

# How I Made It to Law Firm Leadership: 'Create a Supportive Culture Where People Feel Safe to Share Opinions,' Says Jessica Hough of Skadden

By Tasha Norman

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**Jessica Hough, Skadden, Washington, D.C.**

**Job title:** Tax partner and head of the firm's Washington, D.C., office.

**Law school and year of graduation:** J.D., The University of Chicago Law School, 1997.

**How long have you been at the firm?** Just over 24 years. I was a partner for about 14 years before beginning my tenure as Skadden's D.C. office leader in June 2020.

**Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm?** Aside from a year clerking at the U.S. Tax Court, I have been at Skadden since the very beginning of my career, starting as a summer associate.

**What was the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming office managing partner?** I was previously head of the Washington, D.C., tax group. In that role, I dealt with a discreet number of lawyers, as well as the assistants supporting the team. Early on as office leader, I came to fully understand just how much of the firm's success is based on people behind the scenes—legal assistants, attorney recruiting and development specialists, the marketing team and folks in facilities services. Overseeing the professional staff functions made me realize there's much more to Big Law than just the attorneys I typically interact with daily. **What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you head of the firm's Washington, D.C.,**

**office?** After starting as a summer associate, I slowly rose through the ranks, developing many great relationships, as well as a solid understanding of how the D.C. office operates. I also was involved in various affinity groups both inside the office and in the local legal community, including Skadden's LGBTQ and Black Lawyers for Diversity groups, and Skadden's Women of Washington group. I think my broad experience serving on and overseeing committees, and the leadership experience I gained as head of the D.C. tax group, helped position and prepare me for the role of office leader.

**What's the key to successful business development in your opinion?** Patience. Business does not magically appear after you meet someone or make the ask once. It's a gradual process, as potential clients get to know you, the firm and its capabilities. It takes time to build a relationship to the point where someone feels comfortable turning to you as a trusted adviser.

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role?** Fred Goldberg, who was head of the tax group when I



**Jessica Hough.**

Courtesy photo

started as a summer associate. He was and is a luminary in the tax field. Prior to Skadden, he held three prominent IRS government positions: IRS chief counsel, IRS commissioner and assistant secretary for tax policy at the Department of the Treasury. You might expect someone this accomplished to be unapproachable or not have time for younger associates, but he was the exact opposite. Fred took an interest in all the junior attorneys, including me, taking the time not just to mentor me but also get to know me and make sure I was working on matters that would enable me to grow professionally.

Importantly, he cares deeply about diversity and pro bono issues and is the kind of person who listens more than he talks—traits we'd all do well to emulate. Fred was instrumental in helping me identify and pursue leadership opportunities and navigate challenges along the way. I am a huge advocate of mentorship programs, as I have seen firsthand how helpful and important it is to have that kind of support system in place.

**What's the best piece of advice you could give a partner who wants to make it to firm leadership?** Be like Fred! Really listen to people and try to understand their perspectives, because it is important as a leader to create a supportive culture where people feel safe to share opinions and reach out when they need help.

***If you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self what advice would you give to yourself?*** *As simple as it may sound, your career is a marathon, not a sprint. Careers in Big Law tend to last a long time. Associates may sometimes feel pressure to gain exposure to all sorts of matters quickly, but that can be burdensome and isn't necessary. You build up experience over time, so I would tell any associate to pace themselves accordingly.*

**What initiatives are you working on at the firm that you are most proud of?** I am proud of the work we are doing to move the needle on diversity, equity and

inclusion in the D.C. office and at the firm globally. An important part of my role is to ensure there is space for our colleagues to provide their input and contribute to advancing DE&I.

I am particularly excited about the energy that our affinity networks are bringing to the firm's efforts on recruitment, professional development, retention and belonging. I have the honor of serving as a sponsor for our Black attorney affinity network and, as part of that, I joined a task force on racial equity at the firm. It's been gratifying to develop initiatives and policies that are intended to have immediate impact and long-term sustainability. For example, on the recruitment front, in connection with the firm's recent addition of \$50,000 scholarship awards for law students who complete Skadden's 1L Scholars program, our teams are focused on building on the program's long-standing success by soliciting applications from a wider range of law schools and expanding the 1L summer class.

This work, coupled with my role as a mentor for new partners, is central to my efforts to develop our pipeline of talented underrepresented attorneys and to achieve our retention and development goals. Additionally, last year we added to our global DEI resources by bringing on an experienced professional in D.C. who works alongside management, our committees and affinity networks, and we look forward to continuing to deepen our commitment to DE&I in 2022.

**What is the biggest challenge facing leaders today?** Navigating the uncertainty of the pandemic and the sea change in how people work has been a challenge we all continue to face. We have to make sure that we're accommodating people who want to work differently—we can't be so rigid that we wind up not being able to hire and retain the best talent—but at the same time, we want to make sure we adopt a model that allows us to retain our culture of collaboration and provide the highest level of client service.