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Long-Term Success with a Single Employer

By Harrison Barnes

If you go into any firm that has been around more than 20 or 30 years, you will inevitably find a handful of attorneys who have been there from the very beginnings of their careers. These well-adjusted souls will typically report to work each day at a similar time and will have managed to be the only ones left in the law firm after generation upon generation of attorneys has come and gone.



Many attorneys remain for decades in the same firms, and there are characteristics that uniformly seem to characterize these attorneys. While I am a legal recruiter, I have a great deal of respect for attorneys who, in this day and age, are able to “stay put” at firms for long periods of time and remain at single firms throughout their careers.

None of this is to say there are not very good and solid reasons for leaving a law firm or other legal environment if the going gets impossible. I will be the first to admit that there are legal-employment environments that can be intolerable for many. Nevertheless, you need to keep in mind that if a legal employer has been around for 30-plus years, there is a chance the employer is doing something right. Before leaving, it is often wise to take inventory of yourself.

There are certain qualities that tend to characterize attorneys who stick with the same legal employers for long lengths of time and also certain qualities that characterize the sorts of employment situations that make this possible. These qualities are discussed below.

Attorneys Who Remain with the Same Firms for Long Periods of Time Are Generally Very Committed to Their Jobs.

Many people were raised with the idea (or believe) that fidelity to an employer is something that is simply expected. The unwritten rule is that as long as you are not treated horribly, then there is really no reason you should ever end up leaving a job.

One of the saddest but most refreshing things I do as a legal recruiter is interview and meet with attorneys who have been with their firms for 20 years or more whose firms are going under—or who are being forced to look for other opportunities.

When attorneys like this look for new positions, their rationale is most often that something profound has happened at the firm that is making their separation necessary. These attorneys appear as though they are going through divorces or have just had people they are very close to die. For these sorts of attorneys, leaving a position is unthinkable and only happens in the event of a massive trauma.

This sort of fidelity between employers and employees often reminds me of the fidelity of people who have been married 50 years or more. There is a mutual respect that comes out of this and a belief that both parties in the relationship need one another. I believe this sort of thinking is really missing in this day and age. While this may not seem related to careers, a statistic I once saw in a social science class showed that as divorce rates went up in society, so did rates of drug abuse, suicide, and other associated societal ills. The bond between an employer and an employee is a powerful force that, in its best form, is much like the bond between a husband and wife with a very committed relationship. Both sides respect and accept one another with certain conditions but for the most part unconditionally.

The attorney who is committed to his or her job is in many respects similar to anyone who is committed to something—there may be something else out there, but he or she has decided to remain loyal. This sort of attitude is a very healthy one, I believe, and can also make these sorts of attorneys feel very settled. I know an attorney who was called by a rival firm and offered more than \$1 million per year when he was making just more than half of that at his current firm. He was not interested in the money and was more concerned about the bond he had with his current firm. This is how it works when there is commitment on both ends.

Attorneys Who Remain with the Same Firms Are Not Interested in Office Gossip or Negativity.

In every organization, there are typically people who are not



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succeeding at their jobs. These people generally are not doing their work in a competent manner and are also often looking for ways to cut corners with their work. Most organizations will call out this behavior and then speak with the employee.

Some employees correct their behavior, while others simply get mad at their organizations. Some employees may be mad at their organizations for no particular reason at all—or may be angry with a previous organization and simply transfer their anger to their most recent organization. I remember a recruiter once telling me never to hire someone who had been fired from his or her last job. People who have been fired from their last jobs will typically take out their anger on their next organizations, he told me.

Because anger is a part of every legal-employment organization, you need to understand that there are always going to be people in the organization who have a lot of anger toward their employer. These angry employees will start rumors, attempt to share their anger with others in the organization, and often subtly (or not so subtly) forecast “gloom and doom” for their employer. This is how rumor mills get started, and these sorts of rumor mills are prevalent in every legal organization there is, for the most part.

Attorneys who remain with their employers generally do not participate in these rumor mills or even pay attention to them. At certain times in an employer’s history, there are likely to be calls of “crisis” of seemingly epidemic proportions as lots of people leave, for example. At other times, there will be other issues. One of the strongest characteristics of attorneys who remain at firms for long periods of time is that they generally pay no attention whatsoever to rumor mills.

Attorneys Who Remain with the Same Firms for Long Periods of Time Generally Are Not Interested in Being Grandstanders—They Are There to Do Their Jobs and Do Them Well.

I once heard someone say that the most successful people are often the most screwed up. I am not sure if this is true, but there is some wisdom in every saying like this. Attorneys who are able to remain with the same employers for long periods of time are generally not concerned with “getting ahead” to the same extent that many other attorneys are. Attorneys who are extremely concerned with getting ahead will often leave, saying they are looking for better opportunities because they are interested in immediate advancement. In other cases, they will try to show up other attorneys in their firms.

Attorneys who remain at their firms for long periods of time

are generally most interested in simply doing their jobs. They have faith in their organizations and that things will work out for them. They are not loud and do not go out of their way to attract attention to themselves. Their main concern is to simply do the best job possible.

Attorneys who remain focused on their work without grandstanding end up getting ahead, while other attorneys end up putting their feet in their mouths. When I first started practicing, I worked with an attorney from a major law school who had been first in his class and the editor-in-chief of his school’s law review. Everyone thought this particular attorney was really on his toes and likely to enjoy major success at the firm. This attorney wrote articles in his spare time and argued with firm partners about the finer points of law (and was right when he argued).

While this attorney was very smart, he ended up sabotaging his career in the long run because of the fact that he thought he was brilliant; he called a newspaper to discuss a case he was working on and ended up being quoted on the front page of the Los Angeles Daily Journal. The fallout from this incredible incident was that the attorney left the law firm a month or two later and never worked for a large law firm again.

These sorts of incidents aside, it is important to keep a moderately low profile in order to have long-term success in a law firm. It is never wise to raise your sword and capture the limelight. While someone might appear to be winning a sword fight for some time, he or she may eventually lose—and in a sword match (to which your legal career could be compared)—the loss is usually permanent.

Attorneys Who Remain with Their Firms for Long Periods of Time Typically Do Good But Not Necessarily “Brilliant” Work.

Attorneys who remain at their firms for long periods of time typically have learned to “pace themselves” and manage to do work on a day-to-day basis that is good but not necessarily extraordinary. I would estimate that the majority of the battle of being an excellent attorney is simply showing up. Sure, some people can do extraordinary work; however, the brightest flame is not always the longest-burning flame. The ability to consistently show up and do the work is the most important aspect of being a long-term performer in a law firm.

The smartest attorneys out there are often the ones who end up having the most problems in the practice of law. Attorneys who consistently show up for work and do a good job send the



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message to colleagues, clients, and others that they have the ability to get the job done. In the end, it is all about getting the job done.

An Understanding of “Insiders” and “Outsiders” Typically Develops Among Attorneys Who Remain at Their Firms for Long Periods of Time.

After an attorney has been with a law firm for an extended period of time, an understanding develops between that attorney and others who have been at the firm for a long period of time. An institutional understanding also develops. This understanding seems to say something to the effect of “People may come and go, but we are the ones who are committed to this organization, and we are the heart and soul of this place.” A similar sort of understanding that develops says “We owe each other because we have each demonstrated a commitment.”

Bonds form between people who have been parts of the same organization for long periods of time. These bonds are often invisible—but they are real bonds. These bonds are powerful and make the organization and forces within it come to the defense of those who are committed to the organization during times of organizational change and reorganization. These sorts of bonds get stronger over time as an organization

changes. After some time, attorneys who have been with a firm for decades are treated as parts of the very fabric of the firm, and their actions go virtually unquestioned.

Conclusions

While it may seem odd for a recruiter to write a story in defense of attorneys who remain at their firms for long periods of time, remaining with a firm for a long period of time is meaningful in this day and age. There are many characteristics of attorneys who remain at their firms for long periods of time, and these characteristics are usually found in most attorneys who demonstrate this level of stability.

In my experience, attorneys who remain with firms for long periods of time are often less tormented than the average attorney. By looking for reasons to like and respect their organizations rather than find fault with them, they find themselves in organizations that ultimately welcome them.

Finally, it is always important to remember that if a law firm or other legal organization has been around for 20 years or more, chances are it is doing some things right. There will always be people who succeed in these organizations, and, of course, there will always be those who leave or fail.

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