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ASSOCIATES SURVEY | 2004



Having a Life, Too

A relatively relaxed attitude toward billable hours and management openness help keep midlevels at Arent Fox happy.

BY HEATHER SMITH

MATTHEW KANNA WAS GRANTED A CLERKSHIP FOR THE EUROPEAN Court of Justice right after joining Arent Fox in 2001. The firm allowed him to take six months off to work in Luxembourg less than a year after arriving at the firm.

Alison Besunder took a year and a half off after law school to travel around the world before even applying to Arent Fox four years ago. The firm did not hold it against her that she delayed diving into private practice; indeed, it seemed like a selling point.

Eric Baxter came to Arent Fox in 2002 with three children, and has since had another. The fourth was born on March 22. Baxter returned to work in late April and left again for a ten-day vacation and family reunion on June 4. He says that none of his colleagues suggested he change his plans after returning from paternity leave.

Managing partner William Charyk is a martial arts fan. He teaches tai chi and a form of kung fu and is cowriting a book about the Chinese epic *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He sums up why associates—as well as, he says, his partners—are so happy at Arent Fox: “We treat them like adults.”

Washington, D.C.-based Arent Fox ranked fourth in the Midlevel Associates Survey, up from twenty-eighth last year. It

Sane Asylum

Top scores: What is the firm's attitude toward billables?

1. Troutman Sanders (scored 4.64 on a 1–5 scale)
2. Harter, Secrest (4.58)
3. **Arent Fox (4.57)**
4. Carter Ledyard (4.55)
4. Miles & Stockbridge (4.55)

also came in first among Second Hundred Am Law 200 firms in the associates survey. Fifty-four percent of the firm's 26 midlevels responded, praising its humane approach to billable hours and support for pro bono work. They rated the firm a perfect "5" for opportunities to work with partners.

Arent Fox offers more than lip service toward treating its associates as adults. Arent Fox pointedly recruits associates who have extracurricular interests beyond the law. The firm trusts associates like Besunder, who alternates taking classes in Spanish and Hebrew each semester, to be mature enough to balance both their work and their hobbies. "Law has never been how I define myself," says Joanne



WILLIAM CHARYK, managing partner, opens his mind with tai chi and opens the firm's books to associates like KATE BRISCOE. "No one is trying to hide the ball," Briscoe says.

Schehl, chair of the professional development committee. She teaches yoga, tastes wine, bicycles, and gardens. Rather than distracting her from her practice, Schehl insists that these interests make her a better lawyer as well as a better marketer. "I can build clients through personal relationships because I have my own life."

Kanna says that that message resonates with associates. "People have quirks. You don't have to worry about little things at the office that might upset somebody [who will] decide you're not partner material because you don't happen to wear a suit every day, or if you wear the same thing every day, or you're just weird," he says. "Everyone has weird quirks. If you don't have to spend your time hiding them, you can focus on your work."

That's just what Kanna wants to do. Despite being told by his supervising partner not to work so hard, the admitted workaholic estimates he's worked every weekend in the past five months on antidumping and countervailing duty cases. He often works from home to avoid losing precious work time during the commute. "It's not because anyone was cracking the whip, but because I [am] doing work I really enjoy," Kanna explains.

On the other hand, litigation associate Randall Brater grew up watching his workaholic uncle spend night and day working as a Wall Street lawyer. "I always said I would never have that life," he recalls. His weekends are his own, and vacation time is sacred. He says he's flourished in his three years in Arent Fox's litigation group specifically because "I control my life, my docket, and my schedule. There is an inherent trust that whatever I'm working on will be taken care of."

Though associates set their own pace for accomplishing their work, Arent Fox gives bonuses based on their billable hours. They kick in at 1,900, 2,050, and 2,200 hours.

Arent Fox is not laissez-faire about its expectations for associates to help manage the firm. Associates sit on most committees. They make up a majority of the hiring committee, according to chairwoman Quana Jew, an employment law partner. "We need to be an integrated firm, but also they're the future of the firm. We don't wait for their advancement," she says.

This family- and lifestyle-friendly atmosphere trickles down to the bottom line. On financial measures, Arent Fox is less successful than other big D.C. firms. For

example, the firm's revenue per lawyer in 2003, \$545,000, ranks thirteenth among the 17 capital-area Am Law 200 firms. Midlevels earn a lower base salary, averaging \$141,000, according to survey respondents, compared with \$149,000 at other Am Law 200 D.C. firms. But, as Kanna explains, at 1,900 hours, Arent Fox has a lower billable hours expectation, and the productivity bonuses are guaranteed in writing. "I like knowing exactly: I work this much, I get this much," says Kanna. Thanks to those bonuses, Kanna says that he's on par with other associates around D.C.

While the current partnership track is eight years, Schehl says that associates can move on and off track depending on their own career goals, as well as accelerate their pace. Associates who arrive at Arent Fox with previous professional experience, legal and nonlegal alike, can argue for lopping off up to two years. Anthony Lupo, chair of the intellectual property group, says that three IP associates have jumped to partner early, thanks to their success in developing their own areas of expertise and books of business.

Faith in associates' maturity manifests itself in Arent Fox's willingness to open its books fully to them. Arent Fox has traditionally given full details on its financial performance to all lawyers, partners as well as associates. In 2003 there were rumors that the firm was foundering after a series of partner defections. Nonetheless Arent Fox continued its tradition at its October retreat. The slide show, detailing information like the top ten clients, billings, receipts, hours worked, expenses, and net realization, reassured associate Kate Briscoe that "no one is trying to hide the ball."

Ultimately, Arent Fox's associates respect the firm and its partnership because they respect their associates.

E-mail: hsmith@amlaw.com.

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