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Congratulations, You Made Partner: What Happens Now?

by Practical Law

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An expert Q&A with senior law firm partners providing advice for new partners. Practical Law's Jessica Cherry asked several senior law firm partners to address how an attorney's role changes when they become a partner, how to prepare for the transition to partner, the key qualities of successful partners, and more.

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. Jessica Cherry of Practical Law asked several senior law firm partners (see Participating Partners) to provide guidance for new partners on how to address these challenges and thrive in their new role.

This Q&A addresses:

- How an attorney's role changes when they become a partner.
- Steps a senior associate can take to prepare for becoming a partner.
- Guidance for associates who are members of underrepresented groups who want to become partners.
- The various aspects of being a partner at particular law firms.
- Strategies for becoming involved in law firm management.
- Strategies for succeeding as a rainmaker.
- Strategies for managing and mentoring other attorneys and delegating work.
- How the post-pandemic transition to more remote and hybrid working impacts the partner role.
- The most important qualities of successful partners.
- How to gain trust of clients and colleagues.
- Advice that senior law firm partners wish they were given when they first became partners.

Preparing for the Transition to Partner

How does your role within the law 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 only myself, but also other partners to succeed?" It is essential to embrace the idea that you are part of a broader enterprise.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine LLP (Thompson Hine)

When you are an associate, especially in your earlier years of practice, your focus is largely on doing the work that has already been brought into the firm, and doing it really well. To the extent that you are doing any marketing, it is largely internal marketing designed to ensure that others give you work to do. By contrast, when you become a partner, you are responsible for:

- Maintaining and growing the firm's business.
- Putting work on others' plates.

The professionalism expectations are also higher once you become a partner. You become a role model in many respects. Whereas corporations tend to have a pyramid hierarchy structure, law firms have flatter structures, where all partners are perceived as "bosses," so to speak. Partners therefore need to hold themselves to a higher standard and exercise excellent judgment both within the firm and in interactions with others across the legal profession.

Christine Keller, Groom Law Group (Groom)

Our goal at Groom is for the shift to partner to not be too dramatic. If you are an effective senior associate or of counsel, you are typically already directing a lot of your attention outward. Even before becoming a partner, you have a lot of client interaction and have generally started to build a network of contacts outside the firm. However, that responsibility increases even more as you move into the partner role, where getting to know existing clients and expanding your network (for example, to include colleagues in other firms, individuals in charge of associations and conferences, publishers, and potential clients) becomes even more of a priority.

Additionally, as you move into the partner role, you are expected to train, mentor, and delegate work to associates. This is a skill that does not develop overnight. Fortunately, training, mentoring, and delegating effectively are skills that a senior associate or of counsel can focus on before becoming a partner and work to improve throughout their career. Periodically participating in 360 reviews as a partner can help to identify opportunities for growth in this area.

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, we have various committees at Groom, 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)

When you become a partner at Davis Polk, 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?

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

One of the most important things senior associates should do is familiarize themselves with law firm economics. It is important to understand why your billing rate matters, and why your compensation is tied to both the volume, and the type, of work you do. While not the only factor, how much revenue you bring into the firm, either by bringing in new clients or by maintaining and expanding work from existing clients, is important and significantly impacts your compensation in the long run.

Senior associates should also focus on building and maintaining their networks, because when you become a partner, generating business is probably the most important factor that impacts whether you move up the ranks within the firm. It is critical to build a solid network of people who can potentially send you work, whether within or outside your practice area, well in advance of stepping into the partner role.

While I do not think most firms expect someone who becomes a partner to generate work immediately, when deciding whether to elevate someone to the partner rank, they consider whether someone has a rich network and is making the kinds of connections that will help them bring in business in the future.

Senior associates must also be able to delegate work effectively, both to ensure that junior associates get the experience they need and, as they step into the partner role, to create time for themselves to go outside the firm and find new clients.

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 versus non-billable time such as contributing to firm committees and business development.

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 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.

Can you offer any guidance to associates who are members of underrepresented groups who want to become partners?

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

The most important advice I have is to ask for feedback regularly. In general, partners and other supervising attorneys can find it difficult to candidly tell someone that their performance on a project did not meet expectations. And it can be even harder for supervisors, especially non-minority supervisors, to provide that feedback to members of underrepresented groups. Supervisors want to be perceived as supportive and do not want to be accused of treating someone from an underrepresented group more harshly than others.

Therefore, to get honest feedback, it is particularly important for associates from underrepresented groups to ask for feedback very directly. For example, rather than asking "Do you have any feedback for me?" associates can say, "Tell me two things that you wish I had done better." Through this direct request, the supervising attorney has no choice but to provide the associate with something to improve on, and it will probably be something that they would have told you in the first place if they were being completely honest and transparent.

Strategies for Succeeding as a Partner

At your firm, what are some key expectations 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 their 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 responsibilities one person is taking on 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, making decisions regarding office space).
- Billing (for example, taking the lead on billable matters).
- Relationships (for example, building and managing client relationships and developing and enhancing the firm's brand).
- Recruiting (that is, attracting the best people to join the enterprise).

What strategies can you suggest for becoming involved in firm management?

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Davis Polk

By participating in firm management you add value to the firm. 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 satisfying 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 you are trying to build. For example, someone with a real estate practice might want to get involved in the firm's leasing of office 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.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

If your goal is firm management, that is really about leadership. So being a good leader, even when you do not have a leadership title, is important. You need to carry yourself in a way that connotes a leader. It is also important to be somebody who others want to be led by, and most of us want to be led by someone who is compassionate, honest, and loyal.

Can you share any strategies for becoming a successful rainmaker?

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.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

The two main components to being a successful rainmaker are:

- Bringing in new work.
- Maintaining and growing existing work through strong client relationships.

When it comes to bringing in work, my best advice is to always have many irons in the fire. Putting all of your eggs into one basket is a poor business strategy, and it creates tremendous pressure to land that client no matter what.

With respect to maintaining and growing existing relationships, doing excellent work is paramount. In fact, whether you are a summer associate or a senior partner, doing excellent work is really at the core of everything attorneys do.

It is also important to find ways to make your clients' lives easier. One way to do that is to consciously try to anticipate their questions. I am better able to do that when I have built a strong client relationship and understand what makes them tick, and what they are likely to be worried about. When I am discussing issues with my team, I make sure to raise the issues that I believe my clients will be most focused on. I am constantly amazed at how many questions we are able to anticipate, and therefore have the answers ready for them when they ask.

But maintaining positive client relationships is about more than business. Having close client relationships is also important for your overall well-being because it is extremely fulfilling. I recall talking to a client when we had a significant motion pending which she was very nervous about because the relief the other side was seeking would have been hugely disruptive to her business. I was on the phone with her talking through strategy and she said to me "My heart is racing – what if we lose this?" and I never forgot the way I felt at that moment. I was so invested in her success that winning that motion for her mattered enormously to me. (We did win!) I think clients feel that commitment, and they trust you a great deal when they feel that.

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.

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

Keep up with personal contacts such as law school and college friends. When you are a new 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. There is a perception issue for new partners. It is therefore important to leverage personal contacts whenever possible. Publishing and speaking can also help give you legitimacy when you are a new partner.

Can you share any strategies for how new partners can effectively manage or mentor other attorneys?

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

Do not forget what it was like to be in their position. Empathy goes a long way.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

It is very important to be able to give honest feedback. Unfortunately, many attorneys struggle to do this well. We have a hard time saying, for example, "If you did it this way, you would get a better outcome" and explaining why. Or if an associate provides you with something on Thursday that you asked for by Tuesday, explaining to that associate why getting it Tuesday mattered.

Providing regular feedback is also important so that associates know where they stand. Unfortunately, I often see associates whose work is adequate, but not good enough for them to advance to the next level, but no one tells them that. Having those honest conversations, while sometimes painful in the moment, is the right thing to do and in everyone's best interests in the long run.

Also to be a good manager and mentor, you must know and care about the attorney's full life. Having some understanding of someone's full life gives you context around how they are performing. As human beings, we are naturally more forgiving of missteps if we understand them in the broader context of what else someone is dealing with. If someone has a sick parent they are caring for, that is going to have an impact on their work, and by understanding that, I am going to be in a position to allow them some latitude. But if all I know is that someone delivered a sub-par brief, when previously their briefs were excellent, I am left wondering.

Part of caring about associates' full lives is finding ways to be flexible to make things work for them. For example, maybe a talented associate is not meeting expectations because the expectations are too high given what is going on in the rest of that person's life. The solution may be to bring those expectations down a bit, for example, by reducing their billable hour requirement. These arrangements can be a win for everyone. The firm retains a talented associate who might otherwise leave, and the associate is happier because they are no longer struggling to meet the firm's (and life's) expectations.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

It is important to go into managing others with the attitude that the success of those around you is ultimately what makes you successful. Ideally, you will help the people 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 the attorneys 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 micromanaging 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 genuinely enjoying what you do.

Craig Bitman, Morgan, Lewis

Successful partners 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

Successful partners have a strong belief in, and commitment to, the enterprise, and a desire to help others succeed.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

Although being an exceptional attorney, whether you are a junior associate or a senior partner, is key, the revenue generation piece is the real game changer. Many partners are extremely talented writers, negotiators, or managers. However, if they are unable to bring in new clients or maintain or expand existing client relationships, they may be frustrated at being unable to move up in the law firm hierarchy.

In general, for many reasons, women often find it challenging to generate business. There are various reasons for this, including that:

- Responsibilities at home still fall disproportionately on women, so they are stretched more thinly.
- The culture of business generation tends to be male oriented.

I often say to women who are frustrated with where they sit in the law firm hierarchy, "If you generate a lot of revenue, compensation and power come with that." Maybe we should consider fundamentally changing our compensation structures. But in the meantime, we must operate within the system we have. Whether that system is perfect or not, bringing in business is a key to moving up the law firm hierarchy ladder.

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 to them 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 encounter a wide array of complex situations through their legal work, 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.

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

Having client trust is essential – especially because they are spread so thin. We think of ourselves as being spread thin, but from my experience, many in-house attorneys are spread even thinner, which means that they have very few opportunities to devote an extended period of time to any single matter. They therefore need to trust that their outside counsel are watching the details and making smart, strategic decisions on their behalf.

To gain your clients' trust, it helps if you get to know people, and let people get to know you, because it is hard for people to trust you if they do not know you. Early in my career, I used to compartmentalize my personal and professional lives. I did not feel like I had permission to bring the personal side of me to work. But over time I have allowed the personal and professional sides of me to blend, and today some of my best friends are people I work with, whether it be colleagues or clients. Forming those relationships is a great way to gain the trust and confidence of others.

Since the pandemic, some law firms have adopted a hybrid or remote work model. How does this impact the partner role?

Marla Butler, Thompson Hine

When associates are working remotely all or some of the time, partners must work harder to build relationships with them and gain an understanding of their full life. In general, I believe associates are more committed to the firm and perform better when they feel that they are part of a team, and people feel that they are part of a team when they know their team members. It is incumbent upon partners, especially those who lead teams, to find and create situations that bring people together.

I am the partner in charge of Thompson Hine's Atlanta office, and I work very closely with our office manager to find ways to make people want to come into the office. We have office lunches a couple times a month, and people enjoy coming in and interacting with each other. It is not necessary to wait for the perfect, grand reason to bring people into the office. Creating opportunities for people to step out from behind their desks and engage with one another can be enough. At the same time, everyone – partners and associates alike – must seize these opportunities to connect on a human level.

Daniel Glazer, WSGR

Building and maintaining relationships with fellow partners and supporting the professional development of associates requires partners in the post-pandemic environment to take a proactive approach. It is often no longer possible to rely on the serendipity of chance meetings with colleagues in the hallway or over lunch or a coffee break. Also, to the extent your team or the firm as a whole is looking to encourage colleagues to spend more time in the office, partners should look to lead by example, especially for the benefit of more junior colleagues who are seeking to benefit from the partners' experience.

Is there any general advice you can share that you wish someone had given to you when you became a partner?

Christine Keller, Groom

Do not 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

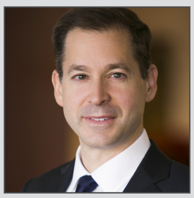
There is no single road to becoming good at business development and relationship building. However, identifying something that is missing in your area and becoming the solution is critical.

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:



Craig A. Bitman, Partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP. Craig leads the firm's employee benefits and executive compensation practice and has over 25 years of experience advising a diverse mix of clients on all aspects of benefit plan design, implementation, and administration. Specifically, he counsels clients in the context of day-to-day administration, plan investments, mergers and acquisitions, and ongoing compliance. Craig advises on matters involving qualified and nonqualified deferred compensation plans, health and welfare benefit plans, equity compensation, and other types of arrangements. He also practices in the firm's institutional investor and private investment funds practices. Craig has served as a member of the firm's Advisory Board and currently co-leads the firm's Disability Awareness Lawyers Network.

Marla R. Butler, Partner at Thompson Hine LLP. Marla is an intellectual property and technology litigator, focusing on patent, trade secret, and contract disputes for clients in the medical, semiconductor, power, networking, and other high-tech industries. She has developed a deep understanding of technology and is skilled at building and leading diverse teams of attorneys, scientists, and economists, which enhances her ability to devise and implement successful litigation and trial strategies and to simplify complex technology concepts for judges, juries, and arbitrators. Marla is the partner in charge of Thompson Hine's Atlanta office. She is a fellow of the American Bar Foundation and the Litigation Counsel of America. Marla is also on the Board of Directors of the National LGBTQ+ Bar Association and a former board member of Lambda Legal.

Daniel C. Glazer, Partner at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati. Daniel is an American technology attorney, strategic business advisor, and the founding and managing partner of the firm's London office. Since the 2010 launch of the UK Government's "Tech City" initiative, he 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.

Christine Keller, Executive Principal at Groom Law Group. Christine counsels employers/plan sponsors, health care insurers/administrators, and other health care service providers on all aspects of health and welfare plan design, administration, and funding. Her expertise includes federal tax issues impacting health and welfare benefits such as cafeteria plans, health accounts (HSAs, FSAs, and HRAs), and fringe benefits, as well as compliance with ERISA and other federal laws impacting health and welfare plans. Christine also helps clients navigate the evolving landscape of state law requirements impacting health and welfare plans. She has been the managing partner of Groom Law Group since 2022. In that role, Christine oversees all operations and strategic decision making for the firm.

Kyoko Takahashi Lin, Partner at 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. She has served on the firm's Diversity and Inclusion Committee, the Women's Initiatives Committee, and the Pro Bono Committee and as the Chair of the firm's Compensation Committee.