this respect suggests that the person does not want to work in a law firm. They are either intellectual or interested in something else.

They want to work at home and control their environment. While different types of attorneys can work at home, those that demand this are more concerned with their needs than those they are supposed to work with. While this is not a bad issue, most law firms thrive on the in-person exchange of ideas and information between attorneys in the office.

Resisting training and feedback. People that resist training and feedback are often protecting their egos. They always want to get better. These sorts of attorneys are bad hires for law firms. Many young attorneys have this issue and do not change. Many older attorneys become settled in their ways and cannot readily adapt.

They are avoiding accountability. People that avoid accountability are always going to be a problem. They will not want to report and want to do everything on their own. These sorts of attorneys are habitually bad hires as well. If someone does not want to give reports, they are either not working as much as they say they are or do not want to see themselves as accountable to others and want to believe they are independent.

Making significant decisions on work matters affecting clients, or superiors, without asking for any feedback. If an attorney makes significant decisions affecting important matters without asking for appropriate feedback, this suggests a lack of accountability. People should want feedback before making important decisions.

They are interfering with your ability to manage other attorneys and employees in your firm. If an attorney is interfering with your ability to manage other attorneys, this is a serious sign that the attorney is problematic. Attorneys who are

management are challenging. Attorneys need to make things easier for management and the people they are working with. It is harder.

Talking seriously (with concrete, realistic plans) to other employees about doing something besides practicing law. Attorneys with plans will commonly leave with the time is right for them.

See also:

[How Law Firms and Other Hiring Organizations Can Determine if an Attorney Can Be Managed](#)

[How Law Firms Can Hire the Best Attorney: A Guide to Hiring Stars](#)

[The Hidden Force of Ego: How an Unchecked Ego Damages the Lives and Careers of So Many Attorneys](#)

The Most Manageable Attorneys Want Promotion and Recognition from the Groups they Are in

Attorneys who are manageable depend on the recognition of others to succeed. When they talk about their current situation, they get excited about things such as:

The quality of their reviews. Attorneys who are manageable get excited by the quality of their reviews and always mention information about this. They often will even mention this on their resume. Mentioning positive reviews means that they are dependent to some extent on others' opinions and not too independent. These attorneys are manageable.

They were receiving the highest bonuses or compensation. If an attorney is manageable, this recognition is something they will make them very happy as well. They will mention and brag about this in interviews and often on their resume.

They are working the most hours. Often attorneys who bill the most hours do so out of a desire to impress the people in their firm. They also bill the most hours because they may simply need to, which is also a sign of being managed. The attorneys working the most hours are quite often the most manageable ones.

Being put on the most significant matters. If an attorney is excited about this, it is a sign they are manageable. When they brag about this, it shows that the opinion of others is important to them.

Getting promoted very quickly. Quick promotions are a sign the attorney is getting along well with other attorneys. If an attorney is excited about this, it also shows that others' opinion is important to them.

Working for the most influential people in the firm. Attorneys who work for the most important and highest-regarded people in the firm often are in this position because they are manageable.

They are being chosen for various leadership roles and put on certain committees. Most law firms choose the most manageable attorneys for important leadership and committee roles.

In contrast, attorneys who are not excited about promotion and recognition are often not manageable. They avoid being the best attorneys in the firm and [may not work as many hours as the average attorney](#). They may miss their hours, be concerned about promotion, and avoid accountability. Law firms need to hire attorneys interested in being part of the firm and want others' recognition.

When interviewing attorneys who are not manageable, they will rarely talk about their achievement level with their current firm. Instead, they will avoid the topic and talk about other things they may have done in the past.

Recently, I was working with a partner attorney who was a candidate for one of my clients. The law firm interviewed her six or seven times and kept bringing her back. Finally, the law firm asked her for her hours and how much she had worked in the previous few years. She came to me panicked about this because the hours were quite low. She was dependent on the firm and had not been getting a lot of hours. She then started complaining about the people in her firm, the fact that they had cut her pay, removed her from various committees, and other issues. Her employer could not manage her, and she did not make her an offer. For whatever reason, she looked like a risk to the firm as someone who a law firm could not manage.

See also:

[Billable Hours and Law Firm Economics: What Every Attorney Needs to Understand to Get Ahead](#)

[How to Make Partner in a Law Firm: Top 10 Characteristics of Superstar Associates Who Make Partner](#)

Attorneys Who Are Manageable Typically Respect and Talk Enthusiastically About the People They Have Worked With in the Past

The most manageable attorneys take pride in the group of people they work with and their individuals. They tend to be

animated and excited when speaking about various attorneys in their firm that have worked on matters. They talk attorneys and the cases they have done with them; they tend to be complimentary of the sort of work that the attorney did and what they learned from them.

One of the best attorneys I ever hired came to me from a well-known labor and employment law firm. She was motivated. She was always asking what she could do to be more useful and help me. Consequently, she was continually improving and getting better at her job. When I interviewed her and started working with her, she always spoke generously about the firm she worked with. She talked about what they taught her and how this was helpful. It was clear that she genuinely learned from the people she worked for in the past. It was almost as if she had a great experience with every superior she ever worked. Attorneys who are manageable look up to the people they work with and want to do good work for them. They want to be liked and thought of highly. They thrive on the positive opinions of others. They are well-balanced and have positive interactions with superiors and leave others pleased with their work and performance. If people like them (and they like other people), this indicates they fit in well.

See also:

[The Five Reasons Law Firms and Legal Employers Do Not Hire You After an Interview](#)

[The Best Interview Tips For Your Law Firm Interview](#)

[Top 10 Interview Questions During Your Law Firm Interview](#)

The Most Manageable Attorneys Are Ideally Motivated by Something Other Than Money and Prestige

Suppose an attorney is motivated by money and prestige. In that case, they will likely be manageable only to the extent that the two elements consistently work in their favor. [These attorneys are only concerned about themselves and not affected by the needs of their legal firms or their peers.](#) If you cannot consistently meet their needs for money or prestige, the attorney will become difficult to manage and likely will not work well with other attorneys or stick around.

Many law firm partners, associates, and others are not manageable because they leave when they are unhappy with their compensation. I see this all the time. It is common for attorneys to start looking for positions the second their compensation is cut or stagnant if other law firms raise compensation. Compensation is something that is a big point of contention at all levels. If an attorney does not get the compensation they want, they will often withdraw and stop reporting to work, cut down their hours, or be unavailable to take various firm assignments.

While there is nothing wrong with an attorney wanting good compensation, some attorneys use it as a reason to stop cooperating with superiors. Some attorneys will consistently [move firm](#) every few years when their firm lags in compensation. Instead of being [team players](#) and working within the confines of what the firm may be able to pay (or is paying) at the moment, this attorney simply stops cooperating with the firm and management. It does not matter if they are partners or associates; it happens all the time.

I regularly explain to attorneys that a career is a long-term prospect. Someone who is in their mid-20s could be practicing for another 60+ years. The most manageable attorneys will not make short-term decisions about leaving due to compensation issues. They will most often be motivated by learning, supporting the group, representing the firm clients, and making a long-term view of their careers and circumstances instead of a short-term one.

The same goes for how the most manageable attorneys approach bad news about their firm. All law firms go through downs where there are various pieces of bad information about the firm out there. The law firm could have been through them for decades and experienced countless adverse news cycles, but attorneys run for the doors anyway. Attorneys who are manageable will often be very upset when there is negative news about the firm and make a quick exit.

See also:

[Showing Up: The Difference between Those Who Get Hired and Advance in Law Firms and Those Who Do Not](#)
[Why Money Is the Dumbest Thing Any Attorney Should Focus on When Joining a Law Firm: How Attorneys Destroy Their Careers](#)

Happiness and Legal Careers by Focusing on Money

[Are You Unhappy as a Lawyer? You May Be Buying into the Wrong Narrative](#)

The Most Manageable Attorneys Will Leave Their Politics and Prejudices Out of the Office

Many attorneys have political views that go one way or another. They could be extremely liberal, extremely conservative, or something in between. Attorneys are certainly welcome to have any political beliefs they choose. However, when those beliefs impact their ability to work in your law firm, work with other attorneys, or get things done, this can cause issues. Some attorneys are so indoctrinated in one or another view of the world that it can impact their ability to get things done in the firm.

I have worked with:

Sexist men who simply could not work with women. They are not manageable by women.

Women that refuse to work with men. They are not manageable by men.

Attorneys that refuse to work with Republicans and have deep-seated resentment towards them and their beliefs. They are not manageable.

[Diverse attorneys](#) are only interested in working with attorneys who are also diverse (and often only the same race as they are). They are also not manageable.

Attorneys who refused to work on matters often for trivial political reasons, i.e., one attorney refused to work on legal matters for a public company because they did not like their overtime policy for warehouse workers.

I could continue, of course, but if an attorney has very strong beliefs that prevent them from working in your firm, they are not manageable.

See also:

[Leave Sex, Politics, Religion, and Social Activism out of Your Job Search and Career If You Want to Work in a Law Firm](#)
[Chapter 1: What is Diversity and How Can It Help Law Firms?](#)

The Most Manageable Attorneys Will be Willing to Act, Dress and Behave Like Other Attorneys in Your Office (and Outside of Work)

Law firms look for all sorts of signs of manageability when they are hiring.

I once worked with an attorney from a prominent New York law firm who decided to grow his hair down to his butt. When his hair reached his shoulders, his firm became a bit concerned.

This attorney was first in their class from a major law school and literally could not get a job.

I had a male attorney show up for an interview wearing a purple suit and white loafers. They did not like this either.

I have had attorneys not hired because the firm discovered pictures of them going wild and misbehaving on social media.

One law firm I know of did not hire at least one attorney because the firm did not like their table manners at lunch.

I have seen several attorneys not hired because they ordered a second or third drink at lunch with other attorneys during interviews.

I had one instance where a law firm did not hire a woman because she dressed too provocatively for an interview.

These are clues that the attorney may not be manageable and would be a difficult hire.

See also:

[What Should I Wear to a Law Firm Interview Known for Casual Dress?](#)

[How to Conduct Yourself During a Lunch Interview](#)

[Do Law Firms Check Their Applicants Social Network Profiles?](#)

The Sorts of Things Unmanageable Attorneys Give as Reasons for Looking for a New Position in Interviews

Here are some things I have heard recently from attorneys that indicate they might be unmanageable:

The law firm is asking me to do work that does not take my abilities into account.

Morale is low at the firm.
 There has been bad news out there about the firm.
 I do not approve of some of the clients of the firm.
 I have to work weekends.
 There is too much travel.
 The law firm is cutting back on benefits and making us pay more for health insurance.
 There is not enough support at the firm.
 I have to work with toxic partners.
 The firm is requiring too much face time.
 I want to go somewhere with more pro bono.
 I do not like the politics of the firm.
 The firm is more concerned with hours than its clients.
 The firm is moving offices, and they are too far from my house.
 I am not getting the sort of work I want.
 Only diverse people, men, women, people from certain law schools, people with wealthy parents, people who grow up in the market get ahead there.
 The law firm will not let me do pro bono.
 The law firm will not let me work with a specific type of client.
 Salary and bonuses are not keeping pace with other firms.
 The law firm expects too much face time.
 I would like to work at home more often.
 The law firm does not have a good pro bono plan.
 I want to work in other practice areas in addition to my own.
 I need more immediate responsibility.