

How I Made Partner: 'Success at Any Law Firm Requires More Than Just Excellent Legal Skills,' Says Sara Margolis of MoloLamken

By Tasha Norman

Sara Margolis, 36, MoloLamken, New York City.

Practice area: Intellectual property and general commercial litigation.

Law school and year of graduation: I graduated from Columbia Law School in 2013.

How long have you been at the firm? Since November 2015. I made partner in January 2021.

How long were you an associate at the firm? I was an associate at MoloLamken for over five years.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? I was an associate at Cravath, Swaine & Moore before I joined MoloLamken. I worked there for one year, from 2013-2014, before leaving for a judicial clerkship with Judge Vincent Briccetti in the Southern District of New York.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? After my clerkship, I was looking for a law firm that would help me gain the skills I needed to become an excellent advocate—not just an excellent associate. I wanted opportunities to develop my writing and my courtroom advocacy skills, to contribute to big-picture

strategic decisions, and to actively participate in business development. I wanted to learn how to run a case from beginning to end.

MoloLamken has provided me with that and more. In my first 12 months at the firm, I took nearly 10 depositions. In the six months after that, I was a key team member on appeals to the United States Supreme Court, the Federal Circuit and the D.C. Circuit. And my experiences since have been similar. I've examined witnesses at trial and played substantial roles in pitches for important work. At MoloLamken, I'm always in the "room where it happens," and that's made me a far better lawyer.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner? MoloLamken does an excellent job of preparing its associates to become partner. From my very first months at MoloLamken, I was trained on how to develop and then execute strategy to drive my cases forward. Everyone at the firm is client-facing to an extent. But the amount of interaction I had with clients, opposing counsel and judges far surpassed that of my peers at other



Courtesy Photo

Sara Margolis.

firms. I was given room as an associate—with supervision, of course—to develop my ability to make decisions in the face of uncertainty, a key skill for any litigator. Judgment is a skill that improves if you are given the chance to exercise it (even if someone else is later checking that judgment). Because MoloLamken associates run cases and make decisions with consequences every day, people have an opportunity to develop judgment at an early stage in their careers. Those are not new skills to learn upon making partner.

Because MoloLamken associates spend time developing the skills they will use as a partner, the transition to partner tends to be smooth. The core aspects of practice that I spend time

on—running cases, business development, firm leadership—have remained the same. How much time I’m spending on each is what has changed. There have thus been few true surprises I’ve experienced in becoming partner.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? I’ve always believed that success at any law firm requires more than just excellent legal skills. While those skills are a prerequisite to career advancement, they are rarely enough on their own to ensure you’ll rise above the pack in an environment where every colleague is brilliant. Good firm citizenship, a commitment to building strong connections inside and outside the firm and thinking strategically about what clients want are all equally important. I think I made partner because I constantly prioritized my leadership role in all three of those areas at the firm alongside my billable work.

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? In my opinion, the key to successful business development is understanding your potential sources of business and what is important to them. That means preparation, preparation and more preparation. Whether attending a pitch or an informal meeting with lawyers at another firm, it is essential to have a deep knowledge of who you’ll be meeting and to identify

potential synergies in advance. Armed with that information, you can steer the conversation where you want it to go—toward the conclusion that you are the right person to handle their next legal problem or to refer work to.

I find that the new hybrid work system actually provides a ton of business development opportunities. Many people are eager to make up for years of missed in-person socializing and are energized by the idea of getting coffee or lunch with a new face. And with others who are mostly remote, it’s easy to have a quick Zoom networking coffee. I’ve found that asking will get you farther than you might think.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? Steve Molo and Jeff Lamken have both had an extraordinarily outsized impact on my career. Steve and Jeff, each in their own way, exemplify one of MoloLamken’s mottos: “brains and brass knuckles.” Both bring intellect, intensity and integrity to their practice.

Steve is a fearless advocate who commands the courtroom and always looks to push his cases forward aggressively. He seems to pack at least 30 hours of experiences into every day, a skill I sincerely hope will rub off on me. He is also a devoted mentor and has spent countless hours teaching me about prosecuting and defending cases, business development and firm administration. From him I’ve learned

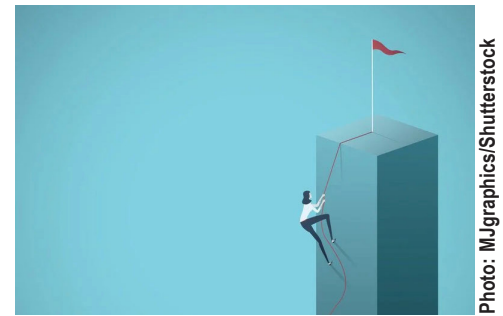


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to litigate boldly and ask for what I want—whether it’s the opportunity to cross-examine a key witness or the opportunity to pitch an acquaintance’s in-house team.

Jeff is an expert at translating the complex into the comprehensible, and he is a master storyteller. His briefs convey an undeniable sense that MoloLamken’s clients are on the right side of the dispute before the reader even reaches the argument section. I have also never met anyone who prepares the way he does: By the time one of his oral arguments rolls around, he can recite what is on every single page of the record. From Jeff, I’ve learned never to neglect telling a story and that preparation provides the confidence you need to deliver results.

What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner? *The best way to become a partner is to demonstrate, every day, the skills of a partner. It’s crucial to recognize that the very best associate doesn’t always make an excellent partner. A great partner has not only excellent legal skills, but the ability to empathize and communicate with clients and be a*

problem solver. Associates don't always recognize that they need to practice business development and client-facing skills alongside their legal skills starting as early as possible in their career. Associates should find mentors in their firm willing to let them practice those skills by exposing them to clients during the course of the case and bringing them to pitches. Luckily, MoloLamken provides its associates with those opportunities in spades.

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? Many attorneys do not realize that perfecting “associate skills”—such as doing excellent research—will not make you stand out in the quest for partnership. As I've mentioned, a great partner has not only excellent legal skills, but the ability to communicate with clients—and ultimately attract more of them. Associates—even senior ones—commonly focus on polishing “associate skills” at the expense of “partner skills.” Senior associates who have ambitions of making partner need to prove to their firms that they have the necessary skill set to perform all the tasks required of a partner, and not just those tasks required of an associate. Sometimes that means leaving your comfort zone and learning new things that may not come naturally.

What challenges did you face or had to overcome in your career path? The pandemic posed a huge obstacle to my career. In March 2020—the year I was up for partner—I suddenly became responsible for so many tasks I'd previously had more help with, including daytime child care, cooking and cleaning. If you'd have told me then that I would make partner at the end of the year, I'd have laughed.

Because of my new responsibilities, I had no choice but to become more efficient. I cut distractions by minimizing time I spent reading emails as they came in, and I concentrated—to the extent possible—on completing one task before moving onto another. I became adept at answering routine emails while cooking dinner and focused on improving my organizational skills so nothing would fall through the cracks.

I have since regained my access to childcare. But I've retained my improved efficiency as I've continued in my career. My improved efficiency benefits my clients, because I take fewer hours to accomplish the same task; my law firm, because I can better balance my billable work, business development, and firm administration roles; and my personal life, because I have more time for my family.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice

would you give to your younger self? I'd tell my younger self not to hesitate to reach for what I want. Your goals are sometimes closer than you might think.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? It's very important to me to show other moms of young kids that we can succeed in the legal industry. I have five- and one-year old sons, and they keep me busy! But I still have time to be an excellent advocate and to truly love my job.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID-1i years)? The pandemic taught me just how crucial it is to surround yourself with supportive people who believe in you. My husband never hesitated to jump in and help—even if it was “my turn”—when he saw I was struggling to get everything done. My extended family pitched in when I had no child care. And everyone at MoloLamken was extraordinarily supportive. They understood when I did not answer emails instantaneously (as I'd done for so many years). No one said a word when my toddler's laughter rang out during an impromptu internal call. My colleagues' support and understanding helped me survive the chaos of those early pandemic days.

What key elements you would like to focus on for 2022. Advocacy, connection and efficiency.