

Spotlight On... William O'Neil, Chair of Winston & Strawn's Hiring Committee

DECEMBER 3, 2020

Winston & Strawn Hiring Chair [William O'Neil](#) recently reflected on his career inspirations, mentors, and advice for future lawyers in a Q&A titled "Momentum: Career Insights from Legal Mavericks" featured in the seventh edition of Major, Lindsey & Africa's *The Legal Navigator*.

Do you have any career insights that you'd like to share?

Growing up, I was always interested in both the law and politics. My dad was a lawyer—he prosecuted race discrimination cases for the Department of Justice under the Nixon administration before leaving the practice of law for a career in politics. He is the smartest guy I know, and I wanted to be like him. I obtained my undergraduate degree in political science and worked for Senator Luger on Capitol Hill before realizing that I did not want to pursue a career in politics and instead wanted to focus on becoming a lawyer.

When I accepted my offer to join Winston & Strawn as a first-year associate, I was torn between the M&A group and the litigation group. The art of the deal was really, really fascinating to me. I felt like a piece of me was a dealmaker by nature. I enjoyed that piece of it, but I felt like a bigger piece of me wanted to stand up and argue and try cases. I wanted to take a run at trying to be more persuasive than my opponent—I get a rush from standing up and trying to do that. So, ultimately, I chose litigation. I have since devoted my career to developing and honing my skills as a trial lawyer.

As a trial lawyer, the greatest challenge I faced was losing a jury trial I believed we were going to win (or at least, I felt we deserved to win). After winning the first seven trials I took to verdict, the thought of losing was starting to seem improbable—particularly on a case I felt my client deserved to win. Now, with a few years of additional perspective, I realize that if you put yourself in the arena enough as a trial lawyer, losing once in a while is inevitable. I have learned from one of my mentors, [Dan Webb](#), that the better you get at your craft, the tougher the assignments you get. Most clients don't hire Dan Webb to try cases that any lawyer can win; they hire him to try cases that virtually no one else but him can win.

Everything came full circle for me about 10 years ago when I chose to concentrate my litigation practice on M&A disputes. Now, I primarily work with private equity firms and strategic acquirers on post-closing disputes. I am equal parts business counselor and zealous courtroom advocate. I personally find this to be a hugely fulfilling marriage of a subject matter that I love (deal-making) with a task that I love (advocacy).

Do you have any advice that you’ve either found beneficial as a young lawyer or wish you had known back then?

The greatest asset you have in the business world is your collection of authentic, meaningful personal relationships. Life is a team sport.

Law school teaches you to focus on individual accolades (great grades), but to succeed as a practitioner, you have to both be pulled forward by great leaders and mentors and then repay that debt by reaching back and pulling up the next generation behind you. Great law firms are built on a culture of stewardship. To some degree, success requires adopting a mindset of selflessness—if you wake up each day and consider how you can help others in your personal and professional network, I believe you will find yourself not only more fulfilled, but also more successful.

Read the full publication [here](#).

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