

Morgan Lewis Launches Remote-Work Option For Associates

By **Melissa Maleske**

Law360, Chicago (March 7, 2017, 8:49 PM EST) -- Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP on Tuesday announced a formal remote-working program for associates.

Under the initiative, which launches May 1, associates can opt to telecommute one or two days a week beginning in their third year. About 100 associates have signed up for the program since it was announced within the firm on Friday, said Morgan Lewis associate talent partner Amanda Smith.

“We don’t need to go back to the days when everyone had to be sitting at a desk from 7:30 in the morning to 10 o’clock at night just because that’s the way things are done,” said Jami McKeon, chair of Morgan Lewis. “What we really care about is having fantastic client service and great talent, and doing things that allow our talent to take advantage of technology to have more flexibility in their lives is something that we’re excited to be able to do, and I think it really resonates with our associates.”

McKeon said the firm has focused increasingly on getting creative to become a destination firm for top talent and to create the best experience for firm attorneys. A remote-working program fits seamlessly into those strategies, she said, and aligns the firm with corporate America, where more and more companies are adopting telecommuting policies and some law firms are following suit. Sixty percent of companies let their employees telecommute, according to a 2016 Society for Human Resources Management survey, and a recent Gallup poll found that remote working in the legal industry increased by 2 percent from 2012 to 2016.

While the firm has allowed remote working in the past, formalizing the program sends a message that associates do not have to worry about getting permission or somebody thinking less of them for putting in less facetime, McKeon said. It also ensures that associates will be able to work remotely regardless of the views of supervising partners or practice group leaders.

The program harnesses the existing capability of the global firm to pull teams together from far-flung locations, McKeon said. The firm is also launching a suite of services to support associates participating in the program, including specialized IT and HR services. Associates will sign up to remote-work on designated days to balance the associates present across practice groups and seniority levels.

A beta test of the remote-work program in the firm’s Los Angeles office revealed that participating associates actually became more engaged and client service was the same or better under the program; McKeon pointed out that when you cut out long commutes, associates are more available to clients.

Esther Ro, a Morgan Lewis litigation associate who participated in the Los Angeles beta test, said it was important that the transition to the work-from-home program was seamless for clients. Because of the firm's tech support, clients who call an associate's office, for example, wouldn't even know the associate wasn't there, Ro said. And associates handled their new flexibility responsibly as well, showing up to the office when they needed to, even if it was on a designated telecommuting day.

"I think everyone is looking for this work-life balance, and if you're able to effectively work at home and not sacrifice any client service, then it gives you a couple of extra hours a day," Ro said. "And those hours can be very valuable to being able to feel that you are getting the balance you want. I do absolutely think this is something associates are looking for."

Although it wasn't an initial aim of the program, McKeon pointed out that the focus on facetime adversely affects women, people with families and other underrepresented groups. McKeon and Smith raised a total of seven kids, McKeon said, and they love that technology has evolved to the point where facetime is no longer the necessity it once was for law firms.

"Our experience is that people do as great a job, are as committed, are as available," McKeon said. "It's a responsible thing to do to leverage technology to make this available, but I think it has a collateral benefit of really helping people where they have commitments in other places as well."

--Editing by Jack Karp.