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The Map to Make Partner as a Litigator at a Firm in the Top 10 of the Am Law Rankings

By Ross Todd

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Partnership at elite firms increasingly looks less like a reward for technical excellence alone and more like a test of whether lawyers can proactively build their own careers. Getting the sort of broad-based experience and exposure needed to show your individual value is especially challenging for litigators at some of the largest firms in the world, where both the client matters and partnerships can be global in scale.

This year, three litigators who recently made partner at firms in the top 10 of the Am Law gross revenue rankings shared their perspectives through Law.com's "How I Made It" series: **Poonam Kumar**, a partner at **Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher** (#4 in this year's Am Law 100); **Amanda Brown**, a partner at **Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom** (#5); and **Jesse Green**, a partner at **White & Case** (#9).

Their paths differed. Kumar, based in Los Angeles, built a practice spanning white-collar defense, investigations and trial work. Brown, in Chicago, spent her entire legal career at Skadden, rising through the ranks over more than a decade. Green, in Miami, developed a



Courtesy photos

(l-r) Poonam Kumar of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Amanda Brown of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, and Jesse Green of White & Case.

specialty in bankruptcy-related litigation after beginning as a commercial litigator.

Yet taken together, their reflections suggest that partnership at the industry's largest firms increasingly depends on more than simply producing excellent legal work. The recurring themes that came up in their answers centered on initiative, adaptability and a willingness to actively manage one's own career trajectory.

Nobody Is Going to Build Your Career for You

Perhaps the clearest through line across all three is the belief that lawyers must take

ownership of their advancement long before partnership discussions begin.

Kumar was particularly direct on that point. Discussing advice for associates, she urged young lawyers to be proactive. “Don’t wait to be asked to do something if you think it needs to be done,” she said. “Your voice matters. You were hired by the firm for your intelligence, skills and judgment, so use them!”

That same message surfaced in Brown’s discussion of the partnership process at Skadden. While she stressed the importance of legal skills and strong relationships, she also encouraged lawyers to be “vocal about their goals,” seek feedback and insist on clear communication about where they stand. “Closed mouths don’t get fed,” she said.

Green said that he would encourage his younger self to “seize the initiative from day one.”

“Remember that you are the architect of your career,” he said.

Waiting for opportunities to arrive or assuming strong work alone will place you on the partnership track isn’t enough at firms of this size and complexity.

Act Like a Partner Before You Become One

Another recurring theme was the importance of operating beyond the confines of a formal job description.

Kumar encouraged associates to master the facts, identify potential problems and propose solutions. Her advice reflects an expectation that lawyers at every level contribute to case strategy rather than simply execute assigned tasks.

Brown encouraged junior lawyers to harness some of the advantages that a large firm such as Skadden has at its disposal, including

development programs, alumni networks and institutional client relationships. “Opportunities for internal exposure and brand-building don’t always happen organically,” she observed. “It’s smart to be intentional about making them happen.”

Green echoed this point, noting that White & Case offers “tremendous” professional development opportunities, but that it’s up to associates to take advantage of them. “Be proactive, seek out challenging assignments, and continuously strive to expand your knowledge and skills.”

All three described advancement less as a reward for years served and more as recognition that a lawyer is already demonstrating the qualities expected of a partner.

Adaptability Remains a Career Advantage

Flexibility also emerged as a notable theme.

Kumar credited Gibson Dunn’s culture for allowing her to build a practice that blends significant criminal and regulatory matters with high-stakes civil litigation and trial work. The firm’s “free market” philosophy, she said, enabled her to develop an individualized practice rather than be forced into a single lane. She said this approach was a big driver behind her decision to rejoin the firm in March 2022 after she spent more than seven years at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Central District of California.

Green repeatedly emphasized adaptability. His advice to aspiring partners was simple: “Be flexible.” He noted that lawyers may develop expertise in one area only to discover opportunities emerging elsewhere, and he credited part of his own success to developing a focus on bankruptcy litigation as client needs evolved in the wake of the pandemic. “The lesson learned

is the importance of remaining adaptable and responsive to client needs, which can open new opportunities and drive success,” he said.

Brown pointed to versatility as one of the personal traits that helped her thrive, describing her ability to adapt to different work styles, team dynamics and professional settings.

Rather than advocating a rigid career blueprint, these new partners described advancement as requiring the ability to evolve alongside client demands and firm priorities.

Relationships Matter—But So Does Breadth

The interviews also suggest that relationship-building remains important, though not necessarily in the traditional sense of finding a single influential sponsor.

Kumar credited Gibson Dunn partners **Debra Wong Yang** and **Nick Hanna** for their guidance and support throughout her career. At the same time, she highlighted the importance of cross-office collaboration and building teams across practices.

Brown similarly emphasized relationships, but rejected the notion that making partner is about finding “the right people.” Instead, she said her advancement was aided by having worked extensively with nearly every litigation partner in Skadden’s Chicago office as well as

attorneys across the broader firm. The result was what she described as “a broad base of support.”

Green pointed to White & Case global litigation leader **Glenn Kurtz** as a significant influence while also acknowledging the contributions of many lawyers across the firm.

Their comments point to the reality that at the largest firms, partnership decisions may depend less on a single champion and more on a lawyer’s ability to build credibility across a wide network of colleagues and clients.

The Price of Admission

None of these lawyers suggested that technical excellence alone is enough, but it is the baseline for success.

Kumar emphasized becoming indispensable by consistently adding value, while Green underscored the importance of developing specialized expertise responsive to client needs. But Brown, perhaps, captured it most clearly when she said that making partner requires “excellent technical skills, substantive expertise, sound judgment and strong relationships with clients and colleagues.”

At elite firms where exceptional legal talent is abundant, outstanding lawyering is just the starting point, rather than the differentiator.