

## How I Made Partner: 'Make an Effort to Invest In Relationships and Don't Be Shy About Asking for Support and Guidance,' Says Rachel Sherman of Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler

"Ultimately, you are in charge of your own career, and you have to look for ways to get to where you want to be."

By Tasha Norman

**Rachel Sherman, 40, Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler, New York.**

**Practice area:** Litigation.

**Law school and year of graduation:** Harvard Law School, 2008.

**How long have you been at the firm?** 8-plus years. I made partner in 2020.

**How long were you an associate at the firm?** 5 years.

**Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm?** Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP. I was there for almost four years and left in 2012.

**What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm?** I was looking for a firm that was more litigation-focused than my prior firm. The litigators at Patterson all pride themselves on being trial lawyers, and they really enjoy the work that they do. I also liked the idea of having a single office because I think that helps foster a culture of collaboration.

**What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner?** The biggest surprise for me is how rewarding it's been. I really like being involved in the business side of the firm, and I feel like I have more ownership over my career. Deepening my relationships with clients and associates has also been extremely gratifying.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner?** I don't think there was any

single deciding factor; in fact, I'm sure there wasn't. Partnership decisions at Patterson are holistic in nature and ultimately take into account a number of factors. If I had to pinpoint the most important of those factors, I believe the decision to promote me was based on (i) my ability to develop meaningful relationships with clients and (ii) my commitment to the firm and leadership in areas such as diversity, equity and inclusion and mentoring. Partners want to know that not only can you do the work, but that you're committed to the firm as an enterprise and will do what you can to make it a success.

**What's the key to successful business development, in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system?** Business development ultimately comes down to relationship-building. While it's of course critical to produce excellent work product and have good judgment so that clients can trust your advice, I've found that it's the ability to develop meaningful relationships with my clients that has made a tangible difference. If you demonstrate that you understand your clients' concerns and are always thinking about how to help them navigate complicated and often difficult business situations, and do so while relating on a human level, those clients will come back to you time and



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Rachel B. Sherman

time again. While the remote work environment has made some things more difficult, I've found that there are still many opportunities to interact with clients, even if it's over Zoom instead of in person.

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner?** There have been so many people over the years that have contributed to my promotion. First and foremost, my parents. Neither one was a lawyer, but they both worked hard, devoted their lives to helping other people and taught me the value of integrity, humility and service. I would not be where I am today without them.

On the professional side, I was fortunate to clerk for Judge Joel A. Pisano of the United States Court for the District of New Jersey. Judge Pisano was an accomplished jurist, but he is also incred-

ibly generous with his time in mentoring young lawyers. He emphasized the importance of forming and maintaining relationships and always treating everyone with respect. He also made clear that there were many paths to success and you have to choose the path that's right for you. He passed away last year, but I still hear his voice in my head. I will always be grateful to him for his advice, guidance and example.

**What advice could you give an associate who wants to make partner?** First, relationships are critical to your success, both inside your firm (including potential sponsors and mentors) and outside (clients, potential clients and even peers at other firms who can make introductions or one day serve as referral sources). Make an effort to invest in those relationships, and don't be shy about asking for support and guidance along the way. I have often been pleasantly surprised at how eager people are to help more junior lawyers and you should take advantage of those opportunities.

Second, whether it's partnership or a different role, take ownership of your career and seize opportunities as they arise. On the latter point, this can mean writing articles or volunteering to assist with a client pitch, or even just inviting partners or clients to lunch, so that you're considered a go-to when a need arises. Ultimately, you are in charge of your own career, and you have to look for ways to get to where you want to be.

**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 think the biggest mistake people make is assuming that by sitting in their office and doing excellent work, they'll get to where they want to be. While that's of course a critical piece of it, it's also important to develop relationships and have frank discussions with those

people about what your goals are. They won't be in a position to help you unless they know you and know where you want to go.

**What challenges did you face in your career path, and how did it influence your career?** As a first-generation immigrant and the first in my family to go to law school, I faced a fair number of challenges in my career path. For much of it, I couldn't look around and see someone like me who could give me insight on what was to come. While the legal profession has made many strides over the last few decades, we still have a long way to go in achieving true diversity and equity.

However, I was fortunate to have sponsors and mentors in my career that sought to demystify the path and make it seem achievable, even most recently through the partnership process. I am particularly grateful to Lisa Cleary, Erik Haas and John Winter (current and former partners at Patterson) who provided endless support and guidance and helped me navigate the challenges I've faced over the years.

**Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?** I would tell myself that it's OK not to have all the answers. For a long time, I assumed partners and more senior lawyers always knew exactly what to do in each situation. It took me a long time to realize that was not necessarily true, and they were often confronted with novel questions or issues. What ultimately made them successful was their ability to operate effectively with incomplete information and their ability to identify what they needed to know and then figure those things out. Like many other things, this is a skill that can be learned and I wish I had understood that earlier.



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**What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole?** I hope that in the years to come I will be able to help others in my position so that they have a sponsor and guide through the process. I also hope that I can continue to devote time to pro bono matters and help those that otherwise would not be able to afford a lawyer. I feel extremely privileged to be where I am and believe that we all have an obligation to pay it forward in terms of helping the next generation of lawyers, as well as those in difficult circumstances in life.

**What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID-19 years)?** I was impressed at how quickly lawyers and clients adapted to a remote-work world. It was a reminder that many of the systems we have in place are not necessarily immutable and that there are different ways of doing things that can be just as effective. While I believe there are benefits to in-person interaction that can't be replaced by Zoom, the existence of these technologies can also greatly increase access for those that may have been shut out of more traditional ways of working. It's a reminder that we should keep an open mind and continue to look for ways to improve on existing structures and systems.

**What three key elements you would like to focus on for 2022.** Client service, increasing diversity, equity and inclusion and public service.