

How I Made Partner: 'Offer Fresh Perspectives and Innovative Solutions,' Says Tansy Woan of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

By Zack Needles

December 04, 2023

Tansy Woan, 35, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom and Affiliates, New York

Job title: Partner

Practice area: Complex Litigation and Trials; Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG); Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Law school and year of graduation: University of Pennsylvania Law School, 2013

How long have you been at the firm? I have been at Skadden for nearly a decade. I initially joined as a summer associate in 2012, transitioned to a full-time role upon completion of law school in the fall of 2013, and have been here ever since, aside from a one-year clerkship with the late Hon. A. Richard Caputo on the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania in 2015.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm? When selecting Skadden, I was drawn by its unique culture, which stood out to me at every stage of the application process. From the beginning, I could tell there was something special about the firm. Everyone I met was warm, welcoming, and incredibly thoughtful. There was a sense of camaraderie that was hard to miss. I recall during my callback interview, the office was full of life and buzzing with energy, which was something I wanted to be a part of. I was struck by how everyone seemed to get along and genuinely enjoy each other's company. After the interview, I took a tour of the office and when I got to the cafeteria, two attorneys came over to me, introduced themselves, and asked what they could do to help. This showed me the kind of supportive, team-focused environment that is part of Skadden's DNA, which perfectly aligned with my own personal values.

In addition to the firm culture, I was impressed by the depth of expertise at Skadden. In every conceivable field of law, we have a leading expert on hand. This wealth of knowledge, paired with the firm's collaborative and team-oriented work culture, facilitates the seamless collaboration among specialists from various disciplines. This enables us to offer our clients the best and most comprehensive, innovative legal solutions to their challenges—a service that in my mind, is truly second to none.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

No, I was a summer associate at Skadden and returned to Skadden following law school graduation.

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

It's hard to pinpoint what made the difference, but a few factors likely came into play. I think my entrepreneurial mindset resonated with the firm's values, as demonstrated by my efforts in helping start our ESG and AI initiatives. My anticipation of emerging trends in ESG and AI allowed me to proactively advise clients on risk minimization and work with the firm to leverage AI to provide cost-efficient services. I think this forward-thinking approach helped set me apart.

Another possible factor could have been my desire to continuously learn and grow. My work across practice areas, including securities litigation, antitrust, and M&A disputes, allowed me to gather a wide range of skills. Collaborating with different partners across groups also gave me the chance to absorb diverse skills and tailor them to my own, unique approach. I also believe my relationship-building skills played a part. I developed relationships with colleagues and clients across practice areas, integrating my expertise into collaborative projects, which equipped me to interact with diverse personalities and strengthen business development across the firm.

Finally, I think my passion for law played a role. I believe the firm recognized my commitment to our work and clients, made evident by my daily office presence and 24/7 availability. I also made efforts to personally connect with clients, hoping to better understand and meet their needs. As the saying goes, success follows those dedicated to their passion, and being a lawyer is undeniably mine.



Tansy Woan, with Skadden.

Courtesy photo

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why? I have been extremely fortunate to have many esteemed mentors from whom I've had the privilege of learning, so it is difficult to choose just one, but Jay Kasner—Partner and National Head of Securities Litigation at Skadden—distinguishes himself as a significant influence.

Jay invested significant time in my growth during my early years at the firm and continues to provide invaluable advice to this day. His guidance on strategic planning, detailed feedback, and comprehensive debriefings following court conferences allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the legal field.

More importantly, Jay has always valued my opinions, treating them with respect even when I was a junior associate. He consistently invited me to share my thoughts on complex cases, nurturing my critical thinking skills. A vivid memory from my first year at the firm involves a complex securities case related to high-frequency trading. Despite a discussion between senior lawyers and experts grappling with complex, unsettled areas of securities law, Jay asked for my opinion. I remember being taken aback, wondering why a seasoned attorney like Jay would value the opinion of a first-year clerk not yet admitted to the bar. However, Jay's inclusive approach underlined the significance of input from all team members, regardless of their seniority.

Fueled by Jay's constant encouragement, I grew more self-assured and vocal in expressing my views. This not only had a lasting impact on my professional growth but also shaped the kind of attorney and person I am today.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? I would advise associates to not only do exceptional work but to think strategically about how they can uniquely contribute to a case or the firm. Merely executing tasks is not enough; offer fresh perspectives and innovative solutions. Instead of just repeating what you did on the last case or deal, challenge yourself to think outside the box and question whether this new case or deal should be done differently. Seek ways to become indispensable to partners so they will want to staff you on their future cases and deals. Always think about how you can add value.

Additionally, develop a professional profile. Participate in webinars, attend networking events, join bar associations, or write publications to build an external reputation. Be proactive in meeting prospective clients and promoting your expertise at social events and conferences. Also, find ways to showcase your leadership skills. Demonstrate that you can lead a team, a practice area, or an initiative within the firm. This could be proactively taking charge on a case or getting involved in the leadership of firm committees.

Importantly, express your ambition for promotion to senior partners. Seek their advice on how to best position yourself for advancement. Understand the firm's strategic direction and identify the gaps you could fill. Be an active player in the firm's growth, not just a bystander.

Finally, stay committed and resilient. The road to partnership is often long and demanding. Stay committed to your goal, be patient, and persevere, even when faced with setbacks.

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? One common mistake I see attorneys make is focusing solely on billable hours at the expense of other valuable activities. While billable hours reflect a level of engagement on client matters which is important to one's development, attorneys shouldn't neglect other important activities like pro bono, DEI initiatives, firm committees, and professional development activities. These activities can enhance an attorney's reputation, develop leadership skills, and demonstrate commitment to the firm.

Attorneys also shouldn't underestimate the value of networking and interpersonal relationships. While delivering quality work is fundamental, it's not the entirety of the job. To thrive, attorneys must be strategic, identifying the firm's needs and positioning themselves in a way that can help fill those needs.

Moreover, it's vital to cultivate relationships with partners across various practice areas. They can be invaluable sources of business and mentorship. Attorneys shouldn't overlook the development of business acumen; understanding and contributing to business development is a cornerstone of a successful law firm career.

Lastly, attorneys should be assertive about their interests, goals, and concerns. Seek out trusted mentors that you can speak to for advice and trusted sponsors who will speak up for you when it matters.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career? Serving as lead trial counsel when I was an associate in one of the first, in-person federal jury trials held during the COVID-19 pandemic was a memorable challenge. Beyond standard trial complexities, I faced unique pandemic-induced issues, such as technical difficulties arising from social distancing protocols in court, which often made it more difficult to examine a witness or connect with the jury. The situation necessitated quick adaptability to navigate novel, unprecedented courtroom procedures and safety protocols.

Compounding the difficulty, I was brought in as counsel at the eleventh hour to litigate the trial, after having not been involved in critical proceedings earlier on, such as the drafting of the complaint, summary judgment briefing and much of the discovery process. Given these constraints, I faced a barrage of complex evidentiary arguments and rulings throughout the trial. While I encountered significant resistance from opposing counsel and sometimes the judge, I persisted, standing firm on my positions and advocated relentlessly for my client. Although the trial was an uphill battle marked by heated arguments, we concluded on a note of mutual respect among all parties, as evidenced by a kind, commendatory note sent from the judge to my firm's senior management.

This trial reinforced two crucial lessons for me: the value of persistence in advocacy and the importance of adaptability in ever-evolving circumstances. These experiences have significantly shaped my legal career and courtroom approach.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? I would encourage myself to step out of my comfort zone and take on more responsibility earlier on, even if it feels daunting at the time. Rising to such challenges promotes personal growth, and after having spent a decade at Skadden, I am confident that I would have had the necessary support for any task that may have seemed overwhelming.

Additionally, I would stress the importance of not hesitating to voice my opinion or propose new ideas, regardless of the presence of more senior colleagues. Every perspective holds value and can contribute to innovative solutions.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development? Yes, I have come to embrace technology to help provide more cost-efficient services to our clients and to safeguard confidential client data. The digitization of legal practice has allowed me to optimize my work processes, which not only streamlines the day-to-day operations but also significantly improves the quality of services delivered.

For example, AI-powered tools (used in responsible ways) increase efficiencies in document review and legal research. Other analytical tools help to get initial insights into judges' prior rulings, aiding in preparation for appearances before them.

Additionally, videoconferencing eliminates substantial costs incurred by clients that would otherwise be spent traveling to depositions, meetings, or court conferences, while facilitating

more meaningful interactions as compared to traditional telephone calls.

Lastly, cybersecurity is of utmost importance to our firm. Our advanced encryption and authentication best practices protect client data and help ensure that confidentiality is maintained at all times.

How would you describe your work mindset? My work mindset embodies a dedicated availability and a willingness to walk through walls for my clients. I pride myself in my responsiveness and commitment to clients. I continually think about their cases, their business needs, and strategies for reaching their objectives every day, at all hours of the day. I adopt a proactive approach, anticipating challenges and proposing solutions, rather than merely reacting to situations as they occur.

Resilience has also become fundamental to my work ethic. The legal profession requires enduring pressure and setbacks. Instead of perceiving obstacles as deterrents, I view them as opportunities for growth and learning. This mindset reinforces the importance of continuous learning in a rapidly evolving world.

Innovation is another cornerstone of my approach. I continuously seek inventive solutions for complex issues, pushing myself to think creatively and outside the box.

Finally, I like to foster a collaborative ethos. I firmly believe that collective success is best achieved through unified efforts. I value diverse insights and welcome contributions from colleagues across various practice areas and levels of seniority.

If you participate in firm or industry initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve. I am deeply involved in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives at my firm, serving on the Global Diversity Committee and leading projects through the Asian Pacific Islander Network and Women's Affinity Network. These roles offer me a platform to cultivate an inclusive workplace culture, which is integral to my professional philosophy. My objective is to ensure an environment where everyone—regardless of their background—feels acknowledged, respected, and valued.

Through active participation in these DEI initiatives, I aim to create a culture where each voice is heard and every perspective is appreciated. Moreover, I hope to champion fairness and equality within the broader legal community. My conviction is that by encouraging an inclusive workspace and nurturing diverse viewpoints, we can enable better outcomes for our clients.