

How I Made Partner: ‘Reflect on What You Want Out of Your Career,’ Says Carlos Ardila of Latham & Watkins

By ALM Staff

July 20, 2023

Carlos Ardila, 39, Latham & Watkins, Washington, D.C.

Job title: Partner

Practice area: Latin America Practice, Energy & Infrastructure, Project Development & Finance, M&A

Law school and year of graduation: Harvard Law School, 2011

How long have you been at the firm? 6 years

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

Latham offered the opportunity to develop within a truly global Energy & Infrastructure Practice, while retaining a strong emphasis on cross-border transactions in Latin America. I have been able to work within a team that is at the forefront of the energy transition in the US, Europe, and Asia, and deploy that expertise in the Latin American context. The Latham platform allows me to continually evolve within my practice and bring new ideas, a broader perspective, and global capabilities to every transaction. The entrepreneurial culture, the openness to innovation, and the drive to deliver for clients all made Latham a compelling destination.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there? I started as an associate at Cleary Gottlieb, where I worked for five years. During my time at Cleary, I completed a two-year rotation in Latin America – first in Buenos Aires and then in São Paulo – which was a terrific opportunity to develop a fully regional, tri-lingual, and multi-cultural practice.

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 think my promotion did not respond to a particular transaction but rather to years of work and development within Latham’s growing Energy & Infrastructure and Latin America Practices. More than anything else, I believe the determining factor was my contribution to an energy and infrastructure platform that is global in scope, combined with my deep personal and

professional roots in Latin America. From that perspective, my promotion furthers Latham’s commitment to the region.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why? Please provide name, job title and a brief explanation.

The lawyers and mentors at Latham who have most influenced my practice with their example, mentorship, and friendship are partners David Penna, Tony Del Pino, and Roderick Branch. I have learned different things from each of them.

David’s approach to the development and finance of complex energy and infrastructure projects is the gold standard that I try to emulate in my own practice. Tony is the consummate Latin America practitioner who understands how transactions work in the region better than anyone I know. He narrows down complex sets of issues into key, strategic areas of focus. While Roderick’s practice in capital markets is different from mine, our frequent collaborations have given me an invaluable opportunity to learn from the way he nurtures, develops, and deploys talent across practice areas. Roderick’s careful selection of cross-disciplinary teams that are tailor-made to meet the needs of any specific transaction leverages the entire Latham platform to bring the most value to our clients. Finally, on a personal note, of course I would not really have been able to get very far without the support, example, and encouragement of my family.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner? Ask yourself, first and foremost: do I really want to be a partner? Latham attracts the very best and brightest law students, and many of these remarkably smart and driven young lawyers instinctively want to win any game they play. My advice is to pause the game



Carlos Ardila of Latham & Watkins.

Courtesy photo

and reflect on what you want out of your career. Once you know what is valuable to you in your field, many roads to success open, and the partner track may be just one of them.

If the answer is, yes, I want to make partner, then my advice is to surround yourself with people —partners, clients, peers, junior associates, paralegals, and staff—who inspire you to go the extra mile. Work will inevitably arise at inopportune times, and you want to be ready to answer those calls with a team that shares your passion and that inspires it. On the substantive side, you learn the most from people who are interested and engaged in what they do. You are able to geek out over the substance, as you support each other through thick and thin, from the all-nighter to the closing party.

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? The most common mistake is overthinking advancement. At Latham, lawyers who do good work and add value to their teams rise to the top. High-level work will find the associates who consistently deliver exceptional performance and who help colleagues (senior and junior alike) along the way. Your experience becomes a virtuous cycle as more interesting and challenging assignments land on your desk, and you build a team that is always ready to help with the next complex assignment. Talented associates who work hard and make the whole team better are in high demand within any practice group. The amount of time you could devote to playing career chess or trying to impress “the right people” is better spent building a team made up of people of all seniority levels that will support you, inspire you, and challenge you to do your best.

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? A challenge I've had to accept (and embrace as an opportunity) is that there is no graduation ceremony, no final hurdle, no finish line. There is always more to learn, whether on the substance of highly technical transactions or the subtleties of the Latin American market. You can reach the apex of your field, but you will need to continue to grow and develop. Understanding that you are never a finished product has been key to my development as a lawyer.



Credit: Shutterstock.com

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self? Know that plans are made to change. At best, a long-term plan can provide a sense of direction, but be prepared for that direction to shift. Embrace your career as a journey about which you have limited knowledge at any given point. Remain open to new information and learn from experience. If you find yourself adjusting your direction of travel as you gain experience, that is a good sign that you are finding your way.

Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development? Technology is constantly improving our efficiency, and Latham does an exceptional job of harnessing new tools to improve client work product. Ultimately, though, no matter how good technology gets at complementing aspects of our work, client service depends on a sophisticated understanding of how to meet each client's needs. In my practice, we are often innovating around new structures and transactions, and that requires a unique combination of deep client relationships, technical expertise, and the ability to think outside the box. I am excited to see how technology can continue to support us in that effort.

How would you describe your work mindset? I try to bring an inquisitive mindset to each matter. What do the client and the counterparty care about most? What are their pressure points? What are their needs and how can I build a team that best meets them? Our clients seldom reach out for cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all solutions, but instead come to Latham for sophisticated responses to complex issues. The first step is always to listen with an inquisitive mindset that is focused on our clients' needs from the first meeting.