

"Partners Of The Future Will Travel Off The Beaten Path"

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For years, young attorneys could make partner if they logged enough hours, sharpened their legal skills and survived 12-hour days. Now, the path to partner is taking longer than in years past as a perfect storm of factors pushes associates off the typical BigLaw trajectory.

As more law firms begin to tap partners for 2012, many of the newly minted ranks will have resumes with stints working in-house or for prosecutors, reflecting the future face of partnership as expectations of associates change in a new economic environment.

The recession deferred some new attorneys' starts at BigLaw, spurring them to seek experience in unconventional places like prosecutors' offices or public-interest firms. Clients in the new economy, meanwhile, began demanding associates with real-world experience work on their cases, leading firms to lend attorneys to clients for in-house stints or encourage them to work for government agencies.

While these detours grew out of necessity, they also fed the desire of Generation Yers for a varied work life instead of one filled with six years of billing hours before making partner, as was typical at some firms up until the mid-1990s, said **Patricia Gillette**, a partner with **Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP** and legal-industry watcher.

"They don't want to do the same job for 20 years like us," **Gillette** said.

Recent data supports the notion that young lawyers are waiting longer than ever to climb the ladder. A study released on Tuesday revealed that while partnership promotions are picking up in 2012, it took 500 of the newly tapped lawyers at 60 of the nation's largest firms an average of 10.5 years to make partner, according to the study by American Lawyer.

"The path to partnership is taking some twists and turns that it didn't previously take," **Gillette** said.

While the road to partnership was getting longer even before the recession, the recession-era upheaval in the legal industry seems to be making it even longer. During that time, associates had to prove they could bring in business before they could graduate to partner, and even lawyers who already made partner were de-equitized if they couldn't bring in business — or asked to leave.

"It started before the recession," **Gillette** said, "but the recession just underscored that you can't have unproductive partners."

While associates might not be able to become rainmakers in only six or even eight years, young attorneys are using their time to develop their trial skills or learn the ins and outs of the businesses their clients work in, according to industry experts.

"A lot of attorneys during the recession had an opportunity to take a sabbatical, to be seconded in-house," said Courtney Goldstein, a partner at legal recruitment firm Major Lindsey & Africa. "They were still able to hone a really great skill set."

At Orrick, seconding can be a boon for the firm and the associate alike, according to Orrick's **Gillette**, who noted that a sixth- or seventh-year associate at her firm was recently seconded to a major client for three months.

"One, it will really cement the relationship with that client, and No. 2, it will give her the practical experience of working in-house. She will know the nuts and bolts of what it's like to be on the ground. That's a skill that's extremely valuable for our practice," said **Gillette**, an employment lawyer.

Associates have also conditioned themselves for partner by working with regulators or at a U.S. attorney's office.

At Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, one lawyer had worked at a government agency tied to the firm's labor practice, which helped her make partner in 2012, said Kim Koopersmith, U.S. managing partner for the firm, who anticipates seeing future partners at the firm who have taken their own detours.

Allowing lawyers to work in different venues helps firms gain new business because it gives lawyers a way to make contacts outside BigLaw, according to Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers LLC. And expanding their networks can bode well for associates, she said.

"It's an opportunity to distinguish themselves," Epstein Henry said.