



A Step-by-Step Guide to Law Firm Success: Rise Up

[Dimitra Kessenides]

From first-year associate to managing partner, a level-by-level guide to law firm success.

The top of anything exerts a powerful tug on the human imagination. Take Mount Everest. Why else would flocks of mountaineers, Sherpas, and bored, middle-aged American millionaires risk their lives every year to scale the thing? Because they dream of standing on top. The same holds true for law firms. At one point or another, every attorney worth his Montblanc pen pictures himself in the managing partner's office. Sociologists have studied this phenomenon. We're sure their findings are fascinating. (Whatever.) What we offer here is something much more practical: a step-by-step guide to law firm success. Will this information guarantee your safe passage to the summit? Of course not. As on Everest, freak storms, bottlenecks at critical junctures, and the sheer endurance required to complete the journey can stymie even the strongest climber. That said, the tips our experts offer are time-tested tools for advancement. Learn them, live by them. See you on top.

FIRST-YEAR ASSOCIATE

Be nice

"Success at a law firm is about human relationships," says Peter Sloan, a career development partner at Kansas City's Blackwell Sanders. Every time you meet someone new—a partner, another first-year, your secretary—smile. Introduce yourself. Take the time to ask the person a bit about herself. Be the kind of person people like to work with, says Sloan. "You'll lay the groundwork for the relationships you'll need to get ahead."

Drop the attitude

You were a superstar in law school. Neat. Now forget about that: You're back at the bottom of the totem pole. There's nothing wrong with being confident, "but stow the attitude," says Sloan. "You got the job for the same reason that everybody else did. Everyone here is hardworking and smart." The best way to convey a good attitude: Take on assignments eagerly and complete each one as if it's the most important piece of work in the world.

Work, work, work

The New Economy was supposed to rid the world of old-fashioned concepts like hard work. Look what happened to the New Economy. The fact is, law firms have always valued, and will always value, sheer unadulterated toil. Be the first one in the office and the last one to leave—or something close to it. And when you're in the office, be accessible, says Lily Fu Swenson, a senior associate in the Washington, D.C., office of Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw. "If you're a meticulous e-mail and voice-mail checker, and you return messages promptly, it enhances the perception that you're serious."

Obey thy partner

Like it or not, being a rookie associate is a lot like being in the army: You take orders from superiors, and your success is measured by how well you execute them. Listen to what a partner asks you to do, then do it. When you join a firm, "you're not working solo anymore," says James Sandman, managing

partner at D.C.'s Arnold & Porter. "You're part of a team." Understand your role—and execute it.

Think "client-ready"

A common mistake among first-years is to turn in work that's "good enough" because a partner will "just tell you to change it anyway." Bad idea, says Gregg LoCascio, a partner in the D.C. office of Kirkland & Ellis. Instead, LoCascio says, adopt this standard: Could a partner hand this work to the client as is? At the very least, your research should be thorough, your logic precise, your writing clear and concise, and your documents 100 percent error-free. "Just because its initial audience is another person at the firm," says LoCascio, "doesn't mean the same standards don't apply."

Communicate

Naturally, it's best if you can tackle every assignment with as little disruption to a partner as possible. "But don't be afraid to speak up and ask questions," says Kathryn Kling, a senior associate in the D.C. office of Atlanta-based Alston & Bird. "Don't sweep a problem under the rug; it will only resurface as a bigger problem." If you do make a mistake, own up to it quickly. Nobody's perfect, and there's a considerable tolerance for errors in an associate's early years, says Kling. "Your supervisors will appreciate your honesty, they'll trust you more, and they'll be more likely to give you work again." The same goes for deadlines. If you have to miss one, tell a partner right away. "Think ahead, and let me



know," says Hal Shapiro, a partner with D.C.'s Miller & Chevalier. "Otherwise, you're not giving me a chance to make adjustments—and then I'm stuck." A better plan: Don't miss deadlines.

Pace yourself

A lot of first-years put tremendous pressure on themselves, says Swenson. They want to take on every assignment, beat every deadline, impress every partner ... But that's a recipe for burnout, she says. Her recommendation? Push yourself, but don't drive yourself nuts. "At least meet your minimum billables, maybe even exceed them, but focus mainly on doing great work. When you're considered for partner, no one will remember exactly what your hours were in years one to three. What will stick is the quality of work you did and how you handled it."

MID-LEVEL ASSOCIATE

Know everything

Now that you've got your feet on the ground, says Tara Gregus, director of professional development at Chicago's Vedder, Price, Kaufman & Kammholz, get up to speed on everything you can, from major business decisions to key personnel moves to the firm's high-profile cases. Also meet as many people as you can, from the managing partner to the junior mailroom assistant. All in all, learn as much as possible about how things get done, who does what, and where you fit in, says Gregus. "Knowing how to navigate the bureaucracy of a large firm is invaluable because it can save you time—and time is key."

Find your niche

Specialization is critical to success in Big Law. Read the journals that cover your practice area. Join relevant professional organizations. Attend pertinent conventions, seminars, and lectures. Start to develop a niche within your

niche (if you're an intellectual property litigator, consider something like Internet liability counseling, for example). "This will help you zero in on what your strengths and preferences are," says Mayer, Brown's Swenson. "You'll be more knowledgeable, and your work will be more satisfying." You'll also enhance your value to the firm. Once you develop an area of expertise, says Swenson, partners will begin to seek you out when they have work in that area. And you want partners to seek you out.

Take initiative

Say you've done all the research on a client question, and you've become relatively expert about the matter at hand. Ask your partner if you can make the call to the client to deliver the answer. The same logic applies to depositions. Watched 20? Ask to take the 21st. "An associate is going to rise higher, get more responsibility, and do more faster if she's always got her eye on higher-level skills," says Arnold & Porter's Sandman.

Seek a mentor

It's not enough to push yourself up the law firm ladder. You need someone to help pull you up. "You can raise sensitive issues with a mentor, seek her help on a specific project, or ask her about how to avoid common pitfalls," says Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe partner Neel Chatterjee.

If a mentor isn't assigned to you, identify a lawyer whose career you want to emulate, then tell her you're interested in her work and that you'd like to work for her. Offer to volunteer if necessary. Even if a mentor is formally assigned by the firm, "that should be a starting point, not an ending point," says Chatterjee. "Ultimately, you want to gravitate to people you admire and trust—people who see the world the same way you do."

Offer solutions

"Nobody wants to be presented with open-ended problems," says Swenson. If you hit a snag on an assignment, don't immediately run to the partner and say, "I have a problem. What should I do?" Think it through, discuss it with another lawyer on the case, and devise some possible solutions. Then go to the partner and say, "I came up against this problem, and here are some options for how we can handle it." Bonus: Solve problems that go beyond the assignment. Say you've been asked to research a mergers question, but you realize there are tax matters involved too. Say: "Besides the issues we've discussed, my research suggests we may also come up against X. Would you like me to send you a memo on that?"

Go pro bono

Taking on a pro bono case is its own reward: You'll be helping others who probably couldn't otherwise afford your help. But lawyering for free also has a careerist payoff: "It's a great way to have your own clients and to interact with attorneys in the firm with whom you might not normally interact," says Daniel Gryczman, an associate in the Los Angeles office of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips. Better still, says Gryczman, it shows you can manage a project on your own.

Get involved

Volunteer to help with recruiting. Offer to make a presentation to the summer associate class. Join the holiday party planning committee. "From the day you walk in, treat the place as if you're an owner," says Chatterjee. "Getting involved will cement your commitment to the firm and the firm's commitment to you. That feeling of reciprocal commitment is critical to your long-term success."

SENIOR ASSOCIATE

Up your profile



By now, you have a fair amount of expertise in your practice area. Look for opportunities to demonstrate this to partners, says Deborah Broyles, a labor partner in the San Francisco office of Thelen Reid & Priest. Send a memo spelling out, say, what you've learned about the new compliance issues that have arisen in the wake of the Enron matter and proposing ways to apply your newfound knowledge to existing cases. Show off what you know outside the firm, too, Broyles says. Write journal articles or op-ed pieces in the popular or trade press. Speak at legal conventions or at gatherings of relevant business people. The goal: When people hear your name, they should think "labor and employment guru."

Court the client

Go the extra mile for the client at every turn. Give them what they've asked for, give them more, and then ask if they'd like more still. You want to be the person who does such consistently outstanding work that the client feels compelled to mention it to a partner, says Broyles. You don't have to become best friends with the CEO, but get to know the staff attorneys or other key players at your level. Invite them to lunch. Take them to a ball game. With any luck, they'll speak favorably about you to their boss. Who knows? One day, they may be the boss.

Court new clients

As a senior associate, you won't be expected to make it rain, "but it pays to demonstrate that you have the drive, the skills, and the interest in doing this early on," says Vedder's Tara Gregus. Volunteer to do research about a potential client, or ask a partner if you can sit in on a meeting where lawyers are developing pitches. Also, think: Do you know anyone who's an in-house attorney somewhere—a friend from law school, a college roommate, a neighbor from your hometown—whose company might benefit from your firm's services? If so, don't be shy. Ask him if he'd be

interested in talking with your firm. If the firm structure allows it, go ahead and work with the person yourself. If his needs fall outside of your area, put him in touch with an appropriate colleague. Either way, remain a point person on the project if you can.

Take charge

Now that you're leading projects, you'll have to start making decisions about strategy, staffing, deadlines, and more. "Most senior associates can handle their own problems and come up with their own solutions just fine," says Anne Castle, head of the management committee at Denver's Holland & Hart. What they're not used to, she says, is managing others. Make it a point to focus on the people who report to you, says Castle. Make time in your schedule to chat with them. Ask them how they're doing. Tell them what you think of their work. "As a partner, much of what you'll do is manage," says Castle. Start to hone the skills now.

Act like a partner

At some point, stop thinking of yourself as a senior associate and start thinking of yourself as a junior partner. "You want to become known as a person who can take problems off a partner's desk and solve them so that she doesn't have to," says Castle. Try this complex approach: "What can I take off your desk?" Then do the job as well as—or better than—the partner would have done it herself. Another way to assure you'll make partner, says Castle: Make it a "historic inevitability. You just act like a partner, so it's like, 'Of course.'"

Shore up weaknesses

Making partner is a Darwinian struggle, and only the strong survive. "One problem many associates have is that they don't take responsibility for their own career development," says Arnold & Porter's James Sandman. One

solution: Take a good, hard look at yourself, and identify any vulnerabilities now. You haven't worked on enough high-profile cases? Get on one—fast. Your performance reviews have pointed to weak managerial skills? Tell a partner you'd like to volunteer for training in that area. "The associates who perform best are ones who take responsibility and don't simply implement what they're asked by others to do," says Sandman. The end result, he says, is an associate who's a better lawyer, and one who's demonstrated a commitment to clients and the firm.

PARTNER

Care

Okay, you're officially an owner. What does that mean? It means "you now have to care about absolutely everything," says Blackwell's Peter Sloan. "You have to care about others, about the client, about the reputation of the firm, about business development—and about anything else central to the firm's success. Take a team-oriented view of your responsibilities. At every turn, ask yourself: What can I do in this situation to improve the fortunes of the firm? On all projects, demand excellence of yourself and others. "That," says Sloan, "is the mind-set of an owner."

Be a business partner

Your job is no longer just to handle individual legal problems. Your job is to be a full partner in your client's business, says Pinney Allen, chair of the partners' committee at Alston & Bird. Get to know the client's business from every perspective. What are the company's strategic goals? How does it plan to achieve those ends? What legal work might it need along the way?

Be proactive. Identify business opportunities for the client and then help the client exploit them. In the process, draw on all of the firm's resources. Think the client might benefit

from a merger? Introduce the key contacts to someone in your M&A group. "The idea," says Allen, "is to develop relationships for the benefit of the whole firm."

Make it rain

All of those things we just mentioned? Use them to generate business for the firm (most new work comes from existing clients). All the positive client relationships in the world don't mean much unless, at some point, you translate those relationships into billings. It doesn't hurt, of course, to bring in new clients as well. However you manage to do it, "build a book of business," says Orrick's Neel Chatterjee. "It's one of the most important things you can do."

Play smart politics

Like it or not, there are politics in any organization, and law firms are no exception. To get ahead, you'll need allies—powerful ones. This doesn't mean you should kiss up to the managing partner (besides being icky, brown-nosing doesn't work).

"It means you should recognize that anyone in the firm can be important to your career," says Allen. Always bring your A-game to every project you work on—whether you're working on the firm's biggest case or its smallest. Be professional and courteous to everyone you work with. Avoid the temptation to get ahead by cutting corners or stabbing others in the back (such behavior will only come back to haunt you). In other words, work hard, play by the rules, and be a mensch. That's how you build lasting relationships, says Allen. "And that's how you gain personal and professional support."

Lead

Sure, you've taken a few recruits to lunch and you've joined the firm's softball team. Now up the ante and start developing a profile as a true firm leader, says Daniel Schlessinger,

managing partner of Chicago's Lord, Bissell & Brook. Chair a high-profile committee such as the legal personnel committee. Spearhead a research project (say, "Changes in Federal Accounting Regulations") that could help multiple lawyers at the firm. Lead a task force on compensation policies or other firm management issues. The key is to demonstrate that you can effectively lead a major project that affects large numbers of people. Says Schlessinger, "That's how you earn a reputation as a leader."

Power network

You're a big-time corporate executive now. Seek exposure and contacts commensurate with that position, says Joseph Altonji, a legal management consultant to major law firms for the Chicago office of Hildebrandt International. Join philanthropic groups, community organizations, or cultural foundations. Write books that address legal or social issues. If you can swing it, appear on television as a commentator on Supreme Court decisions or high-profile trials. Taking such steps will up your status, in and out of the firm. "There's also a reflective glow for the firm from these kinds of things," says Altonji. "The image that a partner can project is that this is a place where quality people want to be." You'll also meet other high-level executives—contacts that can only help your career.

PRACTICE-GROUP HEAD

Multitask

As a partner, you had to be deeply involved in a relatively narrow set of problems. That will continue, but as a group head, you'll also have to juggle dozens of other matters. "The responsibilities are additive," says Warren Gorrell, chairman of Washington, D.C.'s Hogan & Hartson. In addition to handling your existing clients, for example, you'll meet regularly with the managing partner and the executive committee. To balance your priorities effectively,

you have to broaden your focus, says Gorrell. Schedule time regularly for everyone who needs your attention. Listen and communicate—but then make a decision. With so many people reporting to you, says Gorrell, you have to be decisive, or work will bog down.

Delegate wisely

In order to handle your new responsibilities, you must hand off more of the day-to-day work on client matters. "You're the general, and you're deploying troops and resources," says Blackwell's Peter Sloan. But there's a right way and a wrong way to delegate. Remember that the client still demands A-plus work, and he's apt to be wary of change. Think carefully about choosing the right person for each job: Do her skills match the client's needs? Will their personalities mesh? Make sure the client has confidence in the person you've chosen: Share some of her accomplishments as evidence of her ability. Personally attend a few "handoff" meetings to ease the transition. Finally, says Sloan, let the client know that you're still available—anytime—if problems come up.

Grow your group

Think building a practice was difficult? Now you've got to grow a whole group. Step one is to assess the group's business situation, says Gorrell. What are the major growth opportunities in your practice areas? What are your competitor's positions? Who are your star attorneys? Who's not cutting it? "You have to be very straightforward in understanding the strengths and the weaknesses of individual lawyers in the group, as well as in the client base you have and the market for your practice group," says Gorrell. Step two is to develop a strategy. What growth opportunities is your group best positioned to exploit, and how should you exploit them? Should you focus on growth from within, or should you look to lure a star partner and his group from another firm? Whatever you do, focus on a



long-range plan. "It's easier to have greater confidence in what's happening short range," says Gorrell, "but ideally you have to look at a three-to-five-year range."

Manage by consensus

As a group head, you might be tempted to say, "I'm the boss, I decide." But remember, you're part of a collective group of professionals who are all equal to each other—that's what a partnership is. A dictatorial approach, says Holland's Anne Castle, will only alienate people, possibly damage your career, and prevent you from accomplishing your goals. On any major decision, says Castle, take the time to get buy-in from the other partners in your group (and if necessary, from the managing partner and the executive committee)—even if that means moving more slowly than you had hoped to move. Articulate your plan, explain your rationale, and solicit feedback before plowing ahead. The support you build on the front end, says Castle, will translate into cooperation—and results—on the back end.

Develop a following

Like a politician hoping to become president, a practice-group head aiming to become managing partner must build a constituency. You don't do this overnight. You do this by consistently demonstrating positive leadership. Get out among your partners and do just that. Meet with the heads of other practice groups or important firm committees. Take key lawyers to lunch or dinner. Spell out your vision of the firm and how you'd go about implementing that strategy. Explain the thinking behind your ideas, especially if they involve change. What you're trying to do, says Hildebrandt's Joseph Altonji, is convince as many people as possible that you can lead the firm effectively. Finally, tell people how you see them fitting into your plan. It never hurts if they know there's something in the deal for them.

MANAGING PARTNER

Mind your image

Congratulations, you've reached the summit. You're swimming in money, power, and prestige. But along with those rewards come major challenges. For one, everything you do will be scrutinized, says Hogan & Hartson's Gorrell. Lawyers from other firms will watch you, seeking to determine your business strategy. People inside the firm will look to you for cues on everything from how to grow their business to how to treat others. They may even monitor your mood. If you seem angry or upset, they may infer that there are problems at the firm. If you appear pleasant and upbeat, they'll be more likely to assume the firm is doing well. The bottom line? "You're the firm's spokesperson," says Gorrell. "Be cognizant that you set an example."

Grow the firm

Think growing a group was tough? Now you've got to grow the whole damn firm. Essentially, you'll do the same things you did to expand your group—assess the legal marketplace and the firm's place in it, identify growth opportunities, and develop a long-term strategy—soon now you'll be looking at even more macro things, says Hildebrandt's Altonji. Is sheer size increasingly important? Maybe you should consider a merger. Is globalization the Next Big Thing? Perhaps you need offices in Brussels and Beijing. Biotech is an explosive growth area? You might consider expanding your IP practice. Says Altonji: "It's all about defining a market position, then figuring out what it's going to take to get there." Just as you've done at other levels, seek input and build consensus to garner widespread support for your plan.

Sell your vision

When a new leader comes on board, "people want to know in what direction she plans to take the firm and what role they'll play," says Altonji. If you don't articulate a vision—new or

old—people will assume you have none. After you've settled on a strategy, make sure it's clearly understood. Hold meetings throughout the firm to talk about your plan. Explain the rationale behind it. Let people know what you expect of them. "A managing partner can't articulate his goals often enough," Altonji says. "If you don't tell people what you want to accomplish, how can you possibly expect to accomplish it?"

Give it to 'em straight

It would be nice if only good things happened on your watch, but the truth is, bad things will happen, too. Cases will be lost. Scandals will erupt. People will have to be let go. No one likes to deliver bad news, but it's imperative that you, as the top dog, handle sticky situations openly and directly. "It's critically important for anyone in a leadership position to be straightforward and honest," says Alston & Bird's Pinney Allen. If you try to deceive people, she says, your authority will be undermined. But if you tell the truth—especially when it's a painful truth—you'll gain lasting trust and respect.

Super-schmooze

In at least one way, your job as managing partner is the same as it was when you were a first-year: Please the client. Only now you've got to please dozen of clients—in big ways. Fly out to visit a client "just to see how things are going," says Allen. Offer her your Yankees playoff tickets or your opening-night seats at the Met. Invite her to your firm's annual black-tie dinner. Host her and her husband for dinner at your home." For one, you'll get to hear firsthand what the client thinks of your firm. And no matter who a client is, says Allen, "he's always impressed when the head of the firm makes time for him."

Choose an heir

You won't be managing partner forever, and



one of the best things you can do to cap off your tenure is to identify a strong successor, says Altonji. During your term, identify a handful of candidates, and then begin to groom them for the job. Assign them to lead key groups or committees. Introduce them to important clients. Help them polish any skills they may still be lacking. Share with them your understanding of what it takes to run the firm. When the time comes for you to leave, there'll be a well-qualified pool for the partnership to choose from. By helping to orchestrate a smooth transition, you'll ensure the ongoing success and stability of the firm—a classy final act. Let's see the next guy top that.