

## The Importance of Sharing Ideas

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in [law school](#), I went into the library one afternoon and took a seat at a desk across from a guy I knew quite well. We were not great friends but I had been over to his home a few times and he was a likeable guy in all respects. Both of us were in the same Property class and we had an exam coming up in about two weeks. In your first year of law school, Property is one of the more difficult classes and requires a lot of study and preparation because it is a different way of thinking.

In law school, the way people typically study is through outlines. An outline is essentially a distillation of the reading in class and insights from the [Professor](#). Because there is so much to learn, what typically happens is groups of students get together to create them over a 15 week semester. For example, 15 students will get together and one week one student may do the outline and the next week another student will do the outline.

After about 15 minutes, I looked up and realized that the outline he was studying from was absolutely incredible. It was incredible because it was very well organized and was tracking both the Professor's comments and everything that had happened in the class very closely. It appeared to be something that was made in a prior year and had distilled the same class the professor had taught over and over again in a really good way.

I asked my friend if I could see the outline. When I asked him this he hesitated a little bit and I could tell it was not something he really wanted to show me. Before he showed it to me he looked around the library to see if anyone was watching us. When he realized we were alone, he handed me the outline but not before telling me that if anyone walked up to not let them see me looking at it. I thought this was unusual but agreed.

As I looked through the outline more closely I realized this was something that would really make my study of Property go a lot better. The outline was exceptionally well done in all respects. I immediately realized I needed this outline.

"Can I copy this outline?" I asked.

"I promised the people I got it from I would not let anyone copy it," he said.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm sorry. I can't."

This sounded absolutely ridiculous to me. For the next 10 minutes or so I sat there and eventually talked him into letting me copy the outline. In order to copy the outline he made me promise to drive to a city called Culpepper, that was around 30 minutes outside of Charlottesville, Virginia where I was going to law school. He was absolutely paranoid that someone who had given him this outline would see me with it and then blame him for giving me the outline.

"These people are vicious ... " he told me.

A few hours later I had copied the outline and drove over to his home and dropped it off. I chatted with him for another 10 minutes or so about where he had gotten this outline and who else had the outline. Incredibly, he informed me that he had gotten the outline from the same group of people who were in my outline group for property. He did not name all of the people, but he did name around 10 of the 15 people who were in my outline group as all having it. They had been having a "study party" or something along those lines that he had showed up at, and they had all been using this outline. They allowed him to copy it but made him promise never to give it to anyone else. As far as he knew, only these 10 people had a copy of the outline.

The reason these people did not want others to have the outline was because the outline was so good. They believed that this outline was something that gave them an advantage and would enable them to perform much better in the final exam in the Property class. Essentially, the idea was that if they had this and others did not then this "artificial advantage" would enable them to do better, [get a better job](#) and be more successful.

The next day in Property class, I looked around when the class began and watched those 10 people very closely. The classroom was a podium and I always sat at the very back of the classroom, so I could see everyone in the class and also look down. About 10 minutes into the class, those 10 people all had this "secret outline" out and were taking notes on it and so forth.

A couple of days later, before the class started, everyone was waiting out in the hall of the classroom for the doors to open. Individually, I went up to several of the 10 people who were in my outline group but also possessed this "secret outline" and asked them if they had any other outlines except the ones that our group was making each week. Each one said something along the lines of the following:

"No, but if you come across any other outlines, please let me know. I could use one."

I was amazed by this. Some of the people who were claiming not to have outlines were people I thought were my friends. This was something that was quite incredible to me because not only were these people lying to me, they were all sticking together. It almost seemed that they had coordinated responses for anyone who asked them about the outlines. It was not cheating, but it almost seemed worse. What made this so upsetting to me was that these were people who were in an outline group with me, which I mistakenly believed meant that we were all cooperating together to achieve something. I was wrong.

I was in charge of doing the last outline in the Property course. In this week, the Professor decided to cover "new developments in Property law" and discussed some new cases that had happened over the course of the past year. None of this information was on the special outline that the students were hoarding in my class. The last class took place about three or four days before the final exam, if I remember correctly. The final exam was "open book" meaning you could use your notes and other information. Notwithstanding, it was also extremely important to know what the Professor had said.

After the class, I dutifully made my outline. I spent several hours on the outline and made it the absolute best I could. I made 15 copies so that I could give one to each of the members of my outline groups. I put them in their mailboxes in the student commons. However, as I started putting these in the boxes, I decided to play a little bit of the same game that had been played with me. I decided I would not give my outline to the students who had lied to me about not having an outline. I remember throwing away the extra outlines in the trash, right near the mailboxes in the student commons.

This was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made. Without getting into a lot of details, those people became extremely upset with me because about 30% of the final exam was devoted to the last class and things the teacher had talked about in class. Because the last class was so close to final exams, many people had not bothered to show up because they were studying or sleeping in after a late night studying. Many of those people probably believed that they had everything they needed in their "secret outline".

I will never forget when I got out of the Property exam and was standing in the hall. A girl who was in my outline group came up to me all red in the face, with watery eyes. She was actually was a pretty nice person, besides the fact that she had hid the outline she had from me. She started screaming at me and told me that I had ruined her life and she had probably failed the exam due to me not giving her the outline. I got many mean looks from others who exited the exam, who I had not given the outline to. One guy came up to me and told me my outline had saved his life. But for the most part, I had done something I was not proud of. In retrospect, I really feel like this is one of the worst things I have ever done. I simply should not have played these games with them by withholding information like what had been done to me.

Even when the next school year started, there were people who were still upset with me. I remember someone else coming up to me at a party and getting angry with me, telling me they had gotten a horrible grade in property due to me. Then I remember confronting the person with the fact that they had lied to me about their outline and seeing a large group of people actually turn against them. A lot of people learned about this story, and a lot of people were on my side. Still, in my opinion the "tit for tat" was the wrong thing and not something I should have done. In one quick moment, by not providing information to people, I had made several enemies and changed my law school experience in a negative way.

It is largely due to this experience that I run my career the way I do today. I am happy to share any and all information I know about [getting jobs](#). I never hide the ball or hide information from anyone. I provide people with as much information as I possibly can about everything I know. My goal is to put as much information out there as I can--with jobs, with advice and everything. I have taken what was a bad experience and turned it into something to help others.

The idea of hiding information is something that starts very early for many of us. I am reminded of when I was in elementary school and students put their arms around their papers during tests to prevent others around them from seeing their answers. This idea of "hiding answers" and hiding information is something that stays with many of us throughout our entire lives, and ends up having a major influence on our entire lives.

It is the same with our careers. Many people are very secretive about information and their ideas. They do not want others to take credit for what they are doing. When you hoard information, you are constantly playing a "political game" where you are judging if one person or another can know something. In addition, people who hoard information constantly seem to have stale ideas because you only get their information when they deem it is relevant to tell you about them. There are a lot of people out there who are secretive with information. I cannot believe how much I saw this when I was practicing law. I still see it in my job today.

One of my biggest beliefs is that if you are continually giving away all of your ideas, then you constantly put yourself in a need to replenish your ideas. This forces you to be creative and come up with new ideas and information and develops a psychology within you where you are always looking to share what you know with people, instead of looking to hoard what you know. When you share ideas others also tell you their ideas, and this gives you access to more ideas. That is, the ideas you share with others end up coming back to you in the form of access to more ideas.

Several years after graduating from college and after having ended my career as an attorney, I decided to go to business school. I enrolled in Stanford Business School and packed my bags and went up to the school. Prior to classes starting, they had an orientation where all of the new students spent the weekend together getting to know each other and also had the opportunity to meet all of the students who were getting ready to graduate from business school. I remember going to a cocktail party that was being held for the entering students to meet the exiting students. I was excited to see what the exiting students were doing. I was also assigned a "mentor" who was an exiting student I could call with any questions I had.

I spoke with my mentor and asked him what he was doing after graduation. I was very curious. He told me he was starting a business, but that the business was so confidential he could not even tell me what it was about. It was a strange experience standing there, and I wondered what the point was of going to school with someone who could not even tell me what he was doing. I spoke to several other people at the party and I remember another guy did the exact same thing with me. I felt it was very unusual to have no interest whatsoever in sharing what you were doing. It really left a bad taste in my mouth. "Is this what business is about?" I wondered.

In the book *Love is the Killer App: How to Win Business and Influence Friends*, author Tim Sanders writes:

Over and over I have discovered that the people in the bizworld who are most successful, and happiest, are the lovecats. These are the people who you always like the most, the ones who are passionate from 9 to 5, or 8 to 10, or whatever their hours. They are the ones who are most generous with their knowledge, their address book, and their compassion.

There are real benefits to sharing what you know. Ideas are open knowledge that anyone should have access to. There are never any benefits in not sharing most knowledge with the people around you. I have always believed in the power of sharing ideas and have found that the more I have done this the better our companies (and I) have done.

In closing, I want to share with you an email I sent to every member of our company this morning. It is about ideas and the importance of sharing. I send this email (in one form or another) each year as one of our companies, [BCG Attorney Search](#), completes a book for every [law firm](#) in the United States:

Good Morning,

I am happy to enclose [The 2009 BCG Attorney Search Guide to America's Top 50 Law Schools](#) (the "Guide"). Special thanks go to Lalita and her team. Indeed, they have spent the past year working on this important project that signifies what BCG Attorney Search and our other companies represent.

Each year since BCG Attorney Search's inception we have written the Guide and sent it out to every law firm in the United States. I remember first working on the Guide when the company had less than 5 employees.

Providing the Guide to law firms each year and working on the Guide is more of a symbolic act than anything.

First, it is something that insures that our company always has very strong research skills and is "going deep" and knows how to work with voluminous amounts of information. This focus on research has enabled us to venture into numerous fields where these skills are valued that I never could have imagined--whether it is job sites or researching hiring contacts for Legal Authority.

Recruiters who know how to do good research and find information that others do not know about typically do the best here. Our sites which are best at researching information ([LawCrossing](#)) also do much better than newer job sites that are not as good. Our company has been benefited tremendously by the power of research and the more and better we have become at this the better we have done.

Second, working on the Guide each year forces us to pay attention to writing well and our editing skills. Writing is something that is incredibly valuable. Our recruiters are expected to write well. Our companies write hundreds of articles each week. We are always improving our writing-related skills--even in something as simple as how we list jobs. For example, last weekend we did a giant project to eliminate junk characters in our job listings.

The more we have written the better we have done. We owe a lot of our success to our ability to get search engine rankings which has a lot to do with how much we have written. Search engines and others look at us and say "these guys have a lot to talk about" and people come and they listen. We need to always be sharing what we know and writing and speaking. This is an important core value of BCG Attorney Search and it has made our recruiters strong.

Third, the Guide is about sharing information. Our company has always believed and continues to believe that it is best to share information rather than hold it close to the vest like so many other do. We want people to know what we know.

Sharing information brings people to us and allows people to see us as authorities in our field rather than dabblers. We want people to know what we know and we are not afraid to tell them that. If we feel someone cannot get a job through BCG Attorney Search because they do not have the pedigree, our recruiters are happy to share with them another way to get a job. This is not something many other recruiters will do. Our recruiters share information, however, because this is who we are.

Fourth, the Guide is about providing value without expecting something in return. At BCG Attorney Search we spend a great deal of money and time working on the Guide each year and provide it to law schools, law firms and others for free. We want them to benefit from interacting with us and we want to be seen as someone who is an asset and not someone just interested in short term rewards.

It is important to always be providing value. We want to provide value at every turn. I once read something written by Joe Vitale, a well known copywriter. Vitale started a habit of giving away books to people. Pretty soon he realized that the more books he gave away the more books came back to him. He constantly was giving away books and he realized after doing this for some time that for every book he gave away he received far more books back than just one new book. His library just kept growing and getting bigger and bigger. And if he gave away a book about one idea someone would give him a book about a related idea that he knew nothing about.

The point he was trying to make was that the more you give away and the more you share the more comes back to you and the more you ultimately learn and know. This is an incredible concept but it is something that can really change your life and change our business. It is something that the Guide represents and, if anything, it is its greatest meaning.

A lot of who BCG Attorney Search is and what our companies represent is signified in the Guide. As we go into an incredible economic storm and watch companies and law firms around us that once seemed invincible collapse, I am confident that what is signified by in the Guide is something that will enable us to continue growing and provide for our future.

The more our companies have steered towards the values signified in the Guide the better they have done. The more we have strayed the worse we have done. I believe in these values and that is why I am so proud to present you with the Guide yet again this year. Providing you with the Guide forces me to think about our values each year and what really matters.

--Harrison

#### **THE LESSON**

You must share information freely, and never hide information from anyone. When you give away all your ideas you create the need to replenish them, which opens the door to creativity and innovation. Furthermore, sharing your ideas with others give you access to more ideas. People who hoard information tend to have stale ideas because they only share or seek innovation when relevant, meaning that their own store of information stagnates.

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