

# Navigating the Elevation Process—Through Associate Ranks and Beyond



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**By Laura Bottaro Galier and Jennifer L. Wunder Duick | June 8, 2022 | The Legal Intelligencer**

As an associate at a law firm, particularly in “Big Law,” the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel is usually elevation to partner or shareholder. Each firm relies on unique criteria to determine whether an associate should be elevated to that coveted position. Less discussed but equally important however, are the progressive steps made through the associate ranks prior to shareholder elevation: junior, mid-level and senior associate. Each internal progression provides its own challenges, but also opportunities.

While elevation is never a guarantee, any ambitious attorney would be wise to embrace some fundamental tenets throughout their professional development process. Differentiating yourself through meaningful contributions, understanding your role, knowing your client, clarifying your focus, and demonstrating the value you provide at each developmental level are all paramount to successfully navigating these stages and setting a stronger developmental trajectory.

**Do Your Best Work**

As a junior associate, you're not expected to know everything—or much of anything for that matter. The expectation is that you work hard and ask questions. Your value comes from your availability and reliability, communicating early and often, and remaining willing to work with anyone, ask the right questions, and begin to understand the context of each task assigned.

Once you become a mid-level associate, you should develop your knowledge base and begin to understand the overall context and “big picture” of any matter and figure out how each piece fits together. Your main clients are still the shareholders and senior associates with whom you've been working, but now you should understand the importance of the service the team provides to the firm's clients. At this point, you will likely start interacting with these external clients on a more regular basis. The ways you added value as a junior associate remain, but with the further expectation that these skills become instinctive and prevalent in your practice. As you focus on attention to detail, producing solid work product, and taking opportunity to connect more directly with clients, it's imperative to remain responsive and communicative and continue to ask questions to help further hone your legal skills.

As a senior associate, you must polish all the skills you've learned through the junior and midlevel associate years. Your practice of communicating proactively will be perceived as reliability. Your willingness to work hard will result in a more fine-tuned work product and show your efforts toward a deeper understanding of your practice. These elements of your development, or building blocks, have hopefully instilled confidence in both the shareholders and clients for whom you work.

### **Make a Plan**

In addition to doing your best work, make a plan early on. What do you want out of your career? How do you want to get there? Do you have professional goals? These questions and answers can evolve—or change entirely—over time, but at the most junior level, it is important to begin formulating a general plan.

As a junior and mid-level associate, you can start to consider if you're even interested in pursuing elevation to shareholder. Perhaps you'd rather ultimately go in-house with an existing client, start your own practice, or even pursue a path beyond the law altogether. Many firms also offer other paths of elevation in addition to shareholder, such as of counsel or other non-partnership track roles. Regardless of the destination, it is important to take time to explore how to get there and why you want to be there. Talk to others about the elevation process at your firm and understand what can be done to achieve your ultimate goal. Communication is key; nobody can know what you want, what your goals are, or how they could help if you don't tell them or ask.

As you reach the senior associate level, your planning should naturally evolve into a business development plan. Consider the unique value you bring to the firm and its clients and how you can obtain your own clients or create work from existing clients. Make yourself even more valuable and profitable to the firm in preparation for consideration of shareholder elevation.

### **Know Your Advocates**

While being an attorney is about client service, your job and your path are yours, and it is *your* responsibility to advocate for yourself and the career you want. From early on, you should be your own top advocate, monitoring and developing your professional relationships. Being an attorney is a relationship-based career path, not a solo mission. Both intentionally and unintentionally, you can develop mentors and advocates around you. Developing these relationships can look different at each level.

As a junior associate, your willingness and eagerness to work and connect with anyone is a strength. While you're not expected to know much, your value is your ability and willingness to work. In order to give you that work though, people have to want to work with you. One way to foster those connections is to remain visible so senior colleagues know you and want to work with you. Reach out to those colleagues both within and outside of your group and start to develop relationships. Let them know what you want to learn, the type of work you want to do, and how you can support their practice.

By the time you're a mid-level associate, you should be proving yourself not only through your availability and willingness to work but also by producing top-notch work. Continue to be responsive and reach out to those who have given you work in the past. Over time and as you build relationships, you may be able to pinpoint those who can continue to serve as your mentors and advocates. These people can be within or outside your practice area, and can be a support system in a variety of ways.

At the senior associate level, you'll want to continue working with those who have become your advocates within the firm, but now is the time to become your own biggest advocate. Make it known to those who have input in the elevation process that becoming a shareholder is something you want and let them know how you plan to bring business into the firm and provide value as a shareholder. Advocating for yourself is an important part of reaching this next level.

### **Become an Expert**

One of the best ways to position yourself for elevation is to become an expert in an area of your field. You don't need to know everything about everything, but from early on, you should start to focus on your strengths and certain areas that are of particular interest to you, with the goal of filling a void and becoming a real asset to the firm and its clients.

At the junior associate level, it's about learning the basics. You can't become an expert without a good base of subject matter knowledge. This means observing as much as you can of shareholders' or senior associates' work (like listening in or reviewing their written work or comments to your written work), asking a lot of questions, reading pertinent articles about your field, taking relevant CLEs, and requesting one-on-one training sessions with shareholders or senior associates.

As you move into a mid-level associate role, start focusing on your potential niche. Sometimes this happens organically, where you'll start to work on the same types of matters for the same types of clients. Other times, you may need to take the time and evaluate the work you enjoy— and don't enjoy. If an area stands out to you, it may be worth exploring it in more depth, asking for additional work in that area, dedicating time to understand it on multiple levels, and working to carve a niche for yourself.

At the senior associate level, the focus should be on really honing your craft and becoming a go-to person for clients and colleagues alike. Start marketing yourself both inside and outside the firm as part of your overall business plan in preparation for elevation to shareholder.

The road to elevation is not in the form of a checklist. Rather, a multitude of factors influence your path and direction. No matter your end goal, there are key areas you can focus on to elevate your practice and crystalize your career aspirations. In taking the time to understand each step, analyze how to get there, and know your value, you can build yourself a strategic roadmap to getting where you ultimately want to land.

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