

How I Made Partner: 'Don't Be Afraid to Evolve Your Practice,' Says Arianna Evers of WilmerHale

By ALM Staff

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Arianna Evers, 45, Partner at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, Washington, D.C.

Practice area(s): Cybersecurity, privacy and artificial intelligence

Law school and year of graduation: Boston College Law School, 2009

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been at WilmerHale for 15 years. I summered at the firm in 2008, and then joined the firm as a first-year associate in 2010 and have built my career here (with a one-year stint to clerk on the Federal Circuit). It's essentially been my professional home since I graduated from law school.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

The three key factors for me were the firm's reputation for high-quality legal work, standing in the Boston legal market (I started in the firm's Boston office), and collegial environment. When I was choosing a firm, I knew I wanted a place where I could work on cutting-edge issues and learn from top-notch lawyers. WilmerHale stood out for its excellence across a range of legal practice areas, which was important because as a summer associate and first year, I wasn't quite certain



Courtesy photo

Arianna Evers of WilmerHale.

what area of law I wanted to focus on. The firm's collaborative culture is also second to none—during my interviews and as a summer associate, I met lawyers who were not only brilliant, but also generous with their time and knowledge. I had a sense that at WilmerHale, I'd be encouraged to pursue my interests and supported in my growth. That combination of substantive opportunity and supportive culture made it an easy choice.

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

No, I have spent my entire career as an associate (and now partner) at WilmerHale. I joined the firm

directly after law school. Aside from a judicial clerkship early in my career, I did not work at any other law firm before coming here—WilmerHale has been my one and only firm.

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?

In my experience, making partner isn't about one single moment or case—it's the culmination of consistently proving yourself in various ways. I believe the firm saw my ability to adapt to new challenges and demonstrate leadership on complex, evolving areas of the law as crucial factors.

I started my career at the firm in the IP litigation department where I read about two emerging legal areas—privacy and cybersecurity—and thought they sounded exciting. I saw that companies were starting to recognize the value of large amounts of online data, presenting a tremendous opportunity for lawyers to shape new practice areas with little by way of case law and precedent. WilmerHale took a chance on me and let me switch practice groups entirely. A few years ago, I made another pivot to help build out our firm's practice in AI law. I took the initiative to help manage the practice and started developing resources and trainings for both colleagues and clients. Showing that entrepreneurial spirit—identifying an emerging area and proactively positioning the firm to excel in it—I suspect weighed in my favor.

Finally, I wouldn't discount the role of strong relationships: I've been fortunate to have great mentors and to work with partners across different practices who know my work ethic and support me. Their endorsement certainly helped. In sum, the deciding "point" was a combination of demonstrated performance on big matters,

forward-thinking initiative, and the trust and rapport I built over years.

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

This is such a difficult question—it's impossible to pick just one! To name a few, Joseph Mueller for putting me on the Apple-Nokia case as a first year after one month at the firm and Nina Tallon for giving me as much responsibility on her cases as I was willing to take on. Bill Lee, partner (and former co-managing partner at WilmerHale), for giving me opportunities to take on significant responsibility early at trials, recognizing every trial as a learning opportunity, and treating everyone on the team with respect. Michael Summersgill for advocating for me to change practice groups to cybersecurity and privacy, and Heather Zachary for her unwavering support when I joined the group. Last but not least, Kirk Nahra who embodies what it means to be a brilliant client counselor and all-star mentor. He is a legend in the privacy field for good reason!

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

There's no "right" path or timeline to making partner. Be patient and focus on building up skills that are transferable. Strive to become excellent at whatever you're working on so colleagues and clients see you as indispensable.

Seek out mentors and sponsors. Find respected lawyers who will give you feedback and advocate for you when you're not in the room. These mentors may point out opportunities you won't see on your own.

Don't be afraid to evolve your practice. If you discover you have a passion for an area that's different from what you started in, it's okay to pivot. Shifts can feel risky, but if your curiosity is pulling you in that direction and you see opportunity, embrace it. Developing expertise in

an area you're truly excited about will make you more motivated and valuable.

Start thinking like an owner early on. That means understanding the business of your firm and of your clients. Take initiative—volunteering for a new matter, writing an article, or finding a more efficient way to do something—so that you're contributing more than just hours.

Finally, perseverance is key. There will be cases that don't go your way and promotions you don't get as soon as you hoped but partnership often comes to those who are consistently excellent and reliable. Keep improving your skills, maintaining a positive attitude, and showing commitment to the firm and your clients.

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?

One common mistake is thinking that a legal career (especially in Big Law) is a linear checklist—for example, assuming “if I do XYZ by year three, and ABC by year five, I'll automatically make partner.” I've seen associates hesitate to pursue a new opportunity or interest because it wasn't in their original plan. Being inflexible is a mistake. The attorneys who grow the most are often those willing to step outside their comfort zones, even if it's a bit messy or delays the traditional timeline.

I also think some people underestimate the importance of relationships, both with clients and internally. Your reputation within the firm—being known as someone reliable, collegial, and proactive—matters a lot when partnership decisions are being made. A mistake is assuming that doing good work is enough on its own. You also need advocates in the partnership who know you and want you as a colleague. Not investing time in networking within the firm, or not being a team player, is a misstep I've observed.

Lastly, and I've been guilty of this early on, neglecting business development until late in the game is a common pitfall. We get so busy as young lawyers mastering the law and serving existing clients that we forget to cultivate the skills to bring in new business. Even as a mid-level associate, building relationships outside the firm—with peers in the industry, with junior in-house lawyers, etc.—can pay dividends later.

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?

One significant challenge I faced was changing my practice area mid-career, essentially moving from being a senior litigator in one group to a relative beginner in another. It felt like I was risking the reputation and momentum I had worked so hard to build. The lesson learned from that experience is that following your intellectual curiosity pays off, even if it means taking the longer road. In the short term, yes, it took a couple of years to regain my footing as an expert, but in the long term it made my career so much more fulfilling. It also differentiated me—having a strong litigation background combined with regulatory privacy/cyber expertise turned out to be a unique strength in offering clients a broader perspective and handling matters that span both litigation and advisory work.

Another challenge I'd mention is maintaining confidence and persistence over a long partnership track. I was eligible for partner discussions for a few years before it actually happened. During that period, it's easy to get impatient or experience self-doubt, especially as you see peers in other places perhaps moving faster. I had to learn to keep my head in the game, continue delivering excellent work, and trust that my contributions would be recognized in time. It made the moment I finally did make

partner even more meaningful—because I knew I had truly earned it through years of consistent effort and overcoming those doubts.

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

I would tell my younger self two things. First, don't panic if you haven't "made it" by some arbitrary timeline. In law school and early in my career, I was very much a planner (perhaps even a bit of a perfectionist) with a mental timeline for milestones. Life doesn't always follow your script—and that's okay. I'd reassure my younger self that taking a bit longer to reach a goal doesn't make the achievement any less worthwhile. In fact, the extra experiences you gather along the way often make you better at the job when you get there.

Second, be open to unexpected opportunities. 30-year-old me would be surprised to learn that I became a cybersecurity, privacy and AI lawyer! Back then, I thought of myself strictly as an IP litigator. I'd say: it's great to have a plan, but if something sparks your interest or if a new field starts emerging, give yourself permission to explore it. You don't have to stay in the lane you started in if your heart and curiosity are pulling you elsewhere. Some of the most exciting moves in my career happened when I deviated from the original plan.

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

Technology—and especially artificial intelligence—is central to how I practice law and help grow our business. At WilmerHale, we've invested in a wide range of AI tools and initiatives that I use regularly to deliver more efficient, insightful, and strategic legal services. Whether I'm leading a regulatory investigation, advising on privacy compliance, or helping a client navigate AI governance, I'm often using

firm-developed or firm-integrated AI tools to analyze data and streamline workflows. Of course, and I think it is important to say this, I only do this where permitted by clients and consistent with the client's outside counsel guidelines and firm policy.

One tool we are particularly proud of is an AI tool we built called Finch, which we use to prepare for depositions. It allows us to quickly analyze transcripts, identify key themes, and surface inconsistencies or strategic angles that might otherwise take hours to uncover manually. It's a great example of how AI can enhance not just efficiency, but also the quality of our legal strategy.

On the business development side, AI helps me track emerging trends and laws, as well as tailor presentations to different audiences. I also co-chair our firm's AI committee, where we're constantly evaluating new technologies that can enhance our services and deepen client relationships. Ultimately, I see AI not just as a subject of my legal practice, but as a tool that enables me to practice better.

How would you describe your work mindset?

I try to be pragmatic and solutions-oriented. I know our clients come to us to get results or clear guidance on tricky legal questions, so I always try to combine solid legal analysis with practical advice that a busy client can actually use. In internal team settings, my mindset is very collaborative. I see my role as not just to do great individual work, but also to bring a strong work ethic and responsiveness to bring out the best in the team—whether that means mentoring a junior associate through a tough assignment or coordinating across different practice groups on a complex matter.

I also believe in continuous improvement. Even as a partner now, I regularly reflect on what I could do better—every project is an opportunity

to refine something, be it my technical knowledge or my leadership skills. So in short: stay curious, stay humble, and stay focused on delivering the best possible outcome.

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

I wish that I could say I have great advice on this point, but maybe my contribution here will be honest dialogue. I find it very difficult to find work-life balance or time for myself—I have two elementary school-aged children and my husband is also a Big Law partner. I think it's important not to sugarcoat how challenging a Big Law career is, working parent or not. The biggest thing I have learned in my 15 years of practice is that you have to just take whatever time you can for yourself, and get enough sleep. You wanted to go for a 45-minute run, but you only have 20 minutes? Then you go for a 20-minute run and you don't beat yourself up over it. You really should stay up late to finish the memo but will feel horrible the next day, just go to bed! Obviously, sometimes you do have to stay up late, but I've learned to be more conservative about when that happens.

If you participate in firm or industry initiatives, please mention the initiatives you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

Within the firm, one of my key initiatives is co-chairing our artificial intelligence committee. In that role, I'm helping to shape how WilmerHale approaches AI adoption as a firm. This involves both our external work (ensuring we have a coordinated, cross-disciplinary strategy for advising clients on AI-related issues) and our internal use of technology (developing firm strategy and best practices for using AI tools in our legal work responsibly). The impact I hope to achieve there is to firmly establish our firm as a leader in AI law and to make sure we are at the cutting edge of understanding how technologies like machine learning can be harnessed—and managed—in the legal context. It's exciting, uncharted territory, and I want WilmerHale to be at the forefront of it, delivering top-notch service to clients and using the tools ourselves in a savvy way.

In the broader industry, I've been active in the International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP)—I served a two-year term on the Women Leading Privacy Advisory Board. I'm also on the steering committee of the Sedona Conference's Working Group 11 on Data Security and Privacy Liability. With Sedona, we bring together practitioners, regulators, and academics to develop consensus-driven best practices or guidelines on complicated issues such as data breach response or privacy regulations