

How I Made Partner: 'Invest in a Firm That Also Invests in You,' Says Ben Shiroma of Knobbe Martens

By Law.com Staff

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Practice area: Patent and trade secret litigation

Law school and year of graduation: Harvard Law School, 2019

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been at Knobbe Martens my entire career. I started with the firm as a 1L summer associate. After splitting my 2L summer, I returned to Knobbe Martens and have worked here ever since.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

My primary factors in choosing a firm were sustainability and opportunities for growth. After spending a summer and a half at Knobbe Martens, I saw that the firm's model of a reasonable hours requirement, short partnership track, and strong mentorship was sustainable and successful. I also realized that the firm's deep bench of intellectual property litigators could help me develop a truly specialized skill-set. At the end of the day, I could actually see



Courtesy photo

Ben K. Shiroma of Knobbe Martens.

myself spending my career at Knobbe Martens and enjoying it.

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

I spent part of my 2L summer at an intellectual property litigation boutique in Los Angeles. They were extremely skilled attorneys, who did great work on extremely complex cases. I wish them nothing but the best and have nothing but good things to say about them. I still keep in touch with friends at that firm. But ultimately, I returned to Knobbe Martens after my 2L summer because I thought it was the best long-term choice for me.

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 attitude and consistency go a long way. It should be a given for a senior associate to produce great legal work product. However, the combination of great legal work product, a good attitude, and reliability is much rarer.

By giving partners a reason to trust both my work and my consistency, as well as by giving partners a reason to want to work with me, I obtained several key opportunities in my early career. For example, partners invited me to several of the firm's most important trials to support senior litigators. And I was able to make the most of these opportunities by continuing to do great legal work with a good attitude.

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

I am lucky to work with incredibly talented attorneys who have been extremely generous with their time in teaching me how to be an attorney. Several partners in Knobbe Martens' Los Angeles office—Brian Horne, Mark Kachner, and Hans Mayer—each taught me how to be a better litigator and gave me responsibility early in my career. These mentors gave me the benefit of their experience and collective wisdom, and ultimately showed me what it meant to be a good litigation partner and what was possible at Knobbe Martens.

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

If you are interested in partnership, keep your long-term goals in mind over your short-term prospects. As an associate, you have a limited number of working years. Building internal and external relationships, which are critical to becoming partner, takes time. Further, developing expertise in a particular area of the law takes time as well.

You should also choose to invest in a firm that also invests in you. The firm has provided me with several great opportunities in my early career because it was interested in my long-term development. For example, I was given the opportunity to support multiple trials as an associate. The firm also gave me the opportunity to practice as a volunteer prosecutor under the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Trial Advocacy Project. This latter opportunity was not client work for the firm, but rather an opportunity for me to practice and improve my oral advocacy skills as well as serve my community. These early, substantive opportunities were concrete signs that the firm was interested in my work, not just in the short-term, but over the long-term as well.

Given your finite amount of time, and the years it takes to build a strong case for partnership, you should pursue partnership at a firm that is interested in your long-term professional development.

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?

I often see junior associates hesitant to introduce themselves to partners, but those

partners cannot staff you on matters or mentor you if they do not know who you are. Associates should absolutely not hesitate to connect with partners and offer to help with their matters. You never know where your next opportunity will come from.

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?

Shortly after I started as a fall associate, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down in-person work. So, I had to learn how to be an attorney and build my internal network over Zoom. This was challenging and required greater care and attention than doing so in person. However, this experience taught me the importance of in-person collaboration. It is a privilege and opportunity to work at firm with so many knowledgeable attorneys. The work from home era and the subsequent return to the office in a hybrid setting really taught me to value and take advantage of face-to-face interactions.

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

Keep at it and trust the process. But do not forget to enjoy yourself along the way. If you focus on improving your legal skills and deepening your relationships, success will follow. You are privileged to work in a great industry at a great firm, and to do engaging, stimulating work for great clients. Enjoy it!

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

I often use some of the latest technology to provide clients with data-driven advice and to streamline projects. This helps me provide clients with high quality work in an efficient manner. By leveraging my legal expertise to efficiently utilize clients' resources I can better serve clients' legal and business goals.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Client and result-focused. Our cases are not just a "job" to our clients, they can often be our clients' entire livelihoods or businesses. Additionally, clients often care about results, not the specific legal doctrines used to achieve those results. I try to remind myself of these perspectives as I work to achieve my clients' goals.