

How to Network Your Way to Partner

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Every year, thousands of law firm associates buy the right suits, get expensive haircuts, strive to impress the right people -- oh, and bill a gazillion hours -- all with the ambition of being made partner at their firm one day. And yet, there are not enough partner slots for all of these hopefuls, meaning that they need to distinguish themselves from their peers in a meaningful and undeniable way.

Partners are made -- not born -- and their paths to get there are varied. However, one common thread among them is their superior ability to network, both inside and outside of their firms.

SOFT SKILLS, HARD RESULTS

Most firms attest that substantive legal ability and work is the primary consideration when evaluating associates for partnership. However, there is no denying that the practice of law has personal and business aspects as well as legal ones. Therefore, an associate's ability in the so-called "softer" areas of networking, relationship-building, client development, communication and self-promotion often do figure into the evaluation process in varying degrees, depending on the firm's written (and unwritten) criteria.

Benjamin Sibbett, a new partner at [Clifford Chance](#), explains, "Largely speaking, there are two categories of skills that the firm is interested in for potential partners. The first category is substantive legal skills. How well do you know the law? How good are you, from a technical legal perspective? The second category is 'softer skills' such as, How do you deal with clients. How do you generate business, or how likely are you to generate it? Are you a team player or an individualist in your approach?"

So the associate that spends all his or her time billing hours and honing legal skills may have a technical edge, but may not be well-rounded enough to inspire confidence on personal and business fronts.

PERSONAL CONTACTS CAN LEAD TO PARTNERSHIP

Michelle Mancino Marsh became a partner at [Kenyon & Kenyon](#) in October 2004. Looking back, Marsh says, "If it wasn't for networking, I wouldn't be at this firm, and I wouldn't be a partner here today."

Marsh came to Kenyon & Kenyon through a former law school classmate, who encouraged her to consider moving to the firm to specialize in trademark law. At that time, she had been a general litigator at her previous firm for three years. Though Marsh did not specifically practice trademark law at the time, she decided to take a risk and make the move to Kenyon. After slightly more than four years there, she became a partner.

Marsh emphasizes the importance of leveraging her alumni connections when building her business network. She encourages her peers to attend alma mater events whenever possible. "Alumni events are not a waste of time -- they are a great source of meeting potential clients. Attorneys go in-house and become decision-makers about hiring outside counsel."

Ari Weisbrot recently left his previous firm in order to accept a partnership offer from [Phillips Nizer](#), which is headquartered in New York City. He had been an associate at a small New Jersey law firm that seemed unable to support his increasingly expanding practice. He decided it was best to make a move elsewhere, and since he was bringing a major *Fortune* 50 client with him, his prospects were bright.

Weisbrot saw an article in a local paper about Phillips Nizer opening an office in Hackensack, N.J. He contacted the firm's managing partner, and that conversation set the initial wheels in motion, but the real clincher came when the two men, coincidentally, met at a local Jewish temple. That personal exchange sealed the deal for Weisbrot.

He explains, "The firm was looking for a go-getter [who] could try cases, and I was looking for a firm with presences in New Jersey and New York City that would allow me to service smaller clients as well as large corporations. The fit was ideal because Phillips Nizer had the cozy, hometown feel with the big-firm credentials."

YOUR INSIDE JOB

Sibbett admits that personal contacts have been extremely important to building his external profile. However, he also credits internal networking as a key component to his success in becoming a partner.

Sibbett says, "In thinking of 'clients,' you have to think both internally and externally. In coming up through the ranks, one of the mistakes people make is only paying attention to external clients -- that is, clients of the firm. Your internal clients are the other attorneys you work with on a daily basis at your firm. It's necessary to keep both sets of clients satisfied so you are well-regarded and respected by your colleagues and supervising partners. If people talk about you positively, it leads to more work and better work."

Also, finding the right internal mentors is crucial to building a strong foundation on the road to partnership.

Sibbett says, "In order to succeed, having a mentor is critical. I was fortunate enough to have one of the two chairmen of my group as my mentor. If you don't have a mentor at a large firm, you run the risk of becoming lost because people may not be looking out for you on an individual basis."

All mentors are not created equal, though. Associates with an eye on partnership should be sure to hitch their wagons to a rising or current star rather than a falling star. A mentor whose clout is waning is less likely to have significant influence on your candidacy. By contrast, if you are the protégé of someone of who is well connected within the firm, the outcome of that relationship will often be neutral or positive when it comes to your evaluation for partnership.

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SPREAD YOURSELF AROUND

When it comes to internal networking, Marsh emphasizes that associates need to expand their internal exposure to work with as many people as possible. "Associates should look to work with a variety of people and be pushed outside of their comfort zones. I believe that my flexibility and willingness to do any project for a number of partners helped me to make partner."

Sibbett seconds this motion, advising associates to "expand your internal network as much as you can. Try to get assigned to transactions that involve lawyers in the firm other than the ones that sit on your floor." He admits that some practice groups are more conducive to this kind of flexibility than others, but he encourages associates to stretch their reach to the greatest possible limit.

Noah Heller, a new partner at [Katten Muchin Rosenman](#), insists that the number of people you know at your own firm is extremely important to your chances at partnership. "Your reputation is as key internally as it is externally. The more partners that know about you, your good work and your level of commitment, the better."

Heller notes that he was lucky to have worked for someone who allowed him to gain exposure to other partners at the firm. "Partners talk about associates -- they form opinions and share them freely. Therefore, you can't take anything lightly. Get to know as many people as you can -- and impress them all."

GO VERTICAL

In addition to broadening exposure to colleagues at the firm, Heller believes that specialization was a proven accelerator for him on the way to partnership. Over time, he had developed a niche within bankruptcy law, dealing with purchases and sales of distressed debt. Heller represents hedge funds and investment banks, so his target is very vertical, and yet it's abundant with clients.

He says, "My advice to young attorneys is: Don't be afraid to narrow your field of expertise. I believe that my being in a niche allowed me to make the leap to partner earlier than I would have otherwise. Find something specific within the law that you love to do. If you do that, your interest comes across more sincerely to clients, and also you will have less direct competition for being noticed."

When you choose your area of specialization, however, be cognizant of its current and future growth potential. For example, if you're an attorney who only does work that's affected by the credit markets, you're probably not well positioned for promotion, given the current economic climate. If you realize or suspect that you have gotten stuck in a vulnerable practice area, diversify your skills and body of work sooner rather than later. This ensures your ongoing value to the firm and will shore up your chances for partnership.

CONGRATULATIONS, PARTNER -- NOW WHAT?

Once you've attained partnership, the networking doesn't stop there -- in fact, it becomes all the more important. Now you are suddenly required to bring business into the firm as well as shouldering your legal workload. Becoming a rainmaker when you're a partner traces its formative roots back to your activities as an associate. Lawyers who have been building relationships inside and outside of the firm, who have taken risks and opportunities as they have arisen, will have an undisputed marketing advantage once they are made partner. They already laid the groundwork for client development, having networked aggressively as an associate.

Attorney Ari Kaplan is author of "[The Opportunity Maker: Strategies for Inspiring Your Legal Career Through Creative Networking and Business Development](#)" (Thomson-West, 2008). In this book, Kaplan says, "Being elected to the partnership is a worthy accomplishment based on billable hours, but without contributing to the growth of the firm by acquiring new business, you remain remotely expendable and, therefore, insecure. True control comes with contribution, which in law-firm-speak means business generation."

Kaplan admits that many attorneys, partners and associates alike, actually dread business development because they never learned it in law school. However, he notes that "Business generation sounds like a daunting task, but it is only a matter of unleashing talent ... By learning who you are and what you offer most, you can sharpen your business development talent now, instead of the day after you 'make' partner at a firm or decide it is time for you to open your own shop."

The bottom line is that if you have set your sights on partnership, start networking now. If you already consider yourself a great networker, step it up. Add some lunches to your calendar, clip out an article of interest and send it to a former classmate who you'd like to keep contact with. When you can, do favors for people in a genuine and earnest way. Don't burn your bridges and rekindle valuable relationships that have gone dark.

Every day, you have a fresh chance to prove yourself worthy of partnership, even if you've already been made partner. Through strategic networking, positioning yourself and building relationships, you can get "made" -- perhaps sooner than you think!

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