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Becoming a Partner

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Abstract

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Becoming a Partner

Ralph Warner & Toni Ihara*

My enjoyment of practicing law with a good-size firm was hampered by three factors: I didn't like the work, I didn't like the other lawyers, and I didn't like the clients. Nothing I've done in the years since I quit the law has been nearly as boring.¹

Everyone who has ever read a book by Louis Auchincloss knows about the rewards of getting to be a partner in a big firm—the \$400,000 draw (in a bad year), membership in an all male yacht club, March in the Virgin Islands, etc. Unfortunately, while being a senior partner isn't too hard to take (except for your colleagues), getting to be one is not easily accomplished. Here are some helpful hints:

Hint 1: Start Early. Plan to be born white, male and Protestant. If you can't manage this, try female, black, Buddhist and handicapped—it's hard for even the stuffiest old hardline firm to resist a quadruple minority if, in addition, she is also the editor of the Harvard Law Review and agrees not to bitch about being excluded from the yacht club (see Hint 2, below).

Hint 2: Character is Formed in Kindergarten. Not only must you pile your blocks higher than any of the other kids, you must also learn to kick over the piles of the other smart kids without getting caught. Later this will be called "aggressive advocacy." Your only goal in your school years is to be number one in everything so that you are sure to be accepted at Yale. (Harvard, Princeton and about thirteen other schools will also work. If you have to ask which ones, consider setting your sights on the legal department of a good-sized insurance company in the Midwest.)

Hint 3: The Rewards of Abstinence. When you reach Yale, you must study maniacally so that you graduate with honors, get 750 on your law boards, and are accepted at Harvard Law School (there are eight, maybe ten, other law schools that will keep you on the partnership ladder and several hundred or so others that won't).

Hint 4: Law Review Is a Must. Not only must you study 20 hours a day, so as to place in the top 10 percent of all your desperately overachieving classmates and be selected for the law review, your law review contribution must demonstrate that you are politically shrewd (it helps to say a kind word about feudalism, or, if you want to be daringly modern, about the Supreme Court under the leadership of William Howard Taft).

Hint 5: What to Wear at Your Employment Interview. This is critical. More than one law review editor has blown it all by wearing a blue shirt to this interview. Men should be sure to wear ties covered with small pheasants (mallards in flight are acceptable, but crossed golf clubs almost guarantee that you will end up working for a small firm in the suburbs). Women should absolutely avoid Gucci, Pucci, or even Yves Saint Laurent and instead wear sensible tweeds in the style favored by the English royal family in 1938.

So far so good. If you have successfully followed hints 1-5, you should now be an associate at the firm of Adams, Adams & Fudge. But don't relax—the ladder still stretches far above you and each ascending rung is more slippery than the one below. You must realize that, increasingly, most associates can't make it all the way to full partner but are let go when their youthful fire and energy begin to ebb. Why? Mostly because they are just not tough enough. But back to basics.

Hint 6: Energy is as Important as Intelligence. Always stay at work until nine in the evening and be sure to show up first on Saturday mornings. In the more liberal big firms, it is permissible to wear a blue shirt on the weekends.

Hint 7: Making the Most of the Old School Tie. If you went to Princeton, Amherst or Stanford (West Coast only), have your alumni magazine delivered to your office. If you went to college at Cornell or Michigan, or even worse, a state college, it's best to have it sent to your home.

Hint 8: Never Be Seen in the Wrong Court. If you play racquetball, quickly change to squash without telling anyone. If you play tennis, be sure you use a wooden racquet. If you play polo, a discreet picture of your horse should be placed in a modest silver frame on the corner of your desk.

Hint 9: Learn to Order Lunch in Italian. Of course, we assume that you already know French. If you don't, you will probably want to resign

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quietly, although you may be able to get by for a while by announcing that as long as the Frogs vote socialist, you will never eat another bite of cassoulet (kass-oo-lay).

Hint 10: Save Your Money. You will be paid as much as \$80,000 from the start and will get generous raises. Unfortunately, it probably won't last. Big firms are never so crude as to fire anyone, of course. But when your cubicle is reduced to a broom closet, it occurs to you that your secretary, who mysteriously disappeared two years ago, will never be replaced, and you haven't had Oysters Rockefeller and Pommes Frites with a partner since you had that trouble with the Collingworth bonds, you will reluctantly realize that, at 35, you have a lot of knowledge about junk bonds, or leveraged buy-outs, a bad stomach, high child support payments, an over-developed taste for Wild Turkey, tendonitis (from all that squash), and that almost without noticing it, you have been transformed from an "up and coming" to a "down and going." Unfortunately, you have little experience and few legal skills which are valuable outside the world of Big Firms, and therefore are probably unemployable as a lawyer. (No big firm will ever hire anyone eased out by another, of course.) Your best bet is probably to apply for a teaching job at a law school—this being the only place that could possibly be interested in a specialty as narrow as yours.