



Find the Best Target Audience for Your Skills

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was about 13 years old, my parents sent me to a small, private school that catered to children from the wealthiest families in the [Detroit area](#). The school was unusual in that it went out of its way to assist the wealthiest students and seemed to pay less attention to others. I was friends with one of the wealthy kids, and the headmaster actually used to go over to help him with his homework. Despite the difference in the way the wealthier kids were treated, there were some extremely good things about the school.

Upon entering this school, I enrolled in the [English class](#), which was also my homeroom. I would go into homeroom for about 20 minutes at the start of each day, and not much happened there. I think maybe we were supposed to be studying. My homeroom [teacher](#) quickly grew to dislike me as well as a few other kids in the class, because we were quite rowdy. We made fun of the girls in homeroom and acted in ways we shouldn't have. Our homeroom teacher was quite young, somewhat soft spoken, and never reacted to us. This just made us act out even more.

Our homeroom teacher had a brother, who was my [history teacher](#). He was pretty serious and did a good job controlling his students.

A strange thing happened when I came to this school. I had always loved [English](#) and history, and I typically received As in both courses. Incredibly, at this school, no matter what I did, I earned Cs and Ds in both subjects. In fact, my performance was so poor that at the end of the year, the school informed me I was not intelligent enough to proceed to ninth grade. I was told I could go to another school for a year and, if I did well, I could return. They gave my parents – who were extremely upset with me – literature about other schools for people with difficulty learning.

It's crushing to be told you are no good at something, mentally incapable, or otherwise unfit (I am not, but I will explain more about this later). However, I believed this assessment at the time. Being kicked out of school at the age of 13 on the basis of one's stupidity is devastating on many psychological levels. I remember going into a bathroom at the school and crying for more than 10 minutes when the headmaster told me I did not belong in that learning environment. This is the only time I remember crying when I was growing up. I cried so hard that day when I walked out of the bathroom, my entire shirtfront was soaked.

At that age, and after that experience, I began to believe the message I had received from the school. I started hanging around with a different crowd. At one time, I had been friends with the kids who studied, but I decided instead to spend my time with the bad kids. Within months, I was hanging out with kids who smoked pot, drank, stole, and generally were trouble. I was led to believe these were the people I belonged with, and I convinced myself I did indeed belong with them.

The next year I enrolled in a public school. Despite hanging around with a horrible crowd, I received excellent grades in many of the classes I'd failed the year before, including English and history. I did so well that, a year later, my parents enrolled me in another private school, which was even more prestigious than the previous one. When I got to this school, I took the most advanced English classes and got the best grades. When I graduated, I received an award for being an [excellent writer](#). Slowly, I started to believe again I was smart. Throughout the rest of my scholastic career, I ended up doing well in the same classes in which I had once gotten Cs and Ds. I even became a law professor at one point.

What happened to me during these years? Why did I do poorly in one environment and not another? Who knows? What I do know, however, is you need to work with an audience that recognizes and values your skills. There are plenty of people who do not see your talents. Stay away from employers and people who do not appreciate what you can do. People who do not see your talents can crush you and change the course of your life forever.

When I graduated from [law school](#), my fiancée and I moved to northern Michigan for a year while I was working for a judge. She had a master's degree in [landscape architecture](#) and had decided to get a job in Michigan as well. The best job she could get was with a local nursery. At the nursery, she was not allowed to talk to clients or do any of the work she was capable of doing (such as drawing properties, grading, choosing plants). She kept asking, but her bosses essentially told her it was all above her at this point in her career. A year later, she got a job with one of the best landscape designers in the United States. Within a few months she was meeting daily with people like David Geffen, Tom Cruise, Michael Eisner's wife, and others. She had almost complete oversight of their projects and her work was highly valued. Although I am no longer with this woman, I did see her mentioned on the front page of a *Los Angeles Times* section recently.

There are atmospheres, places, and people who will value you and what you are capable of, and others who will not. You need to work in the places that understand what you are capable of and allow you to succeed. You need to be appreciated for what you are and what you can do. By being around people who appreciate you, you can reach your full potential.

Stay away from people who bring you down. Put your skills to work where they are appreciated. The environment you're in is something that can make or break you. This is one reason schools are so important.

Several years after flunking out of school, I was at a party and ran into one of my old friends from the "bad crowd." Four years before, he'd been a clean-cut prankster. He received bad grades but was a happy kid. He was much different now. It was a sight I will never forget. He was standing in a stairwell, wearing a denim jacket with hard rock band patches on it. He was definitely "stoned," or under the influence of some sort of drug, and spoke to me in a slow, monotone voice. He looked like a completely different person, someone who now lived a life on drugs. He might have been dealing drugs in that stairwell, I don't know. I asked him about one of our old friends.

"He's in prison," he told me. "He's been there for a while."

At the time, I was about 18 and getting ready to go to college. I had friends who took their education and future seriously. I realized that, had I remained in that school and in that environment, I could have ended up in a similar position. If my talents

had not been recognized in that public school, I would have continued down a path of self-destruction.

Think about your own life and times when your talents have not been recognized. How did this alter the course of your life? Where would you be now if your talents had or had not been recognized?

If your talents are not recognized, your life will not be as fulfilling as it could be. If your talents are recognized, you can do anything, and nothing can stand between you and the life you want for yourself.

THE LESSON

There are people in your life, just as in everyone else's, who do not appreciate your talents and will seek to undermine you. You must avoid situations that place you among these kinds of people, and instead find colleagues who recognize and appreciate your efforts. Your work environment will do much to either motivate or de-motivate you, so make sure to find one that recognizes your talents.

Read More About Try and Concentrate on Doing the Work You Enjoy and Are Best at and Avoid Things You Do Not Do Well At:

- [Love What You Do](#)
- [Love People Who Give You Work and Your Work](#)
- [You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing](#)