

3 Signs You Aren't Ready To Be A Partner

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (January 7, 2016, 6:12 PM ET) -- Competent, hardworking associates with shining work product and several years of practice under their belts may nevertheless be unprepared to take on a partner role.

The transition to partner is marked by a metamorphosis from being the employee of a law firm to becoming its co-owner, which means a change not only in duties and pay, but also in mindset and values, experts say. And those gunning for partner should display all of the characteristics of the position they desire in order to demonstrate they are prepared to fill it.

"You aren't ready to be a partner if you still think like someone who has a 'job,' instead of thinking like an owner," said Kenneth Young, a former practice group head at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough LLP and current principal of Young Mayden LLC, a boutique legal recruiting firm. "Law firms are looking for partners who can service clients on the client's schedule, not the lawyer who says, 'It's 5 o'clock and I'm going home; I will try to solve your issue after 9 a.m. tomorrow.'"

An attorney prepared to be partner is not only willing to take ownership over the success of the firm by putting in long nights, but also understands the importance of client development and attacks it with zeal, leads others within the firm and is able to produce consistent, high-quality work that keeps existing clients coming back time and again, firm leaders and consultants said.

"If you find you are ready [to become a partner], take the bull by the horns and start acting like a partner now, and build that business," said Lyndon Parker of JD Search Advisors LLC.

Here's what it truly takes to make it to the next level at your law firm.

Leadership

There is no better sign that an associate is not ready to make the move to partner than when they show an inability to act like a leader and co-owner of the firm, according to Sean Wajert, managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP's Philadelphia office.

"It is necessary but not sufficient that they be a hardworking and a consistent producer of quality work," Wajert said. "Ideally they should also have shown an ability to supervise and manage other lawyers: no longer the star of the team, but now becoming a player-coach of the team."

That involves having sufficient interpersonal skills, an ability to teach and a willingness to sometimes make tough or unpopular calls, he said.

“If you can’t do that, you are probably not ready to be promoted,” Wajert explained.

Client Development Skills

A lawyer isn’t ready to be partner if they think it is someone else’s job to make sure they have a full plate of work, Young asserted.

“Not all lawyers are born marketers and can reel in new clients for the firm, but if you aren’t, you better become so invaluable to institutional firm clients or other partners that they seek your counsel on major matters and would be distraught if you left the firm,” he said.

Wajert said that even in firms with large institutional clients, it is often still expected that a candidate for partner understands the importance of client development and generating work. That includes having the ability to keep themselves busy working for a number of senior lawyers, developing relationships with existing firm clients that help cement the firm’s ongoing role with them, and at the very least showing an interest in and understanding of the importance of, marketing for new clients, he said.

“If you haven’t offered sufficient indicia of aptitude and interest in this area, you are probably not ready,” he explained.

Young said not only are they not ready now, but asserted that they may never be.

“Associates who have been at the firm for several years and are still like baby robins in the nest just waiting on the mother to drop them worms, will never be partners,” Young said.

Putting In Long Nights

Being a partner in a law firm is a full-time job and then some, according to Gruber Hurst Johansen Hail Shank LLP partner Tricia DeLeon. Someone who isn’t willing to work nights and weekends simply isn’t ready to fill that role, she said.

“If you are not willing to occasionally stay late to see a client’s project through to the end or willing to sacrifice weekend time to lead your team to a successful result, partnership may not be an ideal fit,” DeLeon explained.

Legal recruiter Delia Swan of Swan Legal Search says not billing significant enough hours is a major hurdle to making partner. It takes more than putting in the required minimum, she said.

“You can bill 2,000 hours to a client, but if you want to be a partner, you better put in even more hours than that for client development, community networking, and other administrative duties. That’s all part of the game,” she said.

Swan said that putting in that kind of time is a “very, very difficult” balancing act, and it is often the one thing that prevents a lawyer from taking their career to the next level.

Two people could be equally ready and on the cusp of becoming partner, but if one takes maternity or

paternity leave, needs to take time off for a major surgery, or has a family crisis, the other will pull ahead, Swan said.

“People that are next in line for partner, within that crucial time frame, they have to be super dedicated and show that they’re unwavering and really want this,” she said.

--Editing by John Quinn and Patricia K. Cole.

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