

Getting it done...or Not

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on April 30, 2014

I recently had the pleasure of watching my son's team compete in the *Sandhurst* military competition at West Point. This annual event features nearly 60 teams – one from each West Point cadet company along with teams from the other U.S. service academies, leading ROTC programs, and the national service and officer academies of allied and other nations around the world. These young men and women come together to compete in a grueling, 30-hour test of military skills, endurance, teamwork, leadership and execution. The participants spend months in preparation, above and beyond the normal demands of academics and other day-to-day responsibilities, without which even completing the event would be doubtful. All the teams did finish, a testament to their collective and individual will and dedication.

As I watched these future leaders execute tasks most of us never contemplate, much less try, I couldn't help but marvel at the focus they brought to something that really mattered to them. At the same time, I couldn't help thinking about how many law firms routinely fail to do the same thing – execute on the things they believe (and know) really matter to them. How many firms over the years have developed intricate “strategic plans” only to see them gather dust on the shelves? How many big initiatives have died on the vine, as the responsible partners (and others) remained immersed in the day-to-day demands of their practice? Why do some firms seem to move forward consistently, while others lag behind?

Many firms today have an execution “problem.” Sure, they get their clients' work done, generally on time and within budget, but when it comes to their own strategic initiatives the results tend to differ. Some never even find out if their strategy is a good one or not – because it isn't implemented. Sometimes, of course, the fault lies with the strategy itself, but at least as often the failure comes in the execution stage. As we all know, there are any number of reasons for execution failure, but if you are not going to execute, there is little reason to plan.

It's often been suggested that you should never let a good crisis go to waste. Not surprisingly, most firms find execution easier when they are in a fight for their lives. Once that ends, or for the firms that haven't fallen into crisis, execution becomes surprisingly difficult. Some firms execute well. We've written often recently about the current “winners and losers” legal environment. It should not be a surprise if we suggest that winning relates to execution.

Over the next few months we will focus more on strategic execution. As an industry, we need to build a much greater capacity to achieve our goals. Just like those young current and soon-to-be military officers executing at *Sandhurst*, the legal industry needs to learn to *get it done*.