Sutton's Law

Idea In Short

Do not begin every analysis with a comprehensive sweep of all possibilities. Sutton's Law is the practical reminder to go first where the value, evidence, or answer is most likely to be found. The phrase is commonly linked to bank robber Willie Sutton's reputed explanation for robbing banks and it was later adopted in medicine to argue for high-yield diagnosis rather than routine batteries of low-value tests. Its strategic force extends well beyond medicine. In business, investigations, product work and operations, progress often accelerates when attention is directed first to the places with the highest expected insight or return. Leaders waste time when they distribute effort evenly across low-probability paths in the name of thoroughness. Sutton's Law favors disciplined triage over indiscriminate coverage

Most organizations face the same hidden problem: too many possible places to look and not enough time to look everywhere well. Sutton's Law offers a brutally practical answer. Start where the money is. In its broadest form, the law means directing attention first toward the place where the value, evidence, or answer is most likely to be found. It is simple, memorable and strategically powerful because it disciplines analysis under scarcity.

What Sutton's Law says

Sutton's Law is commonly understood as the principle that, when diagnosing or investigating, one should first consider the most likely explanation and pursue the test or line of inquiry most likely to yield an answer1. The phrase is named after bank robber Willie Sutton, who was popularly said to have explained his choice of banks by saying, "because that's where the money is." The attribution is contested and Sutton later denied the exact quote, but even he acknowledged that the remark captured an obvious logic.

That is why the law survived regardless of quotation history. It expresses a principle of intelligent search. When resources are limited, start where expected value is highest.

The point is not wit. The point is triage.

How the idea entered professional practice

Sutton's Law became especially influential in medicine. William Dock invoked the idea in a diagnostic context and later medical literature described the law as the instruction to proceed to the test most likely to provide the diagnosis rather than run a routine series of lower-yield examinations2. This was not a call for guesswork. It was a call for yield-aware sequencing.

That distinction matters because many professionals mistake thoroughness for quality. A long sequence of routine steps can feel disciplined while actually delaying the most informative test. Sutton's Law argues that good judgment means prioritizing what is most likely to resolve uncertainty efficiently.

Medical discussions of the law preserve this logic clearly: do not wander through every conceivable possibility first if a higher-yield path is already visible3.

Why the principle is strategically powerful

The deeper appeal of Sutton's Law is that it generalizes beyond diagnosis. In any analysis with scarce time and many possible directions, expected yield matters. If a cost structure is being investigated, start where the largest costs sit. If churn is rising, begin with the customer segments, product moments, or service failures most likely to explain it. If fraud is suspected, look first at the processes where incentives, access and anomalies are concentrated.

This makes the law a principle of efficient attention allocation. It reminds leaders that analysis has an opportunity cost. Every hour spent on a low-probability avenue is an hour not spent on the area most likely to matter.

That is why the law belongs in strategy as much as in medicine. It is a rule for sequencing inquiry under constraint.

Why organizations violate it

Many organizations violate Sutton's Law for cultural reasons rather than logical ones. Exhaustive coverage feels safe. Equal treatment of every hypothesis feels fair. Routine analysis feels defensible in meetings. Leaders may fear criticism if they focus too narrowly too early, so they spread attention across many paths even when only a few are likely to produce useful information.

The result is often pseudo-rigor: activity without diagnostic progress. Teams build huge dashboards, run broad interviews, commission full audits, or execute long test batteries before examining the single source most likely to explain the issue. This can create the appearance of diligence while delaying understanding.

Sutton's Law is uncomfortable precisely because it asks organizations to privilege probability and yield over ritual completeness.

Why the law is not just about the obvious

A common misunderstanding is that Sutton's Law means always choosing the most obvious answer. That is too simplistic. The law does not say the first explanation is automatically correct. It says the first move should target the area with the highest expected informational or economic return. Sometimes that is obvious. Sometimes it requires real judgment.

In medicine, for example, the law is not a license to ignore rare but dangerous conditions forever. It is a rule for initial diagnostic ordering. In business, it does not mean every problem comes from the largest line item or the noisiest customer segment. It means the search should begin where evidence and consequence are most likely to converge.

This is why Sutton's Law is best understood as a sequencing principle rather than a theory of certainty.

Where the law works especially well

The law is especially useful in environments with concentrated signal. Cost-reduction efforts often benefit because a small number of expense categories account for most spending. Operations reviews benefit because a few process choke points often explain most delay. Product debugging benefits because recurring failures usually cluster around particular flows, versions, or user contexts. Strategic reviews benefit because a small number of assumptions often dominate the viability of the whole plan.

A management corollary sometimes called the Willie Sutton rule applies similar logic to activity-based costing: focus first where the biggest costs occur, because that is where the biggest savings may be found4. The same structure appears across many decision settings.

This is not always glamorous work. Often it means pursuing the dense center of the problem before entertaining the elegant edge cases.

What leaders should do with it

First, define the decision question clearly. Sutton's Law only works if the search is tied to a real uncertainty or outcome. Without that anchor, teams can mistake salience for relevance.

Second, estimate expected yield before launching analysis. Where is the strongest signal likely to be? Where is the greatest cost concentration? Which test is most discriminating? Which customer group, workflow, or business unit is most likely to contain the answer?

Third, widen the search only after the high-yield path has been tested. If the initial inquiry fails, then expand. The law is a starting discipline, not a permanent tunnel.

The deeper lesson

Sutton's Law matters because it is really about scarce attention. Most analytical failure is not caused by too little effort in the abstract. It is caused by effort placed in the wrong sequence. Teams investigate the peripheral before the central, the generic before the discriminating and the ritual before the revealing.

The law offers a compact correction. Go first where the answer is most likely, where the evidence is densest, or where the value is concentrated. Then adapt from there. This is not a substitute for breadth when breadth becomes necessary. It is the right first move when time, budget and attention are limited.

That is the executive lesson. Do not start everywhere. Start where the money is.

- 1Sutton's Law
- 2Sutton's Law: A Lesson In Decision-Analysis
- 3Sutton's Law

- 4Willie Sutton

Summary

Sutton's Law endures because it captures a basic truth about scarce attention. Most organizations have more possible analyses, tests and initiatives than they can pursue well, so the first move matters disproportionately. Going where the money is means identifying where evidence is most likely, where costs are concentrated, where signal is strongest, or where intervention can unlock the greatest value. That does not justify laziness or premature closure. It means sequencing intelligently. Strong leaders begin with the highest-yield path, update as evidence changes and only then widen the search if needed. The principle is simple, but its disciplined application can save enormous time, cost and managerial energy