

Relationships, Inefficiency, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the greatest obstacles for efficient businesses is the influence of relationships. In fact, relationships are sometimes so strong that they can ultimately end up crippling a business.

Conversely, some of the greatest powers you personally have in your own career and in business are relationships. Relationships are a powerful force that you can use to your advantage in your career. Inefficient and *top-heavy* organizations are everywhere, and they become this way mostly due to the power of relationships between the people working there. People often get hired and stay employed--due almost entirely to their ability to connect with their employer--and develop strong relationships at the workplace. I would go so far as to say that probably 20% to 30% of the people inside of most organizations are not actually needed at all. These people are kept employed and are allowed to collect salaries, benefits, and so forth because of the power of the relationships they have developed inside the organization. Others like having these people around and will protect them. This is a good, safe position in which to find yourself.

I used to defend companies when they were sued for employment discrimination, wrongful termination, and so forth. I defended more of these cases than I can even remember; they are a dime a dozen. Generally, when people lose their jobs, it is because they did not have solid relationships within the company, people did not like them, and so forth.

Furthermore, people often lose jobs because they are not protected by others inside of an organization. One of my parents worked for years inside of a major American company, not doing much of anything, because my parent was *protected* by someone high up. It was due to this relationship that this parent was able to keep their job for so long. There is a constant tension between efficiency and inefficiency inside of organizations, and often relationships can win out over purely rational business-based decisions.

As any business grows, a *protectionist sentiment* develops, as employees protect each other and do their best to honor various relationships. It is for this reason that most companies generally cease to be competitive within the market or go out of business altogether. In reality, draconian cutbacks, harsh management, and cold and calculating number crunchers are the ones who ultimately save companies and organizations. At the same time, these sorts of people are also typically the greatest enemy of relationships in organizations.

I have been deeply involved in the legal profession for most of my career. Back in the early 1980s, most law firms in the United States and throughout the world dealt with what was called the *lockstep* compensation system. In effect, this was a system of compensation wherein people were compensated more money for each year they worked at their law firms, regardless of their productivity, the amount of business they generated, or other criteria. The idea was that the older attorneys had paid their dues within the law firm by being there for the longest amount of time. Other law firms simply had compensation systems that were less formal, and might be decided through committees, for example. In this case, it was possible for the firm to determine individuals' salaries based on the quality of their relationships with superiors.

Starting in the 1980s, **consulting firms** began to come into law offices, and they started to mix it up. The consultants showed the law firms that they could increase their profitability by rewarding the highest producers based on their individual productivity, instead of paying everyone based on informal compensation systems. The consultants set up *point systems* and other measurements of productivity within the law firms. Before long, a sea change occurred inside of the legal profession, and numerous attorneys ended up losing their jobs or taking massive hits in their compensation. The relationships inside of the organizations became drastically de-emphasized and, instead, the decisive factor became *numbers* and other quantifiable items. This change is still occurring in **law firms**, and it has been devastating to numerous attorneys, specifically to those whose lives and careers have revolved around their ability to create relationships within their organizations. Law firms, however, have had to undergo this restructuring in order to survive.

I have the most *hands-off* management style you can ever imagine. Throughout the years, I have employed numerous managers whom I have given near complete discretion to make all sorts of hiring decisions without my involvement. In watching how these people have hired new employees, I have learned that people hire the kinds of people they like, relate to, and want to spend time with outside of work. I have seen this in most companies, firms, and other organizations I have observed throughout the years.

Several years ago, I hired a human resources director who had experience in working for a large multinational organization in a hiring capacity. On one of his first days of work, the two of us had lunch and spent some time together. While I am not sure how it came out, the man told me that he really liked thin women with giant breasts. I did not think much about it at the time; however, I did find it somewhat humorous, considering this fellow was an older man with a real *professorial* sort of demeanor. I filed this information away in the back of my head and forgot all about it.

I met with this man by phone and in person once a week, and during these meetings, I told him about various people that the company needed to hire. The company was growing very quickly at the time and this person was generally hiring several people per week. Each evening he would take home tons of résumés, review them, and hire people the next day. Because our company was spread over three buildings in Pasadena, I did not meet, nor did I see, all of the people the guy was hiring. In addition, I was traveling a great deal, so I was not in the office as much as I would have liked to be.

At some point, I was in the office and I took a look around. I immediately realized that the man had hired nothing but thin women with large breasts. In addition, the more I watched this story unfold, the more I noticed that the women he had hired all seemed to *fawn* all over him, understanding that he liked feeling validated constantly by women.

Was this a bad thing? I am not sure. What I do know is that, from what I understood, all of the women were pretty good at their jobs--at least to begin with. As time went on, however, it turned out that a few of the women were not performing very well. One, for example, had spent the majority of her time cutting and pasting outfit combination ideas into a Word document, instead of working. When her horrible work ethic was brought to my attention, the human resources director said:

"She is the most valuable person in this company," and he did everything he could to defend her, although she was clearly not necessary to the company's functioning. The human resources director fought with everything he had to keep this woman around, due to a perceived

connection that he shared with her. This is just a minor example of the power of relationships in business.

I remember another employee who had a real leaning toward a certain type of employee. The person that he seemed most interested in hiring and protecting was always of the same race, sex, physical build, and other characteristics. When people that this person hired did not do well on the job, they too were defended blindly and with a great deal of gusto, despite being poor performers.

I have also seen people kept on who literally had no work to do, because they were considered valuable to the company. In the past our company has had entire departments staffed when one person could have probably handled the work. A manager often grows protective of his employees, because of how the relationships with them develop over time: "We could never do without these people!" they may say. However, this usually could not be further from the truth.

Getting a job, advancing in your career, getting business, making the sale, and more--it is all about relationships. The better relationships that we form, the better off we are. When you are being interviewed for a job, your success often has more to do with the connection and quality of relationships you have with others than anything else. People want to work alongside those with whom they feel they have a connection--not necessarily with those who they perceive will do the best job.

One of the most interesting things about job interviews is that many times there is a *favorite* for a certain job--before everyone has had a chance to interview. That favorite could be someone who is a friend of the person making the hiring decision. Or it could be someone who made a great impression on the interviewer before you got to the interview. If you are interviewing after that person has interviewed, it means you have come into the interview at a distinct disadvantage, because the interviewer may have a sense of loyalty to the person he or she has already interviewed and favored; in this case, the interviewer does not want to like you too much. What ends up happening in these sorts of interviews is that a great deal of "professional formalities" generally occur, and you will notice that you are unable to make any sort of meaningful *connection* with your interviewer. This *clammng up* on the part of the interviewer is generally a very bad sign. In order to get a job, get business, and reach your potential in anything, it is extremely important that you make a personal connection.

If you cannot connect with the people you want to hire you, or the people you want to do business with, then you are not going to have an easy time getting work. You need to break down the walls of professionalism between you and others and make sure that the person relates to you, likes you, and feels a connection to you. There is nothing more important than this.

A danger in business, in your career, and in your **job search** is *professionalism*. Many people have a profound belief that they must be extremely professional in the business world--with employers and with others--at all times. While I am in no way against proper decorum, there is a real danger in acting too professional. This is because always being hyper-professional will keep others from feeling connected to you. If you cannot relate to people and build strong personal relationships with them, you are generally not going to do well. Relationships can be built in many ways, but they exert so much influence over our day-to-day careers and lives that without any sort of connection, we are often quite lost.

I absolutely hate it when people in business try to act extra "professional." I dislike being "professional" in business a great deal as well. Professionalism can act as a wall that *potentially* prevents you from getting that job, promotion, or business. If you actually have a real shot at getting the job or position, you will know it because your interviewer will most often let down his or her guard, confide in you, and make the connection. However, if the person you are dealing with actually does not want anything to do with you, he or she will not be willing to reveal much to you and will try to keep his or her distance. The lack of personal connection will most probably either get you into trouble now (i.e., you will not get hired) or later (i.e., you will be let go in the future).

An employer's lack of genuine interest in you makes it incredibly difficult for you to get the job, to get ahead, and to accomplish what you are seeking to accomplish. You need to be able to relate to people and connect with them at work, in interviews, and elsewhere. The more connected you are, the better you will do.

THE LESSON

The influence of relationships can inhibit business growth and lead to disaster. At the same time, however, relationships constitute your greatest assets in your career. All aspects of your job search and your career depend on the relationships you cultivate, so you must strive to form the best relationships possible. You must engender affinity and genuine connections with those around you to achieve success.

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