

## Pay Attention to the Details

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most important things you can do in your career, business, and life is pay attention to details. With very few exceptions, the most successful people I have met always have an extraordinary ability to pay attention to even the smallest details. In fact, the more you examine successful people, the more it becomes clear that they are often obsessed and incredibly knowledgeable about details.

In my house, shows like *The Hills* and so forth are on all the time. (A quick aside: I was at a party a few years ago where I had to sign a bunch of releases because the back of my head was apparently on camera when they were taping the show.) A lot of the good-looking young people on these shows are very, very successful. Watching them, though, it is hard to understand why they are so successful, because none of them seem all that intelligent. In fact, the shows are often comical because the kids seem so concerned about surface-level sorts of things. If you tried to speak with any of these kids about anything mildly intellectual, it seems as if their eyes would glaze over and they probably would not be too interested in whatever you were talking about. When I first started meeting successful Hollywood types years ago, I was baffled. Most of them did not seem all that intelligent, and they seemed mostly preoccupied with superficial things that seemed relatively unimportant to me. Frankly, I did not understand how these people could be doing so well.

The more I observed them and saw what they were doing, though, the more I realized how incredibly in tune they were with details. In terms of their diet, many of them (even the men) had a profound understanding of the calorie count of certain foods, the danger of mixing certain foods, the importance of avoiding sugars and fats, and all sorts of things. Moreover, they had intricate knowledge of hairstyles, different fashions, and more. Finally, they were aware of an incredible number of social intricacies, always in-the-know regarding various events, who was *in* and who was *out*, and more.

Being successful in Hollywood is a skill. I would argue that you need to be *raised and bred for it* to some extent. I do not care if they have great scholastic skills or not; the people who are able to experience success in the entertainment business are in tune with and are always looking out for an incredible number of details. Skills required in Hollywood such as social survival and advancement, maintaining looks, being in the good graces of the right people--all involve being aware of numerous incredibly small details that other people would probably overlook. Then there is the separate matter of maintaining a *thick skin* and a high self-esteem in the face of constant rejection.

The Hollywood moguls are fascinating. One of the more interesting stories is that of David Geffen. Geffen never completed college and started out working in the mail room at a talent agency. He eventually became a billionaire by representing people in the music business, and he started a film company as well. A secret to his success, I used to hear, was that Geffen never drank, smoked, or used drugs, and he spent his career negotiating and doing business with musicians and others who were always under the negative influence of one substance or another. Due to this fact, Geffen used to tell people that he was able to negotiate all sorts of details in his favor.

Being aware of details is not just important for Hollywood types; it is important in every profession. Whether you are a lawyer, a teacher, a waitress, or a professional athlete, your ability to pay attention to details will determine your success or failure. The people who get ahead in every profession are the people who take the extra step to do what others neglect to do. Most people do not concentrate on small details and do everything they can to get ahead except concentrate on the small details. Instead, they gloss right over the small details, not wanting to put forth the extra effort. This often results in a less than satisfactory outcome.

In law, the people who are aware of the most details are the best attorneys. Every really good attorney I have ever known has been the one who examines and understands details that others do not take the time to understand. Glossing over details is a form of *intellectual laziness*, and the attorneys who do this are the ones who typically lose the most cases, have to charge the least money, and are the least respected in their jobs.

When I was practicing law, at one point I worked for an attorney who never lost a case. He worked on several incredibly important cases that you are probably familiar with, and in virtually every case, he won before the case went to trial. These incredible results were due to the attorney's ability to go deep into cases and understand the smallest of details. Without this skill, he probably would have been just another average attorney.

He could come across a misstatement that someone made. Or it could be that someone never received proper notice for a given matter. Whatever the small details he uncovered, they were usually a game changer, and it led to his winning the case. The attorney was disciplined and focused in his work. He was not spending his evenings going out to eat with clients and so forth. He was waking up early and running several miles each morning, then coming into the office and working himself into a *frenzy* of enthusiasm for all the various details of the cases he was working on.

Teachers who pay attention to details will know which students are performing the best and which students are not performing so well. They will understand which students have learned the lesson and which ones have not. Devoted teachers will make sure that their students understand the subtleties of various lessons that other teachers might not even bother to teach. The detail-oriented teachers will have numerous handouts for students and will go the extra mile. They might also spend time after class with students who do not understand certain materials. Ultimately these teachers will make more of an impact on the lives of their students.

Waitresses who are detail-oriented will remember what their customers ordered the last time they visited the restaurant. They will remember customers' preferences and will make sure that their orders are prepared a certain way. Good waiters will watch the customers' coffee and beverage cups to make sure they are kept full at all times. They might write small notes on the check thanking people for their business. They will often greet repeat customers by their first names. They will attend to one detail after another, and as a result, they will make better tips than their less detail-minded peers.

Professional athletes who work out every day, watch their diet, and work on improving their weaknesses and strengths each day, are likely to do better than athletes who do not. When you watch or read about the successes of the top professional athletes, you will generally see that they push themselves and work on details of their game in ways that the more "average" athletes do not.

If you are going to get ahead and advance in anything it is incredibly important that you do your absolute best to concentrate on the details that others are glossing over or outright ignoring. The person who stretches himself or herself and pays attention to details is always the one who ends up doing the best in any undertaking or profession.

Details are also important in your [search for employment](#). When [looking for a job](#), the person who seeks jobs in places that are often overlooked will typically achieve better results. Those who take the time to personally consider and address their applications to the right people usually do the best. Those who follow up afterward will do even better. Those who research a prospective employer before attending an interview are also more likely to receive an offer.

Where people win in business, in their careers, and elsewhere is often *in the small print*. I hate contracts and I hate the small print, but this is where many people and companies make their profits, and it is where you are probably losing, if you are not paying enough attention. The small print hits you when you don't expect it. Your bank charges you all sorts of small fees; a hotel charges you an extra \$7.00 for room service; your credit card company charges you annual fees and so forth. These tiny expenses add up and they can ultimately eat away at you. When you deal with very good negotiators, they will typically negotiate around the periphery and make out better in the end, due to details that you have overlooked. Details always add up. In the aggregate, focusing on the small details can often be more important than focusing on the larger picture of your career and life. You achieve the greatest progress by tending to one detail at a time.

### **THE LESSON**

The most successful people are often obsessed with and are incredibly knowledgeable about the minutiae of their work. You must concentrate and develop an understanding of the details that others "gloss over" for true happiness and success in your job. When looking for a job, you will find greater success by looking for openings in places that others overlook. Focusing on the small details will, in aggregate, bring you much greater success than focusing on the bigger picture, so start by tending to one detail at a time.

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