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Graduates who flock to Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and big law in search of prestige might be in for a harsh wake-up call only a few years later

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BUSINESS INSIDER

Published 10:30 am EST, Thursday, December 13, 2018



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- **People dream of working for big-name companies like Goldman Sachs or Google ... so why would anyone ever leave such a prestigious job?**
- **Many workers quit high-paying jobs at impressive companies because, as their careers progress, prestige feels less important than it did when they were younger.**
- **Other factors, like the quality of their coworkers and the company culture, may turn out to matter more.**
- **That may be because you can always have the impressive job on your résumé — but it may also be because these big-name companies aren't as glamorous as they seem.**

A lawyer friend and I like to joke about the seemingly endless appetite for stories of people who "gave it all up." Typically, these people are lawyers — turned writers, small-

business owners, farmers, basically anything but practicing lawyers. Sometimes they're former finance or tech professionals who haven't seen a spreadsheet in years.

Business Insider has published a bunch of these stories, too. We keep sharing them because they clearly resonate with readers who'd like to do the same, if only they could muster the courage and figure out the logistics.

There are lots of reasons why someone (or many someones) would want to leave a job on Wall Street or at a top law firm. Among the more obvious: The work is hard, the hours are grueling, the bosses are demanding. But over the course of reporting a story on what a "good job" means today, I also noticed a pattern: Prestige may become less appealing as we advance in our careers.

That might be simply because you can always say, "I worked at Google," or "I worked at Goldman," and benefit from the company's reputation, even if you're no longer employed there. Not to mention that jobs at the most desirable companies tend to pay handsomely — enough to start tackling a mountain of student debt or support a family, typical concerns in the early and middle stages of a career.

It might also be the case that people quickly become disillusioned about how glamorous big-name companies really are. And for some, this shift happens even after less than a decade in the workforce.

'I've just seen how empty it is'

One woman I spoke to, Alysa Ain, 31, told me about quitting her job at a top New York City law firm. Ain graduated from Harvard Law School and was initially excited about the idea of doing something "prestigious." But once she'd started working, Ain felt unfulfilled and unable to keep up with the demands on her time and energy.

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Ain told me about Googling advice in the middle of the night; she ultimately wound up in career coaching and is now applying to graduate programs in clinical social work.

"Prestige is definitely not important to me anymore," Ain told me. "I've just seen how empty it is." When she was younger, Ain said, she was interested in proving to other people that she was smart and capable. Now, however, "prestige is last on the list of things that are important about a job."

I also spoke to Josh Druce, 35 years old, who worked for a series of big banks before realizing the role wasn't for him. Today he's the sole employee for private credit fund Loan Ranger LP. It's the "least glamorous organization" he's ever worked for, but also the "happiest I've ever been," Druce told me. Druce regrets that he didn't spend more time "interviewing" his supervisor and coworkers at his previous jobs. When you're spending between 60 and 100 hours a week at work, he told me, you're spending more time with your officemates than with your significant other.

Read more: [Goldman Sachs' head of HR says an 'underrated' factor should make a big difference in which job you choose — especially if you're going to be logging long hours](#)

Meanwhile, Dora, a lawyer in her early 30s (she asked me not to use her last name), remembered applying for jobs and looking up rankings to see which firms were most impressive. Today, she works for one of those impressive firms — but she said that's not what keeps her there. Instead, it's her coworkers.

"They don't accept everything that I say," Dora told me, "but they've made it very comfortable for me to bounce ideas off them. So that's just really great." Dora went on: "I can pick up the phone to a colleague in another office whom I've never met and ask him or her to give me half an hour of their time and walk me through something and they will."

Many mid- and late-career workers start to prioritize meaning over prestige



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For others, the shift away from wanting prestige happens later in their career. A 2009 paper from the AARP's Public Policy Institute reports that "workers tend to move into less prestigious occupations when they change jobs at older ages, especially when they retire from their former jobs."

It often comes down to the desire to find more meaning in your work, said Brie Reynolds, a career coach and the career specialist at FlexJobs. Reynolds told me she's worked with people in their 50s who have "checked all the boxes of what it was supposed to be like to have a really good career and they didn't feel like they wanted to continue down that path just for the sake of continuing down that path."

I heard something similar from Joe Casey, an executive coach and a managing partner at Retirement Wisdom. Casey's coaching clients are typically in their 50s and older,

looking to make a change in their jobs. Many are coming from Wall Street, having long prioritized pay in their careers. Now, they're more interested in "giving back," Casey said. (Casey spent more than two decades at Merrill Lynch before getting his master's degree in executive coaching.)

Bernadette Bielitz is smack in the middle of this process of re-evaluating her career. Bielitz, who's currently volunteering at AARP and looking for full-time work, has held management positions at companies including GE Healthcare. Years ago, Bielitz told me, she focused on companies where she could climb the corporate ladder, even if it meant logging crazy long hours. She remembers being "willing to make it all about work."

Bielitz got somewhat disillusioned when she was caring for her aging parents and simultaneously holding down a full-time job. At that point she started to realize the importance of work/life balance, flexibility, and friendly coworkers. Now, Bielitz said, she doesn't need to be a manager; she's fine being an individual contributor. "I like being on a team."

Know that prestige is important — but not the be-all-end-all

If you're here looking for career advice, the takeaway isn't that you should outright ignore prestige for the sake of placating your future self. Dora raised an interesting point: "A more prestigious firm might have access to the kind of challenging work that you want."

But, she added, "there are other things that are also very, very important, including the people that you're working with and whether they make your life great or they make your life a misery."