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How to Succeed at Your Firm

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Five strategies by and for women on how to make your way up the promotion ladder.

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By Sheila Wellington
Catalyst



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Congratulations. You've decided to accept a great job offer—that is, you've done your homework, found the facts, and selected the best firm for you. Now you ask, "What's the best way for me to get ahead?" Catalyst can help you get on the road to partnership with the following strategies we've compiled through years of researching and talking to successful women at firms.

Strategy #1: Learn the criteria for success. If you want to make it to the top (break through the glass ceiling), you'll need to keep three key points in mind:

- Build your business case for advancement. Make sure that you understand how your skills and specialty fit in at your particular office.
- Focus on being a strong and consistent performer. This includes client service, "billability," people management, and technical expertise.
- Address the "perception problem." Take the time to demonstrate your commitment to the firm's partners.

Strategy #2: Address bias head on. Be aware that stereotypes may

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Partner Spotlight

exist in the firm environment, particularly about women and people of color. Remember that you have the power to dispel misperceptions about you if you're aware of what they are. Lay the groundwork by proving your value as a solid contributor. Then, use your leverage to ask for what you want. Ask for challenging, high-visibility assignments. Voice your desire to be on the fast track for partnership.

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Strategy #3: Learn to develop new business. Selling is not as difficult as it seems. It's a skill that can be learned with help, just like any other skill you've acquired during the course of your career. Finding mentors is the best approach to learning how to sell. Identify a skilled "rainmaker" in your office, and ask to be taken to one of her meetings. Be sure to ask your mentor for pointers as you venture out on your own and attempt to attract new business.

Strategy #4: Determine alternate paths to success. Decide what success means for you; it may not necessarily mean partnership. Then figure out if, and how, your firm accommodates your vision. Many firms are seeking out viable alternatives in order to retain highly valued employees.

For example, some have expanded the "up or out" partnership model to include a level for principals. Others may offer a choice between the traditional path and a slower, more self-paced approach.

Strategy #5: Don't give up. If you really like the work that you do, keep at it. You can use the strategies outlined above to overcome many of the challenges you may face. Also, don't forget to seek the advice of your mentors. Oftentimes, they can add that key bit of insight or expertise that makes all the difference. Be confident in your ability to succeed at your chosen career. And don't be afraid to be a change-maker.

For example, if you need a flexible work schedule, and your firm doesn't formally offer flexible work arrangements, design your own and make a business case for it. Your efforts just may make the path easier for those behind you.

Author Bio

Sheila W. Wellington is the president of Catalyst, the nation's premier, non-profit organization on women's private sector leadership. Having broken new ground for women in her own career, Ms. Wellington identifies strongly with women's efforts to advance in business. She was the second woman officer of Yale University, serving as secretary for six years. Previously, she worked in the public health arena for more than 20 years, serving on the faculty of Yale Medical School and as director of two major mental health facilities.