

# How I Made Partner: 'Making Partner Requires Developing Excellent Technical Skills,' Says Amanda Brown of Skadden

By ALM Staff

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**Amanda L. Brown, 38, Partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, Chicago, Illinois**

**Practice area:** Litigation

**Law school and year of graduation:** Harvard Law School, 2013

*The following has been edited for style.*

## **How long have you been at the firm?**

I started at Skadden as a summer associate in 2012. After law school, I joined the firm as an associate and have been here for the last 12 years.

## **What were your criteria in selecting your current firm?**

When I was deciding where to spend my 2L summer, which would effectively determine where I began my career, I had no idea what kind of law I wanted to practice. I was interested in everything: litigation, restructuring, M&A, tax—you name it. Because I was so undecided, I wanted to choose a firm that was strong across the board, where I'd have the opportunity to do exciting, innovative, high-stakes work no matter what practice area I ultimately chose.

It also was important to find a firm that took corporate citizenship seriously and shared some of my values, and Skadden stood out on that front. One thing that impressed me was Skadden's pro bono policy, which counts all pro bono hours—an unlimited number—toward an attorney's total number of billable hours for the year. To me,

the pro bono policy was tangible evidence of Skadden's sense of social responsibility and the emphasis the firm places on service.

Above all, I wanted to work at a firm where I genuinely enjoyed spending time with my colleagues, because I knew we'd be logging plenty of hours together.

And I loved the people I met at Skadden. So Skadden checked every box, and surprised me by checking a few I hadn't even thought to include.

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

No, I've never been an associate at another firm. In college, I interned at a Boston-based firm specializing in toxic tort defense. Beyond that, I've never worked at another law firm.

## **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 think a variety of factors played a role in positioning me for consideration and ultimately selection as a partner. Performance, personality traits, and connections were all important.



**Amanda L. Brown of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.**

Courtesy photo

With respect to performance, in my experience, Skadden isn't a place where one or two stellar performances can seal the deal on an attorney's promotion. The firm emphasizes consistency and elevates attorneys who've shown they can reliably deliver a stellar performance in any context—because the demands of the job will probably only grow after promotion. Just a few months after I was promoted, for instance, I was helping lead a trial team defending CME Group and the Chicago Board of Trade in a high-stakes class action. As one of four Skadden partners at the helm and presenting evidence to the jury, it was an intense time, but we were determined to do everything we could to get to the right result for our clients. And we got there—the team secured a complete win in a case where the plaintiffs wanted more than \$2 billion in damages.

As for personality traits, I'm as Type A as they come—competitive, detail-oriented, organized, and hardworking. But I also think my versatility has helped me thrive: I adapt easily to different work styles, team dynamics, and even social settings. I'm also pretty perceptive, which has served me well, even if it's not the kind of trait that moves the needle on a promotion decision.

Connections also mattered. By the time I was up for partner, I had worked extensively with nearly every litigation partner in the Chicago office, a number of other attorneys across the platform, and a wide variety of clients, which gave me a broad base of support. For me, it wasn't about having a few connections to "the right people," but about cultivating an array of meaningful working relationships.

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

My mother. She was a marketing executive for most of my life, and I grew up watching her climb the corporate ladder—long days, work-filled weekends, frequent travel—but also seeing her passion for her work, her rich relationships with colleagues, and the fulfillment her career brought her. That became my model, probably more subconsciously than consciously.

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

It goes without saying that making partner requires developing excellent technical skills, substantive expertise, sound judgment, and strong relationships with clients and colleagues. Beyond that, I'd encourage associates to be vocal about their goals. Seek regular feedback, and—awkward as it may feel—insist on clear communication from your practice group leaders about where you stand. And if the message isn't what you hoped, ask for concrete ways you can improve.

Closed mouths don't get fed. I've known brilliant attorneys who weren't considered for promotion simply because they never said they wanted it. And I've known others who thought they were in the running when they weren't, because they accepted and misunderstood ambiguous feedback. Clarity is everything.

**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?**

With respect to career planning, the most common mistake I see is not planning. Skadden is a good place to work, which makes it easy to get comfortable and stop thinking about what's next—whether that's staying long-term or moving on. It's important to have concrete goals, priorities, and plans for achieving them. And, part of that planning is taking advantage of the resources firms offer—development programs, alumni networks, client relationships—to help their attorneys get where they want to go.

It's just as important to be purposeful navigating inside a law firm. Opportunities for internal exposure and brand-building don't always happen organically, so it's smart to be intentional about making them happen and deliberate about making internal connections.

**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?**

One of the biggest challenges I've faced was postpartum depression after my younger son was

born, before I was promoted. Mental health and reproductive health are two of the hardest issues to talk about at work, and this was a combination of both. I was reluctant to tell anyone what was going on—but when I finally did, I regretted not speaking up sooner.

The firm had great support systems in place, and people could not have been more understanding. The first lesson I learned was to give people a chance to help—and to trust that they'll do the right thing. The second was that some things are simply beyond our control. Even when we do everything right, circumstances can derail our plans—and that's okay. I've become much better at accepting what I can't control.

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

I'd tell my younger self to invest more time in relationships, hobbies, and all the things that make for a well-rounded person and a balanced life. I spent years laser-focused on doing great work, but I could have carved out more time to meet people, stay connected with friends, and explore interests outside of work. Those things are essential for wellness and for business development, which makes them essential for longevity at a big firm.

I'd also tell myself not to worry so much about being myself. "Fake it till you make it" is common advice for young professionals, and that's because it's good advice. But I've never been great at faking it—and trying to was stressful. I've learned to just be myself, and if that takes me out of contention for something, it's probably not an opportunity I want.

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

Honestly, it's hard to think of anything I do that doesn't involve technology. I probably appreciate technology most for the way it enhances

collaboration and communication, both within the firm and outside the firm—with clients, co-counsel, consultants, etc. I'm also looking forward to integrating AI more deeply into our work. While I'm confident there's a long list of things AI will never do (or will never do well, at least), I'm excited to see the efficiencies it brings.

**How would you describe your work mindset? (If you want, provide a very brief explanation.)**

Goal-oriented but meticulous, forward-looking, and always overprepared.

**Do you have any advice for improving work-life balance or promoting mental wellness to avoid burnout and maintain your career momentum?**

It's common career advice to get comfortable being uncomfortable. But when it comes to mental wellness, I think it's more important to get comfortable making other people uncomfortable. Looking back, I can't count how many times I agreed to do something I didn't want to do, stayed quiet about something that bothered me, or didn't demand something I was entitled to—just to avoid making someone else uncomfortable. I've realized it doesn't make sense for me to be uncomfortable so that someone else won't be.

**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 parts of my professional life is serving on the board of Legal Aid Chicago, which provides more legal services to low-income people in Cook County than any other legal aid organization. Increasing access to justice is an urgent project for me.

I'm also committed to increasing access to careers in the law for people of color, women, and other underrepresented groups. I'm active in several bar associations and similar organizations devoted to supporting these communities and expanding opportunities for the next generation of lawyers.