

PATHWAY TO PARTNER

WITH NICOLE WILSON

BY ANNALEISE VULIN



Partnership remains one of the most highly regarded and respected roles within the legal profession. The title embodies experience, judgement, expertise and investment in client relationships. It indicates that the holder has a seat at the decision-making table.

Some have their eyes on partnership from the beginning. For others, it's an opportunity that presents itself down the road. For every new partner, there's a different partnership journey, but that journey is often shrouded in mystique. Let's clear the fog by looking at what exactly is involved in becoming partner. How does it happen and what do those who aspire to have the title need to consider?

In 2021, Nicole Wilson was promoted from Special Counsel to Disputes Partner at CIE Legal. Graduating law school with a 5 week-old baby and a background working as a Security Guard at Pentridge and Port Philip Prison, Nicole's perseverance was evident from the outset. Before becoming a partner, Nicole worked at a variety of law firms as a senior lawyer in litigation and was a barrister's clerk at Greens List. VWL interviewed Nicole to gain her insights on how becoming a partner is a journey, not an event. The journey after getting the title is just as, if not more, important than the journey leading up to it.

Where the journey started

Nicole's journey to law began with studying Arts at La Trobe University. 'I always wanted to be a lawyer' she says, 'but I didn't get the right grades to study law straight from school, so I studied another course on the basis that I would transfer. That didn't work out and so I left and was unemployed for a while.' As part of receiving unemployment benefits, Centrelink enrolled Nicole in a security guard course where she worked within the courts and at prisons. After leaving the prison service, she became a legal secretary. One of her principals convinced her to study law. 'Being a mature age student was difficult, but I knew I'd found my place; this is where I wanted to go' she recalls.

It did not get any easier from there. Nicole entered the legal profession around the time of the Global Financial Crisis. On top of that, it was difficult to complete articles whilst looking after her child. 'I was pregnant while doing articles and was not given the option of deferring them. I then studied at College of Law online at home so I could be with my daughter.' Admitted in 2008, Nicole then worked for boutique firms, where she developed a specialisation in dispute resolution.

In 2017, Nicole was approached by two clerks at Greens List to join and worked as a barrister's clerk there until 2020. When coronavirus hit, Nicole was made redundant from Greens List and joined another boutique firm before being approached by CIE legal.

Applying to become Partner

At CIE Legal, Nicole found her home. Nicole was invited to join the partnership after a year at the firm.

Nicole consulted many people for guidance in making the decision:

'I spoke to my accountant to get the right structuring advice. I spoke with a mentor of mine, Teresa Bisucci who was a partner at a previous firm I had worked at, as well as her husband, Robert Cugno who is a career coach (Future U Coaching). I spoke to my friends and asked them if I was crazy and if I could do this as a single mum with 4 kids! I also spoke to my kids about it because I knew that it could have an impact on my availability to them.'

Partners at CIE Legal also gave Nicole a different perspective on the role and provided an honest account of life as a law firm partner. Nicole found this invaluable and her advice to any prospective partner is to consult internally and externally to ensure that they understand the risks, liabilities and benefits, as well as the future of the firm and whether it aligns with their career aspirations.

Can being a Partner also provide work life balance?

The perception of partners is that they work round the clock, so it was interesting to hear Nicole's thoughts on work life balance at the partner level. Nicole said that the partners at CIE Legal value maintaining a work life balance but that being a business owner has its own stresses. 'For example, we are encouraged to take annual leave, but I do need to ensure that I have systems in place for when I'm away so that the work still gets done and I am able to have a proper break.' One benefit Nicole has seen from COVID-19 is the legal industry adapting to flexible working arrangements, 'people now realise it's not just parents who have a need for flexible working arrangements, it may be those who have elderly parents or other things in their life that they place importance on, who also value flexibility.'

Was there anything you found to be unexpected?

'I had an understanding that I would be responsible for managing staff, business development and financial issues, but I didn't anticipate how big the load was going to be initially. It was a steep learning curve but the support of my fellow partners has helped me to transition quickly.'

Business development

One aspect that distinguishes a Partner from another senior legal professional is their responsibility to obtain work for the firm: after all, they are business owners. Nicole recommends turning your mind to building relationships and networks from the start of your career, 'one day you will have to draw on those relationships when the time comes. Networks are important for the firm's longevity, and there is a certain amount of responsibility to ensure that new work is coming in and of a certain quality.'

We discussed how bringing in work in litigation is different to transactional work because of its nature:

'No one likes being involved in a dispute. It's a stressful time, which means you really have to become the client's trusted advisor. It's common for clients to feel that they are not in control, to be stressed and anxious. It's my role to travel the journey with them, providing realistic and honest advice. All of this means that I develop new disputes work, not by hunting for the next piece of litigation, but by approaching things as an adviser who works with the client on their journey. I have a relationship with them, I understand the context and I work to get the best result with that in mind.'

Nicole says the benefit of being part of a partnership is the ability to refer other partners within the firm to clients. 'The fact that I've got other partners that I can promote and draw from their skills is helpful.'

Do you think your coaching and mentoring style has changed now that you are a Partner?

'I'd like to think my style has not fundamentally changed – it has just developed as I have developed. I look at it as, when you move up the ranks you need to impart your knowledge onto others. I always ask for feedback from juniors. I was only Special Counsel for about a year, so it's important for me to get that feedback. Everyone is different; for example you might want sit down have a chat about the file first, or review the documents and ask questions later.'

Was there anything missing in your training that you'd like to train in lawyers now?

'The support. In my early days, I don't know if it was the firms I was at, the GFC, or because I had a little bit of knowledge as a former legal secretary, but I felt like it was a sink or swim. I wish I had a bit more support. That's why at CIE Legal we have regular catch ups with staff instead of relying mainly on annual reviews. I'd like to think I'm supportive and make myself available – my door is always open.'

Were there any sacrifices you had to make in taking on this role?

'When I first was asked to join, I took the kids out for dinner. My daughters were proud, giving me high fives, my boys said "so you're a boss now?" I explained to them that they would have to help out a bit more at home. I'd like to think I've shown them that if you put your mind to something, you can do it. Being a parent isn't as big a hurdle as it used to be to get to the top, and I'm teaching them that they can achieve things they want to. But yes, I've had to make sacrifices, because it is hard for them and for me to balance it all. They live with me 8 out of 14 days, my time with them is precious to me and so our lives have become quite structured now. I schedule weekly one on one time with each of them to make sure we still have a chance to connect. It's their choice whether we go for a walk, bounce on the trampoline or watch a favorite tv show.'

What is your advice on managing family commitments when you become a partner?

'Having a family is a normal part of life. It's not unusual. But it does require some careful planning at times, to be present as a parent and as a partner. There needs to be a discussion at some point about what's expected. I hope COVID-19 has shown that we can be productive outside of sitting in the office in front of the computer from 9am to 5pm. Although I work full-time, I don't see why you can't be a part time partner: like anything else, it just requires open communication, planning and structured thinking to make it work.'

What do you think is your greatest power and responsibility?

'Funnily enough, I think the two are linked. My power: well, I'm empathetic, I understand other people's perspective and put myself in their shoes. My responsibility? To grow and develop the next generation of lawyers. One of my roles at CIE Legal is staff partner, so being empathetic is important. As a business owner at a small firm, it's a balance for us to weigh up individual needs and desires for flexibility plus making sure that staff are mentally well and engaged. Junior staff need to be supported and mentored appropriately, not just by the partners, but also by other senior lawyers. Everybody brings something different and has value. Even on your very first day as a lawyer you will bring value in a way different from everyone else. To me it's important that we make sure all the staff feel supported and valued.'

Being a partner might not be for everyone, but for those who are considering partnership, know that there are as many paths to the top as lawyers who reach it.