

How We Made Partner: 'Never Stop Asking Questions,' Say Alex and Zach Nemtzow of Wilmer

By Law.com Staff

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Alexander Nemtzow and Zachary Nemtzow, 36, Partners at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, Boston, Massachusetts

Practice area(s): *Zach and Alex:* Intellectual property and intellectual property litigation

Law school and year of graduation: *Zach and Alex:* University of Virginia School of Law, 2017

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Zach and Alex: We both started at Wilmer as summer associates in the summer of 2016 and joined the firm as associates in 2017.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

Zach and Alex: We both independently focused on the same three key metrics—location, practice, and people—and unsurprisingly landed at Wilmer. For the first two, we each wanted to return home to the Boston area and join a cutting edge global intellectual property group that takes on high-stakes matters. Those alone put Wilmer at the top of the pack considering its reputation as an IP and litigation powerhouse with deep roots and history in the Boston legal market. But the last criterion made it an easy decision. We both quickly recognized that Wilmer is filled with genuinely good and honest people who love what they do and are committed to excellence. It is a place where



Courtesy photos

Alexander Nemtzow, left, and Zachary Nemtzow, right, with Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr.

people work hard, care about the craft of lawyering and firm clients, and treat each other well. And that's exactly what we've found over the years.

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?

Zach and Alex: To start off, the firm is a meritocracy, which means you need to demonstrate top-of-market skills as a baseline. In our IP group, that baseline is especially demanding: you need sophisticated patent portfolio analysis and prosecution skills in addition to sharp litigation chops—the ability to orchestrate case-winning strategies for the highest-stakes litigations and post-grant

proceedings. Wilmer is dedicated to developing its next-generation talent, and so it was easy for us to learn from the best and meet that mark.

On top of that, the IP group requires candidates to have strong technical abilities to dig deep into the concepts or products at issue for our clients. Our backgrounds in physics trained us to approach problems from first principles, break down complex systems into their essential components, and translate technical concepts fluidly depending on who needs to understand them. If we could explain our areas of research in physics to anyone (dark matter for Alex and gravitational astrophysics for Zach), we can do the same for any technology that comes our way.

Next, Wilmer's dedication to clients is unmatched, and so it was important that we both embraced that ethos. Over the years, we've learned to make our clients' problems our own, understanding how IP relates to their overall businesses and using that knowledge to help them achieve business-defined wins.

Last but certainly not least, Wilmer places a high value on the human element—making sure that our partners are committed firm citizens. We've invested in mentoring associates and junior lawyers, created and held office hours to make ourselves accessible resources, participated regularly in firm events, and contributed to the culture and development of the IP group. Building the next generation and strengthening the institution matters as much to us as winning the next case.

Having demonstrated what the firm values—legal and technical excellence, client trust, and commitment to the people around us—the business case was also clear. Wilmer's IP and IP litigation practices have been booming since we joined the firm.

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

Alex: As a first-year associate, I was assigned a formal mentor named Kelvin Chan, who was one

year my senior. I do not recall my first assignment, but I do remember thinking the task was simple. Regardless, I went to Kelvin and asked him how he would approach it. What I thought would be a quick sanity check turned into an hour-long conversation that demonstrated the assignment was far from simple. He walked through why the assignment mattered for the case, who was going to review my work product and what their preferences were, what the client would ultimately want, and a myriad of other nuances that I had missed when initially charting a path forward.

Kelvin was the tip of the spear, but many others helped reinforce the same Wilmer values. Whether it was Richard Goldenberg when working with my first expert witness, Monica Grewal when navigating my first Inter Partes Review (IPR) before the U.S. Patent and Trademark Patent Trial and Appeal Board, Michael Summersgill and Mark Selwyn in the leadup to my first trial, Josh Stern when taking my first deposition, and Jordan Hirsch when preparing for my first oral argument—each showed the same commitment to excellence, clients, and results that I now know fondly as the Wilmer way.

Zach: If I had to name one greatest influence, it's been Mary Katherine Duggan, practice manager in our intellectual property department, who plays the critical role of supporting matter staffing as the liaison between associates and partners. Having been at Wilmer for over four decades, Mary Katherine gave me advice from day one that shaped my career trajectory—encouraging me to choose matters that would build a balanced IP practice across litigation, prosecution, and post-grant work, and forming lasting relationships with colleagues and clients alike. She helped me discern when to lean into stretch assignments that would accelerate my growth and, as I took on more responsibility, opportunities to lead complex, high-stakes matters for clients.

Along the way, she has served as my advocate, cheerleader, confidant, and—at times—unlicensed therapist. Mary Katherine represents the very best at Wilmer, and I truly would not be where I am today without her. I like to think I've paid it forward from time to time, but I suspect I'll feel indebted to her for the rest of my career.

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

Alex: Never stop asking questions. Even the best lawyers don't know all the answers. Whether you're asking a senior attorney why they made a strategic decision, asking a mentor for career advice, or asking a client what's important to them or their business—those questions are often what separate technically strong lawyers from future partners who go the extra mile. And it doesn't stop when you become partner. Wilmer has a “two partner” policy requiring us to consult at least two partners in connection with any significant advice to clients. It's part of how we continue to deliver the best advice and work product for our clients.

Zach: First, be hungry. The best opportunities come to those who seek them out—including for the work that simply needs doing, not just the work everyone wants. Partners notice associates who consistently volunteer so that when something big comes up, they are far more likely to think of the people who have shown they are ready and willing. It also shapes your attitude—you are far more likely to enjoy the work, and to do it well, when you frame it as a career advancing opportunity that you have sought out instead of work assigned to you.

Second, you must own what you bite off, both in process and substance. That means clarifying from the outset what “finished” actually looks like. It also means proactively looking around corners to understand what other issues might come up and taking responsibility for solving them. It's easy to see why this matters—it's what

you'll be expected to do as a partner. Plus, partners most value work they can rely on and use immediately, and that reliability builds trust that leads to better opportunities.

Third, be the partner you wish to be. There is no better way to become partner than to start doing what they do and thinking the way they think. You should be constantly learning through osmosis, absorbing how partners operate, calibrating your judgment, and emulating their approach.

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?

Zach and Alex: The most common mistake we see is neglecting to plan. Because attorneys at Wilmer get to work on high-stakes and challenging matters from day one, it's easy to assume that all the work is right for your particular career goals. It's crucial to think early about what your goals are and to seek out experiences that will help you accomplish them.

Career planning requires real thought and commitment, but it cannot be done in a vacuum. It's an ongoing process that requires you to talk to people. You need to engage with the lawyers at your firm who have done the things you want to do. Those conversations not only inform your planning, they sharpen your judgment, build lasting relationships, and make people genuinely invested in your success.

Fortunately, Wilmer makes this planning easy. We have strong formal mentors and skilled practice managers who regularly check in with associates to ensure they're progressing on the right path. We even have a structured process where associates work with their mentors to draft and implement strategic development plans.

That said, informal discussions can be just as valuable as formal ones. For some people it's easy to walk into a partner's office and ask about long-term goals. If that's not you, start with baby

steps—ask other questions like how they would approach an assignment, a legal issue, or a matter more broadly. Over time, those conversations build comfort, relationships, and perspective that make more direct career discussions easier and more productive.

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?

Zach and Alex: One of the perhaps obvious but more unusual challenges in our careers was navigating this high-stakes profession alongside our identical twin. From the very beginning, we were compared to each other—by ourselves and others—and at times forced into what could be perceived as zerosum situations. When interviewing for jobs, some firms were only willing to offer one of us a role. And when we both independently chose to join Wilmer, we were nagged by the unspoken question of whether there would be room for two of us in the partnership. That dynamic could have easily bred insecurity or rivalry.

For us, success has never been zero sum—it is positive sum. Having someone so similarly situated pushes each of us to be better: when one of us achieves something, it is not cause for insecurity that one of us has not yet achieved it but rather proof that the goal is attainable. We remain trusted sounding boards for each other—able to offer candid advice, reality checks, and encouragement in a way few others can. We collaborate instead of competing. That approach has paid off. Colleagues and clients now often joke that they wish we had a triplet at the firm.

This flowed naturally at Wilmer where the culture is supportive and collegial rather than competitive. Of course, litigation often has its winners and losers, but it's crucial to internalize that when you work together, everyone comes out ahead.

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

Alex: I would tell myself to delegate more sooner. In fast-paced, high-stakes matters, it's easy for attorneys to resort to a do-it-yourself approach in search of perfection and the best results for your client. I definitely succumbed to that temptation early on in my career, which resulted in a lot of late nights and spent weekends. But while taking responsibility for results is crucial for any manager, law firms depend on delegation to train the next generation of attorneys, provide new perspectives, and keep costs down for our clients. I quickly learned that WilmerHale constantly bolsters its ranks with top notch, talented young attorneys that consistently put out excellent work product. And we have a culture that encourages people to push themselves to be the best and most creative lawyers they can be. Having leaned into that culture and on our attorneys for many years now, my only wish is that I had done so sooner.

Zach: It's never too early to think about business development. At the start of my career, I was rightly focused on doing excellent work for our clients. But it would not have taken much more time and effort to start building my external brand, keep in touch with others I knew in the field, and work with partners to further our business goals in particular fields or practices. And it helps even if making partner is not your goal—you'll make and maintain connections that could lead to the next step in your career.

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

Zach and Alex: It's hard to talk about technology these days without focusing on AI, and Wilmer is at the forefront of AI in legal practice. After all, we can't be working for the most innovative clients in the world without using the most innovative tools ourselves. We of course use many best-

in-class AI research and analysis products on the market, and they are incredibly valuable. But Wilmer also has a dedicated team focused on developing internal AI workflows, which allows us to be immediately adaptive to unique matter needs. We even just had “AI March Madness” where attorneys and staff around the firm submitted AI tool ideas and voted on which ones should be built.

As one example, the firm built a customized AI tool that helped us track rapid changes to discretionary denial practice before the Patent Trial and Appeal Board at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The tool analyzed, synthesized, and categorized each new decision in real time, allowing us to inform strategy and predict case outcomes faster and with greater precision. That kind of capability has proven so valuable that we now regularly develop custom AI tools tailored to specific matter requirements—whether that means tracking evolving legal developments, synthesizing large or distinctive document sets, automating processes, or spotting patterns that inform litigation and prosecution strategy.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Alex: I approach things with a “can do!” attitude, which means approaching assignments (as a junior attorney) and client requests (as I became more senior) with optimism. Early on, I volunteered for reach-assignments that helped me hone my skills quickly. Now, I endeavor to think deeply about how to accomplish a client’s goals, even if it requires seeking creative, unconventional, and non-obvious solutions. I try my best to find a way to get as close to “yes” as the law allows.

Zach: As a Boston native, my mindset has unsurprisingly tracked Patriots culture over the years. When I was more junior at Wilmer, the “do your job” mentality worked incredibly well—focus on your assignment, execute with discipline, and trust that if everyone does their part, the team

wins. As I became more senior and began managing and mentoring others, I learned that execution and accountability only scale if people feel supported and set up to succeed. So while high standards and personal responsibility still matter deeply to me, my mindset has also evolved toward a more playerfocused approach—checking in, setting clear expectations, and making sure people are in the right space to perform at their best. Throughout that evolution, the constant has been a teamfirst mentality. The Patriots’ decision to introduce themselves as a team rather than as individuals in Super Bowl XXXVI captured that idea perfectly—everyone, regardless of role or seniority, contributes to and shares in our successes.

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

Alex: Work-life balance is a challenge regardless of seniority level or career goals. Two clichés are worth noting: (1) it’s a marathon, not a sprint and (2) a legal career is a pie eating contest where the prize for winning is more pie. Recognizing these two facts early on is key to finding the right balance. It’s easy to confuse quantity of work with quality of work, and high-achieving junior attorneys often fail to recognize that pursuing the former can hinder meeting expectations for the latter. Moreover, it’s easy for high performers to get FOMO when good work opens up a plethora of exciting opportunities—especially high-stakes and interesting matters at a firm like Wilmer. Don’t overextend yourself. Be critical about what you want to accomplish and be prepared to say no when needed to maintain high-quality work and your sanity. Run, don’t sprint, and if you get injured you need to take the time to recover.

Zach: You need to find the things that give you energy and make time for them. I’ve been lucky that my job has given me energy rather than taking it away—largely because of the people

with whom I work and the fantastic work we do together. If you can find that, it's great. But I also recognize the importance of diversifying sources of energy so that you always have something to draw on. For me, family, religion, and cooking have been essential sources of energy outside of work, and Wilmer has been incredibly supportive in making space for those priorities. As one example, I took full advantage of the firm's generous parental leave (plus extra time) for both of my kids, and doing so has had nothing but a positive impact on my career. In fact, I was elevated to partner while on parental leave, which I think says a lot about our commitment to supporting the whole person, not just the lawyer.

How has working closely alongside your brother impacted your career?

Alex: It has been one of my (and our) biggest assets. On a practical level, it has made me a better lawyer. I have—and still do—seek Zach's advice and judgment on complex issues. He often shows me how to think about a problem differently, or comes up with a creative solution based on his unique experiences that I hadn't yet seen. Moreover, by setting the bar high, he challenges me to be the best lawyer I can be.

But on a broader level, I do think there's a plus factor that comes from working alongside each other. No matter how hard people try, there's no way to completely divorce our own respective reputations and successes from each other. It's always easier to make a good impression after Zach has already set the stage. In that way, we often joke that when it comes to twins, $1 + 1 = 3$.

What is something about being a twin that has made you a better lawyer?

Zach: The cliché answer is that being a twin made us better at arguing—we've been debating each other since we could talk—but I think the real lessons run deeper than that. Being a twin taught me how to be an advocate, because I've spent my life advocating for Alex (and he for me), whether that meant speaking up on his behalf, translating his perspective to others, or making sure his voice was heard when he wasn't in the room. That instinct to step in and represent someone else's interests and perspective is at the core of good lawyering. Being a twin has also pushed me to aim higher, because whenever I see Alex accomplish something, it reinforces that I can do it too, not out of competition but out of genuine confidence that if one of us can do it, so can the other.

What is something your brother does behind the scenes that has had a significant impact on his career?

Zach and Alex: We talk to each other constantly. Law is like an apprenticeship, and you need to learn from others by bouncing ideas off of colleagues, testing your thinking, and getting honest feedback. We have the advantage of a builtin dialogue from the very beginning, and we've relied on it throughout our careers. That constant exchange has sharpened our judgment, accelerated our growth, and built confidence in our instincts—because we've always had someone we trust to challenge us, validate our thinking, or simply talk through a hard problem. It's one of the most valuable behindthescenes habits either of us has, and it's something we'd encourage every lawyer to cultivate in whatever form works for them.