

If You Really Want Success, Go through Unpeopled Ground

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu says, "To go one thousand lives without fear, go through unpeopled ground." To me, this means when you go forward, you should move through open space that is undesired or uncontested. When you move in this way, your movement will not be challenged by others and you will experience success.

Several years ago, I was an asphalt tar contractor in Detroit doing very, very dirty work. It was strange to me this work was so profitable and so easy. Literally no one was interested in doing the job. One of my main projects involved heating up tar to 250+ degrees in a cauldron that I towed behind my truck, using a crack router to clean out cracks on roads and parking lots, and filling the cracks with sand and hot tar.

When I was working for a [federal judge](#) in Michigan, I got a call from one of my customers, Tony Randazzo, who owned a giant apartment subdivision in Rochester Hills, Michigan. I'd filled all of the cracks in the apartment subdivision, charging less than half the going rate for this work, giving Tony an outstanding deal. For the next six months, Tony sent me a check every month to pay for the work I had done. Those checks ended up being more than I was receiving for my work with the judge each month. Keep in mind getting the job with the judge had required me to go to college and law school, where I was expected to do well. In addition, I had to get up at 7 a.m. and go to work for the judge five days a week. I also had to deal with office politics and coworkers.

This inconsistency really got me thinking.

When I started practicing law after my clerkship, I frequently saw many coworkers working all night. Most of the people I practiced law with were doing the work just for the money. They had all gone to good law schools, which had required years of hard work. Each year, the law firms I worked for would fly around to law schools and interview and hire scores of hungry law students. There was literally an endless supply of lawyers willing to do the work I was doing. I loved the practice of law, but the fact is there are a LOT of people who want to do it.

When I was working with my hot tar kettle in Detroit, Michigan, I was in serious competition with really only two or three people within a 100-mile radius. In some areas, I was in competition with no one. I literally drove around in a truck playing with fire and tar and listening to classic rock on headphones. I was doing the work I loved and I was paid thousands of dollars a day. Keep in mind working with hot tar is dangerous and something that is scary to a lot of people. You need to know how to keep the tar heated properly and prevent it from catching on fire. Often, it's very hot outdoors and there are other dangers. However, when I did this work there was practically no competition, and I loved it.

There are tons of people motivated to work blue-collar jobs in Michigan and, at the time, auto plants and suppliers were constantly laying off workers. There were plenty of people who needed work. Nevertheless, I still had very little competition. Had I not chosen to become a lawyer, and continued to operate in this particular niche, I would have made a much better living than most lawyers, and I wouldn't have been competing with an endless supply of competitors. I would even have had a couple of months off every year since it is impossible to apply the tar when there is snow on the ground!

- Think differently and chose a job which others will not bother to give importance to.
- Be in a job which is unchallenged and has less or no competition.
- Be surrounded by people who are not competing for the same advancement.
- Make sure you are exclusively valued for your abilities and that there is no chance of you being replaced.

I was so successful at this job because no one else was interested in doing it – a characteristic common to many [good jobs](#).

In the legal arena, where I used to work, there were so many people interested in competing with me. Inside [law firms](#) there was even competition to see who could get the most work! In large cities, perhaps one in every 100 people who start at a large law firm will make partner some day. When these people make partner, they face even greater pressure to get business, and many end up losing their jobs once they have made partner.

If you are experiencing problems in your career, or if you feel like it is extremely hard for you to get ahead, my bet is you're in a profession or a geographic location where you're simply competing with too many people. One of the best pieces of advice I can give is to find a place where there is no competition for what you do, and go there. Or, change professions completely and compete in something else. The less competition you have, the better.

One of the easiest ways to get ahead is to move to a market where there is no competition for what you do. For example, say you are an attorney on Wall Street, [practicing corporate law](#), and you just lost your job. You have outstanding skills that are going to be in demand somewhere. You could really blossom if you were in the right atmosphere. Go to a small or medium-sized city where there is less competition! If you go there, you will likely be appreciated more. Your skills will take you further and you will get ahead faster. You will be considered unique for your skills and not just one of hundreds or thousands with the exact same skills. Your hard work and background will make you special and you will stand out.

There are immense benefits to relocating to different geographic regions, or working in a smaller firm or company. Your skills will likely be unique and appreciated and you will not simply be a commodity. Your self confidence will likely improve, and as your self confidence improves you will likely continue to get better and better at what you do. You may even become famous in your field. When you're in an atmosphere where you're surrounded by people competing for the same advancement, you could be replaced at any moment.

For example, say you went to Harvard Law School. In New York City, you can find multiple attorneys who went to the same school working in virtually every building in the city. They are everywhere. In Bay City, Michigan, where I clerked for a federal

judge, however, I don't think I ever encountered a single attorney who went to Harvard Law School.

An attorney from Harvard Law School in Bay City, Michigan, would be a complete star in my opinion. He or she would be sought out by businesses and others just based on where he or she went to law school. The political establishment of the city might even try to get him or her nominated for a local seat in the United States Congress. I am not kidding. If the attorney worked on Wall Street for a few years, local companies and businesses would probably consider him or her close to an oracle. The attorney could charge practically anything he or she wanted and would have more business than he or she could handle. He or she would have a large house, probably do things like investing in real estate on the side, and be prosperous in all respects. The attorney would have a great life in Bay City, Michigan.

Conversely, this laid off attorney could sit around in New York looking for a job for months, perhaps. He or she might be living in a relatively small apartment in New York, spending his or her days at Starbucks reading the paper and screwing around on a laptop, exchanging emails about nothing and ostensibly looking for a job. The attorney might become depressed and start going to therapy a couple of times a week. He or she might start writing a book and never complete it. Ultimately, he or she might get a job with a small boutique firm in New York after six months or so, and might only work there for a few months before the firm went out of business.

I hate to sound so bleak, but I have seen scenarios like this so many times it makes me sick. You need to compete where your skills are most valued, and this often means a change of location. When you are competing where your skills are most valued, you feel better about yourself. I think this is the smartest thing anyone can do.

If I were interested in being a United States senator at the age of 30, I would move to South Dakota, not California. It is much easier to achieve your dream in areas where there is less competition.

The people who have the most secure jobs and continually prosper year after year typically do not have a lot of people competing with them. Did you know that morticians make pretty good livings? It is not too hard to find a job as a mortician, and people are always dying. There are lots of jobs to which you can adapt your skills, which will give you security year after year. These are the sorts of jobs you should seek.

There are jobs in every industry that no one else is all that excited about. I wonder if any doctors really go to [medical school](#) saying their dream is to become a proctologist. My feeling is they probably realize somewhere along the line isn't a lot of competition in that specialty, and choose it for that very reason.

Sun Tzu's advice to "go through unpeopled ground" can change your life and career if you really take the time to think it through. Unless you are confident you can win, you are often best served by pursuing your career in areas and specialties where there is less competition.

This is one of the easiest ways to succeed and it is something far too many people fail to realize.

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