

Law Firm's Summer Associate Competition Leads to Fresh Ideas for Its Corporate Clients

Concepts unearthed by Ropes' summer associates may filter into a new product and revenue stream for the firm.

By **Bruce Love**
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What You Need to Know

- Ropes & Gray pitted groups of summer associates against each other in a hackathon competition.
- The summer associates competed to build innovative solutions to age-old legal problems.
- The results may inform a new compliance training product Ropes' Insights Lab is rolling out later this year.

Getting corporate employees to actively engage—and learn from—compliance training is a challenge in any corporation. Ropes & Gray put its summer associates on the knotty problem, organizing a competition, or “hackathon,” to brainstorm the future of corporate compliance.



Courtesy photo

Zach Coseglia of R&G Insights Lab

ing later this year for Ropes' corporate clients, the firm said.

The hackathon, which allowed the summer associates to participate in the firm's innovation testing through its Insights Lab, incorporated behavioral sciences learning, where some see the future of legal services.

The learning wasn't just one-way. Concepts unearthed by the summer associates in the hackathon, where participants try to reinvent new ways of doing old tasks, may filter into a new product that the firm is launching



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

Ropes & Gray office in Manhattan, New York.

When it comes to rethinking the business of law firms, behavioral elements are crucial, including applying design thinking, said Bobbi Basile, managing director of HBR Consulting's legal transformation and innovation practice. That's “all about understanding the human experience, and looking at redesigning processes and services through the lens of the people who experience them,” Basile said.

“Legal services is a professional service delivered by humans, and getting people to modify behavior in their practice in a different way or with different tools is important for law firms to succeed,” she said.

‘Secret Bad Guy’

Zach Coseglia, managing principal and head of innovation of the firm's Insights Lab, divided the summer associates into three groups, each of them focusing on a

challenge in corporate compliance and where they could incorporate behavioral science. The first focused on reimagining compliance policies, the second on reimagining compliance training. The third group attempted to find a solution for how law firms “could do a better job” of helping clients measure and build “a culture of integrity,” said Coseglia, whose Insights Lab functions as a legal consulting group that spans practice areas within the firm.

The reimagining policies group developed a series of multi-platform digital experiences, where instead of simply reading and signing a corporate policy statement, “which, let’s face it, no one really reads,” Coseglia said, a client’s employees create an avatar and navigate a virtual office while at the same time, learn important lessons about accountability and key areas of corporate risk. When the corporate employees complete the experience, they have effectively learned the corporate policy.

The team reimagining compliance training came up with a concept they called “The Secret Bad Guy.” The idea was that people learn best by being active, rather than passive, participants. So, instead of listening to a trainer or reading a slide deck, the summer associates created a training program that incorporated concepts of gamification. Learners take part in a staged compliance-related event where they must act in the moment, while a secret bad guy stalks them, attempting to cause havoc.

Coseglia said the training and policy groups exhibited one of the key philosophies of the firm’s Insights Lab—injecting concepts from behavioral science into legal problems.

“Both of these ideas do exactly what we try to do in the lab—put people at the center of our analysis,” Coseglia said.

The lab, which was announced just over a year ago, has three areas of focus: compliance, culture, and diversity, equity and inclusion. “On the compliance side, we built the lab in part because we’re frustrated with the state of compliance,” said Coseglia, adding that for many clients, compliance is perceived as predictable and prescriptive yet perplexing.

New Revenue Stream

For the past year, the lab has been working on how to redefine and build better compliance training compliance programs, and in partnership with a third party, the firm will be launching a training platform for clients’ employees later this year, according to Coseglia. While the platform was already designed by the time the summer associate competition began, ideas from the hackathon could be reflected in how the product looks at launch or how it could be refined.

The product is a new service and revenue stream for the law firm and will offer clients “a cost-effective, off-the-shelf, human-centered, storytelling-driven library of digital shorts” that can be used in compliance and risk training, said Coseglia.

Both the hackathon and the upcoming product launch are part of a broader mandate of Coseglia’s lab, which he describes as “intentional innovation.”

“We start with deep knowledge of the laws and regulations and enforcement challenges, but then we build on that with a multidisciplinary team that tries to build things that are going to shape behaviors,” he said.

There was a total of 13 groups of summer associates that took part in the competition. Each group had six to seven people, with a total of 85 participants that were based at various offices around the country and interacting via web conference. Hackathon contestants were judged by a panel that included D.C.-based Ropes & Gray partner Alex Rene and two external judges—Scott Petts, co-founder of storytelling-based education company Labyrinth Training, and Kara Bonitatibus, head of product at Lextegrity, an integrity technology company.

And the winner was? “Does it really matter?” Coseglia shrugged. “They were all incredibly innovative ideas that have real-world applications for law firms and clients.”

Labyrinth Training’s Petts said Ropes & Gray’s summer associate competition showed true innovation in learning. “Traditionally hackathons are born out of software development and product design, so to see the concept applied in a legal setting was innovative,” said Petts.