

# Positioning Yourself for Promotion

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## **I. TIPS FOR ASSOCIATES POSITIONING THEMSELVES FOR PARTNER<sup>1</sup>**

In addition to financial gain, working as a large law firm associate can provide great training. Law firm practice allows an attorney to become familiar with standards of professionalism, feel comfortable with issues of protocol, understand the importance of clear communication, and learn the dynamics of meeting client expectations. It often remains unclear, however, which combination of skills and accomplishments will maximize an associate's prospects to become a partner in the firm.

Ideally, large firm associates would start their jobs having made an educated choice of their practice area, become knowledgeable about specific firms before returning to school for their second year, evaluate other career paths while still in law school, and find a way to develop business skills independently. Realistically, even these steps would not guarantee partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the program materials was written by Kate Neville, Esq.

Many excellent attorneys are passed over for partnership in firms all over the country every year. These decisions, of course, are made on a case-by-case basis by a particular group of existing partners, so no general advice will be universally applicable to every firm. Nonetheless, what follows are tips to keep in mind if your goal is to position yourself to join the partnership ranks.

### **Be Proactive and Take Charge of Your Career**

An attorney who practiced with a large firm for several years before leaving voices a common approach to finding a job while in law school: “I don’t think I ever gave any serious career planning thought to what my post-graduate options were; I just took advantage of the opportunities before me as they arose.” Given the ratio of partners to associates, from the beginning of their careers attorneys interested in partnership need to take more responsibility for their own career paths and act accordingly.

Most law firms are well-known for the lack of substantive feedback in their reviews of associates’ performance. Unless you fall on one end of the spectrum, it is in the firm’s interest to keep you as a billable associate as long as they can generate income from your work. The onus is therefore on associates to ask for specific feedback and anticipate issues that may be of concern so that they are aware of their reputation among the partners with whom they work and realistic about what steps they need to take.

### **Find and Cultivate Mentors**

Firms give new attorneys immediate access to smart colleagues and accomplished supervisors. While some firms now assign a partner “mentor” to incoming associates, the relationship does not always click, and associates who leave a firm often have not found a genuine mentor to help advance their careers. Having the support of a powerful partner can make all the difference as to who becomes partner and who does not at any given firm.

As an associate, it makes sense to cultivate relationships—with more senior associates as well as partners with whom you share an interest or an *alma mater*—both to learn from substantively and to become informed about the path to partnership. Though busy, approached appropriately, most lawyers are happy to talk about what they do and share their perspective on their field.

### **Determine Which Practice Areas are Growing and How Work is Assigned**

It is important to remember that law firms are driven by market changes, just as other businesses are. Certain practice areas can dry up or greatly expand given client demands.

Do some research to determine which of the firm’s practice areas are growing and make it a point to get to know partners in that group. Emphasize your interest in that type of work to whomever assigns work to associates, and remember to follow up consistently to ask if there are projects you can work on in that area.

## **Management Skills**

Many extremely bright attorneys are not necessarily organized or skilled in managing projects or people. Success in law school does not require such skills. Nonetheless, as soon as you start as an associate, you are assigned a secretary and are quickly expected to manage large document reviews and multiple paralegals.

As you become more senior, these management skills will become increasingly required in order for partners to give you more responsibility. Alleviating the workload of partners goes a long way towards gaining their support when being considered for partner. Managing people and projects effectively are valuable qualities—and not always common—in a law firm. Those who do it well often stand out.

## **Develop Business Development Skills and Network**

While successfully managing projects is important, it is critical to recognize that keeping your head down and doing good work is not enough to make partner. Firms have become increasingly focused on the bottom line, and the ability to bring in new business turns out to be the hallmark of the most successful law firm attorneys: most managing partners are typically large “rainmakers.”

Though in fact key to making partner, law schools do not teach business development, and it can be difficult to learn how to gain these skills once in the workforce. Begin your firm career acutely aware of this need, and seek out and take advantage of every opportunity to gain such skills. You may think that “beauty contests,” where firms vie for a client’s business, are less intellectually stimulating than the nuts and bolts of being an attorney, but they are how the firm remains in business. Ask to accompany more senior partners so you see how it’s done and attend as many client meetings as possible to become more comfortable in such interactions.

Take advantage of professional associations, such as local bar association committees or alumni associations, volunteer work as well as social activities that provide you with opportunities to develop networking skills. In reaching out to individuals and engaging them in professional settings associates become comfortable extracting information through informal conversations with other attorneys and non-lawyers as well as develop connections that can serve them well.

## **Be Fun (or at Least Pleasant) to Hang Out With**

You spend a great deal of time with your colleagues; being fun to hang out with—or at least pleasant to be around—makes you that much more attractive as a partnership candidate. Since practicing law is inherently stressful, this is of course easier said than done. It can be important to take vacations when you can and avoid developing a constantly harried attitude or being short with junior attorneys and support staff.

Associates who can keep things in perspective and make long hours of arduous work more enjoyable make things easier for everyone, definitely an advantage when being considered for partnership. Clients, particularly, enjoy working with an attorney who can look on the lighter side of things. The closer your relationships with clients, the more the firm will count on you to retain their business.

### **Recognize That Options Exist**

Though difficult, it is important to remember that associates who are not offered partnership often land impressive and interesting jobs elsewhere. In fact, many in-house counsel describe not having made partner as a “blessing in disguise.” Associates who do not become partners typically remain extremely talented professionals who have a number of professional opportunities.

Another option for associates to consider is negotiating the terms of their current employment. Many firms are interested in keeping an income-generating attorney in whom they have invested, and more associates have become interested in negotiating fewer hours for less money. Such arrangements can prove successful, but require being comfortable remaining in the same work environment with reduced responsibilities and authority. There is ample precedent for an individual who presents a proposal that will serve the firm’s interest successfully negotiating terms that keep him or her there, whether or not having made partner.