

Paralegal to partner



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The journey to partnership is not easy or quick, but there are ways to prepare and a mindset to cultivate

If you are currently working as a paralegal, then please take a bow. Paralegals are often the engine room of any successful family law team. It is a crucial role. To have a successful, high-performing family law team, having people at all different levels is key. There are many highly experienced paralegals out there, who are working on a par with qualified solicitors and partners in practices. You may well have made a conscious decision to work as a paralegal and want to remain as one. This is fantastic and we applaud you, for knowing who you are and what you are and for working hard to deliver essential legal services to your clients. Not every paralegal will want to become a partner and that's ok!

The flip side of that, is that there are many legal graduates in particular who have taken on posts as paralegals, on the basis that this will be a stepping stone into a training contract, which will then propel them through the system with the hope, dream and ambition of one day becoming a partner in a law firm. It is exciting and fulfilling to achieve the status of partner, but it can also be tough. The law is a vocation and rarely a 9-to-5 job. The great responsibility, high targets and very high expectations, not only from those above you, but from your peer groups, as well as your individual teams and the pressure you put on yourself, can be draining.

This article aims to guide you through the process of that journey.

How do I know I want to become a partner?

Zahra says: I worked my way up from legal secretary to partner. I certainly did not know how varied my skill set needed to be and I effectively needed to understand how to run a business if I was going to become a partner. I simply thought it was about doing the law well, getting promoted and ultimately wearing the badge of partner with pride. The actual reality of being a partner is very different. It is definitely not for the faint-hearted. The one key thing to think about is, are you just a lawyer, or are you more, because being a partner is about much more than just being a good lawyer.

Marcie says: The first thing to do is to really understand what you're getting yourself into. Talk to people around you to get real insight as to what being a partner means now and what it might look like going forward. Check in with yourself to see if you still feel excited after you fully understand what lies ahead of you. Is the spark of ambition still burning? Or has it been snuffed out? Be honest.

How do I get there?

Zahra says: Be the best you can be. The starting point has to be that you need to be good at the trade that you want to enter into, so of course you need to be a credible, successful lawyer and understand how to deliver to clients, run a case strategically and, most importantly, how to manage the client relationship. This is the basic foundation and very much the starting point on your journey to becoming a partner.

Marcie says: Start with the end in mind. Picture yourself as partner. Really get into the vision of what it would look like for you. What kind of partner would you be? What values would you lead by? Would you be collaborative and energetic and focused? Really take some time to decide. When you have that vision and have put a timescale on it, whether it be five or ten years into the future, then you can work backwards to figure out all the steps you need to take to get there. Work all the way back to the present day.

How much commercial sense do I need?

Zahra says: You can be the best technical lawyer in the world, but if you don't have commercial sense, then you will not succeed. At the end of the day most, if not all law firms, are businesses and while their remit is to deliver the highest level of expertise and legal professional services to the client, they need to make a profit to survive, grow and to reward their people.

Marcie says: Skills like these can be learned. Being commercially savvy may not be a natural place for you, but there are courses to go on to help you along the



way. Getting yourself a mentor may also be a valuable thing to do. Remember you don't need to achieve all these things by tomorrow. Build them into a growth plan for yourself. Learn as you go. Bite-size chunks of learning are much easier to take on board than huge pieces.

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How do I manage my time?

Zahra says: Know your value. You need to know and understand your charging structure, your Terms of Business, and you need to make sure that you promote strong financial hygiene within your practice area. If you are a brilliant lawyer and doing an excellent job for the client then the client will want to pay for this, but you need to speak with clarity to your client about the cost of their case right at the outset. An invoice should never come as a surprise to a client. It is never too soon to learn how to manage your clients, not only in terms of where the case will go, but in terms of the short and long-term costs that your client is going to need to provide, throughout the lifetime of the case. Getting money on account, ensuring that you are paid and that you bill regularly and profitably are very important aspects of what you do.

Marcie says: Manage your time and bring in some kind of balance. If you're billing hours that aren't expected you will have an unhappy client. Notice if you are spending too much time being a perfectionist. Ask yourself, do I need to be here at 11pm at night. What impact will it have? Also be strong in what is owed to you. It's work. If you do work you need to get paid. So being able to stand up confidently in front of the client to negotiate fees and payment schedules, you will be helping yourself. Confidence can be learned; it can be coached. If you're not feeling confident then get someone to help you to grow some. It's vital.

How do I talk about career progression within my firm?

Zahra says: That old saying, it's not what you know it's who you know, still rings true in my view. To travel through the ranks and get from paralegal to partner, you need allies, you need friends, and you need mentors. This is not something that you can achieve on your own. Stay in regular contact with your boss and let them know your intention to progress in your career. It is your partner's responsibility to keep an eye on your career progression but, trust me, every

partner has so much on their plate, now more than ever, that being direct and talking about things will be helpful and useful. Talk to others about how they climbed the ladder in your firm and outside of your firm.

Marcie says: Use your regular 1-2-1s as a place where you can be proactive about what you want, not just as a place to listen to feedback about your work. Demonstrate your desire to climb the ranks. Show that you have been working to the next level, offer strategic thoughts. The bottom line is to embody the next level up so it becomes easier for someone to promote you.

What else can I do to help myself?

Zahra says: Be visible. It really is all about social media right now. Just because you can't network face-to-face it doesn't mean you can't have a presence and be visible. Make LinkedIn and Twitter your new best friend. Build your contact base via these platforms and reach out to people. Get it done sooner rather than later; if you don't know how then search for it, as there's a lot of support out there.

Marcie says: Think outside the box. What else can you do to increase your visibility? What are the softer skills that you can offer that will enhance the firm's reputation? You will have other skills that you don't usually bring to work. If you can create good camaraderie within the firm through something like a film night or an out-of-office activity, then you can use those as examples of team building. Good teams and strong bonds create loyalty and retention, both of which are coveted values. Think about what other values your firm needs, and look at different ways of instilling them. Don't be afraid to network with people more senior than yourself. Ask for short coffee meetings with them. Explain your career plan and ask them for their own story of how they got there. They will feel listened to. You will be remembered. And you never know when that may come in useful.

Conclusion

Whether you have been a paralegal for a short period of time or a long period of time, it is never too early or too late to look at the next step. Always look within your own firm at opportunities and find out how you can progress. Perhaps your firm has never had a trainee before, don't let that put you off, why not be the first? Remember, just because it hasn't happened before, doesn't mean you can't make it happen. There is a big, wide world out there, be a part of it and if you want to make a change to your own position then find a way. You only fail when you stop trying so just keep trying.

Wherever you are in terms of your journey, stop and celebrate where you have got to. Being part of the legal profession is still a highly respected accolade. A UK law degree is still very well respected internationally. Be proud of who you are, what you do and how you do it.

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