

How I Made Partner: 'Approach Hard Situations With Enthusiasm,' Says Julia Forbess of Fenwick & West

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By Tasha Norman

Julia Forbess, 41, Fenwick & West, San Francisco.

Practice area: Corporate, public companies, life sciences, biotech.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Chicago Law School, 2011.

How long were you an associate at the firm? I started at the firm in the fall of 2011 and I was elected partner in the fall of 2020.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? I was a summer associate at Latham & Watkins, as well as a summer associate at Fenwick & West.

What year did you make partner at your current firm? I was elected partner in the fall of 2020 and it became official on Jan. 1, 2021.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? I decided to join Fenwick & West because of the sense of enthusiasm and ownership that I got from all levels of the organization. While there are several other firms with equally sophisticated and exciting clients that advise on similar issues, I got the sense that associates were

considered somewhat fungible, and they didn't seem to view their work as special. At Fenwick, even during the interview process, I could see that both associates and partners had a sense of pride and commitment around their work.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner? I immediately felt like a valued partner with real ownership and impact over the organization. In my first year of partnership, I launched our first-ever [biotech corporate governance report](#), which expanded on our annual corporate governance report for the Silicon Valley 150. My clients had been asking for this kind of data for a while, and with the resources and support of the partnership, I was able to take on this initiative.

It was really gratifying to be able to dig into trends in the biotech industry. Traditionally, there's been a dearth of information about corporate governance data for these smaller, often younger, companies. Being able to deliver the data behind my advice has been a really valuable venture, and I'm excited to continue to dig into the numbers year over year.



Julia Forbess

Courtesy Photo

What's the key to successful business development, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system? Business development is an ongoing process, and it doesn't hurt to get started early in your career. For more junior attorneys, I would advise them to approach every networking opportunity as an early-stage business development opportunity. The more people who know you—and know your expertise and areas where you can be helpful—the more opportunities you'll have to receive recommendations and referrals.

Also, internal business development has been just as, or more, important than

external business development in my experience. My career was enhanced by developing strong working relationships with senior associates when I was a junior associate. As those senior associates became part of the partnership, they took interest in my development and I had the opportunity to work with their clients. Similarly, as associates go in-house, they become potential clients for the future. All of these relationships can be incredibly important over time, even though they don't originate out of traditional business development opportunities.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? I have learned so much from working with my Fenwick partners Rob Freedman and Effie Toshav, advising clients together in the biotech space. Rob helped me to see that I could have a long-term career at Fenwick, and taught me about securities laws and capital markets deal dynamics. Effie is a great example of the power of having a strong network and industry expertise. Both are great pragmatic business partners to their clients, which is something I strive for in my practice, as well.

What advice could you give an associate who wants to make partner? I think the best associates are ones that are engaged and passionate about their work. A lot of legal work is in the details, which can become dry and pedantic. If you keep a larger perspective on why the details matter, your understanding of the business goals and objectives will

make you more valuable to the clients and partners. I've found that people like to work with those that are excited by a challenge and approach hard situations with enthusiasm.

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? Having the technical chops is necessary—but not enough. On the one hand, if you know the law better than anyone at your firm but you can't effectively communicate with nonlawyers, you're likely to struggle to develop a good working relationship with your clients. On the other hand, if you only put effort into networking and business development, you may have a lot of relationships but not the expertise to be a go-to adviser either within or outside the firm. Finding the right balance and developing these skills in tandem will show you returns over the length of your legal career.

What challenges did you face in your career path and what was the lesson learned? I think every law firm attorney grapples with work-life balance at some point in their career. As I became more senior in the organization, Dave Bell, a partner at Fenwick, offered some advice that I have taken to heart: he refers to it as "work-life integration." I've interpreted this to mean that your time is not always going to be evenly split. Some days will be a scramble just to keep up with work, but overall, you prioritize and take care of the tasks or areas of life that



need your attention the most at the time. By integrating work with the rest of life, it becomes a valued part of the day and experience, rather than a chore.

What lessons did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID years)? Working remotely for two years has really underscored the importance of social connections. I feel fortunate that I already had strong relationships with my colleagues because I see so much value in those relationships. I really admire our lateral partners and associates who joined the firm during this time and had to make those connections in a remote environment. Melissa Duffy, a new lateral partner specializing in trade and security law in our new Washington, D.C., office, has done a particularly amazing job of integrating herself at the firm. My hope is that as we come together again, we can harness that energy and continue to develop our dynamic Fenwick community.

What three key elements you would like to focus on in 2022. Engagement, development and gratitude.