

## How I Made It : 'I Demonstrated a Commitment to Developing the Next Generation of Lawyers at the Firm,' Says Sheila Adams of Davis Polk

By Tasha Norman

**Sheila Adams**, 38, Davis Polk, New York City.

**Practice area:** Antitrust and competition.

**Law school and year of graduation:** Columbia Law School, 2011.

**How long have you been at the firm?** Since 2013—more than eight years.

**How long were you an associate at the firm?** For seven years, from 2013-2020. I was promoted to counsel in 2020 before making partner in 2021.

**What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm?** First, Davis Polk has a very strong litigation practice. I knew I wanted to focus on litigation—at the time, white-collar. Over time, my interests evolved into my current antitrust practice. Second, the firm has a reputation of being a collegial and collaborative place to work. That reputation was confirmed by my peers who had summered or who were associates at the firm. And finally, Davis Polk has a strong reputation as an inclusive place to work and one that values the diversity of its attorneys, which was an important criterion for me.

**What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner?** One of the biggest surprises has been the tremendous amount of time partners dedicate to running the business. I say that broadly to mean recruiting, associate development, management of client relationships and business development, among other things. There is a significant amount of thoughtful consideration (and time) that goes into all of these aspects of running the firm, and I can find myself spending several hours in a day on them at times.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner?**

I think there were probably a few different things. I had shown a tremendous amount of dedication to our work and our clients consistently throughout my time at the firm. I also had demonstrated a willingness and an ability to build both internal and external relationships over the years. I have always been a devoted firm citizen, including recruiting new lawyers to the firm and mentoring more junior lawyers. While this latter attribute, in and of itself, would not propel someone to the partnership, I think my demonstrated commitment to developing the next generation of Davis Polk lawyers was an important factor.

**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?**

*There are two key components beyond doing excellent work for current clients. The first, which is common to many practice areas, is developing relationships over time. One-on-one meetings are vital to building strong relationships, particularly in a remote environment where much of the human connection is lost. During the pandemic, I implemented a strategy that included virtual meetings such as coffees over video, which allowed for more personalized interactions than a simple phone call. Before the pandemic, there were not as many spaces for meeting face to face with people long-distance other than getting on a plane. The pandemic provided a unique opportunity, amid other considerable challenges, to connect in new ways, which I anticipate will survive the pandemic.*



Courtesy Photo

**Sheila R. Adams, partner of Davis Polk.**

*The second key factor is being considered a thought leader on issues of importance. In this respect, I have been able to take advantage of a range of opportunities for speaking engagements on relevant issues in the antitrust field, both in person and virtually. The antitrust group at the firm has made several efforts to help promote me as a leader in antitrust. For example, we conducted two webcasts for clients on antitrust enforcement in the Biden administration where I served as a panelist or co-presenter, both before I made partner. From there, I leveraged those opportunities make connections, which have led to more speaking engagements.*

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner?**

The foundation of all of my success, since childhood, has been my parents. My parents did not have the privilege to graduate from high school or attend college when I was young, although my father went back to school later in life, during my adulthood, to obtain his bachelor's and master's degrees, for which I am extremely proud of him. I credit my parents with instilling in me valu-

able lessons of hard work, perseverance and overcoming adversity, which are traits I utilize to this day.

Beyond my parents, there are too many people to name. Throughout my career at Davis Polk, I have felt an immense amount of support from my partners in the antitrust group, other litigation partners and more senior lawyers outside of my group, several key clients, mentors outside of the firm and the two federal judges I clerked for, all of whom have supported and mentored me at critical junctures in my career. All of those mentorships collectively were integral to my believing that I had a future at Davis Polk and that this was a place where I could be successful.

**What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner?** First and foremost, I think the most important piece of advice is to be excellent in your work. Next, it is best to treat every project or assignment as an opportunity to both demonstrate your skills and to do great work for, and with, your supervising associate or partner. I would also advise, particularly early on, to be a sponge: Gain as much experience in your chosen practice area as possible, make a commitment to always improve, and challenge yourself continuously to be the best version of yourself as a person and professional.

However, doing great work and having broad experience are not enough. People also need to know who you are. Thus, you should endeavor to build an internal network of friends, mentors, and sponsors, and develop similar relationships outside the firm as well.

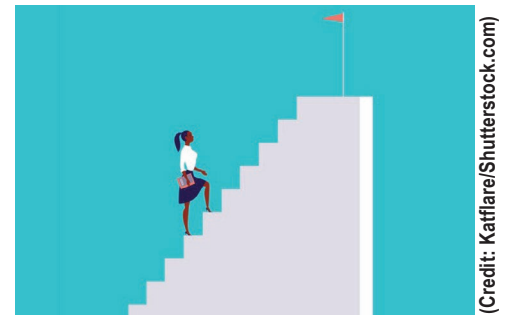
**When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?** One common mistake is having too narrow of a focus. You could potentially turn down great learning opportunities that you are not able to fully appreciate until you experience them.

You should be flexible and willing to learn. That is how I discovered antitrust. Although it was not my initial focus when I started at the firm, my interest was piqued when I was assigned a challenging and complex antitrust matter as a third-year associate. That case ended up having a significant impact on my career trajectory and ultimate decision to make my professional home in our antitrust group.

**What challenges did you face in your career path and what was the lesson learned?** I think one of the most significant challenges I have had to face has been meeting my own high expectations. At many points in my career, I dealt with the uncertainty of whether or not I could accomplish my goals or reach a certain level. Even though I came to believe that I could in fact make partner at Davis Polk, there were still many occasions where I experienced self-doubt. Through a combination of self-work and external support, such as coaching, I have been able to work through these challenges more effectively over time. I have learned that I have the capacity to overcome anything with my dedicated, focused attention, and that it is OK to lean on external resources when they could prove helpful.

The other challenge has been that, frankly, this is a hard job. I think that I am continually learning how to make it work and to make everything fit together. I have grown significantly in this respect and continue to focus on certain aspects, such as prioritizing my health and wellness.

**Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?** The advice I would give my younger self is the same advice that I would tell my current self: Relax and have fun. I have always been very serious about my work and my career, and I know now that if I had relaxed more at certain points, I would have still ended up with the same level of success. I do not have



any regrets, but increasingly I have come to believe that it is important to also enjoy the ride.

**What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole?** When I look back on my legal career, I would like to have been able to help others find their footing, their voice, and their path, especially more junior lawyers and those from underrepresented groups in the legal profession. I want to help demonstrate that this particular career path is as accessible to them as anyone else and to help them achieve the highest levels of their ambition.

**What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID-19 years)?** Like many people, I learned that life is too short and that it is important to connect or reconnect with the people who mean the most to you. I have five siblings, some of whom live in different states, and I found myself doing video calls with them and other family members frequently, and I now speak to them all much more regularly than before COVID.

I also learned that health is paramount—and this includes mental health. The pandemic made that abundantly clear. COVID-19 has been such a scary time for all of us, and I realized that there are some problems that are too large for me alone to figure out how to solve. Finding additional support to deal with the collective trauma has been critical to my well-being.

**Pick three words and/or phrases or key elements you would like to focus on for 2022.** Happiness, Relationships, Growth