

How I Made Partner: 'I Developed "Partner" Skills,' Says Sabrina Wang of Knobbe Martens

Knowing how to promote yourself is just as important as doing all the great work.

By Tasha Norman

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Practice area: Intellectual property.

Law school and year of graduation:
University of Virginia School of Law;
2015.

How long have you been at the firm?
Seven years. I was an associate for six years. I made partner in January 2022.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? I went to law school hoping to become a patent attorney in the medical device industry. I have an undergraduate degree in biomedical engineering and was previously a product development engineer in medical device companies. The first thing that attracted me about Knobbe was the size and breadth of its medical device practice group. It led to me believing the firm and I would be a good fit for each other. Knobbe has the clientele and the legal teams that would allow me to build a career focusing on the medical device industry, which I am passionate about. My technical experience would help the firm better serve its clients, as I have seen how things work from the clients' end. Clients also understand the value in their patent attorneys having relevant industry experience.

Another factor is the team-oriented culture at Knobbe. Work and clients are directed to people with the most relevant technical expertise at the firm, which makes people happy working on what they love to do, and fosters the mentality

of collaboration rather than competition with one another, which ultimately improves the quality of client service. The collegial atmosphere at Knobbe stimulates intellectual growth, which I found very appealing.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner? The biggest surprise was there was not much surprise. Of course, there were some logistical changes after having been promoted to partner, but the transition from associate to partner felt gradual and incremental rather than overnight. I believe that was due to Knobbe preparing associates to be partners from day one by giving them a lot of responsibilities and helping them develop both legal skills and client-facing skills.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you a partner? I believe it would be rare for outstanding performance in a specific case to be the deciding point. Consistency in managing all the cases well and making the clients happy is more likely a key factor. In addition, when evaluating partner candidacy, the firm considered whether I had developed “partner skills.” Such skills can include managing client expectations and budgets, mentoring junior associates, and actively participating in the firm's business development and recruitment efforts.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally



Sabrina Wang of Knobbe Martens
Courtesy Photo

while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system? I think one key to successful business development is to maintain and keep building your personal and professional network. A new client pitch is usually more successful when introduced by someone who has known you for a while. Having prior work experience or hobbies outside of work helps in diversifying this network.

The hybrid work system did not seem to affect client relations too much. Our clients are scattered around the world so we were meeting via videoconferences and conference calls even before the pandemic. The hybrid work system posed some challenges to maintaining relationships with co-workers in the same office. On the days when I am in the

office, I try to arrange in-person meetings, coffees, and lunches, and deliberately walk around to chat with whoever is in the office that day. On the bright side, we got more used to working with attorneys from the other offices because meeting online blurred the distinction between the local and remote offices. Therefore, interoffice collaboration probably increased because of the hybrid system.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to a partner? I am grateful for many amazing people who gave me an extra push throughout my career. I will highlight two of them.

Dr. Casey Chan, M.D., introduced me to the fascinating world of medical device design in my undergraduate class. After graduation, I worked for Casey at his medical device incubator, VentureMD, developing new products. I first learned about patent due diligence from Casey. He believed in me when I decided to pursue patent law as a career. Casey was so proud when I made partner, announcing the news to all his business partners.

Jarom Kesler, a partner at Knobbe Martens, had the greatest influence in how I built my practice. When I first started at Knobbe, I could not get enough work because I mistakenly limited myself to one specific type of practice. Feeling desperate, I walked into Jarom's office two doors down from mine, while assuming my background was not suitable for his clients. Jarom encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone and started me on smaller projects to help me build my confidence. My practice would not have been this diverse and interesting today if Jarom had not given me a try back then. In addition to training my legal and client communication skills, Jarom was always patient in providing insight and feedback when I needed career planning advice. Working with so many great attorneys, like Jarom, who are invested in associates'

professional growth made me aspire to become one of them.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? First and foremost, build a good reputation at the firm.

Then, periodically (e.g., at year-end reviews), seek feedback to align your progress with the expectations of the firm. As you get closer to being considered for partner, it also helps to talk to a few junior partners who have just made it. Among the ones I talked to, everyone was eager to share some tips about how they presented their case to the partnership.

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? A common mistake I have seen is sometimes attorneys get pigeonholed into just doing what they are good at. I believe in the value of diversifying one's legal skills. It is not only helpful for business development, but also allows attorneys to serve their clients better.

What challenges did you face in your career path and what was the lesson learned? The biggest challenge for me was returning to work after being a first-time parent in the year when I was up for partner consideration. Before my parental leave ended, I made plans for optimizing the hours in the day when I could be left alone and set smaller incremental goals to work back toward a sustainable work schedule. And with the support and understanding of my husband, my nanny, co-workers, and also clients, I was able to quickly ramp back up to the pre-child workload. The lesson learned is a support group and good time management skills are essential for parents of young children working law firm hours.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would



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you give to your younger self. Knowing how to promote yourself is just as important as doing all the great work.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? I would love to see more minority women taking greater responsibilities and leadership roles in their respective organizations and strive to be one of them.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID years)? I was impressed by the adaptability of attorneys and supporting staff at Knobbe. Almost the entire firm was sent home within a week at the start of the pandemic, but everyone was able to maintain productivity and even got busier in the pandemic years. I was grateful for our IT support team, who seamlessly set up all the equipment for home offices in such a short amount of time.

I also learned not to take for granted the value of putting a face to a name. When existing attorneys and staff started working from home, their relationships with one another continued to grow over the phone or videoconferencing. However, it was exponentially harder for newer associates who were still trying to make themselves known and develop relationships within the firm. When working with new associates, I tried to meet them in person as soon as the circumstances allowed us to do so.

What three key elements would you like to focus on for 2022. Stay adaptable, consistent, and passionate.