

How I Made Partner: 'Have a Good Work Ethic, Collaborative Spirit and Commitment Developing Technical Expertise,' Says Ken Kumayama of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

By Tasha Norman

May 12, 2022

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Practice area: Intellectual property and technology; cybersecurity and privacy.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Arizona College of Law, 2009.

How long have you been at the firm? I started as an associate in January 2011, so close to 11 years. I was promoted to partner in 2020.

How long were you an associate at the firm? I was an associate for six and a half years before being promoted to counsel, and three years after that I made partner.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? Due to the economic downturn at the time I was hired by Skadden, I delayed my start date by a year and worked at a Japanese law firm in Osaka called Oh-Ebashi LPC & Partners. Although this timeline was not my original plan when I started law school, it proved to be a unique opportunity to gain valuable experience and insight working in the legal field in another country.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? When evaluating firms, I was

focused on a few things. Most notably, I wanted a global firm that would offer opportunities to work across offices and continents, and would ideally afford me opportunities to work with clients in Asia and, in particular, Japan.

Skadden seemed like a perfect choice given their office in Tokyo and strong client base throughout Asia. I also sought a firm that offered opportunities to work on interesting and complex intellectual property matters, while also having the chance to collaborate and work with, and learn from, attorneys in multiple practice areas. After meeting with several firms, I felt confident that Skadden was a great fit and a place where I would thrive.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner? My initial surprise was that clients (and others) suddenly think you're more qualified or smarter than the day before you became a partner! In all seriousness, I



Ken Kumayama

Courtesy photo

found it suddenly much easier to do business development, as clients and potential clients generally view partners as advisers who are able to fully utilize their prior experience to handle whatever challenges may arise.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you a partner? A combination of things played a role in my being promoted to partner. For instance, an unforeseen opportunity opened up and I had the good fortune of being considered for a leadership role, during which I was able to demonstrate and hone my management skills. I also have always strived to have a good work ethic, collaborative spirit and commitment to refining and developing my technical expertise to ensure that I bring cutting-edge legal and technical knowledge to every matter. These factors, coupled with my passion for what I do every day, enabled me to climb the ladder.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system? The business of law is very much centered around personal relationships. Clients are looking for the right individual lawyers to advise and support them. I maintain a mindset that every professional interaction with a client or potential client is an opportunity to develop and deepen a relationship.

I don't think that a hybrid work system changes this. In my experience, stressed out in-house lawyers are very thankful when you provide quality, prompt, user-friendly, commercial advice. Whether the attorney providing the advice is doing so in person, over the phone or through a video call, as long as the advice is timely and accurate, the location and exact

mode of communication are usually irrelevant, as clients tend to be results-oriented and appreciate responsiveness. In fact, I am hopeful that moving to a hybrid work system will make it even easier and more efficient to provide legal services to clients around the globe.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? I've had many mentors and sponsors over the years, but Ken King is the person who has had the greatest influence on my career. Ken is a senior corporate partner at Skadden and a founder and former office leader of the firm's Palo Alto office—in addition to being a bit of a legend in Silicon Valley. I started my career at Skadden in the Palo Alto office because of Ken and his strong connection to Skadden's Tokyo office. I frequently speak with him for advice on everything from business development and business strategy to mentorship and leadership and legal and industry trends, as well as all kinds of things in between.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? *At every big law firm, there has to be a business case for being promoted to partner. I would encourage associates to think about their career path from an entrepreneurial perspective – which is, by the way, a good way to think about things generally if you want to succeed at bringing in business.*

Associates should think about these questions:

- *How do I align the firm's interests in elevating me to partner with my own?*
- *Can I develop a new skill set or expertise that gives my firm (and me) a competitive advantage?*
- *Can I gain a reputation internally or externally that garners the respect of my peers and*

makes me viewed as an invaluable member of the firm, or even the broader legal community?

In addition, inherent in becoming a member of the partnership is the very important element of trust. I would encourage associates to think about their choices and reputation from this perspective as well. At the end of the day, being a partner requires many different attributes and skills that associates can begin thinking about and developing early in their careers.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making? I believe there's no shortcut to learning. It takes dedication and hard work, and I think most people know that when going into a job in law.

The mistake I see most often is that associates will work very hard at their jobs, but fail to work hard to find the right balance between work and the rest of their lives. I would encourage associates to find the right balance for themselves, which will promote job sustainability and ensure you get the most out of the experience.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you have given to your younger self? With some hindsight in

hand, I would prioritize time with family and take more vacations. One thing I learned fairly recently thanks to our new hybrid work style is that even when I'm busy, I can have dinner with my family and create meaningful connections. Pre-pandemic, my default mode was to often work late in the office and put my personal life on the back burner.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID years)? Everything provides an opportunity to learn, and COVID is no exception. To me, I was reminded of the importance and fun in connecting in person, and when that is not available, there are tools to work, collaborate and mentor remotely. The past few years have shown that there are new pathways toward success in law, and these tracks may even help to preserve other aspects of our lives that are essential.

What key elements you would like to focus on for 2022. As we ushered in 2022, I became increasingly focused on reconnecting with friends, colleagues and clients. Essential to my work, I'd also include innovating and recruiting, and fostering talent. For me, a big part of what I enjoy about my job is that there are so many ways to constantly help my colleagues and mentees grow, in addition to helping my clients with their unique business needs.