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## How To Make Partner Working Remotely

By **Anna Sanders**

Law360 (September 3, 2024, 11:21 AM EDT) -- This year saw the first new partner at SRD Legal Group since the founding of the women-owned virtual firm in 2015. Unencumbered by a traditional law firm structure, SRD's business model allowed attorney and Navy veteran Liesel Stanhope the flexibility to become partner while working remotely as a military spouse.

SRD founder and managing partner Suzie Scanlon Rabinowitz said Stanhope was promoted to partner for leading key client relationships and contributing to the firm's growth.

"Obstacles in the path towards making partner can be highly related to the individual culture and business model of each firm, and it's really on the individual lawyer to know how to best navigate and thrive in that environment," Scanlon Rabinowitz said in an email. "At a virtual law firm like ours, providing outstanding legal service and substantive work, caring about the business, being very responsive and communicating extremely well is mandatory."

Making partner as a remote attorney still isn't possible at every law firm despite the shift in workplace culture since pandemic restrictions temporarily forced offices across the country to close. But remote law partners and other experts said attorneys who work at home or outside law firm offices can still position themselves for partnership by becoming indispensable to their colleagues, as well as leveraging new technology and flexible schedules to better serve clients.

This starts with building a loyal client base and a robust book of business remotely — whether attorneys are in person at a traditional office, employed by a virtual shop, or work for a distributed firm where they can operate wherever they want.

"It doesn't matter whether you're working remotely or you're working in the office," said Kevin Broyles, founder and managing partner of FisherBroyles LLP, the first and largest distributed law firm. "It's all about creating either a client base that supports you so that you have that leverage vis-à-vis the firm, or becoming such an expert and indispensable in a certain area that you're a valued service partner."

In this way, the fundamentals haven't changed, according to Adam Forest, founding partner of distributed firm Scale LLP.

"Attorneys who generate business make partner and then equity partner," Forest said.

### Network

That's why networking is a critical tool for remote attorneys hoping to make partner, particularly at BigLaw firms, where some associates simply take over institutional clients.

"Attorneys who are most successful working remote are usually also most successful at internal marketing and networking," said Frederick Shelton, CEO of Shelton & Steele, a legal recruiting, mergers and acquisitions, and consulting firm that specializes in new law models. "They make sure that the people who will be important to them know them."

Attorneys should regularly touch base with clients, either in person or over the phone and email, experts said.

Contacting these high-value clients once every two or three months helps keep attorneys top of mind

when work is available, according to Shelton. He said they can do this by regularly offering clients "value or humor," such as sharing information on a new legal development or sending an amusing video or meme loosely tied to their practice.

"It doesn't matter what kind of law firm you're at, if you just lock yourself in your office and never talk to people, you're not going to make partner," Shelton said.

### **Be Reliable**

Working remotely requires attorneys to be more disciplined in their time management, particularly when home offices are rife with distractions.

"You just have to prove that you can excel just as well working remotely as someone who's working in the office," Broyles said. "Partnership has always been about creating enough leverage so the firm is forced to make you a partner."

Attorneys should become people the firm and its partners can depend on, according to experts. They can do this by referring work to other attorneys within the firm if conflicts arise or when clients need help beyond their expertise.

"Make sure every single client knows the firm has very fine attorneys who can handle other matters," Shelton said. "Do everything that you can to cross-sell."

Forest said an attorney should aim to become someone a colleague knows is responsive and trusts with an important client relationship.

"If they don't, it's hard to make partner," he said.

### **Know Your Firm and Its Obstacles**

Making partner as a remote worker is easier at so-called virtual or distributed law firms where most or all attorneys forgo a traditional office, experts say.

Barriers to partnership at more traditional law firms are often based on ingrained politics and culture, according to Forest. There's a higher burden to demonstrating commitment to the firm and its clients when working remotely.

"Attorneys who make the partnership decisions often grew up professionally in a brick-and-mortar environment and they still equate working remotely with second-tier commitment," he said. "The obstacle is optical and political."

Experts said one workaround is for remote attorneys to operate near a local office of their traditional firms, coming in once a week or month for meetings or social events. For instance, becoming partner at Mayer Brown LLP might be easier for a remote associate who works near the firm's hometown office in Chicago.

There are other barriers to making partner while working remotely, according to experts. Working from home can impede training opportunities for associates, so they become unlikely to become partners down the line.

"You risk a first year who doesn't have the maturity or the experience to self-manage themselves on a remote basis," Broyles said.

Also, not all law firms have adequate technology and business infrastructure to ensure attorneys are successful and feel connected, according to J.Y. Miller, managing partner of Husch Blackwell LLP's virtual office. Unlike Husch Blackwell, he said, some law firms are run by attorneys with "antiquated views toward virtual work."

"They establish policies that require others to join them where they are, instead of where an attorney would be most successful," Miller said.

Making partner as a remote attorney therefore requires an understanding of the firm's culture, who makes decisions and what those leaders care about, experts said.

"If they care about face time, how can you do your best while still preserving some work-from-home flexibility?" Forest said. "Maybe that means attending conferences with those partners or coming in once a week."

These obstacles disappear at firms like Husch Blackwell, which has a "work from anywhere" model. The firm's virtual office, dubbed the Link, is among the firm's most productive, with more than 700 attorneys and staffers. Miller said Husch Blackwell doesn't differentiate between remote and in-office attorneys when making partnership decisions.

"Everyone, regardless of their location, has the same level of eligibility and opportunity to make partner at the firm," Miller said.

Most attorneys who join FisherBroyles arrive as partners, strategically chosen because they can bolster the firm's offerings through their existing clients or expertise, according to Broyles.

"Traditional law firms, in my opinion, have a really backwards business model as it is, and making partner is no different," he said.

### **Face Time and Intention**

But experts said some form of "face time" is critical no matter the firm, though the amount can vary. Some managing partners and clients want to meet attorneys in person, while others prefer phone calls and virtual meetings to save time and money.

"Sometimes you're just going to drop them an email or have a quick phone call," Shelton said. "But going out to lunch or for drinks ... that is the difference between colleagues and friends."

Being in the same physical space can also increase trust between an attorney and colleagues or clients, according to experts. But attorneys can still demonstrate this by showing up for Zoom calls on time and participating in virtual networking events.

"We've organized the firm's culture and discussions in ways that are primarily nonphysical, but that doesn't mean they don't exist," Forest said of Scale.

A remote attorney's path to partnership can also depend on the practice, according to experts. Transactional attorneys have less need for in-person work than litigators, who need to conduct depositions and make court appearances.

"The easiest practice areas are those that focus on the regulatory niche — corporate, IP or regulatory reporting are the easiest to do remotely," Shelton said. "Litigation can require more ad hoc and urgent mustering of the troops."

Experts said technological improvements — in part necessitated by the pandemic — have made this distinction less important. More courts now allow remote proceedings and electronic filings. And many virtual and distributed law firms still have collaborative spaces and conference rooms for depositions and other meetings, making remote work easier.

But Miller said successful remote work still takes "a tremendous amount of intentionality and effort" on the part of the attorney.

### **Benefits of Remote Work**

Even so, experts said the pandemic has significantly shifted this conversation, making remote work more viable and tempting for workers, especially as younger attorneys go up through the ranks and seek partnership.

"The pandemic accelerated the adoption of collaborative tech tools by five to 10 years for everyone, including lawyers," Forest said.

Increased access to remote work technology has also improved the bottom line for firms and corporations as both in-house attorneys and outside counsel are encouraged to travel less, according to experts. This means firms like FisherBroyles with fewer office expenses can afford to have more partners.

"Because our overhead is so low, we don't have quite as high a financial hurdle for people to get over to make partner," Broyles said.

Scanlon Rabinowitz said SRD can provide a high level of service by having remote partners in multiple time zones, boosting responsiveness to the firm's Fortune 500 clients that operate 24/7.

Plus, experts said working from home eliminates time-consuming commutes and distractions at the office, easing stress and improving performance.

"Ironically, law firms had their best years ever in the pandemic, mostly because every single lawyer had extra time to bill," Forest said.

Miller said virtual work also helps with collaboration. Before the pandemic, he said attorneys might gather in a conference room for meetings, dialing in off-site team members who might struggle to hear and fully participate.

"With virtual interactions, everyone can meaningfully participate, and associates can spend more face time with partners than ever before," he said.

Remote work can also lead to more productive attorneys, experts said. The thousands of hours saved in commutes mean attorneys can get "more time in their day," according to Miller.

"Some of that time is used for client work, while the rest is used for their personal lives," he said.

This flexibility can translate into better retention and a more diverse partnership to serve clients.

Broyles recalled when the firm hired a female attorney as a partner. Her previous firm refused to let her work remotely after she had a second child.

"They made it very clear she wouldn't be on the partnership track," he said. "It's easier for us to recruit because we don't frown upon working remotely."

The ability to quickly attract talent "from anywhere" to the virtual office allows Husch Blackwell to expand practices as client needs arise, according to Miller.

SRD launched as a virtual law firm in 2015 to better attract seasoned attorneys who wanted greater flexibility, according to Scanlon Rabinowitz. She said the firm's business model can cater to attorneys who "want to approach work differently for a number of reasons such as having young children, caring for an aging parent, managing a health concern, returning to work after a career break, or having a spouse in the military and managing frequent geographic relocations and deployment."

Even though the firm's first nonfounding partner, Stanhope, lives across the country, Scanlon Rabinowitz said they are in close touch daily.

Experts said the legal industry may become more open to remote or hybrid law partners, especially as more tech-savvy young attorneys enter the workforce.

"Change is inevitable," Forest said. "But like with all things in the law, it's slow."

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.