Top 10 Characteristics of the Best Attorneys

Some of the things that have interested me are:

- What makes a good attorney?
- Why law schools matter?
- And the important things that law firms and others should look for when hiring.

I’ve been in the legal industry about 20 years, and focused on the legal recruiting and legal job search space for approximately 15 years. I’ve worked with thousands of attorneys looking for jobs; I’ve employed at least 100 attorneys myself and I’ve maintained a law practice for several years. I review hundreds of resumes per day and have owned and operated several successful companies in the legal recruitment and legal job search space.

Here are some important characteristics of the best attorneys. I provide this list for both employers and also for those attorneys seeking to fit into this list.

1. **The Ability to Identify With Different Types of People**

The best attorneys are typically not elitist. People without a lot of self-confidence will often use their position as an attorney as something to put themselves on a pedestal. The best attorneys are interested in identifying with lots of different types of people and are able to do so. In many respects, the ability to identify with many types of people is a measure of the attorney's self-confidence because the attorney does not necessarily need to be anything special.

Many attorneys who have elite educational backgrounds and start their careers in large law firms are surrounded by others who are doing work for large corporations with huge budgets. Many of these lawyers have very little client contact and live in a world where they believe they are "holier than thou" and conduct themselves with a sense of entitlement that comes from being coddled and isolated. Unfortunately, clients disappear, circumstances and the economy can change and all sorts of unfortunate situations can happen to attorneys in large law firms. If an attorney is isolated and does not learn how to deal with a diverse group of individuals, they cannot be good attorneys over the long term.

When an attorney can see and understand someone else’s point of view, they can craft better arguments, reach better conclusions, understand others’ motivations better and be compassionate and understand consistently. To be an effective advocate and negotiator, a lawyer needs excellent people skills. (See The #1 Characteristic of the Best Legal Interviewers and Attorneys Who Get Clients)

2. **The Overcoming of Personal Adversity**

The best attorneys generally have some bad stuff that has happened to them in their background or some sort of adversity they have overcome. While it is never pleasant to have struggles, having difficulties does breed the ability to identify with others who are having problems, to be motivated to solve others’ problems and to have a "spark" that is palpable.

Here are some examples of hardships that some of the best attorneys I have known have had to face:

- One was a former cocaine addict when she was a model who then got clean.
- Several have been alienated or have chosen to no longer have contact with their fathers.
- There are often sexual abuse issues in their backgrounds.
Several have grown up in wealthy communities where they were not wealthy and felt excluded.
◆ Many have parents who had substance abuse problems.
◆ Some were labeled as learning disabled or dyslexic when younger.
◆ Many are from single parent households.
◆ Several are first or second generation Americans.
◆ Many were substandard students at some point in their lives before having epiphany-type moments that motivated them to change.
◆ One grew up in a hippie commune.

These adversities are experiences that a lot of the best attorneys use as “rocket fuel” to motivate them to work hard and create and access tremendous effort that most normal people never require and probably could not tolerate. It is not uncommon for the best attorneys to work 80+ hours a week when they could be relaxing with friends or doing something else more enjoyable. There is a certain motivation that is often deep within these attorneys who’ve had to overcome hard times.

3. Never Admitting Weakness

This is probably one of the most important components of being a good attorney. It is literally hard-wired into the legal system that if an attorney admits weakness, they are in trouble.

When I am representing an attorney as a recruiter, I have noticed that if the attorney ever admits any sort of weakness - or plays themself down he or she generally has a difficult, if not impossible, time getting a job. Employers and the public do not want weak attorneys with various limitations.

When good attorneys go to court, their job is to put on a strong face for their client - even if their client is an accused axe murderer. It is expected that good attorneys will be a strong advocate for their clients. If an attorney admits their own weakness, how can they be expected to protect the interests of a client?

I have noticed over and over again that the top notch attorneys will constantly refuse to admit any sort of weakness - even when caught red-handed having done something totally inappropriate. They simply clam up and refuse to offer comments. In contrast, a lesser attorney will instinctively seek to justify their actions. The best attorneys simply refuse to acknowledge mistakes or weakness. This is what is expected.

4. Not Getting Pushed Around

Something they do not teach in law school - or even in most large law firms-is that the law of the jungle operates in the legal world. Attorneys spend their days adverse to other attorneys. There are strong attorneys who do not back down or get pushed around, and there are attorneys who constantly are harassed or otherwise don’t defend themselves.

This is subtle and not something that the average client is likely to see. Attorneys who get pushed around want people to like them and want to make others happy. Thus, opposing counsel often gets their way with these attorneys and ends up getting a better deal. If you can intimidate another attorney, you may stand a much better chance of winning the case for your client.

Several years ago, I had an attorney working for me who was settling a lawsuit I had filed against someone. I walked by his office and saw he seemed to be enjoying talking to opposing counsel and was being flattered into talking about his personal life.

The attorney then brought me the offer he had negotiated. He urged me to take it and seemed to think he had done a great job.

I was angry and called up the other side’s attorney myself. Within a 10-minute phone call where I was incredibly rude, angry and confrontational, I extracted a settlement that was more than five times what my attorney had negotiated for me.

When working with other attorneys, the best attorneys know that the opposing lawyers are not their friends. They realize that being an attorney is war where one side has to win and the other loses (more often than not) and that they need to constantly fight. They realize when they are being manipulated, charmed and lied to and rise to the occasion and fight back.
Many of the highest paid attorneys in the United States—class action attorneys, personal injury attorneys and the like—did not go to the best law schools, did not get the best grades and never had experience with large law firms. Nevertheless, they are not wimps and win because they are strong. Being the strongest kid on the playground is very important in the legal arena.

I cannot tell you how many attorneys with great pedigrees I have seen get crushed by lesser attorneys because they were not strong. The best attorneys are never afraid and constantly are willing to fight. Lesser attorneys may try to hide behind big name law firms, top law schools and such, but can often be intimidated and made to back down by attorneys who are simply not afraid to fight.

5. Generally Having Experience With a Highly-Prestigious Law Firm

When I started practicing law, I worked for a federal judge. Most of my duties involved reading the briefing that two sides were doing and choosing between one side and the other. In doing this, it was generally pretty clear to me who the better attorneys were.

- The better attorneys wrote cleaner papers, they had better arguments and the work they did made more sense from a legal standpoint.
- Their legal arguments were more thought out and were easier to understand.
- They were able to make the complex appear simple—because they actually understood what they were writing.
- They did not use big words and communicated clearly.

In almost all cases, if the attorneys were from large law firms, their work was better and they won more often. In fact, this was true almost all the time. Large law firms generally made better arguments, and had more presentable attorneys.

When I was in college, there were fraternities, and that's where the cool kids were. In a fraternity, there are rules for how people treat each other. People can be critical of one another and a certain product of person is generally created in the fraternity environment. Members of fraternities benefit from this association to some extent. They have parties together, take trips together and often make lifelong friends. If someone does something wrong, everyone comes down on them—and they may be kicked out of the group.

To a great extent, a large law firm is like a fraternity. Everyone knows each other’s business and they tend to keep each other in line. Like a fraternity, each law firm has a culture. Each law firm admits certain types of people and has their own “way.” It is important for attorneys to get into large, prestigious law firms early in their careers because they will learn certain things they would not learn on their own or at smaller law firms.

In my career, I have hired and worked with lots of attorneys who went to great law schools but never practiced with a large law firm. In almost all cases, their work product and the quality of the work they did were poor compared to what they would have learned in a larger firm. Even if the student was at the top of their class from a school like Harvard, for example, not having the experience of working with a large law firm meant that he never learned to do work in a certain way. Large, prestigious law firms teach a thorough approach to issues—learning details that require on-the-job training that are almost impossible for an attorney to pick up on his or her own.

When people meet someone from their alma mater, they generally ask what fraternity or sorority they were in. This is important because it serves to identify the person and can tell a lot about them and how they fit in. Just as you can glean information about a person depending on their sorority or fraternity experience, you can generally get a sense of what type of person someone is based on the law firm they are in.

Getting into a large law firm and staying there is no different than getting into a fraternity. I review thousands of attorneys’ resumes every week. Each year, I see people who went to schools like Yale, Chicago, Columbia and other great institutions and did just fine academically, but for whatever reason could not get a job with a large law firm. When I meet them, I quickly see why. They are generally so socially awkward they simply do not fit in. Some have strong ideas about themselves, their greatness, or disdain for organizations/capitalism that make them completely incompatible with a large law firm. For example, they may make statements like “they’ll need to be challenged by whomever they get a job with or they will leave.”

Oftentimes, these people got summer associate jobs and did not get offers. Subsequent to not getting an offer, they could not get a job with a large law firm again. Working as a summer associate and being with
other associates is sort of like being in a fraternity. Here, you are with a group of other kids who often go out at night. You are expected to cooperate with each other and play and get along. You are expected to show adults (the school) that you can work hard at your job. You are expected to fit in.

- The test for this is the interviews and getting the job at school.
- The second test is getting the summer job and then getting an offer from the employer.

You need to learn how to fit in with other groups of people.

When I review a resume, I generally can understand quite quickly the sort of person the attorney is without even meeting the person. Most law firms can as well.

- If the person has been a summer associate at a large law firm and received an offer, that says something. Where the person worked—what city—also has an impact and gives important information about the person.
- The school the person went to says something.
- How the person did in law school says something.

You can generally come up with a pretty clear mental picture of what the person is like before you ever meet them.

When attorneys from small law firms came before the court, it was like someone who was not in a fraternity. Many of these attorneys were the sort of people that you could tell do not fit in. Like the nerd in college, they might have been poorly dressed, awkward or just “off.” Their papers before the court might have typos in them, be unprofessional or have other problems. These individuals were rude to the court staff (which always got back to the judge), while the attorneys from larger law firms always understood the intricacies and importance of being polite to the staff.

Being with a law firm often meant the attorneys did better work and were treated with more respect. If a large law firm was in town representing a client, the judge and other clerks all recognized the firm and its integrity and paid little attention to the individual attorneys.

My experience clerking for a judge basically taught me about the importance of creating strong arguments, the importance of well-written papers, the importance of being confident in front of the judge, and showed me the respect that attorneys with larger law firms typically receive. This is simply a fact and something that really matters.

When I started practicing law, I was at a firm called Quinn Emanuel and associated with some amazing attorneys. The firm was started by some attorneys from Cravath Swaine & Moore—one of the most prestigious New York law firms. While I also had job offers with several New York law firms, I was never interviewed or considered by Cravath. Since I could not work for Cravath in New York, I figured the next best thing was to work with a bunch of attorneys who had been trained there. It was a great decision and I learned quickly how a good attorney’s decision-making and problem solving skills can make all the difference. I never would have learned this on my own.

The best attorneys almost always have experience with a large, prestigious law firm.

### 6. The Quality of College Attended

When I went to the University of Virginia Law School, I was surprised by the fact that most of the students in my class who were not from the state of Virginia had all gone to top colleges-Amherst, Stanford, Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale. This did not make a lot of sense to me. I had always been under the impression that people were admitted to law school based on a formula: A combination of their Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) score and grade point average. Obviously, something was going on.

While I have no way of knowing exactly what was going on, my belief is that the University of Virginia closely studied the undergraduate alma maters of the students it admitted. I feel that it did this because it believed that the college a student attended before law school was going to translate into the quality of the attorney the law school ultimately sent out into the world. In fact, this topic was previously covered on our site in an article titled "Does Law School Rank Determine Success?"

It requires an incredible degree of motivation to get into schools like Harvard, Stanford, Amherst and other top quality universities. Generally, you not only need to be very gifted intellectually; you need to have more
to contribute as well. Outstanding leadership skills, a strong outside interest in something (one guy I know that went to Harvard was interested in bug collecting), or excelling in another discipline or extracurricular activity such as sports, the arts or other interests are all qualities that can help someone who wants to get into a great law school. In short, you need to show unusual potential that far exceeds just being intelligent.

I went to a private boarding school for high school and knew a guy who took the Scholastic Admissions Test (SAT) twice. The first time he missed two questions and got a 1580. He took it again trying to get a perfect score but only got a 1560. However, despite being a good student and such a gifted test taker, he really did not have that much to offer schools. He applied to every Ivy League school and was rejected by them all. The best school he could get into was the University of Michigan (as an in-state student.) Michigan is a great school. However, it is the sort of school where you will get in simply if you have great numbers.

I have nothing against state schools, and a ton of good attorneys come out of them. The point, though, is that it generally shows something if an attorney went to a highly selective school that looks at more than just numbers. What this means is that the attorney showed a high degree of motivation and was interesting from the time they were 15 years old or so. A student’s past is no guarantee of future success, but it does mean something when it comes to whether the person is likely to be an outstanding attorney in the future.

However, I want to add a few caveats to this.

First, just because someone went to a good college does not necessarily mean they will be a good attorney. This is simply an indication that something might come of them in the future and that they looked motivated and interested in their future. You cannot always tell motivation by the quality of the college because people can be admitted for a variety of reasons. Children of alumni, academic reasons, geographic diversity, and racial diversity are some of the more common reasons. As a general rule, though, the quality of the college matters.

Furthermore, when a potential attorney attends a good college, they become accustomed to working with other people who are quite motivated as well. When you compete with others at a high level early in your career, you adopt the habits of these sorts of people. This is worth something and is meaningful in the long term.

Second, in my experience, sometimes the quality of the college someone attends can actually be a problem. Something I have witnessed time and time again throughout my career is people who went to great colleges and who believed that this alone made them talented or smart. Oftentimes, these people are hired at law firms and find themselves in serious trouble when they discover that a good school is meaningless: they are still required to work hard, be creative and perform.

7. The Performance in College

One of the most important characteristics of a good attorney is their performance in college. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, but the performance of an attorney in college is something that I have seen often matters a great deal.

The reason college performance is so important is because it shows motivation and also the ability to be engaged with the subject matter. In order to get great grades, a college student generally needs to be involved with the subject matter and have an interest in the subject matter that transcends simply rote learning. They generally need to be a bit more interested in the material they are studying than their peers who are getting Bs. They need to get to know their professors and must be active in numerous classes on a consistent basis.

These are the same sorts of characteristics that make good attorneys. A good attorney needs to be engaged with the material they are learning about and studying. They must be able to get passionate about whatever matter they are working on. It is essential that they see more issues than the other side does. This is how cases are won, one-sided deals are put together and clients are protected.

When a good attorney is representing a corporation or a person in a transaction or litigation matter, their job is to understand more about the matter than the other side. When a litigator comprehends more, he or she can tailor their argument appropriately, surprise the other side and win. When a transactional attorney understands more, he or she can negotiate and get better terms in deals, protect the clients with better language and more.
A high-level performance in college shows that the attorney is likely to be constantly engaged and will do well. In my recruiting practice, I have regularly had the opportunity to represent a variety of people. Let me tell you a typical scenario I see.

I may see two different candidates. Once candidate may have gone to a school like Vanderbilt for their undergraduate degree and graduated Phi Beta Kappa and then gone to University of Michigan Law School on scholarship. Another candidate may have gone to a school like Dartmouth and been in the upper middle of their class, then gone to a school like Columbia Law School.

When I have my choice of the candidate to represent-and the candidate that is most likely to excel in a law firm-it is generally going to be the person who graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vanderbilt and went to Michigan Law School on scholarship. I know this person is likely to be hungrier, likely to be more committed, try harder and ultimately be a better attorney.

Is this a gross generalization? Of course it is. But when I look at my 15+ years of experience placing attorneys, I have seen that the more signs of extreme academic motivation someone has as a college student, the better they are likely to do as an attorney.

At top schools around the United States—Yale, Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and so forth—there are no shortage of people who are extremely gifted intellectually. At the University of Chicago, where I went to school, just about everyone I knew was able to get in the mid-to-high 90th percentile on the Law School Admissions test. Most of these people were average students who did not work that hard. Very few were the sort of people I would want representing me, despite their smarts.

Being a good attorney has a lot to do with motivation: If you were in serious trouble, would you want someone motivated representing you - or someone who was just smart? The motivation makes a huge difference.

Not too long ago, I hired a law firm to work on a case for me. The attorney I hired had gone to great schools several decades ago. I went to watch the attorney argue a case and could not believe how dry, unimpassioned and unprepared he was. In contrast, the attorney on the other side was lit up, energetic and enthusiastically argued his client’s case. The other attorney won.

8. The Attorney's LSAT Score

In order to get into a good law school, an attorney must take the LSAT. This test is important because it shows the person’s ability to solve all sorts of little puzzles, comprehend what they are reading and other important skills. When I was studying for the LSAT, I never really understood why this test was so important. However, now that I am some 15 years out, I do.

Attorneys, of course, do not advertise their LSAT score on their resumes. However, the score does mean something and it is important to determining how effective the attorney is likely to be in solving problems.

The LSAT basically tests how quickly and effectively the potential attorney can solve problems. This is critical to being a good attorney because the best attorneys need to be able to spot issues, process lots of information and reach conclusions effectively. This has real world application in how effective a given attorney is.

When I first started practicing, I worked with an exceptionally bright but boring attorney who had reputedly gotten a perfect score on his LSAT. We were dealing with a very complex set of facts involving a defective satellite that had been launched by a consortium of nations and companies. Our client was being asked to pay tens of millions of dollars for their fault in this issue. Through an ingenious simplification of complex and diverse facts, this attorney was able to make the case that someone else and not our client was at fault. He was the only one who was able to do this in a team of 20+ attorneys studying the problem. It is this sort of penetrating intelligence and ability to analyze facts and problems in a different way that makes the LSAT an important barometer of how good an attorney is.

I have seen this manifest itself multiple times in my career. At the first law firm where I worked, there was a man in his mid-40s who was a genius graduate of Yale Law School. Personally, he was a mess: He’d had all sorts of personal problems, psychological issues, you name it. This man’s job was basically to sit in a corner office and discuss cases with other attorneys in the law firm. He would reach incredible conclusions using the particular facts that would often win cases.
I once had an attorney working for me who got into Harvard Law School after graduating college at the age of 16. (He chose to go to Berkeley because they gave him a full scholarship and he thought the West Coast sounded more interesting.) He had also gotten a near perfect score on the LSAT.

I had a labor and employment matter where I had hired one of the top labor and employment attorneys in the State of California to help me on the issue. This attorney billed out at more than $800 an hour. After running up more than $40,000 in legal bills on the matter and losing several motions, I decided to let this 18-year-old attorney take a stab at the matter. Using his incredible intelligence, within a few hours after starting work on the matter, he was able to find a solution to the presenting issue(s) and win the case for me.

Being able to do excellently on the LSAT proves that an attorney’s intelligence and ability to analyze problems effectively can make a huge difference in how they will ultimately do as an attorney. Attorneys who are not that intelligent may find themselves going down a path that is incorrect and wasting a client’s money. They may spend their time chasing information that is completely irrelevant. That same attorney may take on bad cases and get dismal results. A smarter attorney will run circles around the other attorney in court, in transactions and such because the attorney who isn’t as intelligent will miss spotting important issues and connecting them to what is going on.

While the LSAT score and an attorney’s intelligence are important, I believe it begins to matter less and less the longer an attorney practices, especially if the attorney specializes in one area of law. While it may take a less intelligent attorney longer to learn information, once they absorb the necessary facts, they are likely to be nearly as effective as the smartest attorney once they learn how to apply the information.

9. **The Quality of the Law School**

The quality of the law school an attorney attends is important because often it is an indication of how well they did in college (motivation) and how well they did on the LSAT (intelligence.) Most people applying to law school will try their hardest to get into the best law schools. The sorting done at this stage is an indication of the quality of attorney the person will ultimately be.

As mentioned above, when you employ an attorney, you are hiring them for their ability to solve and analyze problems. Therefore, it is important that an attorney be quite intelligent. While characteristics like aggressiveness and tenacity are important, it is generally not enough when confronted with complex legal problems. Therefore, the quality of a law school attended does have some importance with respect to how effective a given attorney is.

In addition, attorneys who went to the best law schools generally decided early on that they were interested in attending a highly esteemed law school. Getting into a proven law school requires a high degree of motivation throughout an attorney’s college years to get the sort of grades that merit admission to excellent schools. Someone who wanted to be an attorney when they were 18 years old, and was dedicated to this early on, is a good bet for an employer.

See My Discussion and Rankings of Top Law Schools Here

10. **A Good Attorney is Extremely Detail-Oriented**

While it is the last thing I am writing about, it may be the most important quality a great attorney needs. Nothing reveals a poor attorney more than having a lack of attention to detail. Whether it is formatting errors, spelling errors, missing arguments - you name it-the worst attorney always has a problem with details.

Details are hugely important in the legal arena. If an attorney cannot pay attention to details, then they can get ripped up by the other side. Attorneys love pointing out the mistakes that other attorneys make. If you are working with a truly exceptional attorney, you will find they rarely miss important details.

One reason the ability to pay such close attention to details is important is because an attorney's work product needs to be trustworthy. If an attorney is interpreting a piece of law for a judge or another attorney, they are expected to be correct. However, if the attorney's work product is littered with typos, the perception is that the attorney probably has not carefully thought through the issues. Thus, the attorney's
work and thoughts will be discounted, and their client will suffer.

In addition, the entire culture of the law requires that attorneys do not miss important details. The strength of an attorney lies in his or her ability to find small details that the other side does not - and win transactions, cases and so forth due to this. An attorney needs to constantly be aware of details.

For most attorneys, finding small details is something that is practically instinctual. They are bothered by chaos and demand order. They can find what is out of place quickly. They are good at spotting small issues and effectively tying this into the larger picture.

Conclusions

To identify the best attorneys out there, find those with the qualities listed above. What is so shocking to me is that most people do not understand what to look for. The quality of attorneys can vary quite widely - the best attorneys generally have a lot of the characteristics above.