

The Importance of Being Extraordinary

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago I was giving a speech at a law school that I think is ranked about number 25 or so in the United States. I was the only speaker and at least 100 law students had turned up to hear me speak to them about the job market.

At the time, the legal job market in the United States was doing very well. Law school applications were up and lots of people coming out of law school were doing very well.

However, as I looked at the kids in this audience, I could see a high level of arrogance. People were leaning back in their seats and appeared very confident for the most part. They seemed to feel as if they had already made it and would do very well no matter what occurred.

Because I was a full-time legal recruiter at the time, I knew the opposite was likely true. Despite the fact these kids were going to a good school, I knew that only 20% of them would ever get jobs with large prestigious law firms. I also knew that of those, only a small percentage would stay more than a few years. Regardless of the state of the legal market, my assessment of the prospects for most of them was not pretty.

In your life, unless you are truly extraordinary you are not going to get the big rewards. The highest levels of success are only reserved for those who are the absolute best at what they do. You can be average, or above average and get along just fine, but you will never do that well. The highest rewards go to those who are extraordinary.

Being extraordinary is more than being just gifted. Once you are gifted in something, you need to keep pushing yourself to do better and better. You only become extraordinary when you push and develop every muscle you need to in order to be successful.

Instead of my planned speech that night, I decided that I would be better off giving the students a serious pep talk. I knew that despite this law school's pedigree that most of these kids would never make it at the high level they all seemed to think they would. All of these kids expected they would get good jobs at a large law firm.

- Most would never get jobs at large law firms.
- Out of the few that did get jobs at large law firms, only a few of them would end up succeeding.

To make it in the legal profession you need to be extraordinary. You cannot be average, or even good. None of that is enough.

My speech that night was about how all of these kids needed to be extraordinary if they were going to succeed. I told them that most of them might think they would succeed but very few would.

If you are average, you will probably not get a job. If you are good, you will not get a job at a large prestigious law firm. You will get a job at a smaller law firm. If you are extraordinary, you might get a job at a large law firm. However, once you are there you will need to continue being extraordinary to keep your job. You will need to be extraordinary compared to those you are working with who are extraordinary as well. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 5% of you who are able to get jobs with large prestigious firms will probably ever be a partner in one of these firms. You will need to work harder and be smarter. If you do not think you can be extraordinary, you should stop doing what you are doing right now and do something you feel you can be extraordinary doing.

When I was in college, I knew a few math geniuses. These were the sorts of kids who finished all the calculus classes in their high school when they were in ninth grade then spent the next couple of years taking advanced classes at local colleges before they finished high school and formally enrolled in a college. Since I was in a dorm room with these guys and remembered them, I looked a few of them up recently.

One is a math professor at a good sized college and this is sort of what I would expect. He could probably have been a lot of things and he chose something that I am assuming was up his alley. After college he kept going to school and finished a PhD program at a prestigious school somewhere.

The other guy has been a journalist with a small town paper for several years. I looked up some of his articles and they do not appear that in depth or good. I am not saying there is anything wrong with being a journalist. What strikes me about this is that he is in a job that probably is not making the most of his skills. While I hate to say it, just about anyone with a high school education can put together a short article about the local gas station closing. Very few people have the ability to understand complex math and do it at such a high level.

If you've been doing math problems at a higher and higher level for a decade or more and spent thousands of hours doing this, it is probably not a good idea to do an 180-degree turn and do something completely different altogether. This is not going to make the best use of your skills. If you want to be incredible at something, you should continue down the path of your greatest skills.

I wonder what would have happened to this math genius if he kept pushing himself in the direction of his natural gifts. My thought is that he would probably have continued to get better and better. Instead, he has chosen something where he probably does not have the same level of innate ability.

In everything you do, you are going to get the best results if you choose something based on your strengths. The rewards in life generally go to the people who are not good, or even excellent, but rather to those who are extraordinary. If you are going to be truly successful at something, you need to be extraordinary.

I've been a legal recruiter for the past 12 years and am paid to recognize the extraordinary. The legal profession is a very

difficult one to rise in if you want to practice at a high level with the largest firms with the most prestige. I've been reviewing at least 100 resumes a day for most of the 12 years I've been in the industry. Because getting jobs with the very best firms is so competitive, very few attorneys can ever do it. As I told the law students from the top 25 law school, if you want to work at the very best law firms in the United States, you need to be extraordinary.

There are roughly 250+ accredited law schools in the United States. Out of these, 25 are very good. If you do not go to one of these 25 law schools, you are generally going to need to do incredibly well wherever you go to get a top job with a major law firm coming out of law school.

- You will probably need to be one of the top five or 10 students in your class to get the best jobs available with the largest firms in your city (the best firms in a city generally always hire out of local law schools)
- If you want to go to a major city not near your law school (Chicago, New York, Los Angeles), you are going to need to be the number one or number two student in your law school class.

In order to get into a top 25 law school, you generally need to do very well just to get in there. You will need to have excellent grades at whatever college you go to and do upwards of the 90% percentile on your admissions test to law school. You need to do very well just to get into these law schools.

If you go to a law school that is not in the top 10, you are going to need to be in the top 50% of your class in most cases to get a job with a large law firm. There are numerous exceptions to this. However, this is the general rule and had been for some time. Some people who are not in the top 50% may be very good at interviews, good looking, have connections, and so forth that enable them to get into the best firms. These are things that ultimately set them apart and make them extraordinary.

If you are coming from a top 10 law school, there is a whole pecking order of law firms as well. For example, there are very few attorneys who will get jobs at the top 5 most prestigious law firms. Certain jobs will require that students from these top law schools be at the very top of their classes. Other jobs will require that students be near the top of their classes. If a student from a top 10 law school is at the bottom of their class, they will likely not get a job with a large prestigious law firm and may not get a job at all.

In life, the largest rewards go to the people who are extraordinary. You need to be truly extraordinary if you are going to get the rewards.

In the Olympics, there are gold, silver, and bronze medals. Everyone remembers who got the gold medal. Notwithstanding, very few people remember who got the silver and bronze medal. If you are not in the top three, you get NOTHING--no rewards whatsoever. You do not get a reward despite the fact you have to be the best in the world to even be competing in the Olympics.

One of the saddest things out there is that many people are doing the exact opposite of what they should be doing. Because they are not doing what they should be doing, they tend to get the worst results possible. You should only do something where you have the chance to be extraordinary. If you cannot be extraordinary, then you are likely wasting your time.

Why pursue a career doing something where you are never going to be the best? The odds are you have some sort of skill that is truly extraordinary that the world recognizes. Why aren't you doing that?

Life will pay any price you ask of it, if you ask intelligently. Asking of life is more about choosing what to ask than simply asking. If you are a poor writer and ask to be a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, life probably will not give you this. If you are a gifted mathematician and ask to be a noble prize winning scientist you probably stand a better chance.

Life is about focusing your efforts where you are likely to be extraordinary.

If you do a poor job you will get pain. You will lose. The world will not recognize you and you will have a hard time.

When you do a good job you get poor rewards. A bronze medal in the Olympics is not something that people thrust above their head with a great deal of joy. This is a poor reward.

When you are really excellent you get good results. You may get a silver medal.

The most rewards come when you are at the level of outstanding. When you are outstanding you get all the rewards. The rewards for being outstanding are completely disproportionate.

The difference between excellent and outstanding is not that great.

The people who are outstanding are constantly demanding of themselves just a little bit more. They are able to do this because they push themselves and do things they do not want to do. The athlete practices harder. When they are competing, they reach within themselves to get even more out of themselves.

Outstanding is when you raise the standard for everyone. For example, Thomas Edison raised the standard for everyone. Because he kept pushing and pushing, he was able to discover how to successfully light a room with electricity using a light bulb. Due to what he achieved, everyone now has electric light. A new standard was born.

Many people in Edison's position probably would not have continued despite all the failure he experienced. The story is that it took him 10,000 attempts before he was able to perfect the light bulb. Instead of accepting that he failed 9,999 times, Edison is quoted as saying: "I have not failed. I just found 9,999 ways that do not work."

You build muscle when you do things you do not want to do. To build muscle, you need to push and do things that are uncomfortable to get growth.

The reason it is so important to be working in areas where you are truly gifted is because you will always be competing with people who are also very good. It is not enough be gifted. You need to be gifted AND work harder than the next guy.

I saw a *60 Minutes* segment about the swimmer Michael Phelps recently. The story was incredibly interesting and talked about how at one point Phelps did not miss a daily 6:30 am swim practice for several years. Here is someone who is a naturally gifted swimmer already and yet he never missed a practice. He just kept trying to get better and better at this skill.

Could someone who was good at ice hockey suddenly switch gears and compete with a guy like Phelps at swimming? No. It would be impossible.

You need to do what you are really excellent at and then work like hell to be extraordinary. There is no other way. All the rewards go to the person who is extraordinary.

