

How I Made Partner: 'I Worked to Make Authentic Connections With Partners Across Offices,' Says Avia M. Dunn of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

Once you find an area of law that interests you, find external organizations early in your career to join to broaden your perspective and network within that field.

By Tasha Norman

Avia M. Dunn, 39, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, Washington, D.C.

Practice area: Life sciences enforcement and regulatory.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Pennsylvania Law School, 2008.

How long have you been at the firm? I have been at Skadden for 13 years. I joined the firm in 2008 directly after law school but left in 2009 to clerk for the Hon. Marvin J. Garbis on the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland in Baltimore. I returned to Skadden in 2010 and have been with the firm ever since.

How long were you an associate at the firm? After seven years as an associate, I was promoted to counsel in June 2017 and elevated to partner in April 2022.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? The sophistication of the work and the firm's culture played a key role in differentiating Skadden from other firms, which sounds like a cliché but is 100% true. I had an elaborate spreadsheet of rankings and other external data points as a law student that Skadden certainly topped, but it wasn't until I summered at the firm that I observed firsthand the

complexity of matters that Skadden handles. In fact, as a summer associate, I remember grappling with the McCarran-Ferguson Act's preemption provision, and I am now frequently asked by clients to advise on cutting-edge, business-critical initiatives in areas in which there is little to no regulatory or legal guidance. In terms of culture, Skadden is second to none. Our culture embodies not only a commitment of excellence in our work but also a commitment to support each other.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner? Being a successful partner means understanding my clients, their business and their needs in-depth so that I can be in a position to anticipate challenges and opportunities. Skadden is an extremely well-managed business organization, and as a partner I have to think strategically about how to incorporate my business objectives into the goals and direction of the firm so that my work adds value for my clients and also my fellow partners. And, of course, this all needs to be done in addition to the administrative tasks that come with being a partner, such as conflicts and billing.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you



Courtesy Photo

Avia Dunn

partner? I had a proven track record of delivering high-quality, practical advice to clients on complex issues that considered not only the legal landscape but also each client's business operations and objectives. I also had the benefit (and, frankly, good fortune) of joining Skadden's Life Sciences and Health Care Group when it was first created. As a result, I became one of a few life sciences attorneys at the firm who could advise clients on a broad spectrum of issues, including regulatory and compliance matters, government and internal investigations and litigation, and high-stakes transactions.

I also worked to make authentic connections with partners in other groups and across offices by working on various matters and committees.

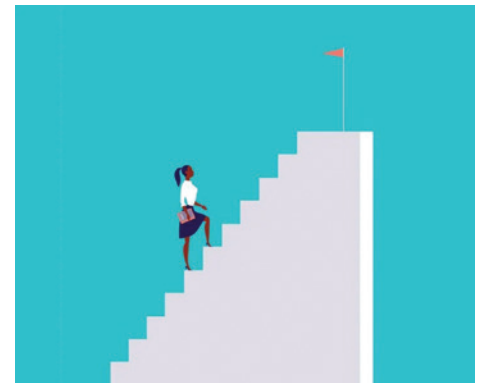
What's the key to successful business development, in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system (remote/in-person)? In terms of business development, the key is staying top of mind through sustained outreach to clients about issues that are important to them. I try to understand what will help make life easier for each client and personalize my outreach accordingly. Sometimes this means sending a client a short, tailored note about a potential trend, with others it means offering to conduct a webinar for their team that addresses a specific need or challenge. With respect to professional growth, I seize every opportunity to speak on a panel or webinar and have learned to embrace technologies that are designed to facilitate remote networking, such as breakout rooms.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? I can't narrow it down to one person, because I don't think I would have become a partner at Skadden without the guidance and support of three partners: Jennifer Bragg, Maya Florence and John Bentivoglio, all of whom are or were partners in Skadden's Life Sciences and Health Care Group. Jennifer is head of both Skadden's Washington, D.C., litigation practice and the firm's Life Sciences and Health Care Group. Starting quite early in my career, Jennifer provided me with opportunities to lead client calls and manage various client matters. This built up my confidence and sparked my interest in life sciences. She also was instrumental in identifying speaking

and other reputation-building opportunities that helped to further establish my career and raise my profile. I worked closely with John until he retired, and he not only provided real-time guidance and feedback at every turn, but also ensured that I had leadership roles on his matters to implement that guidance. Finally, I try to model my approach after Maya, as she is unflappable and able to provide practical advice on complex issues in the often time-sensitive context of a high-stakes transaction.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? Talk to senior attorneys at your firm about the firm's strategic direction and goals and then work to develop expertise in an area of law that will be beneficial to and support the firm's business objectives. Although nothing is guaranteed, and firm business priorities can and do shift, understanding this strategy will provide a tangible, and hopefully distinguishable, skillset.

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? For junior associates especially, I would say failing to view senior associates and partners as clients. This means that junior associates should take a step back to consider how the research question or other task assigned fits into the larger case strategy, which will help the attorney become more effective and efficient at spotting issues and problem-solving. In addition, it is imperative to be proactive and take ownership of the task assigned, as the assigning attorney might not have thought of every angle or next step.



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What challenges did you face or have to overcome in your career path and how did it affect or influence your career? I had a fear of public speaking. I was open and honest about it, so my mentors at Skadden encouraged me to sign up for public speaking classes and identified low-stakes speaking roles within the firm to hone my skills.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? Once you find an area of law that interests you, find external organizations early in your career to join to broaden your perspective and network within that field. I now dedicate time to and understand the value in connecting with organizations that align with my practice and area of focus, and believe there is tremendous opportunity for junior attorneys to do the same.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? I would like to be an example of an African-American woman who achieved and sustained success in the legal industry while also balancing life as a mother and wife.

What three key elements you would like to focus on for 2022. Develop deeper professional connections with my partners and clients. Expand my external profile. Enjoy the journey.