

How I Made Partner: 'Don't Underestimate the Importance of Honing Good Judgment,' Says David Niemeyer of Skadden

July 2, 2025

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Practice area(s): Mergers & acquisitions/private equity

Law school and year of graduation: USC Gould School of Law, 2011

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been at the firm for 10 years.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

I was looking for two main things: a platform that would put me at the center of the most complex, high stakes deals and a culture where I could grow into the kind of lawyer I aspired to be. Skadden stood out immediately. The firm's transactional practices are second to none, and I knew I'd be working on transformative matters for industry-leading clients from day one. I was equally as drawn to Skadden because of the firm's collaborative approach to lawyering, with an emphasis on teamwork, creativity and delivering practical solutions. At Skadden, it was clear to me that the firm is serious about the investment it makes in its people; you're surrounded by incredibly smart, driven colleagues and the commitment to mentorship in this environment is tangible. That combination of excellence and support made it the right choice for me and it's why I've stayed.

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

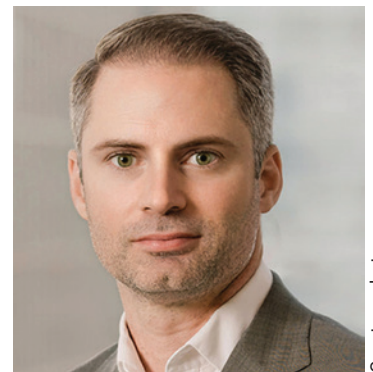
The first 3.5 years of my career were spent as an M&A/private equity lawyer in the downtown Los Angeles office of another large law firm.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific transaction? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I don't think it was a single moment or one standout transaction, it was consistency: delivering under pressure, earning client trust, showing up as someone the team could count on, deal after deal. At this level, technical skill is expected and many of the qualities that make someone stand out are more difficult to teach. For example, are you someone who makes people's lives easier when things get hard? I have put a great deal of emphasis on developing strong relationships—not just externally with clients, but internally with partners, peers and the broader team. Being someone who collaborates well, brings others along, and helps build the culture is just as important as being sharp on the substance. I also tried to think a few steps ahead: not just, "How do I get this deal done?" but "How do I contribute to the firm, and how do I grow something of my own at the same time?" That mindset, taking ownership of my career and thinking like a future partner, probably signaled that I was ready before the title came.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

I've been fortunate to work with a number of incredibly talented lawyers throughout my career, and each



David Niemeyer of Skadden

Courtesy photo

influenced me in different but lasting ways. Some taught me how to navigate complex deals with precision and poise. Others modeled what it means to be a trusted adviser; how to balance legal risk with business judgment and help clients make decisions in real time.

What they all had in common was a deep sense of ownership and accountability. Watching them work, I learned that being a great deal lawyer isn't just about knowing the law and providing great work product, it's about leading through uncertainty, communicating clearly under pressure and building trust with clients and your internal teams. Just as important, many of them took the time to invest in me by giving real feedback, letting me take on responsibility early and showing me how to think like a partner long before I became one. That kind of mentorship made a huge impact, and it's something I try to pay forward.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

Mastering your craft is essential: become known for your technical skills and ability to handle complex matters with confidence. But technical ability alone won't get you to partner; leadership and teamwork are just as important. Being someone who not only contributes to the success of deals but also supports and elevates others around you is crucial. Additionally, focus on building strong, trust-based relationships with clients over time. Developing a book of business may take time, but being proactive in adding value for clients and understanding and anticipating their needs will set you on the right path. Firms also value attorneys who understand the business of law, so engage with your firm's broader strategic goals. Lastly, be patient and resilient. It's a marathon, not a sprint; stay committed, seek feedback and keep improving.

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 of the most common mistakes is failing to proactively seek feedback and mentorship. Many associates focus intensely on their technical skills and client work, which is important, but they sometimes overlook the value of regularly checking in with partners and mentors to understand where they stand in terms of their career trajectory. Without

this guidance, it can be difficult to gauge whether they're on the right track or missing opportunities for growth.

Another common mistake is not taking enough ownership of their career development. Those who wait passively for opportunities to come to them may miss out on leadership roles, client interactions or business development chances. Being proactive (whether it's taking on challenging assignments, seeking out leadership opportunities or building relationships with key clients) can make a significant difference. Finally, some attorneys underestimate the importance of building internal relationships. Collaborating across practices and being known as a team player is just as essential to success as individual performance.

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?

From the time attending law school entered my mind until I started my career, my dream was to become a litigator. I imagined myself in a courtroom cross-examining witnesses and delivering closing arguments. I didn't have any lawyers in my family so I was drawn to the law by the dramatic courtroom scenes on television and I had no idea what being a transactional lawyer entailed. However, when I started as a first-year associate at my prior firm I was asked to join the M&A/private equity group. I was reluctant at first, but decided to take a chance. I am so thankful that I did because it has turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life.

The lesson? Be flexible, open minded and willing to take big, career altering chances.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

As a junior deal lawyer, it's easy to get tunnel vision and focus on drafting agreements, managing diligence checklists and learning deal mechanics. That's all important but the real value we bring as lawyers is helping clients navigate strategic, high-stakes business decisions.

The earlier you start thinking like a dealmaker, not just a technician, the faster you'll accelerate. Relatedly, don't underestimate the importance of honing good judgment. Technical skill will get you

in the door but it's demonstrating sound judgment (knowing when to push, when to concede and how to read the room) that earns client trust and defines you as a true adviser. That only comes from paying close attention to how senior lawyers handle pressure, conflict and nuance.

I'd also tell myself: get comfortable being uncomfortable. The transactions you will work on are fast-paced, high-pressure and full of gray areas. You won't always have perfect information and the answers won't always be obvious. The ability to stay calm, think clearly and make smart decisions when stakes are high is what separates good from great.

Finally, build your internal network. The strongest careers I've seen are built not just on client work, but on collaboration—learning from others, building coalitions, and helping your peers succeed. That internal credibility matters just as much as your external reputation.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

One of the most impactful shifts has been the ability to meet with clients virtually. Whether it's a quick strategy call or walking through deal documents in real time, video conferencing lets us be highly responsive and embedded in our clients' day-to-day decision-making. This accessibility can help strengthen relationships. We're able to have more informal, high-frequency touchpoints that build trust and allow us to get ahead of issues early. It also gives us the flexibility to quickly assemble cross-office teams with the right mixture of skills, no matter where people sit. In a global deal environment, that's critical. From a business development standpoint, virtual tools have expanded our reach. We're able to join pitch meetings and industry panels at a

moment's notice, often adding value before a formal engagement even begins.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Solutions-focused and relentlessly client-driven. In my practice, things move fast and complexity is a given so I focus on staying calm under pressure, distilling issues quickly and helping clients make smart, strategic decisions. I also approach every deal with a sense of ownership. Whether it's a multibillion-dollar transaction or a smaller strategic investment, I treat it like it's my name on the line. That mindset pushes me to be responsive, detail-oriented and proactive—not just executing, but anticipating what's next.

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.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is mentoring and developing the next generation of lawyers. I take an active role in training associates, both informally and through structured initiatives. I view mentorship not just as a professional responsibility, but as a core part of building a strong, collaborative team. I also support the firm's pro bono program and encourage associates to engage in meaningful work beyond billable matters. I lead by example through my involvement with the Innocence Project, where I assist in efforts to overturn wrongful convictions, and with Homeboy Industries, advising on initiatives that support reentry and rehabilitation of those who have been incarcerated. Outside of the firm, I serve on the board of Synergy Charter Academy and volunteer with KIIP SoCal Public Schools, both of which aim to level the educational playing field and eliminate the achievement gap.