

## How I Made Partner: 'The Path to Partnership Requires Much More Than Working Hard,' Says Marisa S. West of Sidley Austin

By ALM Staff

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**Marisa S. West, 35, Sidley Austin LLP, Washington, D.C.**

**Job title:** Partner

**Practice area:** White Collar: Government Litigation and Investigations

**Law school and year of graduation:** Yale Law School, 2013

**How long have you been at the firm?** 2013-2014; 2019-present

**What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?**

When I applied for a Summer Associate position at Sidley Austin, I was looking for a firm that (1) valued diversity, equity, and inclusion; and (2) fostered an enjoyable workplace. All of the firms that I considered were comprised of excellent attorneys who worked on interesting matters, but I was really looking for a place where I could be happy for years to come.

Throughout the interview process, I was impressed by the personability of Sidley attorneys and their commitment to their passions and activities outside of work despite the pressures of Big Law. Sidley also showed me in many ways that diversity, equity, and inclusion is a priority and stood out as a leader in that space.

**Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?** I summered at Sidley and joined the firm for one year after graduating. Subsequently, I clerked for a judge on the District Court for the District of Columbia and worked as an Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Columbia for four years. I returned to Sidley as a rising seventh-year associate.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?** Sidley considers each partner candidate as whole, so I do not think that there was one deciding factor that pushed my candidacy over the edge. My business

case was certainly a critical component of my candidacy, and my relationships within the firm helped me translate my experience and skills into a business case. As a former prosecutor, I have a wealth of investigation and courtroom experience. Accordingly, I am a resource for clients facing a wide range of challenges: whether a client is threatened by a government-enforcement action, conducting an internal investigation, preparing for testimony, or implementing a robust compliance program, I can offer the unique perspective of how the government approaches these challenges.

When I returned to Sidley in 2019, partners with whom I had worked as a junior associate invested in my career by including me on pitches, introducing me to clients, and pulling me onto high-profile matters. These relationships were not only essential to my promotion and success at the firm, but also critical to my happiness at work.

**Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why? Please provide name, job title and a brief explanation.** I have been fortunate to have innumerable firm mentors and sponsors who have been essential to my career development. They guided me through the partnership process and gave me invaluable advice. For example, they selected me for leadership positions, raised my profile internally and externally by nominating me for speaking opportunities, and advocated for me to take on critical, client-facing roles on complex matters. Additionally, one former member of Sidley's DEI staff spent a significant amount of time introducing me to changemakers in the



**Marisa West, Sidley.**

Courtesy photo

firm and coaching me on how to best position myself for partner. I am thankful for all of the support and guidance that I have received at the firm, all of which has helped me to succeed and to grow my practice.

**What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?** The path to partnership requires much more than working hard and working well. Associates must be very intentional about becoming partner. What this looks like may vary by firm, practice, and associate, but the foundational steps that helped me include: telling others early and often that you would like to be promoted to partner; seek advice from your mentors and sponsors about what types of skills they recommend you develop and which matters would be helpful to take on; maintain a dialogue with the individuals who evaluate you to ensure that your reviews are helping you meet your goals; challenge yourself by volunteering for opportunities to showcase yourself and expand your professional network; and be a good firm citizen by paying it forward to the associates coming behind you.

**When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?** The most common mistake I see some attorneys making is ignoring the social aspect of our profession. The legal industry is a relationship business. The lawyers whom I admire the most are constantly creating, growing, and maintaining connections with others. They not only excel at the practice of law, but also at the practice of connecting with people. In addition, relationships with colleagues and clients are important for job satisfaction. Without such relationships, it is easy to feel disconnected or burn out.

**What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?** Four months after I returned to Sidley, the pandemic sent us all home. What I had imagined would be a challenging, condensed path to partner became far more difficult when I was isolated at home. The valuable hallway and elevator conversations that allow for impromptu connections were not possible for my first two years back at the firm, so I developed a detailed plan of how to chart an unusual path to partnership. I scheduled countless virtual

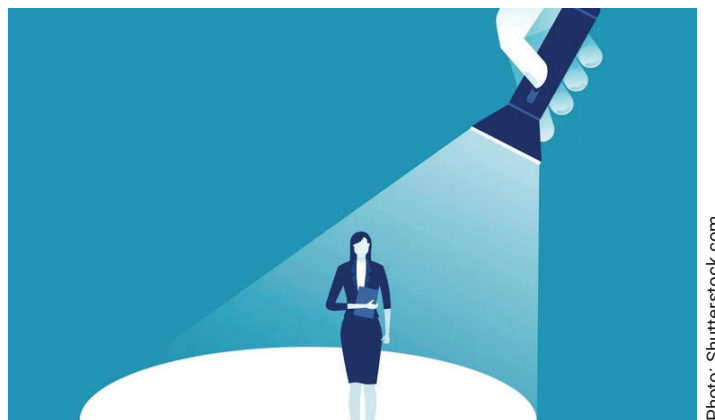


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meetings with firm stakeholders and volunteered for as many opportunities as possible to introduce myself to the office and the firm. During this process, I learned how to truly take charge of my professional development and execute on a plan for growth and advancement.

**Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?** I would advise my younger self to vocalize my goals and priorities. People want to help others succeed, but my mentors and sponsors would not have been able to help me along the way if I had not articulated my career goals early and often. For example, when I returned to Sidley, I frequently spoke about my goal to be promoted to partner. These conversations evolved into strategy discussions and ultimately helped me succeed.

**Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?** Sidley has 21 offices worldwide and technology is essential to maintaining a cohesive presence all over the world. Over the last few weeks, for example, I am working with colleagues in California, D.C., the United Kingdom, and Brussels on a series of client presentations related to the rise of ESG litigation across the globe. We are well positioned to offer a global perspective on the growth of ESG litigation not only because of our robust presence and expertise worldwide, but also because of our ease with adapting to expanding technology.

**How would you describe your work mindset?** I enjoy my work immensely, which makes it easy to maintain a positive work mindset. My matters present new and interesting challenges on a daily basis, and I enjoy learning new skills with each new opportunity.