



The Partner Track

How to Go From Associate to Partner in Any Law Firm

by Cliff Ennico
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Take-Aways

- Corporate law firms select only the top law school graduates as junior associates.
- Only the best of these young attorneys ever become partners at their firms.
- Large corporate law firms pay the most and provide the most interesting work.
- They also demand that young attorneys work like dogs for years.
- If you make too many mistakes as an associate, you never will become a partner.
- You cannot achieve partner status if you make enemies and people don't like you.
- For the best chance to make partner, cultivate profitable clients who are loyal primarily to you, not to the law firm where you work.
- Law firm partners enjoy great prestige and can earn vast wealth.
- Yet they constantly must stay on their toes to consolidate their positions at their firms.
- They can use their elevated status to move to high-profile leadership roles throughout society.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall

9

Applicability

9

Innovation

9

Style

9

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) What to do, and what not to do, to become a partner at a major law firm; 2) What the advantages and disadvantages are of being a junior or senior associate or of working at a large or small firm; and 3) How to protect yourself if you make partner.

Recommendation

Attorney Cliff Ennico is an expert on what it takes to become a partner at a corporate law firm. In this insider's career guidebook for young lawyers, he explains that making partner has little to do with your good work (though one sizable mistake will sink your prospects) and everything to do with whether the partners, associates and staffers like you. If they don't, you stand a better chance of growing wings and flying backward to Neptune than of making partner. If you are willing to work 100-hour weeks for years, handling boring, technical legal matters, and if you are goof-proof, congenial and a bit Machiavellian, in 10 to 15 years you may become a partner. Ennico provides worthwhile recommendations on what you must do to grab that brass ring. *getAbstract* thinks his savvy book will improve your odds of joining the partners' ranks, if you have the stamina (and don't come to your senses before the race is run).

Abstract

Most Law Firm Associates Will Never Become Partners

So you want to become a partner at a corporate law firm. That means you have to work like a dog to stay at the top of your class – in high school, university and law school. Corporate law firms select only the best, brightest law school grads as junior associates. In this capacity, you will be a “grinder,” working at the lowest level for years – proofing documents, organizing case materials, and doing research and other relatively unsophisticated legal tasks. You seldom will have direct contact with clients. The next step up is senior associate, managing cases under the direction of the partners. Few associates make it to the mountaintop where the partners reside. The partners work with clients, decide how to represent their interests and try cases. And, most importantly, partners bring in new business. That is the classic “partnership track.” Five recent developments:

1. **“Clients are not as loyal as they used to be”** – They will move to a new firm more quickly than in the past and they are far more likely to divide work among several firms instead of giving it all to one office.
2. **“Lawyers are not as loyal as they used to be”** – Similarly, partners and associates will swiftly move to new firms if they are not happy.
3. **“Associates must now bring in business”** – Better learn to become a rainmaker early.
4. **“Passed over” associates are no longer tolerated** – Often, firms will kick you out if they do not want you as a partner.
5. **“Partnerships are not forever anymore”** – You don't get to rest after you make partner. Let down your guard for a minute and your colleagues can take what you have.

Should you join a “large firm” with 50-plus attorneys, a medium-sized firm with 10 to 20 lawyers or a small firm with fewer than 10 partners? Small firms expect you to bring in

“The vast majority of law firm associates who are considered for partnership fail to make the grade.”

“Making partner at a large firm is a combination of skill, determination, total concentration, commitment to the goal, personal style, timing, and sometimes sheer luck.”

“Law school didn’t teach you...what you do when you practice law.”

“Just like your first love, your first law firm will always hold a special place in your heart.”

“In any law firm... it’s important to identify early on the power players who make things happen and align yourself as closely to them as possible.”

“You must know your clients and your superiors (both partners and senior associates) inside and out.”

new business right away. It is easier to move from a large firm to a small one, so starting out at a large firm gives you more flexibility. Big law firms pay the best and offer more chances to handle “state of the art’ legal work,” but 100-hour weeks are customary. Small firms give you more responsibility earlier and you can make partner faster, but usually you won’t deal with cutting-edge cases – unless you join a boutique, specialty law firm. Midsize firms offer the best mix of pay and flexibility, but they are not always that stable. Other variables when you leave law school include:

- **“What type of legal work do [you] really want to do?”** – Without experience, this is a tough question. You may want to join a firm where you can try out different areas.
- **“Where do [you] want to live and practice law?”** – Pulling up stakes and moving from state to state is hard, since states have varying laws and professional certifications.
- **“Do [you] really want to be a law firm partner?”** – The job comes with great perks, status and pay – but also huge responsibilities and a heavy workload.
- **“Are these [your] kind of people?”** – You may be with them for years, so make sure.

Investigate the firm that hires you to learn what it is really like and who is important within it. Make a chart that lists all the partners, including the all-important “drivers,” plus their associates, practice areas, and so on. This chart will visually depict whether the firm has too many partners, and if a large number of associates stand between you and eventual partnership. Consider whether legal, regulatory or economic changes will affect the influence of a specific practice area. The implications of this information may dramatically alter your chances to become a partner. People make partner at corporate law firms for “four reasons”:

1. **“The firm is growing so rapidly, it needs more partners”** – Law firms never want to decrease each partner’s individual profits “to make room for a new partner.” However, firms need enough partners on hand to exploit new growth opportunities. For example, in 2009, demand exploded for lawyers who practice bankruptcy law.
2. **“You are a prominent politician or a close relative of the firm’s most important client”** – The names of well-known politicians on letterhead are “client magnets.”
3. **“You develop a legal specialty that is critical to the firm’s success”** – Thus, you can write your own ticket.
4. **“The best way to make partner”** – Bring in clients “the firm can’t afford to lose.”

To make partner, follow these additional, important rules:

- **“Make no mistakes”** – Law firms work on “a demerit system.” Each mistake you make earns demerits. Accumulate too many and you never will make partner.
- **“Live the law”** – Junior associates have no personal life.
- **“Cultivate your professional image”** – Dress smartly and conservatively.
- **“Start thinking like a partner”** – That’s the only way to become one.
- **“Position yourself for success”** – Often, this means work in a profitable practice area.
- **“Get your financial house in order”** – You will earn good money as a young associate at a corporate law firm. Be frugal and save.
- **“Manage your personal life for maximum advantage”** – Make sure your nonwork activities help you. Good: Become a member of a trade group relevant to the firm’s practice. Bad: Don’t join a “local theater company.” Lawyers do not have creative sides. And avoid pro bono work. Partners want you to work on the firm’s affairs.

"If...all of the important partners and senior associates in the firm like you, then you've got a pretty good shot at making partner there, assuming you can make yourself indispensable to the firm's success."

"A small minority of partners can effectively exercise a veto power over an individual's career."

"The fewer enemies you have in the partnership ranks, the stronger your candidacy for partnership."

"Managing your career is somewhat like trying to roll a 1,000-pound beach ball from point A to point B."

- **"Make no enemies"** – They quickly can sabotage your efforts to make partner.
- **"Get clients of your own"** – Rainmaking is the one surefire way to become a partner.
- **"Never let them see you sweat"** – No one hires a lawyer who looks or acts scared.

After a few years of hard work, you will have a better idea of whether you want to stay at your firm and if you could make partner. Good signs: You work for crucial clients on prestigious, high-profile matters. You have constant access to clients. Bad signs: You work only for senior associates, not partners; you have no client contact. The associates give you only low-level assignments. If you are stuck, you may want to leave. By now, you have marketable experience. If your career is going nowhere after five or six years, make a move; job hunting from a position of strength will become increasingly difficult.

Most associates do not become partners. Some become "permanent associates," which brings increased job security and a respectable salary. In this role, you do not have to generate new business, yet you won't become rich and your colleagues may "view you as a failure." Accept this slot only as a "temporary expedient" until you find a better job. "Contract partners" also hold a between-jobs status. In this "salaried partner" role, you earn good money and you do not have to work the same number of billable hours as equity partners. Yet you quickly must meet certain goals to become an equity partner. If not, the firm may let you go at the end of your contract.

The Snake Pit

Like everything else, the practice of law has become a brutal, bottom-line business. If profits drop, associates' salaries are the first targets. Loyalty is a memory. Clients quickly move to other firms or lawyers for better deals. To survive, associates must develop "portable clients" who will move with them. As an associate, you must be a little Machiavellian to win. Some tips:

- Never let others make you feel bad about yourself.
- If you are short on expertise, develop it.
- Never turn down a new client because you're worried you can't do the work. Sign up the client and then find a way to do the work.
- You always will be an associate if you have no clients of your own.
- Focus your practice on what your clients want done, not on what you want to do.
- Never forget that clients retain you to handle tough assignments, not fun jobs.
- Fear is a valuable ally that keeps you on your toes.
- Your long-term success ultimately depends on who likes you. Work to impress everyone.
- Do not concentrate your practice in areas that will turn out to be "legal fads."
- Be prepared to do whatever "it takes" to make partner.

Office Politics

Legal firms are just like any other firms – collections of human beings who work together, so office politics play as big a role here as in any other organization. Some "rules for survival":

- **"Do what the situation demands"** – As an associate, you have many bosses: "partners, senior associates and clients." Often, each one will want you to handle an emergency assignment. Turning someone down and creating disappointment is no way to get ahead. Accept all the assignments and then work extra hours. Too bad if this interferes with your personal life. That's the price of becoming a partner.
- **"Make sure you are perceived as a good fit"** – To do so, adapt your "behavior, appearance and professional style" to fit the firm's expectations.

“Keep your eye on your specialty...and be prepared to move into a different specialty...if the need arises. As Mark Twain once observed, to succeed, one must, ‘put all your eggs in one basket, but watch that basket!’”

“Any career is a game and the object in any game is to win.” (Michael Maccoby, The Gamesman)

“Don’t break the law. Lawyers don’t look good wearing orange.”

- **“Find out what the other person wants and provide it”** – Does a partner expect long detailed memos about case law? If so, start writing. If your clients are big opera fans, let them know opera intrigues you. This does not mean being a toady. Simply displaying an interest in your partners’ and clients’ avocations can make things go more smoothly.
- **“Join the club”** – Loners do not last long at law firms.
- **“Keep your eyes and ears open”** – Lawyers do intensely detailed work. Those who make mistakes will have a hard time staying employed. Be diligent. Stay alert to what happens around you outside the office. That’s the only way to find new clients. Create a network that keeps you informed about practice development opportunities. Join trade groups, professional associations, country clubs and other networks. Read widely.
- **“Get the support staff on your side”** – Always treat those who support you with consideration and respect. If you don’t, they can easily derail your career, right down to faulty word processing of an important document, poor proofreading of a crucial contract, super-slow delivery of an urgent package or an inability to find a book in the library.
- **“Do something to advance your career every day”** – Call an influential contact, have lunch with someone at a company that could become a client or read an article that expands your knowledge. Fitting such activities into a tight agenda isn’t easy – but do it.
- **“Cultivate the right interests”** – Equip yourself to discuss the “‘right’ topics” with a client during social occasions. “Safe” topics include “sports, current events...(but never your own political views), the national and regional economy,” and so on.
- **“Learn the social graces”** – Mind your manners. People are watching.
- **“Maintain a professional demeanor at all times”** – Be low-key, understated and “a person of few words.” Watch your facial expressions.
- **“Commit yourself to your work and your career”** – Deliver a 100% effort at all times.

You Made Partner!

Congratulations! You made partner. “You have beaten the odds at one of the toughest games on planet Earth, at one of the worst times in recorded history to be a lawyer.” Now get back to work, because “law firm partners today are less secure than ever.” Develop “three survival skills”:

1. **“Grow your practice”** – Sharks die if they don’t keep moving. For lawyers, metaphorically speaking, moving means expanding your client portfolio.
2. **“Build an internal power base”** – Build a quality team so you can focus on rainmaking.
3. **“Protect what you have built”** – Don’t let anyone steal your clients.

Once you reach the inner circle, what’s next? Strive to become a “power partner,” someone whose clients account for more than 5% of the firm’s total revenue each year (10% in a smaller firm). The field opens up for power partners. You can become an author and respected legal expert. You can work as an “adjunct professor” at a law school, become a community leader or even stand for elected office. You can gain prestige as a philanthropist. Or you can springboard to some entirely new high-status position – outside the firm.

About the Author

Attorney **Cliff Ennico** is an expert on the legal ramifications of entrepreneurship. A prolific author, he formerly hosted PBS’s “MoneyHunt” and “MoneyHunt Small Business Challenge.”