

How I Made Partner: 'Invest Time and Energy Connecting With People,' Says Demetrius A. Warrick of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

By ALM Staff

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Demetrius A. Warrick, 40, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom and Affiliates, New York City

Job title: Partner

Practice area: Mergers and Acquisitions and Shareholder Activism

Law school and year of graduation: University of Pennsylvania Law School, 2010

How long have you been at the firm? I have been at Skadden for 10 years total, initially joining the firm in January 2011. I began my career in Skadden's New York office and also spent some time in our Los Angeles office.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm? I focused on a few key criteria, including the sophistication and caliber of the legal practice, and the firm's culture and community.

I was immediately drawn to Skadden's top-tier, unparalleled M&A practice, as well as its global reach. In looking at the long list of precedent-setting, record-breaking deals the firm has handled over the years, I was excited about the opportunity to work alongside and be mentored by attorneys that have advised on the types of cutting-edge transactions that make front-page headlines and can define a lawyer's career.

From a culture and community perspective, Skadden is a place where you can be your authentic self, thrive and find success, and that was evident to me from my very first on-campus

interview. During the many conversations I had early on, I became convinced that Skadden was a place where I could continue to learn and never feel stagnated as a lawyer, because an environment that values different backgrounds and life experiences is one that fosters creativity. My initial assessment was spot on.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there? After starting my career at Skadden, I spent 18 months in the Los Angeles office of Jenner & Block. I also briefly served as senior director of operations at Roc Nation before returning to Skadden in the fall of 2018.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people? I don't think there's a single "deciding point" that ultimately determines these decisions. Consistently providing clients with strategic guidance and exceptional service proved to be the partnership that I would continue to develop trust



Demetrius Warrick, with Skadden.

Courtesy photo

and nurture strong relationships. Additionally, over the course of the pandemic, I approached the many unprecedented challenges we all faced as a chance to deepen relationships with my colleagues and our clients, executing at the highest level to deliver results during a very busy and difficult time.

I once heard an actor share some advice given to him before an audition: “You’re not auditioning for a role, you’re auditioning for a relationship.” In all my roles at the firm – as an attorney, colleague, committee member, recruiter, mentor and mentee – I’ve focused on building relationships, including by actively participating in recruiting, diversity, equity and inclusion, and business development initiatives.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why? The saying “it takes a village” immediately comes to mind! I’ve been fortunate enough to have worked with nearly all of the partners in the NY M&A Group throughout the course of my career, and I believe those experiences helped me develop into the lawyer I am today. To name a few: Ann Beth Stebbins has been an amazing mentor, helping me to navigate the ins and outs of a law firm and encouraging me to develop a vision for my career from the very beginning. Rich Grossman has taken me under his wing in developing my shareholder activism practice and I’ve benefited greatly from his deep experience in that space. I’ve spent probably the most time in the trenches with some combination of Howard Ellin, June Dipchand and Ken Wolff, who each have extremely successful practices, despite having very different styles and approaches to the practice of law, aspects of which I’ve been able to incorporate into what is ultimately my own unique approach to lawyering.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? There is no perfect path to partnership, but a few fundamentals are key to maximizing your opportunity to make it. First, make sure people know you want it. People are more likely to invest in your development if they know you’re planning to be there for the long haul. Second, ask for the work you want. There is no shortcut to experience, so young attorneys should be laser focused on staying busy with quality work. Take on new challenges, but exhibit good judgment by asking for help when you need it.

Finally, invest time and energy connecting with people you work with and for, and whose support and encouragement keeps you going. Within the firm, there are three main sets of relationships you need: 1) Peers – teams succeed when their members are accountable to and trust each other. Get to know your peer and junior attorneys; they’ll grow with you and may become long-term colleagues, future clients or trusted friends; 2) Mentors – solicit guidance from people after whom you would like to model your career – those who can help you see the big picture; 3) Sponsors – identify your firm’s power brokers and figure out how to work with them or make your work visible to them. When your time comes, you will need people to advocate for you and act on your behalf. Importantly, take note of the mentorship you receive along the way: The firm’s long-term success depends on your ability to pay it forward to the next generation!

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? When I speak to new attorneys, I often ask them, “Who do you want to write your story?” This is obviously

a rhetorical question, because it's really a prompt for them to understand the importance of taking ownership of their career path. Young lawyers often approach their time as an associate passively, assuming that the path ahead will reveal itself and that there will be a road map for them to follow. Ultimately, you are responsible for your career, and while there are substantial resources available to guide your steps, young attorneys should be strategic and thoughtful about what they want to achieve and where they want to end up. Ask questions, seek and apply feedback, reach—and, ideally, exceed—key developmental milestones and ensure that if you have gaps in your experience, you actively and affirmatively close those gaps.

What challenges, if any, did you face or have to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career? Early in my career, I was hesitant to ask questions or ask my colleagues for help because I worried that I should already know the answers or that I should be able to do it all on my own. In many instances, it led me to spend hours searching for solutions that I could've found in minutes had I picked up the phone. It also deprived me of key opportunities to connect with other attorneys at the firm by talking through the best ways to address the issues. My goal was to present as having it all together, but the result was wasted time and fewer touchpoints for collaboration and relationship building.

Luckily for me, two partners in the group sensed that I was isolated and told me, "We all talk to each other multiple times a day to figure out the answers. You don't have to — and as a matter of fact, you should not try to — do this on your own." Since that day, I've become a substantially better

attorney by tapping into the collective wealth of knowledge we have at Skadden and working collaboratively with other attorneys to find the best solutions for our clients.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? It might be the Philadelphia in me, but I would tell myself to TRUST THE PROCESS. So many of the factors that go into making partner are outside of your control. I would remind myself to focus on what I can control and that it's a marathon, not a sprint. Excellence is a practiced skill, not a state of being or natural talent, so the daily focus should be on exhibiting attention to detail in everything that you do, always continuing to educate yourself as you hone your craft, seeking out new challenges and opportunities, and learning when and how to advocate for yourself to ensure that your efforts are noticed.

I'd also advise young attorneys early on to look for areas of focus within their practice that are emerging, underserved or particularly inspiring to them. While I have experience across the full spectrum of M&A and corporate governance matters, I have also established a focus on shareholder activism defense. It goes a long way when you can demonstrate to a client that you have a depth of knowledge and experience in a niche area where they have a specific need.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development? Networking on social media platforms has been a huge asset for developing business. It enables me to connect with my various networks efficiently, keep track of trends, stay apprised of what folks have been up to and update my communities on what I am doing professionally. Also, post pandemic, the

normalization of video conferencing provides an easier way to connect with individuals who aren't at "arm's reach" on a more regular basis.

That being said, I'm still a strong believer in the importance of in-person connections. I often invite clients and potential clients to the golf course, which gives us the opportunity to have the kinds of authentic and well-rounded conversations that lead not only to business opportunities, but to friendships. My tee-time app, which helps facilitate these outings, has become one of the most important pieces of tech I use.

How would you describe your work mindset?

A lifetime ago, I was a college football player, and, although 99% of my athleticism is gone, I continue to rely on the concept of teamwork. As an M&A lawyer, my role is generally to quarterback (again, Philadelphia native, so Jalen Hurts) the transaction, and to do that you have to consistently display to your team that you are in control, organized and capable of effectively navigating issues. As such, I want to make sure that I have a clear understanding of, and consistent focus on, our client's (internal and external) goals, and ensure that we have a process in place that allows the deal team to meticulously and efficiently do their jobs. I also maintain a growth mindset, which means being open to continuous learning and improving. We are often working on high-stakes, "bet the company" transactions, so we have to be prepared, flexible and creative to address unusual topics and anticipate and solve new issues.

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. A particular source of pride for me is the fact that I am the first Black partner in Skadden's New York M&A Group. It's important to me to leverage this position and my successes to assist and support other people of color and women, both at Skadden and in the broader legal industry, to achieve their professional goals. I encourage other attorneys to look for opportunities to positively impact their communities in meaningful ways that resonate with their own experiences and values. Personally, I remain active in efforts to provide equal opportunity for diverse talent to develop skills and progress as attorneys. I have been a member of Skadden's Black Lawyers for Diversity Affinity Network (BLD) since joining the firm, and for a time served on its steering committee. I remain connected to my alma mater Duke University through the recruitment process and an internship program I established between Skadden and the school's football team.

I also look for opportunities to lead by example in my other communities as well. One identity of mine is "Skadden partner" or "attorney"; others include "New Yorker" and "athlete." I have served on the board of several New York community-focused organizations, including La Cima Charter School in Brooklyn; the City Parks Foundation, a nonprofit entity that focuses on building and bringing arts and educational opportunities to New York City parks; and Up2Us Sports, a nonprofit organization that trains individuals in communities to serve as coaches for children and adults.