

SUPPORTING THE STEP UP TO PARTNERSHIP

Challenges, lessons, and advice from
junior partners

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INTRODUCTION

Expectations of partners are evolving, as firms are under increasing pressure to show a return on investment from new partners quickly. At the same time, succession planning has risen up the agenda. Many firms are facing the dual challenge of supporting senior leaders transitioning out, while ensuring junior partners are equipped to lead the next phase of growth. These pressures make it more important than ever to address the gaps in support and training. Business development is no longer a 'nice to have' but a fundamental part of the role.

Based on ten in-depth interviews with junior partners – and informed by a wider series of conversations featured in our [Trifecta newsletter](#) – this report explores the practical realities of life after promotion. Each of these partners has made the transition to partnership in the past few years. Their experiences shine a light on what changes when you become a partner, the business development challenges that come with the role, and the gaps in support from firms.

The purpose of this report is twofold:

1. To help associates better prepare for partnership
2. To help firms understand how to support new partners more effectively

Throughout, we draw out practical tips and real-world examples that can be used by individuals and leadership teams alike. We hope you find the report valuable and insightful.

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The shock of the step-up

The shift from senior associate to partner is not just a promotion. It is a fundamental change in how you are expected to operate, lead and deliver value. Several junior partners described it as a “reset” or a “jolt”. The safety net of having someone else ultimately responsible is removed. You are now responsible for driving revenue, managing relationships, and often for building something from scratch.



As a senior associate, your pressure is to bill six hours a day and make X amount per year. As a partner, you realise you shouldn't be billing that much – you should be giving work to juniors and spending time on profile raising, meeting people, and other intangibles.

– Darren Hooker, Partner at Capsticks



COMMON CHALLENGES AND HOW TO NAVIGATE THEM

New partners often fall into what we've termed the *visibility trap* – they're suddenly expected to lead externally, but many feel unprepared to take centre stage. The most effective approach is to build confidence gradually – starting with low-risk visibility such as small presentations, internal showcases, or writing – ideally before being promoted.

Another common hurdle is the *internal reset*, as relationships within the firm shift with the transition to partner. Associates become your reports, peers become competitors, and you may find yourself no longer being 'invited in' to the same discussions. To navigate this, it's crucial to build trust early with peers and key internal referrers. Take time to clarify your role, focus, and priorities to prevent misunderstandings.

The shock of the step-up (cont.)

Many new partners experience *pipeline panic*. Without a ready-made client pipeline, the early days can feel disconcertingly empty, which in turn can knock confidence. Some partners arrive at the role with limited BD experience, often having relied on one major client or inherited workstreams.



By the time I hit 10 years PQE, my BD experience was limited. I'd never needed to do anything but keep one client happy – suddenly I had to build something from scratch.

– Joseph McCaughley, Partner, Spencer West



The solution lies in early action. Even informal coffees and consistent LinkedIn engagement during the associate years can lay the groundwork for a strong future network.

A further challenge is a lack of clarity. Too often, firms provide little information about what success actually looks like in the first few years of partnership.

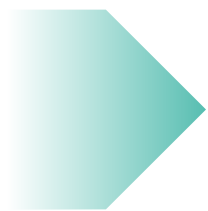


That constant cost-benefit analysis was a completely new concept I encountered after making partner – a real, critical analysis of where I spend my time, which clients I focus on, and which opportunities are worth pursuing.

– Julie Marsh, Partner, Boyes Turner



Asking direct questions before promotion – about metrics, support, and what a successful year one looks like – can make a big difference.



Putting it into practice

The transition to partnership isn't a single leap – it's a journey that demands preparation, support, and clarity. Whether you're an associate aiming for promotion, a firm building future leaders, or a team supporting growth from within, everyone has a role to play.

Associates

- Ask to **shadow client pitches**
- Sit in on **BD meetings** before you are up for promotion (and actively contribute where you can)
- Observe what partners do and **how they lead** conversations

Firms

- Offer structured transition support for the first **12–24 months post-promotion**. Treat this as an **onboarding phase**, not a completed journey
- Provide **BD training & financial insight** (the earlier the better)
- Assign **mentors** or transition sponsors

Teams

- Talk openly about **expectations at partner level** so that future leaders are not blindsided by the change
- Share **real stories**, challenges and tips
- Promote **transparency** on how the role changes

Common themes

Across the interviews, several recurring themes emerged that shed light on the realities of stepping up to partnership.

PRESSURE TO BRING IN WORK IMMEDIATELY

One of the most consistent pressures mentioned was the expectation to bring in work quickly. This demand came from both internal and external sources, and often set in from day one, regardless of whether the new partner had an established pipeline.



As a Senior or Principal Associate it is important to develop behaviours for the job you want, not the job you're in, as there is no safety net when you make Partner. It's on you to pick up the phone, convert the opportunity and deliver.

– Joel Nixon, Partner, Higgs



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SHIFT TO LEADER

Many also spoke about the psychological shift required when moving from a focus on execution to a leadership role. This transition wasn't always intuitive – it involved letting go of familiar tasks and stepping into more strategic, often ambiguous territory. Internal dynamics also shifted. Navigating competition among peers and adapting to changes in team relationships proved challenging, particularly when former equals suddenly became rivals or direct reports.

STRATEGIC AWARENESS

Understanding the broader goals of the firm and recognising how their role contributed to those goals was another key challenge. Junior partners were often expected to align with firm strategy without always being given clear visibility of it.

STEPPING INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

Lastly, there was a marked change in external visibility. New partners found themselves suddenly in the spotlight, expected to lead conversations with clients and intermediaries – sometimes without the preparation or support to do so confidently.

What helped

(and what didn't)



HELPFUL

Having had BD exposure before promotion

Being taken into pitches or referrals by existing partners

Mentoring or shadowing experienced partners during the transition

Having senior partners open doors and involve you in client relationships early

Getting clarity on how your role feeds into firm goals



UNHELPFUL

A lack of transparency around what partnership actually requires

Being expected to 'just get on with it' without clear guidance

Unclear performance metrics or expectations

Being kept away from key clients or BD opportunities by senior partners

Relying too heavily on one big client or referral source

What works: successful BD strategies

THE COMMON THREAD: CONSISTENCY OVER PERFECTION

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to business development, but the most effective junior partners share one trait: consistency. They try, test, and refine their BD habits over time. Most had a written plan with clear goals – even if informal – and they treated BD as a rhythm, not a one-off task.



I've actually drawn up my own marketing plan...you need to do all of it: webinars, articles, and face-to-face meetings.

– Darren Hooker, Partner at Capsticks








Some of the most successful strategies included:

✓ Leveraging personal networks	The first few instructions often came from former colleagues, law school peers, or in-house contacts.
✓ Hosting niche events and webinars	Especially in sector-driven practices, this helped build visibility and credibility quickly. <i>"Webinars have been a great way to showcase what we do. It's scalable and targeted."</i>
✓ Speaking at or attending sector events	Being present in the right rooms mattered more than sheer volume. <i>"Care conferences and panels helped me build a profile in a niche area where few lawyers play."</i>
✓ Internal referrals	Several partners credited other departments and senior partners for helping them secure early wins.
✓ Content with purpose	Writing articles or LinkedIn posts worked when aimed at a specific audience with clear follow-up.

What doesn't work: common BD pitfalls

Even the most ambitious new partners can fall into traps when it comes to BD. The most common pitfalls stem from either overestimating what will work or avoiding uncomfortable actions altogether.

Some of the recurring issues raised in the interviews included:

 Generic marketing activity	Producing content or hosting events without a clear audience or follow-up strategy rarely converts. <i>"Writing articles is easy. Turning them into work is the hard bit."</i> - Darren Hooker, Partner, Capsticks
 Avoidance due to internal politics	Fear of stepping on toes or disrupting hierarchy stopped some partners from building their own networks early. <i>"I didn't feel I could go around a particular partner, so I just avoided BD altogether for a while. Big mistake."</i>
 Copying others' style	What works for one partner may not work for another. Several interviewees mentioned trying (usually unsuccessfully) to mimic more senior partners before finding their own rhythm.
 Over-reliance on firm-wide marketing	Assuming that central marketing teams or firm events will deliver results led to disappointment.
 Poor targeting	Reaching out to the wrong people, at the wrong time, without a clear message, wasted effort and created disengagement.



Putting it into practice

Associates

- Start identifying **contacts** and friendly intermediaries now. Make a list - reach out without pressure.
- Test and learn. Pick **one channel** and **one audience**, and hone your craft. Start **small** but stay **consistent**. Once you're comfortable with one channel (e.g. referrals), then expand - don't try too many new things at once.

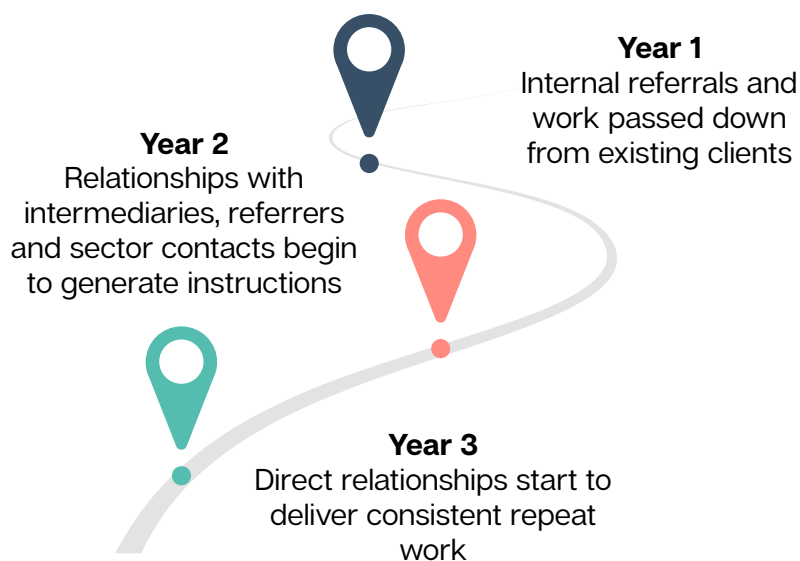
Firms

- Provide **guidance** on how to select BD activities that play to each lawyer's strengths - networking, writing, speaking or collaborating internally
- **Coach** new partners through their first year of BD as a partner - don't just hand over a budget and expect results. BD at partner level doesn't always look the same.

Where the work really comes from

One of the most important insights from our interviews is that the mix of work sources changes over time. In the first year of partnership, most junior partners rely heavily on internal referrals, inherited clients, or introductions from more senior colleagues. As they grow in confidence and build their networks, the balance shifts.

A typical evolution might look like this:



Understanding this timeline is crucial for expectation setting – both for individuals and firms.

Typical sources of work:

- **Internal referrers** (other partners and teams)
- **Referrals from external intermediaries** (accountants, banks, agents, consultants)
- **Direct client relationships** from prior roles or personal outreach
- **Visibility** via sector events, awards, webinars or content
- **Recommendations** from peers or ex-colleagues

Where the work really comes from (cont.)



It's probably 40% internal, 40% from referrals, 20% direct outreach.
– Leanne Wright, Partner, Osborne Clarke

All of my work is direct instructions. That's because I've stayed in one niche and become well known in it.
– Robin Wood, Partner, Clyde & Co



Putting it into practice

Associates

- Don't wait until you're a partner to start building your network. Those early relationships will become your year-one work sources.

Firms

- Track where new partners are winning work and use that data to inform support, BD plans and internal collaboration.

Teams

- Encourage early visibility of cross-team opportunities and introduce future partners to key firm referrers.

Top 5 pieces of advice from junior partners interviewed

01

Treat BD like billing – schedule it, track it, and follow up. That's the only way to build consistency.

02

If you're relying on one major client or internal referrer, you're at risk. Diversify your pipeline early.

03

Everyone talks about BD, but no one tells you what it actually means. Ask early. Learn by doing.

04

Don't just copy what someone else is doing. Your BD style has to feel authentic or you won't stick with it.

05

Start building your visibility before you're up for promotion. It's easier to test ideas when the pressure isn't on.

Training, coaching and the gaps in support

Across every interview, there was a clear consensus: BD training is often too little, too late – or missing altogether. While a few firms offer structured programmes, most junior partners learn through trial and error.

Some had received networking training in their early years. Others were offered support only after promotion, when the pressure to perform was already high. The gap in mid-level and senior associate training was especially noticeable.



You're thrust into BD from an early stage because everybody's got to be doing everything. But there often isn't any formal training.

– Ben Willows, Partner at EIP



What made the biggest difference? Ongoing support, visibility, and exposure – especially from senior partners. Being invited to pitches, included in conversations about pipeline, and coached on how to position oneself were recurring themes of success.

There was also a strong sense that individual coaching or mentoring worked better than broad training sessions. Junior partners wanted help applying BD strategies to their practice, style and goals.






As I was building my business case for partnership, I personally got lots of support from the partners in terms of them taking me along to meetings, making sure that I was front and centre of pitches and opening up their networks to me.

– Leanne Wright, Partner at Osborne Clarke



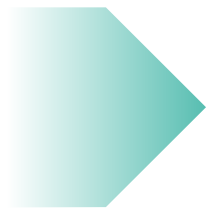
EXAMPLES OF GREAT TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Some firms are beginning to close the gap. Several interviewees pointed to specific initiatives that helped them build confidence and capability in business development:

 Early exposure to client-facing activity	One partner described being consistently invited to join pitches and relationship meetings from his mid-associate years onward. That visibility helped him develop trust and commercial awareness long before partnership.
 Structured internal training	One firm created a 'Future Leaders' programme that focused on BD, leadership, and strategic thinking. The content was tailored to practice areas and delivered over six months, giving associates time to test ideas and reflect.
 Partner coaching and tailored goals	Several mentioned how impactful one-on-one sessions were in shaping their approach. These coaching sessions focused on identifying strengths, clarifying goals, and building personalised plans rather than generic skills training.

Ben Willows, Partner at EIP, described how his firm introduced a more structured BD planning approach using “vision traction organisers” (VTOs), where partners set clear 10-year, 5-year, 3-year, and 1-year goals, as well as 90-day BD priorities. This gave focus and helped translate long-term goals into manageable action points.

Importantly, while all lawyers were assessed against the same business development behaviours, the expectations were calibrated differently at each level, helping to embed BD as a core part of the culture from early on.



Putting it into practice

The transition to partnership isn't a single leap – it's a journey that demands preparation, support, and clarity. Whether you're an associate aiming for promotion, a firm building future leaders, or a team supporting growth from within, everyone has a role to play.

Associates

- Ask partners and BD teams **what's worked** for them. Look for chances to **join a pitch**, write a piece of **content**, or shadow **client meetings**.

Senior Partners

- Bring future partners into **real conversations** – pitches, debriefs, strategy meetings. Share your approach **openly** and help build their confidence by giving them **visibility**.

Firms

- Offer structured BD **training** for associates (junior and senior), and create a defined **support programme** for new partners. Include practical **toolkits** and one-to-one **coaching**.

Teams

- **Share examples** internally of how BD growth happens over time. Normalise **slow starts**, **plateaus**, and **shifts** in focus.

Recommendations for associates and firms

This section distils everything we heard into practical guidance for those at the start of their BD journey – and those responsible for supporting it.

FOR ASSOCIATES:

- ✓ Start now. The most successful new partners didn't wait until they had the title to start acting like one.
- ✓ Treat BD as part of your role, not something extra. Add it to your task list, track it, reflect on it.
- ✓ Build your network and visibility gradually. Focus on genuine connection and consistency, not perfection.
- ✓ Ask to join pitches or help with content. Get into the habit of following up and closing the loop.

FOR FIRMS:

- ✓ Make BD expectations clear – and set them early. Don't wait until partnership is on the table.
- ✓ Support senior associates, in particular, with relevant, practical training and exposure to clients and internal stakeholders.
- ✓ Ensure new partners have a structured plan and support network in place for the first 12-24 months.
- ✓ Promote a culture that recognises different BD styles and encourages experimentation and learning.



Even the case of more senior people taking you along to meet clients and meeting prospects from an early stage, that really does have an impact.

– Ben Willows, Partner, EIP

We tell trainees to get on LinkedIn and start building connections from day one.

– Partner, Lester Alridge



Conclusion and next steps

The step up to partnership is a career milestone – but also a moment of vulnerability. Without the right support, junior partners can feel like they're being set up to fail. However, with early exposure, structured training, and a culture of openness, firms can equip the next generation of partners to succeed.

This report highlights what junior partners need – and how firms can deliver it. We hope it prompts reflection, conversation and action.

If you'd like to explore training, coaching or advisory support for your team, get in touch (details below).

USEFUL RESOURCES

Looking to take the step up to partnership but not sure where to start? We've got an array of valuable resources designed to elevate your business development and strategic planning efforts.

- **Making the jump to partner: 20 key BD actions**

This free guide walks you through 20 BD steps to help you build a sustainable, thriving practice without burning out. Click [here](#) to download.



- **Course: Creating a BD plan**

This course offers a structured approach to formulating an effective BD plan that aligns with your objectives and market dynamics. Click [here](#) to find out more.

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About Gemma Francis Consulting (GFC)

At GFC, we help law firms and lawyers unlock sustainable growth through strategic business development.

We specialise in supporting mid-sized law firms – from training and coaching for associates and partners, to in-house BD support and campaign delivery. Our work is grounded in real-world insights, not theory, and draws on experience from top 100 UK firms, boutique specialists, and cross-border teams.

Whether we're helping lawyers build a business case for partnership, revamping a firm's BD strategy, or coaching junior partners to find their voice, our approach is always practical, tailored, and results-focused.

Core services include:

- 1:1 coaching for partners and associates
- Associate and future partner training
- In-house BD team support
- Legal directory strategy and submissions
- Campaign design and delivery
- BD health checks and diagnostics



If you're looking to strengthen your firm's approach to BD – or better support your next generation of partners – we'd love to talk



[Book a strategy call here](#)

Or email Gemma directly here:



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