

You Should Not Dabble: To Succeed It's All or Nothing

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

My last helicopter lesson was on a Christmas morning several years ago. I'm very glad that I made that my last helicopter lesson. I'd shown up at the flight school around 6:00 am. The previous evening, I'd been out pretty late and was not in a mood to fly a helicopter that morning. I had to go to school at that hour, however, because it was the only time slot I was willing to pay for (it's cheaper to rent a helicopter early in the morning), and I also had a [full-time job](#) to be at during the day. I am going to tell you about something today that very few people do in their [job search](#) and life: persevere when things get a little rough. There is an "other side" to most things that is really worth doing and has large rewards. The person who perseveres in a job is generally the one likely to get a raise or important promotion. The person who perseveres in any profession, whether it's acting, academia, sales, or anything, is the one most likely to break through to the other side and get huge rewards. Nowhere is this more clear than in the struggle so many people go through when trying to become an actor or actress in Hollywood. Hollywood is incredible because there are tens of thousands of young men and women all dying to be famous actors and actresses. Year after year, I meet these people. They're like ants. They work as waiters and waitresses and do all sorts of things. You meet them when you're shopping for clothes in stores. When they wait on you, they are quick to tell you their job is just a "part time thing" while they wait to get an [acting job](#). You see these want-to-be actors and actresses all over the place. In restaurants in certain parts of Los Angeles, probably 85% of the waiters and waitresses are people who want to be actors and actresses.

The struggle to become an actor or actress is grueling, and the people who choose this route for their lives face almost impossible odds. They work jobs they aren't interested in and take the money they make and give it to a myriad of acting schools around Los Angeles that are eager to take it. They move to Los Angeles from all over the world and stand in lines around the block whenever there's an audition. They try to get agents and do everything within their power to get into the business. Many use people in their struggle to get to the top. It's a very difficult life trying to become a fixture in this industry. They sacrifice getting an education and skills for another profession in order to get into the business. The stories about actors and actresses being "discovered" while walking around a mall are rare indeed. Most of the people who make it in the business are the ones who sacrifice and persist in the face of overwhelming obstacles. These obstacles include poverty, rejection, and a whole host of other things. For every 1,000 people who go into the business, I would say the odds of one of them "making it" are probably less than 1 in 1,000, or .1 percent.

What happens to most of these people, due to the extraordinary obstacles they face, is most quit along the way. Because so many quit, the ones who stick with it and continue to improve their craft are the ones who usually succeed. Anything that's worth having or doing generally requires incredible obstacles, and the obstacles are put in our way to drive us forward. The same obstacles that exist in the acting world also exist in the legal and business world. At many large [law firms](#), they may hire as many as 100 attorneys fresh out of [law school](#) each year. Nine or ten years later, probably no more than two or three of these attorneys are partners at the law firm. Why? Because most of the attorneys get discouraged and quit along the way. The law firm makes it difficult for them to become partner and puts massive obstacles in their way. These obstacles include 18-hour work days, the fear of getting fired, and more. Most people simply think it's too much and end up leaving. Those who stay may end up making \$1,000,000 a year or more as partners in the law firm, and those who leave will make a fraction of that—likely for their entire careers. Obstacles are something that really separate people.

I remember in college the incredible number of kids who entered school wanting to be doctors. The obstacle to get into medical school then was a class called organic chemistry. A high percentage of people simply couldn't make it through this course and, as a consequence, never became doctors.

The world always asks: "How much do you want this?" If you don't want something enough, and you don't continue through, then you won't receive the rewards at the other side.

I know several people who spent their entire college years working very hard to get into law school. Then they went to law school and worked hard as well. Then they took the bar exam and failed. Then they tried again and failed a second time. Then they gave up and pursued another profession. The world is like that. Obstacles are put in our way to make it difficult for us to achieve something.

My mother's brother had been a decorated helicopter pilot in Vietnam and had spent his career [flying helicopters](#) primarily between oil rigs in the Middle East and the Gulf of Mexico. He'd spent the last part of his career flying helicopter ambulances in Toledo, Ohio. Early one morning, while going to pick up a drunk driver who'd been in an accident with a doctor and nurse aboard, he crashed the helicopter into a tree as he was coming off of a lake. He died and so did the doctor. Somehow, and miraculously, the nurse on the helicopter had managed to grab onto the tree during the crash. She was rescued from the tree among the debris of the helicopter crash. The day my grandmother found out about this tragedy, she died as well. I'm not sure what motivated me to take up this profession, which had resulted in so much tragedy for our family. I guess I felt like I needed to prove something to myself and the lure of flying was something I was incredibly interested in.

My last few weeks at the helicopter school had scared me quite a bit.

First, learning to fly a helicopter is a very difficult thing. It took me about two weeks to learn to control the thing. A helicopter is not like flying an airplane—it is exceptionally difficult to keep the helicopter from going out of control, and it's an inherently unstable piece of machinery. I persevered, however, and eventually flew the helicopter and knew what I was doing. At this point, I was just putting in hours so I could take a test and get my license. Notwithstanding, these little helicopters are really scary and a little gust of wind can send them careening a little bit in one direction or another. Despite knowing how to fly a helicopter, I was never comfortable with them.

Second, I'd shown up to school one day and saw a group of men talking in a corner in hushed tones. The first thing I did, of

course, was to walk up to them and see what they were talking about. It seemed quite unusual to me they were speaking so quietly.

"What's up guys?" I said.

They all looked at me very seriously and with droopy eyes.

"There was a helicopter disaster at Long Beach Airport."

Without getting into too many specifics, there was another helicopter flight school at Long Beach Airport. Apparently, the manufacturer of the little Robinson helicopters I was flying had convened at a safety demonstration to show them off. Two helicopters had taken off at the same time in front of a large audience. As they were rising, a gust of wind had caught one of the helicopters and it'd gone careening into the other. The blade of the helicopter, caught by a gust of wind, had decapitated the pilot of the other helicopter. Horrified people on the ground had watched this as the helicopter spun out of control with passengers still in it and crashed into the ground exploding into flames. For another 15 or so seconds, the surviving pilot had tried to get control of his helicopter but he was unable to control it and crashed, resulting in a couple of deaths. The entire thing was shocking, and even people who hadn't seen it were shocked by it. Since this was a safety demonstration, and there were only a few major helicopter schools in the Los Angeles area, this caused me a bit of concern. In fact, since this happened with the same little helicopters I was flying, I was unsure whether or not it made sense for me to continue. I persevered, however.

Third, a few days previously, I'd shown up for school at 6:00 am (I went to school before work in the morning) and received a real shocker. I was the only one at the helicopter school brave enough to take lessons at 6:00 am. The school had three helicopters, and when I showed up each morning, the helicopters were always right there in front of the school. One morning I showed up, and there were only two helicopters.

"Where's the other helicopter," I asked the head of the school as he was opening up the office of the school.

"We lost it yesterday. It crashed a few miles from here. Thank God only the pilot was killed."

I was amazed. The man seemed so casual about everything. What had happened to the helicopter was even more astonishing. The R22 helicopter I was flying has a manual carburetor. When it's cold, you must pull this while flying to prevent ice from developing in the carburetor. Apparently, someone was flying around in this helicopter and forgot to pull the carburetor heater and the fuel froze. The helicopter lost power and they went plunging to the earth and died.

On this Christmas morning, I was already getting a little freaked out around helicopters due to all of the accidents I had heard about recently. My instructor was a [nuclear engineer](#) who had gone to MIT and worked for an aerospace company in Los Angeles designing propulsion systems. He taught me how to fly helicopters every morning before he went to work. He was incredibly uptight and incredibly nerdy. Without boring you too much, on that Christmas morning, I started the helicopter and didn't follow some sort of procedure he mandated needed to be followed every single time the helicopter was started. He went absolutely ballistic and started screaming at me and lost his cool.

"You know what," I said. "This is too much. Let's call it a day."

That was the last time I ever went near a helicopter, and I stopped just at the "cusp" of becoming a licensed helicopter pilot. That was probably a stupid thing to do because, if I had persisted, I would have a skill I could use forever. But I quit, and I'm pretty confident I'll never go back.

There aren't a lot of helicopter pilots out there because of people like me. Most people who try to learn how to fly a helicopter quit like I did. They get frightened, the work becomes too much, the cost becomes too much, and more. Therefore, helicopter pilots become scarce, and this is precisely what the market wants. I remember my uncle was able to make \$120,000 a year in the mid-1980s flying helicopters in the Middle East. When you do something that few people persist with, you can get really serious rewards.

The list of things that I've started and not completed boggles my mind. You probably have a similar list of things as well:

- Piano lessons
- [Being an attorney](#)
- Going to business school
- Surfing
- Being an asphalt contractor
- [Yoga teacher](#) school
- Being a full-time [legal recruiter](#)
- Restoring a car
- Calling former business associates at least once every six months
- Businesses
- Restoring a boat
- Friendships and relationships
- Exercise at 6:30 am every morning
- Reading certain books
- Gardening
- Going hiking once a week
- Meditation
- Tennis lessons
- Being a [law professor](#)

One of the things I've noticed with every business I've ever worked for or started is there is generally a period of hardship. After you start the business and get going, there tends to be a time where the going gets really tough. It's easy to start anything, but it's more difficult to finish something and really get it going. It's like my experience learning to fly a helicopter: I analyzed the conditions around me and I just stop trying. This is what most businesses do, and it's why most businesses fail. It's easy to rent a storefront and declare you're selling dresses or whatever your business may be. It's easy to say you're starting a business online build a website for it. However, when businesses are faced with challenges (a slow

economy, payroll, problems getting inventory, etc.) most of them give up. I heard recently that something like 98% of all businesses are out of business more than a decade after they start. This is such an incredible percentage that it's difficult to believe. But it's true. Less than one in 50 companies continue for more than 10 years.

We often quit at that last moment right before we succeed. This is something everyone does. We do this with many, many things. So many of us just decide at some point not to push through and not to keep going even when a little bit of extra effort would push us through. We do this in relationships. We do this with exercise. We do this with learning. We do this with diets. We do this with so many things.

We tell ourselves that if something hurts we should stop. This is a huge mistake that many people make and it's something that holds us back.

When I was in high school, I played defensive tackle on the football team. I was a big guy and defensive tackles were always expected to be slow. However, when our football coach would make all of the players run laps around the track I'd always be first. I was not afraid of the pain of running harder than the other players who were more suited to long-distance running than I was. I fought through the pain. I also learned how to lift weights when I was playing football. When you're lifting weights and doing so competitively, essentially what you are doing is taking your muscles to the point of "failure" where they can push no more, and where it's physically impossible for them to go on. What most people do, however, is they never end up pushing their muscles to failure. Instead, they just go through the motions because they're afraid of the incredible pain that this sort of failure brings to their muscles. They're in pain and get scared and stop. The bodies of weightlifters you see on television or on the cover of magazines are people who learned to push through the pain. The incredible muscles they have are the result of this pain.

When you see 85-pound supermodels and stars on the covers of magazines, they are people who know how to push through pain. They know how to not eat and put themselves through the pain of hunger. The result on the other side of this, and for the ones who persist, is being extremely thin and looking the way they believe they need to.

It's the people who keep going and push through who ultimately get the best results in everything. The secret to being incredibly good at everything is pushing through and getting better and better when others around you are quitting. You need to choose to do something and follow through.

That's all there is to it.

You cannot quit.

You also need to be seen as the best possible choice in everything you do.

When an employer is hiring someone, they typically have a lot of choices. In both the best and worst of economic times, employers have a lot of choices about the person they hire. What they're asking themselves when making these hiring decisions is whether or not they're making the best possible decision. They don't want to hire dabblers or people who are "trying something out." They want to hire people who are committed and have gone through and over all of the obstacles that most people don't go through.

One of the most ridiculous things I see with people applying for jobs is when they take their résumé and redo it several different ways so they look good for [different types of jobs](#). These job seekers are "jacks-of-all-trades" and will seemingly be appropriate for every job out there. This isn't something that really does anyone much long-term good. Employers have a lot of decisions when figuring out who to hire and they rarely want to hire the "chameleon" who looks like they may be mildly qualified for the job. An employer wants to make the best decision they can when hiring, and the sort of person they're looking for is "the expert." They want to hire the person who is incredibly committed to a job and has persisted against the odds when others have given up. This is what matters. Employers want experts and people who are the best at what they do--they don't want dabblers. Anyone who's going to hire you is going to want to make sure you're the best they can possibly get in the market. Employers don't want to hire people who are casual passersby at anything. They want to hire people who are committed and will keep going despite the worst of circumstances.

I had a candidate once who was a [technology attorney](#) with expertise in helping Internet firms with technology agreements. She had become an expert in doing this at her first law firm, which was on the east coast of the United States. She did this directly out of law school. In late 2000, she'd lost her job with this law firm because this type of expertise was no longer in demand. In fact, this particular expertise became like selling ice to Eskimos. She unceremoniously lost her job with a large American law firm and, by the time she came to me, I felt like it was nearly impossible that this woman would ever [find a job](#) doing what she did ever again. It was my opinion that she needed to try something else. She wasn't someone who was interested in my opinion, however. Despite the fact that she was unemployed, had no money saved, and was living off credit cards, she was traveling around to various conferences around the United States (which at that point had very few participants) to learn about the latest developments in this branch of Internet law. She was also busy writing articles about technology agreements for various trade magazines.

When I spoke to this woman, I told her that there really was not a lot of work out there for people like her--in fact, there was none I was aware of. She told me she didn't care because she liked the work and was good at it. I was so impressed with this woman I told myself I would do everything within my power to help her. I started working with her and trying to get her interviews all over the United States. At this point in time, I had some firms I was close with that would interview people if I simply pushed them to do so. They liked me a lot and trusted my advice. It became a little difficult, however, because despite my relationships with these law firms, they weren't interested in paying to fly this girl around the United States to various locations. I didn't have any money either at the time. What I did have, however, was a frequent flier account with miles in it that I'd been saving up for probably close to a decade. I cherished those miles and had never touched them, but there was something about this girl's passion and her situation that just really moved me. I ended up cashing in all of my frequent flier miles to fly this girl from the East Coast all over the United States to get to interviews. I'd been planning a summer vacation to Italy with my wife using those miles and ended up not going because I used the miles for this girl instead. I was that impressed with her dedication. I'd never met the girl and didn't even know what she looked like. I just knew that if someone was that dedicated to something in the face of so much adversity, then this was a good thing.

Despite the fact that they didn't have any of the sort of work she did, one of the law firms I flew her out to see ended up hiring her. They did so due to her passion, as well. A year or so later, the sort of work she did miraculously picked up for a few years, and the law firm was well-served having her on board. Her career thrived for a few years. Then her law firm (a large national law firm) suddenly went out of business all over the world and closed down all of its offices.

I felt like crying because this time I felt like this girl would never get a job now. I called her on the phone and she was

surprisingly chipper and happy. She told me that she was going to open her own practice doing this sort of work and already had more clients than she would be able to handle. I looked at her biography on the law firm website. She'd continued doing what she did before with technology agreements and was now a leader in several technology organizations for attorneys around the Bay Area, had written numerous articles, and had become a "go-to-person" for many of the Internet companies in the Bay Area and around the United States. The last I checked, she had her own law practice and was doing exceptionally well.

What is so inspiring to me about this story is that in 1999 and 2000 there were thousands of attorneys doing what she was doing. I'm aware of only two people who continued this sort of practice when all of the work went away. One of them is now one of the most important attorneys at Google, and the other is this woman. Both have been well-served by picking something and sticking to it. Despite my expertise as a legal recruiter, I remember at the time thinking they were both crazy persisting at what they were doing--but both did, and by persisting, they succeeded in a major way. Persisting in something you have faith in against all obstacles is one of the most important keys to success. You shouldn't dabble: to succeed, it's all or nothing.

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