Congratulations, You Are a Partner: What Happens Now?

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A Q&A with senior law firm partners providing advice for new partners. This Article addresses how an attorney's role changes when they become a partner, preparing for the transition to partner, and qualities of successful partners.

Being an attorney is hard work. For attorneys at law firms who strive to become partners, it is a long and arduous road. For the individuals who achieve this goal, the accomplishment brings great satisfaction. But for many new partners, the satisfaction is accompanied by anxiety about whether they will be able to rise to the challenge and meet the expectations that come with their new title. New partners face many new challenges, including:

- Building and strengthening client relationships.
- Achieving clients' raised expectations.
- Developing and enhancing the firm's brand.
- Training and managing other attorneys and delegating work.
- Taking the lead on billable matters.
- Balancing billable time with non-billable work such as serving on firm committees and developing business.
- Becoming involved in firm management.

We interviewed several senior partners from different types of law firms, ranging from small boutiques to large international law firms (see Participating Partners). We asked these partners to address:

- How an attorney's role changes when they become a partner.
- The qualities of successful partners.
- How a senior associate can prepare for becoming a partner.
- Strategies for succeeding in the partner role.

It is clear from their answers that success as a partner requires much more than strong legal skills.

PREPARING FOR THE TRANSITION TO PARTNER

HOW DOES YOUR ROLE WITHIN THE FIRM CHANGE WHEN YOU BECOME A PARTNER?

Daniel Glazer, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati (WSGR)

It is important to understand the big picture of the law firm as a business. Having a firm grasp of your practice area and being a strong attorney is not enough. A partner must work on strengthening client relationships and helping to position the firm within the market. The most successful partners ask the question, "How do I help, not just myself, but also other partners, succeed?" It is essential to embrace the idea that you are part of a broader enterprise.

Kathryn Zecca, Robbins, Russell, Englert, Orseck, Untereiner & Sauber LLP (Robbins, Russell)

At a small firm there are a host of managerial and administrative duties that are divided amongst the partners. You are therefore expected to become involved in the management of the firm in a meaningful way immediately. There is also an expectation within the firm that you will help to grow and maintain the business. This is not something that happens overnight. Rather, it is an ongoing process to build your contacts and your reputation. You are expected to be proactive about planting the seeds for growth consistently over time. At a small litigation boutique, an entrepreneurial focus is especially important.

Clients' expectations also change when you become a partner. This is true regardless of whether you are the lead person on a matter. Clients look to you for more than research results. They expect you to provide them with sound judgment and advice.

Christine Keller, Groom Law Group (Groom)

At Groom, the shift is not that dramatic. An effective senior associate is already directing a lot of her attention outward. Even before becoming a partner, you have a lot of client interaction and you have generally started to build your network of contacts outside the firm. However, that increases even more as you move into partnership, where getting to know existing clients and expanding your network (such as colleagues in other firms, individuals in charge of associations and conferences, publishers, and potential clients) becomes even more of a priority.

In addition, as you move into partnership you are expected to train, mentor, and delegate work to associates. This is a skill that does not develop overnight. So, learning to do that is something a first-year partner needs to begin to focus on and continue to focus on throughout her career.

A partner may be asked to participate as a leader on a firm committee and be responsible for the development and achievement of that committee's goals. For example, at Groom we have various committees, all of which provide vital services to the firm, including:

- A recruiting committee.
- A professional development committee.
- A "fun" committee.

Showing that you can excel on one of these committees may lead to:

- A role as a practice group leader.
- A seat on the firm's executive committee.
- A role as the firm's executive principal.

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP (Davis Polk)

At Davis Polk when you become a partner you become an owner of the business. You therefore have a proprietary interest in how the firm runs as an enterprise that you do not have as an associate. Also, while there are no guarantees, you have a greater sense of security and permanence which gives you a longer-term view and motivates you to invest even more in your client relationships.

WHAT STEPS SHOULD A SENIOR ASSOCIATE TAKE TO PREPARE FOR A SEAMLESS AND SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO PARTNER?

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

A senior associate should:

- Be comfortable taking a leadership role on matters, despite the reality that there is a partner there backing you up. You need to start acting as if the buck stops with you.
- Start thinking about how to differentiate your practice within the broader legal community in order to create a strong reputational brand.
- Learn how to balance billable vs. non-billable time such as serving on firm committees and business development.

Kathryn Zecca, Robbins, Russell

When you are an associate, doing great work is enough. But as a partner you are relied on to analyze all alternatives and make strategic recommendations based on your best judgment. To prepare for this, senior associates should get into the habit of thinking about the choices they would make if they were the lead attorney on the case. For example:

- What recommendations would you make in the situation?
- What are the odds of succeeding?

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP (Morgan, Lewis)

Senior associates should be thinking about developing a network of business referrals. Often these referrals come from former law school classmates and former colleagues. That is why it is so important to keep in touch with people and always work on building your network of contacts.

Senior associates should also be gaining experience in assigning work to other associates and managing teams. The ability to do this effectively takes time, so you should not wait until you become a partner to start working on it.

It is especially important to seek out opportunities to get your name out there in the community. There are many ways to do this, including:

- Speaking at conferences.
- Joining bar associations and practice area lunch groups.
- Publishing articles on current issues in your practice area.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCEEDING AS A PARTNER

AT YOUR FIRM, WHAT ARE THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF BEING A PARTNER?

Christine Keller, Groom

Each partner is asked to contribute to the firm in a meaningful way. We recognize that every person is different and will bring something unique to her role as a partner. In addition to consistently providing excellent client service (which is a baseline requirement), there are many ways in which a partner can contribute, including:

- Obtaining new work from existing clients.
- Establishing new client relationships.
- Developing an area of expertise.
- Taking an active role in firm management.

The mix of how much of these one person is doing versus another will not always be the same, nor is that required or expected.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

Partners are expected to contribute to the firm in a variety of ways, including:

- Firm management (for example, serving on committees).
- Operations (for example, office space).
- Billing (taking the lead on billable matters).
- Relationships (building and managing client relationships and developing and enhancing the firm's brand).
- Recruiting (attracting the best people to join the enterprise).

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN YOU SUGGEST FOR INVOLVEMENT IN FIRM MANAGEMENT?

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis Polk

By participating in firm management you add value to the firm and therefore you should participate in some way. It is a good idea to speak with the individuals who supported your candidacy for partner and find out how you can help make their lives easier and make the firm a better place. There is, however, something to be said for taking some time to observe as you transition to partner and figure out how you can add the most value. It is important to recognize that this is also an important time in your practice, as you have a new platform in which to embed yourself and make yourself invaluable to others.

You need to strike the proper balance between growing your practice and firm management commitments.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

Play to your strengths and try to achieve work-life alignment. As a partner there are so many demands on your time. If you are going to serve on a committee try to find one that compliments what are you trying to build. For example, someone with a real estate practice might want to get involved in the firm's leasing of space, whereas someone with an art law practice might want to get involved in the décor of the firm. If you are comfortable building bridges, a great way to effect that vision is in firm management. But it is important to consider how much of your time you want to devote to your core practice versus management, as both involve a significant time commitment.

FOR NEW PARTNERS WHO ARE EXPECTED TO BECOME RAINMAKERS, CAN YOU SHARE ANY STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN THAT ROLE?

Christine Keller, Groom

Building relationships outside the firm is important at every level. A good starting point is with existing clients and law school friends. Joining a group that will bring you into regular interaction with the same set of individuals is another good way to build relationships over time. Inviting people to lunch and firm-sponsored events and sharing articles or information are all good ways to form a connection. Also, when traveling to another city, meeting someone face to face over coffee or a drink after work is a nice, low-key way to connect.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

Seek out an area that is underserved and become the go-to expert in that area. This involves the following three steps:

- Identify the problem to be solved, that is, what clients need in your area.
- Become the solution to the problem.
- Make it known that you are solving the problem.

Kathryn Zecca, Robbins, Russell

Start working on it early in your career, even before you become a partner, so that it becomes a habit. Make a commitment to doing something every month to solidify a relationship or bring in new business. This could include:

- Sending an email to a former classmate or colleague.
- Publishing an article on a timely substantive issue.
- Participating in a client pitch.
- Taking one of your contacts out to lunch.

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

Keep up with personal contacts such as law school and college friends. When you are a junior partner, it is difficult to convince large clients to engage you based on your substantive expertise, even if you are the best attorney in the market. But there is a perception issue for junior partners. It is therefore important to leverage personal contacts whenever possible. Publishing and speaking can also help give you legitimacy when you are a junior partner.

FOR NEW PARTNERS WHO ARE EXPECTED TO MANAGE OTHER ATTORNEYS, CAN YOU SHARE ANY STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS IN THAT ROLE?

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

Don't forget what it's like to be in their position. Empathy goes a long way.

Kathryn Zecca, Robbins, Russell

Good communication is essential. When assigning work, it is important to be very clear regarding expectations with respect to substance, timing, and work product. And it is always important to make sure that everyone on the team knows what is going on in the case and is given an opportunity to contribute. This not only makes everyone on the team feel valued, it also results in better work product.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

It is important to go into managing with the attitude that the success of those around you is ultimately what makes you successful. Ideally, you will help those you manage succeed to the point where you make yourself redundant.

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis Polk

Communication is key. If you are managing a group, it is important to communicate your vision for the group both within the firm and in the macro environment. When managing other attorneys, you must communicate your expectations and then support them so they can do the best job they are capable of. An overly laissez-faire approach can feel like a ship without a rudder, and micro managing can feel heavy-handed. Most importantly, you must have your team's back, as the buck ultimately stops with you.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE QUALITIES THAT SUCCESSFUL PARTNERS SHARE?

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis Polk

Successful partners have a vision for themselves, their group, their practice, and the firm and they are able to convey that vision and become trusted confidants to their clients. They also have a sense of optimism. Being an attorney is not an easy job. To be successful, you must be able to step back and say, "I am contributing in a meaningful way that matters to people and I am helping my clients to execute on their goals and aspirations." There is a spark that comes from appreciating that your skills matter and enjoying what you do. If you do not have this spark, it will be evident to everyone around you. Before embarking on the arduous road to becoming a partner, you will want to consider whether or not you have the spark that comes from enjoying what you do.

Kathryn Zecca, Robbins, Russell

They communicate well both with their clients and their teams. On the client side, they get to know their clients, which helps them to present information more effectively. For example, an individual with a legal background may expect information to be presented differently than someone who has always worked on the business side. And they take the time to understand the client's business, which is critical to becoming a trusted advisor. The best partners are comfortable with their judgment but also remember to advise their clients of all options and the risks associated with each alternative. The most successful partners are also creative, that is, they think outside the box when making recommendations.

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

They are respected because they treat others well. For example, they:

- Consider the views of others, thereby creating an environment of inclusion.
- Lead by example, so that members of their team are inspired by their dedication and work ethic.
- Are good mentors, looking for opportunities to help others succeed.

Under the large law firm model, not every associate will make (or want to make) partner. Many of your colleagues, therefore, will end up in-house. If you treat your associates with respect and empathy, they are much more likely to have positive views toward the firm if they leave and go in-house.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

A strong belief in, and commitment to, the enterprise. A desire to help others succeed.

ACROSS PARTNER ROLES, IT SEEMS THAT AN ABILITY TO GAIN THE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE OF CLIENTS AND COLLEAGUES IS PARAMOUNT. WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS IN DEVELOPING THIS ABILITY?

Christine Keller, Groom

Get to know people! Understand what their priorities and goals are and help them to achieve them when you can. Explore common interests (both work-related and non-work-related) and discuss those when you have an opportunity.

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis, Polk

It is important to spend time with your clients and really listen so that you understand their concerns. While they may articulate some of their concerns, others may be lingering in their minds and you must listen carefully in order to bring them out into the open.

It is also important to remember that while attorneys see a variety of situations, clients are the experts when it comes to their businesses. The job of outside counsel is to leverage the client's existing capabilities in helpful ways and make them look good within their own institutions.

IS THERE ANY GENERAL ADVICE YOU CAN SHARE THAT YOU WISH SOMEONE HAD GIVEN TO YOU WHEN YOU BECAME A PARTNER?

Christine Keller, Groom

Don't put too much pressure on yourself in the beginning. It is exciting to be given the title and responsibility of partner but no one expects you to do everything differently that first year or even the first five years. Enjoy the achievement and lay out a strategy for the next five to ten years with clear goals so you can measure your progress. Consider working with an outside coach to get the benefit of expertise that goes beyond your firm.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

There is not one road to becoming good at business development and relationship building. But identifying something that is missing in your area and becoming the solution is critical.

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis, Polk

Becoming a partner is not the be all end all. In fact, it is just the beginning. There is a tendency to emphasize making partner as grasping the brass ring. When you think in terms of a longer time horizon, your perspective changes in a way that is beneficial to you, the firm, and your clients.

PARTICIPATING PARTNERS

Practical Law would like to thank the following individuals for their participation in this Q&A:

- **Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Partner, Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP**. Kyoko advises boards, compensation committees, and individual executives on executive compensation, equity-based incentives, deferred compensation, severance plans, and other compensatory arrangements, with a particular emphasis on issues arising in mergers and acquisitions, initial public offerings, and new and joint ventures, as well as for financial institutions. Kyoko serves on the firm's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, the Women's Initiatives Committee and the Pro Bono Committee and is the Chair of the firm's Compensation Committee.
- **Christine Keller, Principal, Groom Law Group**. Christine advises clients on all aspects of health and welfare plan design, administration, and funding, including compliance with federal tax, ERISA, and other federal and state law requirements, plan and VEBA trust document drafting, participant disclosure, change in election issues, wellness program compliance, and claims and appeals. Christine also serves on the firm's Executive Committee.
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- **Daniel C. Glazer, Partner, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati (WSGR)**. Daniel is an American technology lawyer, strategic business advisor, and the founding partner

of WSGR's London office, which is scheduled to open on August 1, 2018. Since the 2010 launch of the UK Government's "Tech City" initiative, Daniel has focused on supporting high-growth UK and other European companies with US expansion and fundraising, and connecting the UK and wider European tech communities with US investors, corporates, advisors, and other stakeholders. Daniel also leads the firm's US expansion practice, with a focus on advising UK and other non-US technology and life sciences companies through their US life cycle.

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