

## How I Made Partner: 'I'm Gutsy. I Stand Up for What I Believe In,' Says Joanna Wright of Boies Schiller Flexner

**"Know your personal brand and stay true to it. Trust your gut, follow your instincts, and have faith."**

By Tasha Norman

**Joanna Wright, 37, Boies Schiller Flexner.**

**Title:** Partner and Executive Committee member.

**Practice area:** Litigation.

**Law school and year of graduation:** Columbia Law School, 2012.

**How long have you been at the firm?** Six years. I was an associate for five years. I was not an associate anywhere else. Before joining Boies Schiller Flexner, I clerked on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit and then in the Southern District of New York. I made partner in December 2019.



**Joanna Wright**  
courtesy photo

**What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming a partner?** At Boies Schiller, associates are counseling clients and arguing in court

very early, as soon as they have proved themselves capable, so I had been performing the external-facing responsibilities granted to newly minted partners at other firms for a long time. I was surprised, however, by how gratified and happy our clients were by my making partner and the extent

to which our clients used my title change to introduce and promote me to other potential clients. That was both personally satisfying and professionally helpful.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you a partner?** Early on at Boies Schiller, I sought to have a caseload that ensured as much on-my-feet, in-court, formative experience as possible. That often meant jumping on back-to-back trial teams or offering to fly across the country to take a deposition when a partner had a last-minute conflict. Over time, I began to take on smaller cases with important clients over which I could have complete ownership, including independently counseling the client. Halfway through my seventh year, I was able to make the case that I already had the same experience as many junior partners. I think both skill sets—honing the craft of being a trial lawyer and establishing the ability to build and maintain a client's trust—positioned me well when my partnership candidacy was evaluated.

**You went from associate to partner to member of the executive committee in less than 18 months. How did you do that?** I think there were two things: First, put plainly, I'm gutsy. I stand up for what I believe in and do so in an effective, forceful



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way. I do this for my clients on a regular basis, but I also do it internally for causes important to the firm. Second, other than two federal clerkships, I have spent my entire legal career at Boies Schiller and know, firsthand, the signature culture that makes it a unique, fun place to practice law at an elite level. I can thus serve as a trustee of the institution's DNA and ethos, bringing that forward into the future.

**Describe how you feel about your career now that you've made partner?**

In many ways, making partner is like starting over. In an arbitrary, 24-hour period, you go from being a very senior associate with an established reputation to being the most junior member of a new group. For me, that was exhilarating. Twelve months after becoming partner, I was elected to the firm's Executive Committee. Much like making partner the year prior, I joined an entirely new group where I was the most junior. Both opportunities, however,

cemented why I could only practice law at Boies Schiller. In both situations, the partnership has been welcoming and affirming, making it clear that my viewpoint, perspective and skills as a lawyer are highly valued. Most of my partners are former and current mentors and friends, which made integrating into both new roles especially fun and rewarding.

**What's the key to successful business development in your opinion?** I don't think there is one key or one way to develop business. People who enjoy developing business are the best at it. To me, the lesson there is that business development has to be an extension of who you are as a person. For some people, that will mean making and nurturing client relationships on the golf course, and for others—and certainly for me—that will mean doing the same in preschool parking lots and at toddler soccer games. There is no one singular client so there cannot be one singular formula to developing clients. Business development—like being a trial lawyer—calls on your faith in the future to bear fruit and your commitment to authenticity in the interim.

**What's the biggest change in your day-to-day routine since becoming a partner?** I became a partner two months before the COVID pandemic so it is hard to separate the two in terms of my biggest day-to-day change. Almost immediately on becoming a partner, I was working full time remotely and parenting full time. Boies Schiller has always had an incredibly flexible remote working policy for which the pandemic was a proof of concept so the remote work part was not a huge change, but the dual roles full time was. Putting that aside, I think the biggest change is the extent to which new, potential clients will reach out to me based on a current client's referral and satisfaction with my work and representation. I don't think that would

have happened absent the title change and imprimatur of the firm's confidence in me.

**Who had the greatest influence on your career that helped propel you to partner?** Without question David Boies, our chairman, has had the greatest influence on my legal career. David taught me to be rigorous, precise and exacting in legal argument and in marshaling facts—every word must be deliberate and necessary to merit inclusion. He also taught me that every decision, no matter how small, must support the overall strategy and narrative. That disciplined consistency is key to winning. David and his firm are also the only reason I am still in private practice and now a partner. I planned to work at the [American Civil Liberties Union] after law school and joined Boies Schiller between my clerkships for six weeks on a lark. I fell in love with the institution, its mission of doing well while doing good, and its broad commitment to bringing systemic change and social justice through class actions. I also became, quite frankly, addicted to the adrenaline rush of solving bet-the-business problems for major institutions and corporations. If not for David and the firm he created, I would never have been in private practice to begin with.

**What's the best piece of advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner?**

"Know your personal brand and stay true to it. We are all honing the same set of skills in service of the same craft but how we integrate that toolbox into who we are as individuals is what makes lawyering fun and worth all of the enormously hard work and long hours.

"Lawyers tend to be goal-oriented high achievers but if singularly focused on making partner, it can become easy to lose sight of also developing yourself as a practitioner as opposed to pruning yourself to 'fit in' or 'please.'

"The fastest path to success as a partner, in my opinion, is the same path to success as a lawyer: trust your gut, follow your instincts, and have faith that if doing those two things while working enormously hard, the partnership will have a place for you."

**How do you grow professionally while everyone is working remotely?** In some surprising, small ways, COVID and the remote working wave has yielded some advantages. The transaction costs of a virtual happy hour or networking lunch are much lower than they would be in the traditional office setting requiring transit time and the high likelihood of missing dinner and bedtime. While dinners, lunches and coffees are virtual, however, I can jump on a Zoom after hours without missing any family obligations or time. I have spent more face time with my colleagues and clients this year than I would have otherwise. The lesson there, I guess, is to proceed without preconceptions about the unintended consequence of a situation. Here, in the midst of a tragic pandemic that has caused innumerable human suffering and cut off so many avenues of human connection, an unexpected upshot is that I have more freedom and ability to connect with my clients and colleagues. The same goes for court appearances. I have appeared multiple times in federal court in California. Before COVID, that would require at least a two-day trip complete with 12 hours of flights. Now, I appear in court literally between meetings. Clients and the court system have taken note of these opportunities for efficiencies and I believe a lot of the virtual landscape will stay intact even after COVID recedes and we return to normal. That will be a boon to working women.

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