

The Power of Gratitude in Your Job Search

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Many people who order their lives rightly in all other ways are kept in poverty by their lack of gratitude. --Wallace Wattles

After years of [counseling attorneys](#) in their searches for new employment, I've realized most attorneys do not appreciate what they have, and are, for the most part, ungrateful. I think there is an epidemic of sorts of ingratitude among attorneys. Most do not appreciate their jobs and are enormously critical of themselves and others, regardless of whether they are earning \$30,000 or \$2 million per year. This lack of appreciation holds most attorneys back from reaching their full potential and results in a great deal of dissatisfaction within the practice of law.

Most attorneys are extremely aware of what they do not have and what others do have. They are aware of where they are working and what their employers pay compared to other employers. They are aware of what other attorneys in their offices are working on, how many hours they have billed, and what sorts of cars they are driving. Because attorneys continually obsess over these sorts of things, few of them are able to find happiness in their careers.

Compared to most professionals, attorneys are more aware of what they are lacking. This awareness probably has its roots in the way attorneys are taught to think and the way their arguments are constantly attacked and critiqued. A constant awareness of weakness, a constant need to be on guard, and a constant need to cover all shortcomings does not necessarily make for a happy person.

In order for attorneys to be effective in their existing positions and to successfully obtain new ones, they need to express gratitude and appreciate what they have achieved--and what they are becoming. In this profession there is very little time spent on learning to appreciate the good, and a great deal spent on comparing and cutting down. Attorneys can use the power of gratitude to become more effective in their current jobs, job searches, and careers.

As part of my job, I often find myself having conversations with colleagues regarding attorneys' states of mind. Invariably, much of this conversation turns to issues such as how depressed many attorneys are, the prevalence of suicide in law compared to its prevalence in other professions, the fact the average litigator dies in his or her 50s, and the higher incidence of divorce among attorneys. The list of maladies goes on and on, and I frequently learn about new problems and pitfalls that appear within this particular career path.

I cannot judge the specific origins of these problems. However, I can definitely say they exist, most likely because attorneys are simply too hard on themselves. Attorneys often inflict their critical views of the world -- which they need in order to be good at their jobs -- on themselves.

Negative thinking does little good. There is a quote attributed to Buddha: "All we are is a result of what we have thought." This is very true in the [practice of law](#). By constantly focusing on what is negative about their jobs or careers, most attorneys attract more negativity to their lives and careers.

When you focus on the negative in your career, you attract further negativity. For example, if you believe there are no opportunities in your [law firm](#), your working environment will remain a place with limited opportunities -- for you. When you see your world in a certain way, you perceive everything around you as something that supports your particular belief system. If you do not get a good assignment, you will believe there are no opportunities. If you see someone leave your firm, you will believe there are no opportunities. If you hear something negative about your firm from a co-worker, you will believe there are no opportunities.

In 1957, Leon Festinger wrote *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. This book has generated thousands of studies and has offered an extremely influential theory of social psychology. According to Festinger, if two cognitions are relevant to one another, they are consonant (in agreement) when one follows from the other, and they are dissonant when the obverse (opposite) of one cognition follows from the other. Because dissonance is uncomfortable for people on a cognitive level, people are motivated to reduce dissonance and avoid information likely to increase the dissonance.

In Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills' *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*, the authors write:

Dissonance can be reduced by removing dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions. The likelihood that a particular cognition will change to reduce dissonance is determined by the resistance to change of the cognition. Cognitions that are less resistant to change will change more readily than cognitions that are more resistant to change. Resistance to change is based on the responsiveness of the cognition to reality and on the extent to which the cognition is consonant with many other cognitions. Resistance to change of a behavioral cognitive element depends on the extent of pain or loss that must be endured and the satisfaction obtained from the behavior.

An example used by Festinger (1957) may assist in illustrating the theory. A habitual smoker who learns smoking is bad for his or her health will experience dissonance because the knowledge that smoking is bad for his or her health is dissonant with the cognition that he continues to smoke. He can reduce the dissonance by changing his behavior. That is, he could stop smoking, which would be consonant with the cognition that smoking is bad for health. Alternatively, the smoker could reduce dissonance by changing his cognition about the effect of smoking on health and believe that smoking does not have a harmful effect on health (eliminating the dissonant cognition). He might look for positive effects of smoking and believe that smoking reduces tension and keeps him from gaining weight (adding consonant cognitions). Or he might believe that the risk to health from smoking is negligible compared with the danger of automobile accidents (reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition). In addition, he might consider the enjoyment he gets from smoking to be a very important part of his life (increasing the importance of consonant cognitions).

If you are an attorney practicing law, or one looking for a position, when you are not grateful and are continually looking for negativity, you will usually find it. In fact, you will *almost always* find it.

In 2001 and 2002, the market was catastrophically bad for [corporate attorneys](#) (especially [junior corporate attorneys](#) in the United States). Most corporate attorneys knew how bad the market was, and they were very aware of the complete lack of opportunities. Many corporate attorneys faced with such dire prospects and knowledge about the market simply gave up. I saw many enormously capable attorneys walk away from the practice of law completely.

In terms of cognitive dissonance, these attorneys were simply looking for information that supported their belief system, which asserted the market was bad. Everywhere they turned they saw evidence to support their belief the market was horrible. This ultimately led many of them to leave the practice of law.

However, I saw many other attorneys keep going, despite the slow market. In fact, these attorneys seemed grateful they had a chance to look at new opportunities in the market. Some of these attorneys said things like, "Well, I am not sure if I want to work in Hong Kong or in New York. I'm going to have to think about this." I remember thinking to myself while listening to these attorneys, "Are these people insane? They think they have a choice?"

Looking back, though, I realize there was something very powerful in the psychology of these attorneys. They believed they would consistently have good and exciting careers, and they looked for information in their environment to support this belief. What ended up happening, of course, is they consistently found good positions and their careers actually improved during an otherwise horrible time.

In order to be happier, to do better in your current position, and to find new positions effectively, it is essential you learn to be grateful. Gratitude has to do with the sort of emotional energy on which you choose to focus. People who focus on negative emotions and are ungrateful will likely attract more unsatisfactory outcomes. Whether you feel you do not make enough money, resent others, or are dissatisfied with your work, negative emotions will not take you forward. In fact, these emotions will build upon themselves as they attract more of the same negativity over and over again.

Cognitive dissonance theory says if you are upset with the world and your job, you will look for evidence that supports your views. *Is this what you do?* If so, you should immediately begin focusing on something positive. Like attracts like.

People who do well are able to focus on positive emotions and are generally grateful. As you begin to focus on what you are grateful for, you will be amazed at how much there is to continually be grateful for. If you are an attorney, you should be grateful you have come as far as you have. You should be grateful for the opportunity to work on other people's problems. The process of being grateful and looking for the positive is never-ending. Being happy with what you have and who you are is a very powerful feeling that will enable you to consistently improve and advance.

When you view the world and your job positively, others will feel good when they are around you. Your employer or potential employer will feel appreciated. You will be excited about your work and will look to make a difference. Clients will pick up on your enthusiasm and gratitude and will want to give you more work. The more you focus on being excited and charged up about your work, the better your work will look to you.

Instead of focusing on what you do not have, focus on what you do have and what is positive about your career. Your career has tons of potential, and so do you. Make lists of what is right about your career and what you are doing well. Make lists of what is good about your [employer](#) and why. Make lists of colleagues you like and why you like them.

By focusing on the positive you will draw more positive elements into your life. In addition, focusing on the positive will improve your outlook and how you feel about the world and your life.

While I have always been interested in studies that focus on the reasons attorneys supposedly have so many difficulties, I also know they wouldn't experience most of them if they kept their focus on being grateful. Being grateful for what you have now will lead you to enjoy success and fulfillment in your career and life.

THE LESSON

In order for you to be effective in your position and successfully obtain new ones, you must express gratitude, and appreciate both what you have achieved and what you are becoming. Believe in positive things. Your career has great potential and so do you, and only by realizing this can you perceive the world around you as supporting your belief system.

<https://www.harrisonbarnes.com/>