



# SUE-ELLA'S GUIDE FOR NEW PARTNERS

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH

More than 250 new law firm partners were appointed in Australia's biggest 50 law firms - a 44% increase from last year. Accounting and consulting firms went even harder still. Ninety-two employees were elevated to partnership at PWC; at Deloitte, that number was 70. Meanwhile, KPMG made 70 new partners and Ernst and Young added another 40 to the 31 they made in October 2020.

If you're one of those new partners let me begin by saying congratulations. Partnership is a significant career milestone and one you should be celebrating.

It also means you're going to have to have a pretty solid game plan for cementing your position and growing your practice into everything it should be. After all, you've got more competition than those who've gone before you. What's more, you're competing during a time of incredible uncertainty. And that requires a major shift in mindset on your part.

When you were a Senior Manager, Director, Special Counsel or Senior Associate, you had the luxury of concentrating on career growth. Well, now you have to shift from a heroic individual focus to a business focus - from ego- to eco-thinking (Stoke & Dopson 2020).

When you step up to Partnership, no matter how big your firm, you'll need to suspend some old habits of thought, let go of old identities (like 'us versus them', 'our practice versus the firm') and consider co-creative relationships across your networks.

So, with that in mind, here's my guide to getting Business Development (BD) right if you're a new partner.

## 1. GO FORENSIC ON YOUR FIRM

As a Partner, it's vital you understand the mechanics of how your firm makes money.

As a start get your hands on some past pitches, review client feedback, and take a good look at any referral and origination reports.

But you should also try to understand the last three years of the firm's financials. That way you can see which clients and which practices are generating the fees. You'll see which are the consistent clients that form the bedrock of your practice, and which ones come and go. Where margins are made (and how sensitive they are to lock-up and utilisation) and where investments are tested. You'll also give yourself a sense of how money flows into and out of the firm.

When you understand the financial levers this way, you can work smarter. You can also see how your practice fits into the broader scheme of things. And you'll be able to do things like work out the difference between your break-even budget and contribution to profit.

## 2. KNOW THE POWER SOURCES

Don't be naive. Your firm's organisational chart never reflects the reality of what's happening on the ground. In any organisation, power derives from control of key assets. And, for professional services

firms, these fall into three categories: control of valuable client relationships, technical expertise and marketplace reputation.

If you don't know who holds each of these in your firm - and trust me in large professional services firms a lot of new partners don't - now is the time to explore and find out. Do your own due diligence.

### **3. GO FROM KNOW IT ALL TO LEARN IT ALL**

You've spent years honing your technical craft and proving how great you are but, as a Partner, you must be comfortable with ambiguity rather than prediction and control. This requires a shift in learning from 'Know it all' compliance to 'Learn it all' curiosity so your skills at sensing situations are heightened and you're ready to wrestle wicked problems for clients (leave the tamer ones for your team).

### **4. BUILD YOUR PERSONAL BUSINESS PLAN**

Forget template filling exercises about BD, this is the time to get real. Now that you know the three valuable assets in professional services, work out how you're doing in each of them and build a proper business plan around them. How do you rate in your three key areas: client relationships, technical expertise and marketplace reputation? If you're only solid in one of these, you're at risk. If you're solid in two your position is still contestable. It's only if you've nailed all three then you're safe.

Now work out what you're going to do about defending or developing each of them and build a business plan around that.

Could you focus on upskilling by doing a course or reading more\*? Could you get your name out in the marketplace by, say, hosting CPD, writing articles or an opinion piece? Do you need to shore up client relationships with more regular check-ins or engagement? Whatever it is, focus on the three assets that matter. Forget the rest for now.

*[\*to start I've included more references than usual at the end of this article]*

### **5. HOLD YOURSELF TO ACCOUNT**

It's common knowledge that most business plans sit around gathering dust. And that is perfectly OK. The purpose of writing a plan is the process of making you pause and think. Just because you don't revisit the document doesn't diminish this value.

But you should have the disciplines and check-ins to make that plan hum. For this, I often recommend having a weekly action plan, a monthly review and then quarterly self-reflection to assess and adjust your progress.

### **6. TAKE ANOTHER PARTNER OUT TO LUNCH**

If you want help with getting ahead, why not take another partner out to lunch (or a walk) to chew the fat and ask them how they've done it. It'll help re-set relationships. If you're feeling bold, you could even ask them for their business plan so you could speak to them about why and how it worked.

Get to know them well. Find out about their practice, who their stars are, the clients they enjoy working with, and how they add value. Some of the best sources of ideas are those senior professionals who've built a practice in the past but are now stepping back.

## 7. SMOOTH THE PATH

It's not just other partners you need to frame your new relationship with; it's also your team. Reflect on what you enjoy about working with them and let them know that you appreciate them. Thank them for their work. Don't be the guy or girl who makes it to the top and then stiffs the people who got them there. It won't help your cause now or in the future. Remember, the colleague who missed out on this round of promotions might just become your client when they [accept that in-house role](#).

You should also talk with your clients about what your elevation means to your relationship and their business. Now is the time to break from workflow updates and set a new type of check-in with clients and referral sources. You're shifting to their adviser and guider, not just the deliverer of work. Introduce someone else from your team to escape that tag if you still have it.

## 8. DELAYER, DELEGATE OR DELETE

Let's face it, you're going to be spending a lot of time at work while you earn your stripes as a partner. So now's the time to critically analyse your discretionary activity. Where is your time really going? Look at your routines and break one or two of them if to make room for new thinking, different mindsets, challenging views and strategic conversations. If something's getting in the way, or getting tired, stop doing it (or at least halve your time commitment). Hand over your role on the professional development committee, or the firm's social committee, or the young professionals networking group to a Senior Manager or Associate.

Eisenhower's principle of urgency versus importance is a good foundation tool for prioritising effort...



## 9. HELP YOURSELF

It might seem strange to say it but you should be already envisaging what your life beyond partnership will look like. When do you want to step down? Do you want to retire or move on elsewhere? And how much money will you need to make that happen?

When I was a partner with a listed professional services firm one of the best initiatives they had for every partner was an annual comprehensive health check and access to a financial adviser. This covered both our physical health and our financial one.

So make sure you're on track to live the life you want post-practice right from the start.

## 10. HELP THE NEXT PARTNER

Finally, I don't have to tell you how important it is to have support for your journey to the top. So think about the people who've helped you get where you are today. Now pick out the one or two people in your team who you think will make good partners. Mentor them and show them what they need to do to get to where you are.

Bringing on junior staff isn't just your duty and the right thing to do, it's also the way you create a sustainable practice for a long time to come. After all, if push ever comes to shove, these guys will hopefully be your supporters.

### WANT MORE?

If you've just been made partner, you can [sign up to receive my articles](#) or get personal advice on what to do next. [Check out BD45 and organise a 45-minute conversation with Sue-Ella today.](#)



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING FOR NEW PARTNERS

Camillus, J (2008) [“Strategy as a Wicked Problem”](#), Harvard Business Review

Empson, L (2017) [“Leading Professionals: Power, Politics, and Prima Donnas”](#) (22 minute video) and [Book](#).

Casciaro, T & Sousa, M (2005) [“Competent Jerks, Lovable Fools, and the Formation of Social Networks”](#), Harvard Business Review

Covey, S (1989) [“The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”](#)

John, L K (2021) [“Savvy Self-Promotion: The Delicate Art and Science of Bragging”](#) HBR

Dweck, C (2014) [“The Power Of Believing You Can Improve”](#) (Ted Talk 10:24 mins)

Dweck, C (2017) [“Mindset: Changing The Way You Think To Fulfil Your Potential”](#) Little Brown

Govindarajan, V (2016) [“Three Box Solution: A Strategy for Leading Innovation”](#) ([author summary 14 min video](#)) and [book](#)

Malhotra, N., Smets, M. & Morris, T. (2016) [Career Pathing and Innovation in Professional](#)

[Service Firms](#) Academy of Management Perspectives

Maister, D (2005) [“Strategy and the Fat Smoker”](#)

Noordegraaf, M (2020) [“Protective or Connective Professionalism? How Connected Professionals can \(still\) Act as Autonomous and Authoritative Experts”](#) Journal of Professions and Organisation

Oakes, N [“New Partners”](#)

Oakes, N [“Some Thoughts on The Cost Of Production”](#)

Prodonovich, S (2021) [“Five Tactics To Help Your Firm Thrive”](#)

Prodonovich, S (2016) [“The Changing Face of In-House Counsel”](#)

Scharmer, O (2013) [“From Ego System to Eco System Economies”](#)

Stoke J and Dopson S (2020) [“From Ego to Eco: Leadership for the Fourth Industrial Revolution”](#) University of Oxford Said Business School.



**Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](http://www.prodonovich.com), a business dedicated to helping professional services firms sharpen their business development practices, and attract and retain good clients.**

[www.prodonovich.com](http://www.prodonovich.com)

[sueella@prodonovich.com](mailto:sueella@prodonovich.com)

*© Prodonovich Advisory. Please respect our copyright and the effort taken to produce the original material in this article. This article, and any portion of it, may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author.*