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How I Made Partner: 'Never Take a Seat at the Table for Granted,' Says Brittany Bolen of Sidley Austin

By ALM Staff

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Brittany Bolen, 37, Partner at Sidley Austin, Washington, D.C.

Practice area(s): Environmental, health and safety

Law school and year of graduation: George Mason University School of Law, 2013

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Four years, 8 months (since February 2021)

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

I was looking for a firm with a truly collaborative culture where I could leverage my experience over my years in the U.S. government. Sidley's environmental practice group was ranked highly, and coming from the EPA, it was important for me to join a preeminent environmental practice with a firm that had the resources to handle some of the largest and most complex environmental regulatory matters. Having worked with Sidley lawyers in the past, I knew they were some of the best in the business. Sidley was also known for having former government officials in the D.C. office, especially the environmental practice group, which made me feel like I could genuinely integrate into the firm.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?


Courtesy photo
Brittany A. Bolen of Sidley Austin.

I joined Sidley after serving nearly a decade in various roles in government. Prior to joining Sidley, I served at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), where I was most recently associate administrator for policy and senior counsel to the administrator. As the head of the EPA's Office of Policy, I was a member of the senior-executive service, overseeing all aspects of agencywide (i.e., air, water, waste, and chemicals) regulatory development under each federal environmental statute. I worked on a daily basis with cabinet-level and senior officials across the administration, and regularly represented the EPA in White House and interagency meetings. I also served as the EPA's "Regulatory Reform Officer," testifying before Congress on the EPA's regulatory reforms. Prior to the EPA, I served on congressional committees in the House and Senate, including as counsel for the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee that has jurisdiction over the EPA and environmental laws.

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?

I think one of the key reasons was that I had already built a book of business while at Sidley and I was frequently part of cross-firm pitch teams that brought in new business. I was also able to translate my experience in government into meaningful guidance for clients. Sitting on the opposite side of outside counsel, I know what the government expects, and clients value that insight. You can study as much as you like, but until you're in the seat of a regulator, you will not fully understand the process and considerations. And I had experience engaging with senior executives, including those at some of the most iconic companies, that was a differentiator clients appreciate.

I think my collaborative approach and positive attitude helped, too. Because of these traits I was able to quickly build relationships with other Sidley lawyers and partners, and work on matters with partners across the firm—in Texas, California, Illinois, New York, Massachusetts, and even Geneva—and across many practice groups like energy, transportation and infrastructure, health care, litigation, M&A, PE, tax, trade, and securities.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

There are many people who have influenced my career, particularly as someone with no direct connections to the government, law firms, or Washington, D.C., generally before law school. I moved to the D.C. area laser focused on working in government. It was a dream I had since a high school field trip to D.C. with my AP American Government class. My "big break" came through Kristina Moore, a former senior counsel of then-U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Kristina oversaw the Committee's EPA-related work, and I was one of the legal interns supporting her. It was the first position I held where I was tasked with digging into EPA regulations; I worked around the clock in hopes of landing a permanent position. A couple months after my internship with the committee ended, Kristina accepted a job as senior counsel to the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW) and recruited me to be her junior counsel. Coupled with my relentless drive and work ethic, the rest is history because every opportunity flowed naturally from that initial Senate EPW role. Other noteworthy shout-outs go to Justin Savage, former U.S. EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler, and Ryan Jackson.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

Develop relationships with partners and lawyers across the firm at all levels. Don't limit your network to your specific practice group or office. Start thinking about the business of law by building relationships with clients and potential clients whenever you can. Network and connect with friends and classmates who went in-house. Think about building your brand by becoming a thought leader—really understand your industry and how it will change in the future. Volunteer for webinars and speaking engagements, author or contribute to articles, and attend conferences in your area and industry of interest. And think about what you can do so you're the first person a client or colleague thinks of on the issues in your practice.

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?

A common mistake I see is not taking charge of your own career and assuming that senior leadership is aware of your contributions or career goals. Everyone is incredibly busy, so assume nothing. You are your best advocate. Similarly, another mistake I see lawyers make is holding back critical ideas and thoughts. Don't just "phone it in." I often say to mentees, especially women, never take a seat at the table for granted. Be engaged; meaningfully contribute.

What challenges, if any, did you face or have to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

I think the biggest challenge for me is that I've been "the first" at many points of my career; I didn't necessarily have a clear picture of the best path forward; I had to take notes as I went along and pivot where necessary, learning on the spot. I was the first in my immediate family to graduate from a four-year college, let alone law school. I was the first in my family to work in the federal government, particularly at the level I served, and certainly the first to work at a leading law firm. One of the things I've learned is that it's OK to be "the first"—lean into it and don't be bashful about calling on friends and others to help guide you along the way. Being "the first" gave me agency over the direction of my career; I wasn't trying to fill anyone's shoes or follow in the shadow of a particular person—it's my own path and I own it. Turning to others for support required self-motivation and persistence, which are key attributes I needed to build a successful practice.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

Stop worrying over every little thing. It's all going to work out. Trust yourself and God. There's a quote by Thomas Jefferson that really resonates with me: "How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened!" The quote expresses how people often suffer more from imagined future hardships than from actual events. I identify with it because I have wasted time agonizing over different decisions and scenarios throughout my career that never materialized. And while it's important to think about every angle of an issue as a lawyer, including worst case scenarios, it can take a toll on us personally. So try to be grounded and make decisions based on reason, not emotion.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

Technology is an evolving space. Of course, the firm—and many clients—are prioritizing the use of AI. I've found it helpful in some ways and not in others. I'm still an IRL-type. I cherish the site visits, in-person meetings, networking at conferences, and meaningful conversations over client dinners. I have a love/hate relationship with all the virtual platforms. I'm one of those folks who came to the office after it was opened following the pandemic. I show up and turn on the camera during meetings with colleagues and clients in other locations to stay connected. To me, that matters. I may have a hard time counting on technology, but you can count on me.

How would you describe your work mindset?

My mindset is to be flexible, ready, and able to help bring my knowledge and experience to any matter when I can. During my time in government, I was once referred to as the "Bo Jackson of the team"—able to play any sport. I do the same at Sidley because my environmental experience cuts across so many industries and practices. But I'm honest in my capabilities and not bashful to refer to a colleague or ask for help when I need it. Collaboration is key to getting the most successful outcomes for your clients.

Do you have any advice for improving work-life balance or promoting mental wellness to avoid burnout and maintain your career momentum?

Get outside! It's easy to get locked to the desk—there's so much to do. But it's important to find time to get outside. Living in the city, this meant neighborhood walks with my dog. On the weekends, if possible, I try to find some dedicated time to spend outdoors. It's one of the reasons I love golfing with my husband so much. I'm also in a women's golf league that helps motivate me to carve out time to play periodically, even if I can only play nine holes—it gets me outside and moving around.

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