THE RECRUITER'S BOOKSHELF: *Atomic Habits* by James Clear

Article by Raphael Franze, Esq.

Released in 2018, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* is considered by many to be the most practical book ever written on simple behavioral change. *Atomic Habits* has consistently remained at the very top of the New York Times bestseller list of business books and, given its continued presence in popular and business culture, appears destined to be a new classic.

AUTHOR'S STORY

Atomic Habits is largely informed by author James Clear's recovery following a severe cranial injury suffered on the baseball diamond during his sophomore year of high school. Despite recovering in time for the following season, the injury left Clear a shell of the high school player he previously had been. It was as a freshman riding the bench on the Denison University baseball team, however, that Clear would discover the power of habits in his quest to make good once again on his athletic talents.

Very much a reclamation project at the bottom of the team's depth chart upon arriving at Denison, Clear would use this time of minimal play to develop good habits across various aspects of his life (including his sleep, environment, and studies). With a consistent focus on small habits and the compounding marginal gains that would result, he would steadily rise up the team's depth chart and earn Academic All-American honors as a senior. While Clear's baseball aspirations did not continue beyond college, he felt that he fulfilled his potential and parlayed his experiences into a career as a performance coach for athletes and executives.

HABITS VS GOALS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY

In order to understand the esteem in which Clear holds habit formation as a vital cog in attaining sustainable success, one must first wrap their head around the three levels in which change can occur:

–Changing outcomes (which is most associated with goals),
–Changing process (most associated with habits and systems), and:
–Changing identity (most associated with beliefs, assumptions, and biases).

All three levels have their merits, but issues typically arise when the process of habit formation begins at the outcome level (resulting in outcome-based habits) as opposed to the identity level (resulting in identity-based habits). One may set goals and attempt to build habits and create subsequent systems to attain these goals; however, these behaviors will not last if they are incongruent with the self. Put another way, ask "what kind of recruiter will I be this year?" before asking "how many placements will I make this year?"

When identity is consciously fostered and is reinforced by the resulting habits and systems, one is likely to change their outcomes for the better even if they've ignored setting goals. As the cycle keeps repeating, the habits and systems become part of the identity and produce the intrinsic motivation that keeps the cycle repeating more seamlessly.

While goal setting can help frame one's ambitions more clearly, it must remain in its proper context and not distract from proper habit formation and system building. This is further reinforced by the central tenet of this book: *YOU DO NOT RISE TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR GOALS—YOU FALL TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR SYSTEMS.*

THE STAGES OF HABIT FORMATION AND THE LAWS OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE

The intriguing and attractive aspect of habits (at least when they move one towards positive outcomes) is that they have been repeated enough times to become automatic and they are refined over time through the feedback loop that affects all human behavior: try, fail, learn, and try differently. As such, habits become reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment and are useful in reducing cognitive load and freeing up mental capacity for other cognitive tasks.

It has long been established that the process of building a habit can be divided into four simple stages: cue, craving, reward, and response. While there have been countless publications (both academic and commercial) that address these external factors and that serve as the basis for Clear's work, *Atomic Habits* is groundbreaking in that it considers the effects of internal emotions as well as external stimuli on our habits. This is embodied by Clear's four laws of behavior change, each of which corresponds with a specific stage of habit formation:

Law #1: Make the cue obvious (or, inversely for unwanted habits, make it invisible).
Law #2: Make the craving attractive (unattractive).
Law #3: Make the response easy (difficult).
Law #4: Make the reward satisfying (unsatisfying).

ATOMIC HABITS AND BECOMING A BETTER RECRUITER TODAY

An example of how *Atomic Habits* can improve one's recruiting practice is in its impact on candidate prospecting efforts. Personally, while I've long known what a good prospecting call is, the quantity of those calls had long been inconsistent from day-to-day and even week-to-week. It was, however, through an understanding of the stages of habit formation and incorporating the corresponding laws of behavior change that I was able to turn this inconsistency into one of my greatest strengths.

LAW #1

As it pertains to the first law of behavior change ("make the cue obvious"), a recruiter's calendar is by far the most effective cueing tool in their arsenal. Although this statement itself may seem obvious, the mindfulness required to maximize a calendar's utility can take some practice. While cues that can trigger a habit take many forms, the two most common forms are simply time and location—a self-regulatory strategy known as implementation intention leverages both. Simply put, implementation intention is embodied by the following sentence: "I will (BEHAVIOR) at (TIME) in (LOCATION)."

"You do not rise to the level of your goals—you fall to the level of your systems."

For me, the mere act of scheduling candidate prospecting at my in-town office from 9 AM to noon ET every weekday (and doing so in perpetuity) has reinforced my commitment to the practice and leaves no doubt as to where I prioritize it in my overall recruiting strategy. Whereas I would frequently shift candidate prospecting in my schedule to accommodate other activities (resulting in a less consistent prospecting effort), I now view it as a standing appointment that I consistently honor with any and all other activities (personal or professional) rarely taking precedence during the time block.

LAW #2

Granted, my previous attempts at consistent time blocking had rarely stuck. It was only after understanding and implementing the second law of behavior change ("make the craving attractive") that the time blocking would bear consistent fruit. As recruiters, we must identify and gamify the small wins as we labor towards the larger ones—think Jerry Seinfeld facing an uncertain future as a comedian by marking his calendar for every day that he wrote a joke and committing to keep his daily streak alive. We may not have any control over a placement being finalized or a resume being received on any given day but we do have control over so many of the fundamentals that ultimately lead to these results.

Inspired by a workout that requires completing 10 repetitions each of 3 different exercises in under a minute over the course of 20 consecutive minutes, I gamified my candidate prospecting practice by aspiring to a combination of 20 conversations had and/or voicemails left during any given hour. While the number was selected as a stretch goal that I have yet to hit (at least not during office hours when there's a healthy mix of conversations and voicemails), aspiring towards the hourly goal and obtaining tangible results along the way provides small dopamine spikes. These spikes trigger the dopamine-driven feedback loop, which ultimately leads to an activity becoming a habit.

LAW #3

The previous two laws of behavior change prepare us to act, whereas the third law ("make the response easy") involves actually performing the behavior that we associate with a habit. In detailing this law, Clear makes a distinction between "being in motion" (the passive learning that we undertake in preparation of performance) and "taking action" (the active practice of engaging in the behavior that produces an outcome). While being in motion can seem like a more comfortable form of progress, it can easily become a prolonged procrastination trap. Taking action, on the other hand, is all about diving in head first and learning over time by "getting your reps in." This law is intended to reduce the friction of doing just that.

As I looked to recalibrate my candidate prospecting practices while actively aspiring to the aforementioned stretch goal, it became evident that friction existed everywhere and had not only served to slow my prior efforts but too often to derail them completely. This realization led me to embrace the Law of Least Effort and design my environment to seamlessly manage the sources of my friction.

For instance, my engagement with my database would thwart my momentum between calls and ultimately led to rethinking the manner in which I organize and track certain information in my process. Also, the bad habit of picking up my cell phone to dial and/or hang up calls would open me up to countless distractions of which we're all too familiar. As a result, reinforcing my hyperlink calling through

my computer while keeping my Bluetooth-connected cell phone out of reach (in accordance with the inverse of Law #1: make it invisible) got me dialed in—pun intended—and building upon the momentum from the preceding calls.

LAW #4

While the first three laws of behavior change increase the odds that a behavior will be repeated this time, the fourth law of behavior change ("make it satisfying") increases the odds that a behavior will be completed next time. The human brain has evolved to value immediate rewards over delayed ones and even observing a small success in the moment can help get a habit to stick. Tracking these successes is its own habit and helps to reinforce endurance. Revisiting the Seinfeld method of marking his calendar every day that he wrote a joke, the act of marking the calendar was the incentive he sought to write the joke on a given day (in accordance with law #2); however, seeing the streak grow was what motivated him to do it again the next day (in accordance with law #4).

In the context of my candidate prospecting calls, I have grown to acknowledge and appreciate all the small wins that come from my efforts. Whether they be the loops closed every time I hear "not interested," the productive conversations that inspire promise for the future, or even the refining of scripts that result from every voicemail left, the rush of satisfaction felt from aspiring to a higher call volume in any given hour provides me with the inspiration to carry that momentum into the following hours and onto the next day.

HOW HABITS CAN IMPACT THE FORMATION OF STRATEGY

Habits in a fundamental sense are behaviors that have been repeated enough times to be automatic. Stated more broadly, they are reliable solutions to recurring problems in our environment. Also, the more we develop and lean into our habits, the less active our brains are in completing the corresponding task. The conscious mind is the bottleneck of the brain, as it can only focus on one problem at a time. With the unconscious mind the domain for our habits, greater habit development results in reduced cognitive load and frees up mental capacity for other cognitive tasks.

Practically speaking, building habits in the present allows one to do more of what they want in the future. More energy can be devoted to creative endeavors beyond the fundamentals that have already been mastered. For instance, the pianist who can now play in their sleep is free to create music as they no longer give any mind to matching a particular finger with the right key. Over time, the pianist creates increasingly inspired pieces as new and increasingly complex behaviors and thought processes become habitual.

The development of a recruiter is no different. Through trial-and-error and repetition, even the most novice recruiter can see positive results in a matter of months, if not weeks. As the effort of putting in a full day of diligent work becomes more habitual, more thought goes into refining technique and targeting certain candidate and client types that play to the recruiter's talents and strengths. As results become more consistent, the recruiter becomes increasingly confident and identifies efficiencies for greater output.

To help manage the anticipated output, the recruiter may then add an assistant to aid in the management of such outputs as well as adding recruiters who have already or will eventually ascend in their careers through a similar devotion to good habits. Fast forward a few years and the original recruiter now is overseeing a multi-layered and ever-evolving recruiting organization heavily informed by the individual and collective habits developed in the organization.

It is from habits over time, both favorable and unfavorable, that policies and strategies are created. They inform every aspect of growth and development from the type of clients the organization services to the manner in which it attracts and manages talent (both on behalf of its clients and for the organization itself). Much as the novice recruiter relied on habit formation to free up capacity to propel themselves upward, the novice recruiter-turned-boss can now lean into the policies and strategies as they continue to guide the organization forward.

INSTILLING HABITS INTO OUR BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

A wonderful value-add that comes with the purchase of *Atomic Habits* is the wide variety of bonus material available on the JamesClear.com website. One of these is a bonus chapter to the book titled "How to Apply These Ideas to Business." In it, Clear revisits each of the four laws of behavior change and explores examples of how each law might be applied in a business context.

From a recruiting perspective, I found this bonus chapter helpful in that it showed how powerful messaging can be when it's crafted with the four laws of behavior change in mind. Just as the four laws work to alter our behavior when we properly apply them internally, they can be equally effective when targeted outwardly. After all, they're designed to make any behavior more likely to occur, and that includes getting prospective candidates and employers to utilize our recruiting services.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Raphael Franze, Esq. is the founder of LegalSummit Search Consultants.

P: (404) 242-5702
E: rfranze@legalsummit.net
W: www.legalsummit.net