

How I Made Partner: 'I Knew That Firm Culture and a Respectful, Professional Work Environment Were Critical to Me,' Says Cheryl Chan of Davis Polk & Wardwell

"I hope that others like me—minorities, women—will feel that the legal industry has evolved and is continuing to evolve and that there is a place for them."

By Tasha Norman

Cheryl Chan, 42, Davis Polk & Wardwell, New York

Practice area: Mergers and acquisitions.

Law school and year of graduation: Harvard Law School, 2012.

How long have you been at the firm? Since 2012. I made partner in 2020.

How long were you an associate at the firm? From 2012-2020.

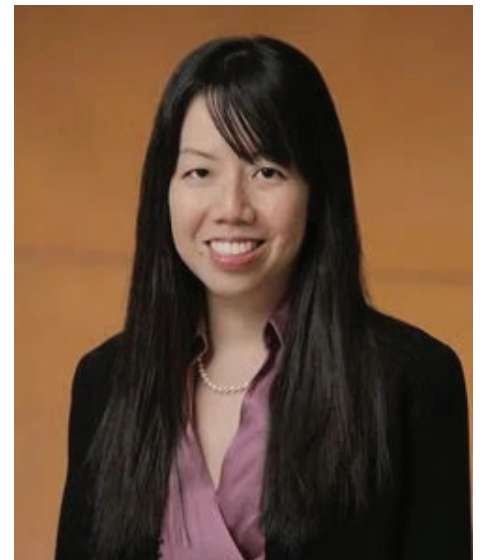
What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm?

At the time, it felt like an incredibly tough decision. I was interviewing at a time when the aftereffects of the 2008 financial crisis were still being felt. Financial stability was one of my top criteria, as many of the top firms seemed to be experiencing volatility. I had also worked for a substantial period of time before law school,

and I knew that firm culture and a respectful, professional work environment were critical to me. There were actually several firms that seemed to meet this criteria. After a lot of internal debate, I decided to spend my summer at Davis Polk. The moment I arrived and met the partners, associates and fellow summer associates, I felt such relief—it was evident that I had made the right decision and that the culture of Davis Polk was exactly as had been described to me.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner?

How much time and attention of the partners is spent on associate development, well-being and morale. I had received a great deal of mentorship and training, but I suppose I had always assumed that the partners with whom I worked most closely were



Cheryl Chan

Courtesy Photo

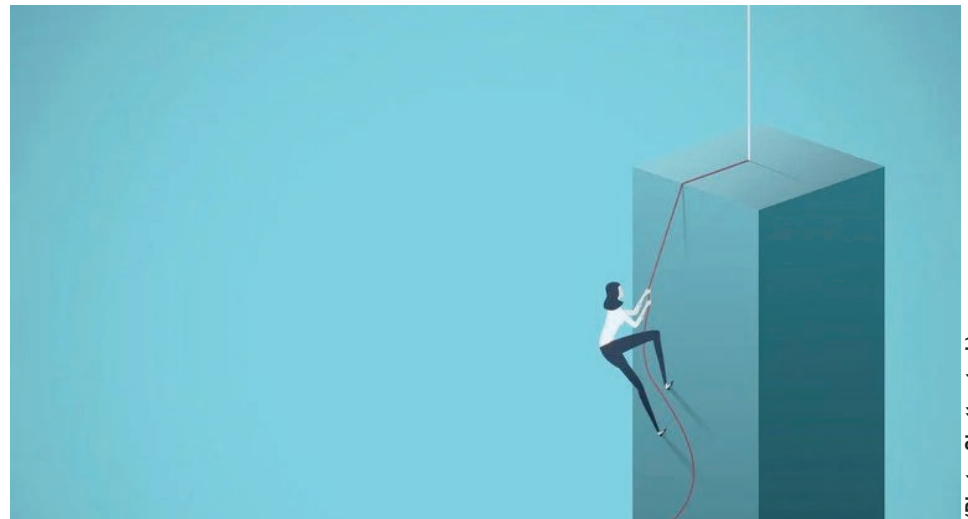
exceptional teachers and mentors. I only realized after becoming a partner how much time is spent on each and every associate and how deliberate and focused this is.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? I think the firm believed that I had demonstrated over a period of

time that I had the substantive and technical skills, as well as a 100% commitment to client service, expected of a Davis Polk partner. I have had long and deep relationships with several clients since I was a junior associate, and I believe their support for and confidence in me also made an impact.

What's the key to successful business development, in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system? I do think that it will differ for each person as to how to do business development successfully, and so it is important to be honest in evaluating one's personality and style and to go about business development in an authentic way. Being genuinely interested in helping someone solve their potential legal issues definitely helps, even if there is no immediate return. The remote work environment made meeting up in person more difficult in some respects. However, it also made video conferencing so widespread and normalized that it helped in making connections with people who would have been hard to meet up with in person pre-pandemic (e.g., in a different country).

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel



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you to partner? There were so many people that I am incredibly grateful to. But in particular, my now partners in the M&A group in Davis Polk. Early on in my career, so many of them provided me with mentorship and guidance, taught me so much about the practice of law and generally made me aspire to be like them in terms of the professionals they were. And then, later in my career, several of them were really instrumental in encouraging me and pushing me to the finish line. I am well aware of how much support I had from them, and I am incredibly grateful.

What advice could you give an associate who wants to make partner? It is a wonderful career to be a partner at Davis Polk. If this—being a partner at a top law firm—is something that you want, it is absolutely worth it to try, even if the hours and effort can seem daunting at times.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? I took a longer path than many other people. Prior to my legal career, I had a substantial career in the Singaporean government, which was rich and rewarding. I truly believe I ended up in the right place though, as I have realized that I really enjoy the practice of law. So my only advice would be to not be afraid to take a more circuitous path to end up at the right place.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? Maybe a modest one. I hope that others who are like me—minorities, women—will feel that the legal industry has evolved and is continuing to evolve and that there is a place for them if this is something that they want to pursue.