

# "Making Partner," or Things to Do While Waiting for the Dream Job and the Dream Practice!

By Peter L. Smith, Esq.

As I sit before my computer monitor writing this short article, the window for my document is minimized so as to maximize my view of my desktop background—a view of our beloved, blue planet from two hundred miles above its surface. The stunning vista of creamy, white-blue clouds and indigo sea against a black, starless sky reminds me of the amazing richness of opportunities constantly before us?and of our regrettable inability to take advantage of all of them. Fortunately, leading full and joyful lives does not require that we take advantage of all opportunities but, rather, that we carefully choose the precious few possibilities that we can and will pursue. What a difference it will make in your law career if you seize those few opportunities and take full advantage of the doors they open!

## No Such Thing as "Making Partner"

Candidates ask me all the time, "Which firms are making partners now?" I always respond, "None of them!" The dead silence is usually followed by nervous laughter. "No, really," candidates say. "I know it seems like that, but where are associates really making partners?"

At this juncture, I usually let them in on a little secret: things have changed in the practice of law since the 1950s. **Here's the bottom line: there are no more firms where associates simply "make partner."** Instead, associates grow up, get clients, create practices, and only then are awarded partnership status.

What this means is that attorneys must know how to create thriving practices while maintaining heavy workloads, and most firms cannot or will not expend resources to teach lawyers how to do this. They are on their own. Well, almost.

Here are some pointers that will help you develop the personal and professional clout you will need to build your own book of business.

## Start Building Partner Skills Now

Associates who are ultimately invited to join their firms' partnerships are not created equally, yet there are several "types" of attorneys who possess skills that increase their likelihood of [making partner](#). I once sat in on a lecture given by the chairman of a prominent law firm, in which he discussed three types of partnership-bound associates.

First, there is the "rainmaker" who spends all (or most) of his or her time networking, having lunches, meeting people, and bringing in business. Second, the "service partner" adds value to a firm by providing niche expertise in a specialized area of the law, thus meeting the needs of sophisticated clients in ways that a partner with general legal skills cannot. Finally, the "hybrid" brings good leadership skills, strong connections to the firm and within the local community, and the ability to supervise projects and associates with aplomb.

While I respect these distinctions, I see things a little more simply. **The only kind of person who can make and remain a partner is a person who has developed and continues to nurture a large, quality network of friends, colleagues, experts, and clients with whom he or she is involved on a professional level.** This means that a potential partner must be able to call upon the people within his or her network to meet the needs of existing clients, to refer and generate new clients, and to keep abreast of developments in his or her industry.

No matter what level of practice you may now enjoy, the levels of ability and interest you exhibit in maintaining such a network may well mean the difference between professional and remunerative success or failure.

## The Core Competency of a Partner

**The ability to develop successful professional relationships is one of the core competencies of a partner.** Almost anyone can practice law, but only a few develop law practices. I always try to emphasize to younger lawyers that it is never too early to start the process of building a network of strong relationships. The fundamental difference between a partner and any other lawyer is leadership ability. Partners lead. That means that partners assume responsibilities, delegate tasks, and are accountable for meeting the needs of their clients. These leadership traits are not innate; they must be learned, and to be learned, they must be practiced.

The only way to become a leader is to practice leadership in a thousand small ways. Sets of small acts tend to grow, of their own accord, into larger sets of responsibilities that eventually can develop into leadership over an entire case, with a large client, or in a 3,000-member law firm.

Furthermore, leadership does not begin with a "lucky break," such as when, for instance, the [senior associate](#) on a matter calls in sick and you are named the lead attorney...or when the lead partner suddenly realizes that you are brilliant...or even if a client suddenly prefers that you take the reins. Rather, leadership begins with relationship management. In essence, **every legal task can be broken down into a series of relationships that need managing.** For example, an attorney must exhibit leadership in order to assign the [appropriate people within a law firm](#) to answer interrogatories, to find critical documents, to communicate key information about deals to clients, or to manage support staff and other associates in preparing filings or coordinating nationwide document collections and reviews.

Thus, to build the confidence, credibility, and leadership skills necessary to fulfill these responsibilities, attorneys must begin by cultivating as many meaningful relationships as possible. **To do this, they must actually meet people.**

## Get Out There, Meet People, and Make Friends

Networking is just a fancy way of describing the process of intentionally making friends. *Every* lawyer in the country should be a member of at least three organizations and should contribute to each of them. It is often the case that the most effective, highest-functioning attorneys are those who are members of scores of organizations that they have joined over the courses of their [careers](#).

For starters, however, any professional--and every lawyer--should join one organization within each of the following genres: professional, service-oriented, and fraternal or social. At the most basic level, every lawyer should be closely involved with some sort of professional organization of lawyers dedicated to furthering the practice of law. This might be a subcommittee within a state bar association, the American Bar Association, the Association of Trial Lawyers of America, or even your local Barristers Club. There is no substitute for meeting and interacting with new lawyers in settings devoted to their respective practices. Successful lawyers have *hundreds* of colleagues who are essentially professional acquaintances with whom they have developed familiarity. Although meeting people and getting to know colleagues is incredibly easy to do, many lawyers dread it. It doesn't have to be painful. Go out and meet someone new today!

## For the Socially Challenged: A Step-by-Step Guide to Creating Your Network

Here is a step-by-step primer for developing a network of professional colleagues that even a partner would envy:

Join the "[fill in the blank]" club.

Actually go to a meeting.

Say, "Hello, how are you?" to five people. Be brave. Try to initiate some small talk. (For example, ask questions such as "Where do you practice?" or "What is your most interesting case right now?")

Give a business card to each person you talk to. Ask for a business card from each of them, or write their names and phone numbers down on one of your own cards and hang on to it!

Once you get home or back to the office, enter their names in your Outlook folder (or some other location), and set up a reminder to call each person back in one week to follow up and say how much you enjoyed meeting him or her.

Actually call each person back.

Make it a practice to call each person on your list of contacts once every three months.

Follow where this leads you.

There. That wasn't so hard! These are simple but invaluable steps. Every lawyer has some basic social skills, or he or she would not have survived the first year of legal practice. Begin naturally--but begin--and see where these proto-relationships take you. The point is that, just like in sales, there are only so many solid opportunities per "X" number of contacts. The only way to "get lucky" is to make sure that you make lots of attempts to build and maintain your personal network. Not every person is going to become a client, but the greater the number of personal contacts you maintain, the greater the resulting synergy between their accumulated sums of interactions, relationships, and experiences and your own.

## Bringing It All Together

Once you have started down the path of generating a network of diverse professionals, you will be surprised at how it starts to take on a life of its own. Telling one colleague about an amusing vignette may lead him or her to do a small favor for you, such as sending over a client as a referral. Over time, that client or that colleague may lead you to significant business opportunities. All the while, you should be continuing to grow these and other relationships.

The key point to remember is that becoming a responsible leader depends on your ability to manage relationships. In every interaction, follow through with whatever you promise to do. If you offer to provide a reference, provide it! If you agree to get the name of someone who can serve as an expert, do it--and promptly! **Demonstrating this kind of courtesy builds reputations and relationships--one small, solid step at a time.** I absolutely guarantee that if you follow these practices, you will eventually succeed. You don't have to be perfect all the time. You just need to be reasonably careful, reasonably reliable, and reasonably friendly, and you will be ahead of the majority of the pack.

See [The Only Seven Reasons a Law Firm Will Ever Make You a Partner](#) for more information.

## Conclusion

The world is full of [opportunities](#), but we cannot take advantage of them all; we can only capitalize on a few. To the extent that you can internalize this powerful principle, you will find that the world--and, in particular, your own practice--is as full of opportunities as a path strewn with gems. The key is to determine which gems to pick up, carry, and ultimately safeguard...because you cannot take them all. If you follow this path, you may find that your biggest challenges lie not in finding opportunities, but in having sufficiently large pockets!

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