

Are You More Specific-or More General?

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One summer I was working in New York City for a big law firm and was told to go see an important partner about an assignment. I went into the partner's office and was handed a file:

"We have a deadline of next Thursday. Make sure we have filed the proper form with the SEC."

"What sort of file are you talking about, and what is the deadline?" I asked. Keep in mind that I was a [law student](#) and had no legal experience whatsoever.

"I do not have time for this bullshit," the partner said, picking up his phone. "Just make sure the fucking form is filed."

Terrified to ask for any further instruction after this exchange, I started asking other young attorneys in the firm if they knew what I should be filing. After three days or so of bothering all sorts of attorneys, I came up with a list of 15 possible forms I could file. At one point, I had to make a telephone call to a stockbroker in the Caribbean for assistance with the question (I have no idea why this was even relevant). After a few days of this I finally went to see the partner again, after making an appointment with his secretary.

I began listing out the possible forms it could be once I got in the guy's office, and explained to him that I had spoken with a certain associate that had suggested these forms.

"Jesus Christ!! This company is traded on three separate stock exchanges. What a jackass!"

He picked up the phone and started yelling at the associate and then said, "Get out of here!" to me, and I hustled away. The funny thing about this was that this partner had never given me the slightest inclination about how to go about doing the assignment. He had a reputation for doing this with associates, and no one liked to work with him. He had a very *global* nature to the way he assigned work, and he never gave details. There are people out there who are very general and there are others who are very specific.

Part of being a really [good recruiter](#) is giving the candidates you are working for as much information as possible. Throughout my years of recruiting, I have learned that there are also essentially two types of job seekers out there: those who are concerned with a great number of specifics and those who think more globally and generally.

Several years ago, an important partner at a large law firm called one of our recruiters on the phone, and the recruiter suggested that the partner apply for a job at a certain firm. The partner did not want to know anything about the law firm. In fact, he told the recruiter the details about the firm were "irrelevant," that he did not want to waste his time with details, and would just meet with the [law firm](#). The recruiter made him an introduction to the firm, and the partner said he would handle it from there.

Within 10 days our recruiter had placed the partner at the firm and had earned a \$250,000 fee. The entire transaction had taken less than an hour of the recruiter's time. In most cases like this the recruiter would have spent hundreds of hours of his time, working with the partner and helping him choose firms. Even then, the transaction might not have gone through. In this particular case, though, the partner just said he "felt like" he would be more comfortable working at the other firm. He did not have a lot of questions for the firm when he interviewed with them, and the entire move was very painless for everyone involved.

There are people out there who are very general about their approach to work and the world. They are not interested in hearing about and learning about a lot of details. They are people you could call "big picture" thinkers who only want to hear big pieces of information. In fact, they may be bothered by details. Global people:

- want to understand the forest and not the trees
- believe that the details are not as relevant or important
- prefer to think about the overall situation, not all the details associated with it

Global people will not follow a lot of structure and may describe their day in no specific order when speaking about it. When being given assignments or things to do, global people will mostly be more interested in hearing just a general overview of the work they need to do.

In contrast to global people, there are specific people. The specific sort of person typically prefers a lot of details about everything. They like small bits of information and are often not concerned at all with the "big picture."

One of the best attorneys I ever helped find a job turned me into a full-time researcher in the process. He had come out to Los Angeles from a big city on the East Coast to interview with a multitude of law firms over several days. Prior to coming out to L.A., he had sent me a list of at least 50 items that he wanted investigated. These items included things like

- public and private schools in various areas of Los Angeles
- commute times from these areas to areas he might be working in at various times of the day
- male/female ratios in the firms he was considering
- attrition at the firms he was considering
- news stories about the firms, from over the previous two years
- average partner compensation at the firms
- billing rates of the firms
- average age of partners at the firms

This particular attorney was well known and well qualified enough that the odds were pretty good that just about every firm he was interviewing with would be hiring him *if he let them*. He had taken a week off from work to come out to Los Angeles, and his entire week was action packed. I had picked him up from the airport one late Sunday morning and spent the entire day chauffeuring him around the city to look at various neighborhoods. Although I am not a real estate agent, I had printed up home listings for him in his price range and drove him by several of them. During the five or six hours I was driving him around, he gave me several additional "research assignments" to do for him that evening.

After dropping him off at his hotel, I was up until at least 11:30 doing research for him online and faxing all sorts of documents to his hotel room (laptops were not popular then and older people especially preferred faxing information when traveling). For the next several nights, after coming back from interviewing with law firms that day, the attorney would call me and give me additional research to do about the firm he had interviewed with, and I would tell him about the firm he was scheduled to speak with the next day. The number of details that this attorney wanted was so profound that over the next week I spent several hours each evening doing research for him.

What was so funny about this particular partner is that he was so interested in various details that by the time his offers started rolling in, he became incredibly critical of each firm--so much so that he completely forgot the very important reason he was moving to Los Angeles (to be closer to his kids, who had just moved there with his ex-wife). In fact, the global reason for moving to Los Angeles became completely overwhelmed by these details, which seemed incredibly insignificant to the big picture: he wanted to see his kids grow up. He became completely overwhelmed and obsessed with so many small details that, even in speaking to him on the phone, I felt like I was going insane trying to piece through the morass of incredibly small minutia that he had deemed relevant to his [job search](#).

This is how specific people are, though. They love details and are more concerned with details than the overall picture. Specific people:

- are more interested in the trees than the forest
- believe that the global way of looking at things is shallow, and even a lazy form of thinking
- often cannot understand and/or see the larger picture, in terms of how things work
- are very good at understanding small bits of data and information

People who are very focused on specifics typically provide lots and lots of details when you are speaking with them. In fact, specific people love details, order, and so forth. When you speak with specific people they typically relate information and things to you in an exact order of how they occurred and make sure that they give you lots of details about everything. It is fun sometimes interrupting salespeople who are "specific" in terms of how they sell things, because they are always interested in relating each step of a process to you, and if they are thrown off, they feel like they need to start again.

Understanding whether you are a global or specific sort of person is quite relevant to your career. It is important that you are in a position that makes the most of your skill of being either general or specific.

If you are a general person, you will be more comfortable with a managerial role, and [working in an environment](#) where you are given tasks in such a manner that the "big picture" is explained to you. In addition, you will not want to be given a lot of details and will prefer to be in an environment in which you understand how your tasks are a part of the overall work that the organization is doing. You are unlikely to have a lot of tolerance for being forced to explain all sorts of small details.

If you are a specific person, the opposite is true. You will prefer [working for a manager](#) who explains tasks to you specifically and with a lot of details. In addition, you will not want generalizations. Instead, you will want to understand the logical sequence in which the work should be done. You will typically require a lot of information before acting on a task and will always want to make sure that you understand specifically how things work, and what you should be doing each step of the way. You are a meticulous person.

In my experience, people tend to be either predominantly specific or predominantly global. It is important that you are working in a job and environment that makes the most of your natural inclination. It is also important that you recognize the importance of people who make the most of your skill set.

THE LESSON

Determine whether you are a global or specific person. Most people are either too general or too specific in the way they treat information, and overly detail-oriented people risk losing sight of the bigger picture. General people are more comfortable in managerial positions, while detail-oriented people prefer everything to conform to a logical sequence. Understand which sort of person you are, and seek work that best harnesses your natural inclination.