

'Offsite' Program Helps Ropes & Gray Lawyers Chart Their Own Path

The firm's 20-year-old offsite program provides an option for Big Law attorneys who might not want the partner track.

By Samantha Stokes
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On a recent October afternoon, a handful of Ropes & Gray associates and counsel from across the country converged at the firm's Midtown Manhattan office to meet and discuss their work.

But most weren't visiting from one of the firm's headquarters or its other offices. Instead, they were in town from locations such as Iowa and Vermont, where Ropes & Gray doesn't have an outpost at all.

Forty-three attorneys—33 women and 10 men—currently participate in Ropes & Gray's offsite program, which it touts as an option for associates and other lawyers looking to pursue their practice outside of the traditional partner track. The program gives high-performing associates the flexibility to decide their own geographic location and number of hours, but without giving up a chance to return to a more standard career at Ropes & Gray eventually—including a **path to partnership**.

Charles Humphreville, an associate in the asset management group who is based in Seattle, said the offsite program has allowed him to take on challenging assignments and make meaningful



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contributions to the firm. "I still wanted to do high-end legal work," he said.

The offsite program began informally around 1998 with some associates in the tax and benefits practice groups, according to Ropes & Gray. Today, many of the participating attorneys are members of the firm's asset management group, although other practices are represented in the program.

Lawyers take advantage of the program for different reasons. For many, it's driven by a need or desire to move away from one of the firm's six U.S. offices or to gain greater, extended flexibility to care for children, among other situations.

"The flexibility to change what I wanted out the [off-site] program has been invaluable," said

Zaid van Giffen, a counsel in the asset management group who has been offsite for six years while based in Vermont. She said that after entering the offsite program, her work became more independent, predictable and flexible.

She and other program members said they could reevaluate and adjust their workload with the firm at any time.

There are advantages for the firm, too. Ropes & Gray says that by offering the offsite program to high performers, the firm retains top talent it has already spent years investing in and training. Many of the attorneys also have valuable institutional knowledge and relationships that the firm is keen to retain.

“We had a need [for experienced attorneys], and in order to fill that need, we realized we didn’t need an associate in the office,” said Isabel Dische, partner in the asset management group and co-chair of the firm’s institutional investors team.

As for how the offsite lawyers are compensated in comparison to other associates at the firm, Ropes & Gray declined to offer any details. (Ropes & Gray raised associate salaries last summer along with other large firms.)

Big Law firms in recent years have expanded their work-from-home and flexible time policies, and many have boosted their parental leave.

Ropes & Gray’s program stands out for letting successful lawyers opt out more broadly from some aspects of normal associate life. Clients like it, too: Since lawyers in the offsite program tend to have greater-than-average experience and expertise, Ropes & Gray says clients regularly ask to work with them.

“[The program] can fit all sorts of different lifestyle choices,” said Dische, adding that this flexibility has allowed the firm to hold onto valuable employees it might have otherwise lost. “You keep people.”

For a handful of attorneys who have shifted back onsite, they said the transition back to the partner track and full-time work was “seamless.” Melissa Bender, after working in the offsite program for a decade, rejoined the firm’s San Francisco and Silicon Valley offices in 2013. She was promoted to counsel in 2016 and made partner in 2018.

For those who aren’t looking to make partner, the program offers a different version of life in Big Law. Humphreville, the Seattle-based associate, summed it up: “Times have changed. Now, there are other options.”

Samantha Stokes, based in New York, is a staff reporter at *American Lawyer* covering the business of law. You can reach her at sstokes@alm.com or on Twitter: [@stokessamanthaj](https://twitter.com/stokessamanthaj).