

Time Economy Jobs and Productivity Economy Jobs

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In a law firm, when an attorney stops billing hours and no longer has any work, the person will be very close to losing his or her job. Survival in law firms involves staying busy and *making work* all the time. This is one reason it is so hard for young attorneys to stay employed in law firms. They find that they must ingratiate themselves with the right people in order to consistently get work. Moreover, they have to do top-quality work. And finally, because law firms typically charge clients by the hour, the attorneys are expected to bill lots of hours because, unless they do so, the law firm will not make money. If an attorney stops churning out the hours, he or she will soon be out of a job.

When I was practicing law, I remember a first-year attorney I was working with was quietly asked to leave the firm. However, despite how quiet the firm was about the entire thing, the attorney made a big stink about it, telling everyone who would listen that there was a conspiracy of sorts regarding why he had been asked to leave the firm.

He had gotten into a giant conflict with two of the more successful partners in the law firm, who had asked him to go and do a bunch of research about a complex legal matter. It was the sort of research that was meant to take days--if not weeks of his time. The research was something that the [law firm](#) would be charging the client thousands of dollars for, of course, and the attorney decided that, before going and doing all of this research, he wanted to make sure that the work was necessary at all. The attorney had not received any prior information about the case, so he went and got the case file and started looking through it, studying it.

In the course of reviewing the file, he discovered a technicality: the statute of limitations had run out on the lawsuit, which would definitely be good news for the client. Without more than six weeks of law firm experience at this point, the young attorney was very proud of what he had discovered. I remember that he went to the partners who had assigned him all of the research and said:

"I may be reading this wrong, but it looks like the statute of limitations would bar this lawsuit against our client. This is fantastic. All we need to do is tell the court about this and the case should go away."

The partners did not share his enthusiasm. In fact, they told him they were aware of this issue but that he was to go do the research they had assigned him. The statute of limitations was not something he was supposed to be researching, they told him, and they wanted answers on other issues.

The young attorney then went and spoke with some other partners in a "hypothetical" about the situation, and they all agreed with him that the case would be barred by the statute of limitations. He then e-mailed the attorneys who had assigned him the research and cc'd the partners who had agreed with the statute of limitations issue when he had brought it up as a hypothetical.

The young attorney was taken off the case and ended up getting into a giant argument with the attorneys who had assigned him the work. He accused them of being "unethical" and trying to "run up unnecessary legal bills" for their client, among other things. I do not know exactly what was going on and why he was doing research on a case that sounded like it could easily have been put away by filing a simple motion; however, the young attorney's inability to cooperate and do the requested work ultimately cost him his job.

After this episode, people simply refused to give the attorney any work. He did not play by the rules. The rules of the job required him to do what he was told, and even to run up legal bills when it was necessary. Within a few months, with nothing to do and no one willing to give him work, the attorney was asked to leave the firm. He was told he was "not productive."

I am not sure if the [attorneys in the law firm](#) were doing anything unethical or not--I tend to believe they were not. What I do know, though, is that they were upset that the attorney was not willing to do the work they had assigned him.

One of the most important things for attorneys is always having work on their table, and in fact, "creating work," since their time is valued based on how many hours they put in. Since attorneys charge by the hour, most of them are looking to do as much work as they possibly can. One of the reasons that attorneys are so highly paid, I think, relates to the fact that they are always working and billing out for as many hours as possible.

Especially in the case of an attorney, if someone is willing to pay, it is important that one consistently looks and is busy at all times. When I was practicing law, I remember that many times I myself was working on research and all sorts of projects that were only tangentially relevant to the case I was involved in. Nevertheless, I was given the work in order to increase billings for the case. As an attorney in this position, I feel the job could be viewed as simply showing up and doing meaningless work.

Much like an attorney, if you are a barber who gets paid directly by customers, you can only make a lot of money if you cut a lot of hair. Similarly, a doctor only earns a lot if he or she sees a high volume of patients. There are typically two types of jobs:

- **Time Economy Jobs.** The first job is one you report to, and you generally get paid for, regardless of your productivity. Many office jobs inside corporations and the government are like this, for example. People report to work each day, and for the most part, they have a deal that if they are there a certain number of hours and produce at a certain standard, they will be paid. These sorts of jobs are called "the time economy."
- **Productivity Economy Jobs.** The second type of job is one in which you exchange a task for a certain amount of money. A doctor, for example, may be paid based on the number of procedures that he or she has done. Someone who cuts hair may get paid based on the number of haircuts he or she has given. People who do these jobs typically only make a good amount of money and increasing amounts of money when they are able to be very productive with their various tasks.

These sorts of jobs are termed "the productivity economy."

Your ability to succeed in a job will generally be based on your ability to deliver in the sort of environment you are working in.

Success in time economy jobs is generally based on your ability to

1. look busy and deliver the amount of productivity expected of you,
2. show up at work on time, and
3. be effective at impressing superiors.

The more productivity you deliver and the more effective you are at impressing superiors, the more likely it is that you will be successful in your job. These are skills that not all people have, and if you have these sorts of skills, then you will do best in a time economy job.

In the case of the attorney who lost his job for not doing seemingly needless work, he was failing to deliver the amount of productivity expected of him, and he also failed to impress his superiors. A certain amount of productivity is expected in every job. You need to find out what is expected in your job and to make sure that you deliver. The better you deliver, the better off you will be in your career.

Success in productivity economy jobs is generally based on

1. doing as much work as possible,
2. doing that work in the minimum amount of time, and
3. doing high-quality work.

The more you can get done and the more productive you are, the better you will typically do in productivity economy jobs. If you have a productivity economy job, you can have horrible interpersonal skills and still do very well, as long as you are productive and your work is of high quality.

I read recently that the average office worker who goes to work each day, ultimately ends up accomplishing no more than 60 to 90 minutes worth of work. Instead of working, the person is doing numerous things, like the following:

- talking on the phone
- day-dreaming
- getting involved in conversations that are not relevant to the task at hand
- gossiping
- thinking about working
- screwing around on the Internet
- walking around the office
- planning lunch
- talking about lunch
- going to lunch
- thinking about working some more

This lack of work being done is far more common in time economy jobs than it is in productivity economy jobs. I believe that there are numerous dangers in time economy jobs because for many people doing these sorts of jobs, the objective becomes to do as little as possible and still get paid. People in time economy jobs are at the greatest danger of being laid off because it generally and eventually becomes understood by higher-ups that there are numerous people inside the company who are simply not adding value.

If you are in a time economy job where this is the case, you should be doing something else. The key to succeeding in a time economy job is to play by the rules and be involved in something that is meaningful to you, and that you enjoy. If you are doing something you enjoy, your productivity tends to be higher. In contrast, in a productivity economy job you will be paid based on the amount of work that you do and, in most cases, for the results of that work.

In everyone's career, people need to decide which sort of job they want to do. There are advantages to being in either a productivity economy or a time economy job. I have found that most people are suited to one or the other. You need to decide which one makes you most comfortable, and once you have decided on this, do this sort of work.

THE LESSON

There are advantages to both time economy jobs and productivity economy jobs. Time economy jobs pay you for your time spent on a project regardless of your productivity, while productivity economy jobs pay you a fixed amount for a given task. Success in the former depends on your ability to look busy and deliver the level of productivity expected of you, while the success in the latter depends on doing as much work as possible. Determine which of these two types of jobs most suits you, and focus on that type of work.