

3 Big Law rookie associates talked to Insider about the unexpected upsides of working from home their first year on the job

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- After an initial delay due to the pandemic, law firms' first-year associate classes are under way.
- Some associates say the virtual workplace has given them more 'face time' with clients.
- A few law firms are beginning to consider in-person start dates for the year ahead.

At 8 a.m. on November 2, Brendan Sasso put on a button-up shirt and logged into Webex, sweatpants safely out of view. It was his first day at Perkins Coie, which, like most law firms in the past year, kicked off its first-year associate programs virtually.

It wasn't at all what Sasso had pictured when he accepted the job in 2019, after he summered at the firm in 2018. "Starting remotely was a little weird because you can't naturally meet and interact with new people, which I was really excited about," he said.

The coronavirus pandemic forced many organizations to shift their daily operations online, and law firms were no exception. While many firms quickly found their footing, remote work presented particular hurdles for their incoming first-years, recent law school graduates typically expected to learn the fundamentals of lawyering while on the job.

The newest batch of recent graduates took a hairpin turn to virtual learning in the middle of their final school year before tackling the vagaries of the high-stakes bar exam.

The pandemic also affected when they could begin



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First-year associates and talent managers at three Big Law firms say there have been challenges and unexpected upsides to starting a legal career in the virtual realm.

their careers. While some firms kept their usual fall start dates, many firms delayed their new hires, citing postponed bar exams and ongoing health concerns. Nearly half of law firms pushed their start dates to January, per a survey by the National Association for Law Placement.

Now that first-year associate classes are under way, Insider checked in with three Big Law firms to learn about the bumps their newest batch of attorneys have encountered in the virtual realm.

Associates worry about missing important partner relationships

One of the major drawbacks of remote work is that there are far fewer opportunities to organically interact

with colleagues. In a profession that hinges largely on relationships with partners, who often decide which associates to bring onto cases, the lack of these natural connections can be a setback to a young lawyer's career.

"We don't really have those water cooler conversations that can lead to relationship building," said Sasso. "It is a little harder to get to know other people working on interesting cases."

"Remote work has impacted the type and volume of work associates can get," said Kari Anne Tuohy, Perkins Coie's senior manager of attorney personnel. "There are no drop-by opportunities to help build relationships naturally, and newer folks may not be as top-of-mind when it comes to assigning work."

As a remedy, firms are tasking workflow coordinators and associate mentors with more direct outreach, said Tuohy.

"I actually feel like I maybe have more opportunities, because people are making more of an effort," said Vanessa King, a first-year associate at Latham & Watkins. "Usually it takes walking by their office at the right time, but now partners and senior associates are taking the time to schedule specific times to chat."

But young lawyers can now get 'face time' with clients

A new associate's first couple of weeks at a law firm are typically filled with orientation, training sessions, and introductions, speckled with catered lunches and happy hours.

Each office at Latham & Watkins, for example, usually holds individual first-year workshops. With 175 US associates starting remotely on the same day this year, the firm instead held a single workshop week for all offices, said Kathy Lauer, a partner and vice chair of Latham's associates committee.

Perkins Coie consolidated their typically staggered start dates to a single day to maximize virtual onboarding. The firm usually onboards new associates in their first week with "one and done" type of meetings, said Tuohy. This year, however, it spread its onboarding process across multiple weeks and sessions to avoid WebEx fatigue, allow for more time to digest information, and create more opportunities for first-years to connect with their colleagues.

King, the Latham associate, believes the all-virtual workplace has actually given her more opportunities to learn about her clients.

"A lot more clients want to Zoom instead of conference call, so it's been exciting to get that face time with clients, who can put a face to the name of junior associates early on in their career," King said. "It's also been exciting to watch senior-level attorneys during those calls and



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Kathy Lauer, partner and vice chair of Latham's associates committee.

observe their facial expressions, gestures."

Screensharing has also enabled King to shadow senior associates and partners as they mark up documents, providing a live, behind-the-scenes look at a task central to lawyers' work.

Firms have created new virtual training programs

Law firms have also created new training initiatives in light of the virtual setting.

This year, Latham launched an 'observation deck,' an online portal where associates can attend public hearings virtually and observe lawyers in action. Before the pandemic, it was more difficult for associates to hop on a train to sit in a courtroom. The observation deck, by contrast, opens up access to more than 100 hearings and trials in more than 30 jurisdictions, said Lauer.

Latham offers more than 80 training programs for new associates working remotely, such as how to navigate virtual client meetings, remote depositions, and hearings, according to Lauer.

Barnes & Thornburg has been ramping up events designed to foster connection within the workplace, espe-



VANESSA KING

Vanessa King, a first-year associate at Latham & Watkins.

cially for first-year associates, said Savannah Robinson, chief legal talent officer at the firm. Project Key Maker, for instance, is a program that pairs new associates with senior associates or partners in another office.

John Heinz, a first-year associate at Barnes & Thornburg, believes these programs have been good substitutes for in-person events. “But I am definitely looking forward to when we can all be back together,” he added.

There are other upsides to Zoom lawyering

While there are some challenges to limiting interactions to the computer screen, there have been some unexpected upsides, too.

Normally, some junior associates may feel intimidated by more senior partners, but, “as stiff as the Zoom environment is, it’s created some intimacy and broken down hierarchies,” Tuohy said. “Maybe you’ll see a partner in sweatshirts, baseball caps, or they’ll say they just came off the Peloton. It’s more laidback.”

And, while remote work can lead to a blurring of the line between work and home, it can also unexpectedly lead to some more balance in other ways. On top of shaving down on the commute time, for instance, associates also don’t need to wait around in the office late into the night for a partner to get back to them on a certain document, said Sasso.

Flexibility of working from home has allowed some young lawyers to maximize their productivity. “As someone who’s a beginner in the practice, I’ve found that to be very beneficial,” said Heinz.

The year ahead

Perkins Coie is planning for a gradual and flexible return to their offices starting July 6. Summer associate programs are tentatively scheduled to be virtual this year, though the firm is anticipating a flexible in-person start for their first-year associates in the fall.

While Latham’s offices are currently open at a reduced capacity – and with strict health and safety protocols in place – its summer associate program this year will be held remotely, from May 17 to July 23. As for its next batch of first-year associates, it will continue to follow public health guidance and work remotely whenever possible.

Barnes & Thornburg’s summer program and first-year associate programs will both be hybrid and dependent on each office location’s progress in their return-to-office plan.