



You Need to Bring a Singular Focus to Everything You Do

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

What makes a person really good at something? The answer to this question is identical to the reason for exceedingly high success in any profession.

There are people who are really good at [finding jobs](#). People who are good at finding jobs bring an incredible level of focus to their search. This is the level of focus I want you to bring to your [job search](#) as well. In order to get the position you are seeking, you need to be focused and follow one very simple rule.

In order to be good at your job, you need to be focused. No one becomes good at something and stays that way without focus. If you understand the rule I am about to share with you, you too can be at the very top of your chosen field.

Those Who Do One Thing Well and Those Who Do Many Things: The Fox and the Hedgehog. The Greek poet Archilochus wrote: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox" based on Archilochus' quote analyzes the differences between foxes and hedgehogs. Berlin believed people can be classified as either foxes or hedgehogs.

In the fox and hedgehog parable, the fox is always trying to get the hedgehog. Day after day, the fox is in pursuit of the hedgehog, devising means to catch the it. The fox is by all appearances a highly intelligent, crafty, and resourceful creature. Indeed, compared to the rather dull hedgehog, the fox appears to have every advantage. The hedgehog is a small, awkward animal that lives a simple life and spends his days taking care of his den and finding food. Each day, the fox tries a new scheme to catch the hedgehog and each time the hedgehog simply bundles up into a ball of sharp spikes—foiling the fox's attempts.

Berlin believed foxes "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle." As a consequence of this outlook, foxes "lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision."

In contrast, Berlin believed hedgehogs "relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance...."

Jim Collins, a noted management theorist and a former professor at Stanford Business School, discusses the concept of the hedgehog and the fox based on Berlin's famous essay in his book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. Collins notes his conclusions formed from Berlin's essay by Princeton professor Marvin Bressler during his interview with him:

- Whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability.
- Multitasking is good but expertise in just one thing is better.
- Bring a singular focus to what you do.
- Be the hedgehog and not the fox in your job search.

"You know what separates those who make the biggest impact from all the others who are just as smart? They're hedgehogs." Freud and the unconscious, Darwin and natural selection, Marx and class struggle, Einstein and relativity, Adam Smith and the division of labor—they were all hedgehogs. They took a complex world and simplified it. "Those who leave the biggest footprints," said Bressler, "have thousands calling after them, 'Good idea, but you went too far!'"

To be clear, hedgehogs are not stupid. Quite the contrary. They understand the essence of profound insight is simplicity. What could be more simple than $e = mc^2$? What could be simpler than the idea of the unconscious, organized into an id, ego and superego? What could be more elegant than Adam Smith's pin factory and "invisible hand"? No, the hedgehogs are not simpletons. They have a piercing insight that allows them to see through complexity and discern underlying patterns. Hedgehogs see what is essential, and ignore the rest.

Do you have any fox and hedgehog stories? As a young attorney, I spent approximately one year working almost exclusively for a partner at a world class law firm who never lost a case. The partner also had the reputation for burning out associates very quickly. While I could spend considerable time dissecting how this attorney operated, the simple fact is the only thing that mattered to him was ethically winning every case he took. Everything else was superfluous.

A case would start with this attorney being given a fact pattern which seemed insurmountable. These were the types of cases the attorney generally handled. The reaction of most attorneys would be to settle the case after a few short hours of research. But this attorney refused to give up. He kept pushing. He would question every single aspect of the case and the law. We pulled every legislative record necessary to determine if the law was being implemented the way it should be—even if there were 30-plus years of case law against him. He carried this fanatical focus and attention to detail to the extreme. This push could go on for months or even years.

After numerous months of researching the seemingly inconsequential—and questioning the truth—something would emerge that enabled this attorney to win the case. It always worked that way.

Another great attorney I know, who is considered one of the top lawyers in America, once told a client in my presence: "If I take this case, I will eat, sleep and drink this case. It is all I will think about."

This is the essence of the hedgehog as I see it. Any person or group of people who achieve greatness in any calling generally do one thing and are focused on doing one thing. They do it the absolute best it can be done.

Many people and organizations go through their existence trying different things and pursuing different goals. Their thinking abilities in this regard are often flawed, in my opinion.

Truly stellar law firms and truly exceptional attorneys also tend to be hedgehogs. The firm Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, for example, has made its name doing essentially one thing. Conversely, the great majority of law firms in the country have far lower profits, but work in numerous areas of the law. Wachtell's profits per partner are also higher than any other similarly sized firm in the world. The top partners in the best law firms are hedgehogs who do one thing really well. They are focused on their careers. Few of these partners probably dreamed about going in-house when they were practicing, for example. They focused on the here and now and being the best at what they do.

When you search for a job, do one thing and do it well. At its core, the difference between people who are best at looking for and finding jobs can be related to the distinctions between the hedgehog and the fox. In order to really succeed in your job search, you need to be concerned about one thing and one thing only: getting the best job possible for you. Everything else is superfluous.

In order to do what you do well, you can't do multiple things at once. You can't look for shortcuts and you simply shouldn't do anything to which you aren't 100% committed. You need to focus on what you do in a strong, singular way, blocking out all distractions. Once you do this, everything else falls into place. In order to explain the process of being a hedgehog, I would like to tell you about something I love—legal recruiting.

At its highest level, legal recruiting is a very sophisticated and serious business. While the average legal recruiter makes less than \$100,000 a year, there are a small handful of [legal recruiters](#) in the United States (less than five, I believe) who make well over \$1,000,000 a year. These recruiters move around practice groups, important partners, some associates and are even instrumental in merging entire law firms. These recruiters can call managing partners of large national law firms and get through right away. As professionals, these recruiters are given a high degree of respect because they influence the future of entire law firms.

There is a contrast to recruiting at its very highest level, however. People go into legal recruiting for a variety of reasons. When I started legal recruiting several years ago, it was my perception that the great majority of legal recruiters were not bringing the high level of focus needed to truly excel in this business. As recently as 2000, what was once ranked as one of the top legal recruiting firms in the United States didn't even have a formal office. Moreover, I would frequently reach my recruiter in the middle of the work day on her cell phone when she was doing trivial things such as buying a dress.

There also appeared to be no organization in the profession and few legal recruiters even knew the type of work their candidates did. Most recruiters did in-house placements, law firm placements, and would even place legal secretaries and paralegals. Some recruiters also placed executives in corporations. In short, these recruiters would do whatever they could to make a fee.

When I questioned these recruiters about why they did this, their response was generally that they believed the money was good and they were "people persons."

This is not to say all recruiters are like this. However, for the most part, the legal recruiting profession hasn't benefited from the high degree of focus and organization that characterizes many other professions. In addition, I believe there is somewhat of a bias in this country—which is largely a product of the fact most attorneys are so solidly middle class—that makes most attorneys believe they must practice law to have respectability in society. Anything less would be extraordinarily wrong to these sorts of people.

It's not really a surprise then that many legal recruiters went into the business feeling they'd somehow failed in the practice of law. Indeed, one of the first legal recruiters on record went to an [unaccredited law school](#) in California and couldn't pass the bar exam even after numerous attempts. Accordingly, the job of a legal recruiter—even at its outset—was associated with failing.

I am not faulting the way this system works. Indeed, this is generally how most of the world works. This same analogy could probably be carried over to law firms. Not every young attorney is good enough to get into Wachtell. Not every young attorney is good enough to get into an AmLaw 100 law firm. Some attorneys do personal injury law—others do not. This sort of class system is all around us and pervades the profession.

The lesson I learned from talking to recruiters while practicing law is very few were committed to practicing the art of legal recruiting like I had been taught to practice law. Far from being true advocates for their candidates and pushing their expertise—and questioning everything about the attorney job search process to reach true levels of excellence—most recruiters were simply happy to do something they enjoyed and didn't regard as particularly taxing.

When I started legal recruiting, I worked seven days a week at it. I routinely started work at 5:30 in the morning and worked until at least 10 or 11 p.m. seven days a week. I am often so happy when my candidates get offers I get choked up. This business has invested everything it has—and will continue to do so—into making [BCG Attorney Search](#) the best it can be. We have attempted to translate the vision of the way recruiting should be throughout the country. Being exceedingly focused on what we do, and what BCG Attorney Search does, is the only way I feel recruiting should be done.

This is how the BCG legal recruiters think about their work. Doing our jobs to the absolute best of our ability is our single-minded obsession. This is the only thing that matters and it is something we take extremely seriously. Here at BCG Attorney Search, we practice legal recruiting the way we were taught to practice law.

The idea that legal recruiting is a break from the practice of law is about the most foreign concept imaginable. A good recruiter has chosen the recruiting industry as his or her profession. It's not a safety catch—it is the focus of their career. For them, recruiting is not just a unique alternative to practicing law, but an alternative just as challenging and demanding as any in the legal profession. It is a place in the legal community to be innovative and to work at the highest level of the profession. It is this drive that pervades their work on a daily basis. To a good recruiter, recruiting is a powerful and essential industry in its own right.

A good legal recruiter knows the market. In Los Angeles County alone, there are over 3,000 law firms. There are an additional 5,000+ companies that hire attorneys. These numbers grow exponentially as one covers the United States. In order for a recruiter to get a candidate a job, they need to know where the jobs are and where their candidates are likely to fit well. This is an extraordinarily difficult task. Indeed, the knowledge a recruiter must have at their disposal is profound.

When you think about how most recruiters operate, you may wonder how a recruiter in Los Angeles could possibly monitor over 3,000 law firms. This is especially true if the recruiter also makes in-house placements. How on earth could a recruiting

firm comprised of maybe just two or three individuals monitor all this activity? Meanwhile, firm names change, people leave their jobs, and so forth. Accordingly, the answer to this question is that most legal recruiters do not.

Because most legal recruiters don't monitor the entire spectrum of the market, they generally only focus on a few firms. The firms they monitor are, incidentally, ones with which you're familiar. In addition, they also have a few key relationships.

At BCG Attorney Search, we divide the United States into numerous regions and station recruiters in those regions. We believe it would be impossible for a legal recruiter to know what is going on in different areas of the United States at one time.

To be good at your job and your job search, you need to bring a singular focus to it. The lesson here—and the lesson of the fox and the hedgehog—is you need to do what you do as well as it can be done. This is also the lesson of BCG Attorney Search and our present and ongoing success. This is the lesson you need to understand in your own job search and career. The more focused you are the more successful you will be.

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