



## What Makes A World Class Recruiter

[by A. Harrison Barnes]

The CEO and founder of BCG Attorney Search tells us what he thinks makes a successful legal recruiter -- and it involves catering both to the candidates you represent as much as to the law firms that pay the commissions.

### Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to address the question of what makes a world class legal recruiter. The answer to this question is identical to what translates to an exceedingly high level of success in any profession.

#### Those Who Do One Thing Well and Those Who Do Many Things

##### A. The Fox and the Hedgehog

The Greek poet Archilochus wrote: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox" based on Archilochus' writing analyzes the differences between foxes and hedgehogs. Berlin believed the people in the world can be classified as either foxes or hedgehogs.

In the fox and hedgehog parable, the fox is always trying to get the hedgehog. Day after day, the fox is in pursuit of the hedgehog devising one method after another to try and catch the hedgehog. The fox is, by all appearances, a highly intelligent, crafty and resourceful creature. Indeed, compared to the rather dull hedgehog, the fox appears to have every advantage. The hedgehog is a small awkward animal that lives a simple life and spends his days taking care of his den and finding food. Each day the fox tries a new scheme to catch the hedgehog and each time the hedgehog simply bundles up into a ball of sharp spikes-foiling the fox's attempts.

Berlin believed that foxes "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory,

connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle." As a consequence of this outlook, foxes "lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision."

In contrast, Berlin believed hedgehogs "relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel - a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance...."

##### B. Have You Ever Known Any Hedgehogs?

Jim Collins, a noted management theorist and a former professor at Stanford Business School, discusses the concept of the hedgehog and the fox based on Berlin's famous essay in his book, Good to Great. Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't. Collins notes the conclusions reached from Berlin's essay by Princeton professor Marvin Bressler during his interview with him:

*"You know what separates those who make the biggest impact from all the others who are just as smart? They're hedgehogs."*

*Freud and the unconscious, Darwin and natural selection, Marx and class struggle, Einstein and relativity, Adam Smith and the division of labor-they were all hedgehogs. They took a complex world and simplified it. "Those who leave the biggest footprints," said Bressler, "have thousands calling after them, 'Good idea, but you went too far!'"*

*To be clear, hedgehogs are not stupid. Quite the contrary. They understand that the essence of profound insight is simplicity. What could be more simple than  $e = mc^2$ ? What could be simpler than the idea of the unconscious, organized into an id, ego and super-ego? What could be more elegant than Adam Smith's pin factory and "invisible hand"? No, the hedgehogs aren't simpletons; they have a piercing insight that allows them to see through complexity and discern underlying patterns. Hedgehogs see what is essential, and ignore the rest.*

As a young attorney, I spent approximately one year working almost exclusively for a partner who never lost a case. This partner also had the reputation for burning out associates very quickly. While I could spend considerable time dissecting how this attorney operated, the simple fact is that the only thing that mattered to this attorney professionally was ethically winning every case he took. Everything else was unimportant.

A case would generally start with this attorney being given a fact pattern which seemed insurmountable (these were the types of cases the attorney generally got). The reaction of most attorneys would be to settle the case

after a few short hours of research. But this attorney I worked with refused to give up. He would keep pushing. Every single aspect of the case and the law would be questioned. We would pull every legislative record if necessary to determine if the law was really being implemented the way it should be (even if there were thirty-plus years of case law on the books working against him). This fanatical focus and attention to detail was carried to its farthest extreme. This push could go on for months or even years.

Most associates dealing with this type of push could simply not deal with it; however, after countless 250-hour months researching the seemingly inconsequential-and questioning the truth-something would emerge that would enable this attorney to win the case. It always worked that way.

Another great attorney I know, who is considered to be one of the top lawyers in America, once told a client in my presence: "If I take this case, I will eat, sleep and drink this case. It is all I will think about."

And, in essence, that is the essence of the hedgehog as I see it. Any person or group of people that are able to achieve greatness in any calling generally do one thing and are focused upon doing one thing as well as it can be done.

Many people and organizations go through their existence trying many different things and pursuing many different goals. Their thinking abilities in this regard are often flawed, in our opinion.

Truly stellar law firms and truly exceptional attorneys also tend to be hedgehogs. The firm Wachtel, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, for example, has made its name doing essentially one thing. Conversely, the vast majority of law firms in the country have far lower profits, but practice in various other areas of the law. Wachtel's profits per partner are also higher than any other similarly-sized firm

in the world because they are so dedicated to their practice that they have developed a reputation as the best.

The top partners in the best law firms also tend to be hedgehogs that do one thing really well. They are quite focused on their careers and serious about what they hope to achieve. Few of these partners probably dreamed incessantly about going in house when they were associates, for example. They were focused upon the here and now and doing the best at what they do.

The funny thing about the hedgehog is that when people around the hedgehog are constantly questioning their organization's methods, or finding fault in everything that is going on around them, the hedgehog remains focused on the task at hand. Only one thing matters to hedgehogs and they are resolutely focused to the exclusion of all external stimuli.

#### **A WORLD CLASS LEGAL RECRUITER DOES ONE THING**

At its essence, the difference between a world class recruiter and an average recruiter can be related to the distinctions between the hedgehog and the fox. In order to succeed as a legal recruiter, a legal recruiter needs to be concerned about one thing and one thing only: Getting their current and future candidates the job they want. Everything else is superfluous.

#### **Barriers to Becoming a World Class Legal Recruiter**

In order to do what you do well, you cannot be doing multiple things at once. You also cannot look for shortcuts and you simply should not be doing anything you are not 100% committed to.

In the field of legal recruiting, there are many substantive obstacles to someone becoming a good legal recruiter. We believe

these obstacles are: (1) being able to make a commitment to being a legal recruiter at its highest level, (2) the amount of time and effort it takes to truly become an expert on the legal market, and (3) the requirement to be good at developing relationships.

#### **1. A Successful Recruiter Must Have a Commitment to Being a World Class Legal Recruiter**

At its highest level, legal recruiting is a very sophisticated and serious business. While the average legal recruiter makes less than \$100,000 a year, there are a small handful of legal recruiters in the United States (less than 10, I believe) who make well over \$1,000,000 a year. These recruiters move around practice groups, important partners, some associates and occasionally are instrumental in merging entire law firms. These recruiters also can call the managing partners of large national law firms and get through right away. As professionals, these recruiters are given a high degree of respect because they can literally influence the future of entire law firms. At BCG Attorney Search, we have recruiters who operate at this level and are involved in single transactions with law firms where the placement fees may exceed \$250,000.

There is a contrast to recruiting at its very highest level, however. Many people go into legal recruiting for a variety of reasons. When I started legal recruiting several years ago it was my perception that the great majority of legal recruiters were not bringing the high level of focus needed to truly excel in this business. As an attorney with a good pedigree that once sought out the help of a legal recruiter, I was astonished that in dealing with what was once ranked as one of the top legal recruiting firm in the United States, my recruiter did not even have a formal office. Moreover, I would frequently reach my recruiter in the middle of the work day on her cell phone when she was doing such things

as buying a dress.

For some attorneys, there is no such thing as a good legal recruiter. There can't be. It's a totally incongruous concept. A myth -- or at least an oxymoron. They've been burned in the past or have heard horror stories from others. Simply mention the word "recruiter" and some are struck by a flash of dark staccato images and the sounds of knife-screaming string music: sharks circling the waters, vultures converging on a fresh carcass, sweaty garage offices with men in short-sleeve shirts making cold calls at dinner-time.

Does this sound any different than how the general public perceives lawyers in general? It should not. The dichotomy is simply due to the fact that most people have not been exposed to legal excellence, just like many attorneys have not been exposed to "recruiting excellence". We do believe that some of the public perceptions of legal recruiters are accurate - just as they are for attorneys in general - but they should not be taken as universal truths.

When it's done well, the business of legal recruiting is a truly indispensable service to the legal community. Some legal recruiters work with the best attorneys in the country and make placements in the world's top law firms on a daily basis.

There also appeared to be no organization in the profession and very few legal recruiters even truly knew the type of work their candidates did. Most recruiters did in-house placements, law firm placements and would even place legal secretaries and paralegals when they could. Some legal recruiters even placed executives in corporations. In short, these recruiters would do whatever they could do to make a fee.

When I questioned these recruiters about why they did what they did, the response generally had something to do with the fact

that they believed the money was good and that they were people persons.

This is not to say that all recruiters are like this, because they are not. However, for the most part the legal recruiting profession has not benefited from the high degree of respect that characterizes many other professions. In addition, I believe there is somewhat of a bias in this country-which is largely a product of the fact that most attorneys are so solidly middle class-that makes most attorneys believe that they must practice law to have respectability in society. Anything less would be extraordinarily wrong, and therefore recruiting is seen as taking the easy way out with your law degree.

Accordingly, it is not really a surprise then that many legal recruiters went into the profession of legal recruiting with a feeling that they are doing so because they have somehow failed in the practice of law. Indeed, one of the first legal recruiters on record was someone who went to an unaccredited law school in California and could not pass the bar exam after numerous attempts. Accordingly, the job of a legal recruiter-even at its outset-was something associated with somehow failing and not making it into the middle class ideal of a steady job.

I am not faulting the way this system works. Indeed, this is generally how most of the world works. This same analogy could probably be carried over to law firms. Not every young attorney is good enough to get into Wachtell. Not every young attorney is good enough to get into an AmLaw 100 law firm. Some attorneys do personal injury law-others would not dream of it. This sort of class system is all around us and pervades the profession.

However, the lesson I learned from talking to recruiters while practicing law is that very few were committed to practicing the art of legal recruiting in the same way I had been taught to practice law. Far from being true

advocates for their candidates and pushing their expertise-and questioning everything about the attorney job search process to reach true levels of excellence-most recruiters were simply happy to be doing something that they enjoyed and that they did not regard as particularly taxing.

When I started legal recruiting, I worked seven days a week at it. I routinely started work at 5:30 in the morning and worked until at least 10 or 11 pm seven days a week. I am often so happy when my candidates get offers that I get choked up for them when they do. I have invested millions of dollars into making BCG Attorney Search the best it can be and have done my absolute best to translate my vision of the way it should be throughout the country. I have done all this because I know that being exceedingly focused on what I do, and what BCG Attorney Search does, is the only way recruiting can truly be effective.

This is how the legal recruiters who work at BCG are also taught to think about their work. Our single-minded obsession lies in doing what we do absolutely the best it can be done. This is the only thing that matters and it is something we take extremely seriously. Here at BCG Attorney Search, we practice legal recruiting the way we were taught to practice law.

Indeed, a world class legal recruiter takes the business of recruiting as seriously as practicing law. It's true that there are some who "fall" into legal recruiting from dubious backgrounds or the desire for short-term financial gain. Opportunists, part-timers, and former attorneys may try their hand at recruiting as an easy way to make money in the legal community without the stress of hard hours. They perceive it as a break from the working world, a kind of paid vacation. There are many of these recruiters out there, but as can be expected, they are never very successful, making a limited number of placements a year, if that. They are not dedicated and soon move on to something else.



The idea that legal recruiting is a break from the practice of law is about the most foreign concept imaginable to BCG recruiters. A good recruiter has chosen the recruiting industry as his or her profession. It is not a safety catch -- it is the focus of their career. For them recruiting is a unique alternative to practicing law, but an alternative just as challenging and demanding as any in the legal profession. It is a place in the legal community to be innovative and to work at the highest level of the profession. It is this drive that pervades their work on a daily basis. To a good recruiter, recruiting is a powerful and essential industry in its own right.

## **2. A Good Recruiter is an Expert in the Legal Market**

In Los Angeles County alone, there are over 3,000 law firms. Then, there are an additional 5,000+ companies that hire attorneys. These numbers grow exponentially as one covers the United States. In order for a recruiter to get a candidate a job, they need to know where the jobs are and also where their candidates are likely to be good fits. This is an extraordinarily difficult task. Indeed, it requires a profound amount of knowledge for the recruiter to be able to do their jobs well.

Recruiters must be the experts on the legal market. Candidates look to recruiters as the ultimate source of information and knowledge on virtually every issue that affects their career. A good recruiter follows the legal market on a daily basis with the same diligence that a stock broker follows the stock market, perhaps even more so, because the legal market does not close for the day at 4:00 pm. Law firms are dynamic businesses, and it takes a smart and energetic personality to stay ahead of the issues of the day.

However, when you think about how most

recruiters operate, you may wonder how a recruiter in Los Angeles could possibly monitor over 3,000 law firms, for example. This is especially true if the recruiter is also doing in house placements. How could a recruiting firm comprised of even two or three individuals possibly monitor all of this activity? Meanwhile, firm names change, hiring contacts leave their jobs and so forth, meaning there is even more information to stay on top of. Accordingly, the answer to this question is that most legal recruiters do not even bother.

Since most legal recruiters do not monitor the entire spectrum of the market, they generally monitor only a few firms. The firms they monitor are also, incidentally, ones you have almost certainly heard of. In addition, they also have a few key relationships, which can limit their effectiveness in finding a job for a candidate who may not be a good fit with the contacts he or she does have.

At BCG Attorney Search, we have divided up the United States into numerous regions and stationed recruiters in different parts of the country because it is our belief that it would be impossible for a legal recruiter to know what is going on in different areas of the United States at one time. More importantly, we only do law firm placements. Making in-house placements would simply make it impossible for us to monitor all the potential jobs in a market. Each recruiter is charged with the large task of becoming an expert on his or her region so that we can successfully represent our clients anywhere in the country. It requires many hours of work outside of the regular recruiting work they already do, but our recruiters are willing to put in these hours to better benefit our clients.

## **3. A Good Recruiter is an Expert in Developing Relationships**

While good recruiters are serious about the

business of recruiting, they can hardly be characterized as serious people. That would contradict the nature of the profession. A good recruiter must be genuine and sociable, someone who can easily gain a person's trust and attention. This is not to say that a good recruiter is a "yes-man," someone who tells candidates exactly what they want to hear, yet fails to deliver on their promises. (Unfortunately, there are plenty of recruiters who operate like this.) But a good recruiter, rather, is something of an idealist. They are also creative enough to find solutions that go beyond the obvious and can open new doors of opportunity. They believe only in the right job for the right candidate; there is no settling for second-place. If a candidate can find the perfect job by using another recruiter, then a good recruiter is happy for them all the same because the candidate's goal has been satisfied. The money will come sure enough -- it's the reward for doing good work --, but the real driving force is always on making sure the candidate finds exactly what they are looking for.

Therefore, the heart of good recruiting lies in the relationships that a recruiter is able to develop with his or her candidates. A recruiter can be everything from counselor to advisor to administrative partner to friend and even therapist, in some cases. For each candidate the recruiter is above all an advocate, one who is deeply trusted. He or she is the voice that speaks on behalf of the candidate and is able to communicate their strengths, experiences, and intelligence in a bold and concerted effort to advance their professional life. A good recruiter brings out the best in a candidate and inspires them to greater success.

Recruiters must also connect deeply and consistently with the employers they work with. Legal employers look for recruiters who understand their law firm as well as they do, including, but not limited to, the



caliber of attorneys they employ. Recruiters must be able to immerse themselves in the culture of each law firm to ensure that they are knowledgeable and up-to-date in all levels of the firm's business and practices. To do this well, many successful recruiters choose to focus on a particular niche of the industry. Others may work with only a few select law firms where they are able to develop lasting relationships. For these law firms, the recruiter becomes a valued and trusted hiring partner.

### CONCLUSIONS

At BCG, we strive to be the leaders in the recruiting business, and every aspect of the company has been carefully designed to support this goal. BCG recruiters are trained professionals with strong backgrounds who take their work very seriously and are committed to long term careers in the industry. No one knows the recruiting business as well as we do, and BCG as a company is organized so that each recruiter can focus on one thing: finding the best possible jobs for their candidates. To ensure our recruiters can devote all of their time to this end, BCG employs a complete support staff that supervises and executes all of the production and editorial aspects of the business according to the direction of the recruiters, everything from the research of firms and market trends to resume writing and proofreading to the production of application materials.

At BCG, we are very selective in choosing the candidates we work with. Because our recruiters are committed to giving each candidate the maximum amount of time and personal attention, we can only work with a limited number of applicants, and therefore we choose only those candidates who we feel we can help the most. We work with only the country's top-performing law firms, and we have a very high success rate in making placements for our candidates. In fact, we

place just about every one we work with in a top law firm. It's a testament to the strength of the relationships we develop that many recently placed candidates will refer their human resources departments to us when their law firms are looking to hire new attorneys.

In the end it is not up to us to decide who and what makes a good recruiter. It is up to you, the candidate. At BCG, we have surrounded ourselves with the brightest and most dedicated people in the profession and we have the best resources available to help serve your career. But our job is never the same; it depends on you. We've helped thousands of candidates find attorney jobs in many of the best law firms in the country. And while experience is one of the most important measures of success, a good recruiter knows that they're only as good as their next placement. Where would you like to work?

You see, the lesson here-and the lesson of the fox and the hedgehog-as I see it, is that you need to do what you do and be willing to do it as well as it possibly can be done. Working with a single-minded goal helps the hedgehog consistently thwart the fox's plans and it helps BCG Attorney Search consistently find more jobs for more attorneys than any other company.