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How I Made Partner: ‘Take Time to Explore and Learn What You Want to Do,’ Says Utibe Ikpe of Meland Budwick

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ALM Staff

[Utibe I. Ikpe](#), 39, Partner at Meland Budwick, Miami, Florida

Practice area: Commercial litigation

Law school and year of graduation: The George Washington University Law School, 2009

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Seven years.

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

I was looking for a firm where I could learn from industry leaders and develop my skills. Also, it was very important for me to be at a firm that was willing to support my community involvement, understanding that it assists with my personal development and provides numerous benefits to the firm.

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

I was an associate at a boutique firm, Rivero Mestre, for three years before joining Meland Budwick in 2017.



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?

I grew significantly during my time at the firm, taking on leadership roles both inside the firm and within various outside organizations. I also had a proven track record of doing good work, which allowed me to articulate my career goals and have conversations about my continued growth within the firm. The firm understood my desires, supported my goals, and assisted me in developing the skills that were necessary to become a partner.

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

I am a firm believer in having organic mentorship relationships both inside and outside the firm. When I joined Meland Budwick, James Moon (a fellow partner at the firm), approached me very early on and encouraged me to get involved with the Florida Bar business law section. I joined the organization as a fellow, and I am now the second vice-chair of the business litigation committee. Judge Peter Russin (a former firm partner) second-chaired a three-hour evidentiary hearing with me, and as a young attorney, it was a fantastic opportunity to get courtroom experience and hands on coaching.

I also have many mentors outside of the firm, and I met the majority of them through legal organizations like the National Bar Association. I strongly encourage people to find someone they can have candid conversations with while understanding that each mentorship relationship is different and adds a unique value to your career.

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

We must learn to be our own best advocate, so understand the requirements, work to meet them, and don't shy away from asking questions.

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?

I think young associates often don't understand that they have power in charting the course of their own careers. Young associates should take time to explore and



learn what they want to do. Once they figure that out, seek out assignments in that area, and it is okay to ask someone you admire to be your mentor.

What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

I graduated in 2009 and was immediately faced with an unfriendly economy. Navigating that taught me how to persevere and continue to work towards goals, despite uncertainties. Success is not a linear path, and I learned to give myself grace while believing that continued hard work will pay off.

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

Don't be afraid of asking the supposed "dumb question." I am the first lawyer in my family and the child of immigrants. There is a lot that I did not know before law school or entering the practice of law. I think a lot of young associates fear the judgment that potentially comes with asking the "dumb question." However, when the question is not asked, it can result in wasted time or a missed opportunity for expanded learning. I think it's important to find that person where you feel safe enough to be vulnerable and ask all of the potentially "dumb questions."

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

I'm excited that our firm is working with an AI company to develop our own in-house proprietary large language model, exclusively trained on our data. Currently, the program is being used for first draft motions, and we expect it to evolve to eventually handle more sophisticated tasks. It's rare for a firm of our size, 25 lawyers, to create its own program.

How would you describe your work mindset?

Work hard, be fair, be kind. The practice of law can be very stressful, and I believe that if we bring a positive attitude to our work and our professional relationships, it will make practicing law more pleasant for everybody.

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.



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I helped create Meland Budwick's first diversity committee and worked with that group to update the firm's maternity leave policy to offer more paid time off for new parents. The committee is now working on ways to expand the pool of law schools the firm recruits from to support legal diversity initiatives.

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