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How I Made Practice Group Co-Leader: 'Be a Connector—Both Inside and Outside of Your Firm,' Says David Ruff of Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe

"Hold yourself accountable–set goals to build relationships, and pursue business development efforts–and then map your progress and keep that business plan up to date."

By Tasha Norman

David M. Ruff, 40, Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, New York.

Job title: Partner and deputy practice group leader, M&A and private equity.

Practice area: M&A and private equity.

Law school and year of graduation: University of North Carolina School of Law, 2008.

How long have you been at the firm? 13 years. I made partner in 2019.

What criteria did you use when deciding to join your current firm? When I made the decision to join Orrick as a summer associate in New York, I had spent a grand total of one day of my life in New York up to that point. I made my decision based solely on the people that I met during the interview process and my distinct feeling that this was a special group I'd enjoy working with. Thankfully, my gut was right—it's been 13+ years now, and I couldn't be happier to be on Team Orrick.

What's the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming partner? Just the overwhelming amount of support. I had always suspected (wrongly) that, after making the jump to partner, success would become more of an individual sport. What I found instead was a partnership focused on encouraging and rewarding collaboration, aligned around a sector strategy that continuously spins off opportunities. That environment is a result of a very conscious effort over time by leaders within the firm, and I feel fortunate to be in a position to contribute to that tradition.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Looking back, I think the biggest thing was making sure I was someone that others felt they could count on to represent our firm and our clients well in high-stakes, complex transactions and then aligning my practice with the firm's strategic priorities in tech/innovation and energy/infrastructure. As we aggressively expanded in private equity, primarily with tech, and energy/infrastructure-focused funds, I was in a great position to help lead and expand those growing relationships. But none of that happens without the support of a bunch of my now fellow partners that went out of their way to put me in front of those opportunities. Being able to partner with this great team to grow our global M&A and private equity practice has been a career highlight.

What's the key to successful business development, in your opinion, and how do you grow professionally while everyone is navigating a hybrid work system?

- Be a connector—both inside and outside of your firm.
- Learn what your colleagues and other contacts do, and be ready to speak to their capabilities when the opportunity arises. Putting someone in front of an opportunity or in front of someone who can help them solve a problem is a powerful way to propel your career forward.
- Be prepared to be that problem-solver yourself when someone reaches out to you. That holds true in a hybrid work environment as well—the only difference is you have to be more intentional about it since a lot of the natural excuses we used to have to get together have been suspended temporarily.

courtesy photo

David Ruff.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to partner? King Milling, our managing partner, was a mentor and sponsor to me before I even knew what a sponsor was. King modeled a dedication to clients and an approach to firm citizenship that I was fortunate to be able to observe and emulate as I was coming up. As my career progressed, he consistently put me in front of opportunities that he knew were solid, all without letting on how big a favor he was actually doing for me. I feel incredibly lucky to have had King's support.

What advice you could give an associate who wants to make partner? Start planning early. Not all paths to partnership are the same, but you want to build a narrative over time that supports your candidacy. Get to know the firm's strategic priorities and think about how those align with your own interests. Make sure there's overlap there, and then actively pursue work and business development opportunities that align with both, understanding that there will likely be some evolution over time. As your career develops, make sure you're taking full advantage of your relationships with mentors and sponsors, and make sure they have a clear understanding of what your goals are (including that one of your goals is to make partner) so they can help you. And, finally, hold yourself accountable—set goals to build relationships with particular partners or clients, and to pursue particular business development efforts—and then map your progress and keep that business plan up to date.

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? Be intentional about your career and invest in yourself. Don't sit back passively and let the career happen to you—make sure your interests are known and do your part to actively pursue opportunities that align with those interests. Invest in yourself by stretching to take on that deal that you may not totally have time for, but that is strategically important to your career development, or by staying up a few extra hours to pursue that business development opportunity that came in at the least opportune time. You'll be glad you did!

What challenges did you face in your career path, and how did it influence your career? I've been remote since 2014. While Orrick embraced agile working arrangements early on, there certainly wasn't a lot of precedent for an associate going remote back in 2014 and even less precedent for a remote associate progressing to partner. Looking at where we are today, I'm proud to say that my story of having a somewhat nontraditional path to partnership is not at all unique. Just this year, nearly a quarter of our new partners are currently working a flexible schedule. Having a nontraditional path forced me to think harder about my career path and how I was going to differentiate myself. I made a decision to visit New York at least monthly and to make those trips count by planning them around client meetings, business development activities or internal catch-ups. Turns out, it was the jumpstart I needed. I think the same holds true for a lot of us—a little adversity never hurts.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? It's a long career—don't be so focused on how long it takes you to reach a goal. Longevity will mean more to you than short-term success.

What impact would you like to have on the legal industry as a whole? My proudest accomplishments at Orrick have been my contributions to our "best place to work" environment, a guiding principle for us. This has included encouraging people to take time off through our


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"unplug" program and ensuring associates get opportunities to shine and mentoring them, as others have done for me. I've also been proud of my work mentoring our Legal Innovators fellows—a legal startup we've partnered with to grow our pipeline of diverse talent. I'd love to see the legal industry as a whole see "best place to work" for the competitive advantage that it is. There's no better way to attract and retain the talent that's needed to compete. And I think clients notice and appreciate working with a firm that shares their approach to the workplace.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the COVID-19 years)? Culture and connections matter. Organizations that went into the COVID years with strong connections were able to thrive, notwithstanding the difficulties we all faced. I'm personally very proud of the way we all came together to support one another, as well as our clients, during a period of record-setting deal activity. I'm especially proud of the way we gave each other room to unplug, and actively encouraged it, even when providing coverage wasn't altogether comfortable. There are a lot of lessons we'll take forward with us from the last couple of years, but I think, most of all, it's an appreciation for our friends and colleagues in this profession.

What three key elements you would like to focus on for 2022. Reconnect with colleagues. Celebrate the wins. Innovate and move the practice forward.