

Should You Slash Your Summer Associate Program? Quinn Emanuel Thought So.

By [LawVision](#) on July 14, 2015

Once a reliable pipeline for top rising legal talent, summer associate programs are coming under increasing scrutiny, with powerhouse litigation firm Quinn Emanuel leading the charge. Recently the firm eliminated 80% of its summer associate program, reducing the number of participants to between five and ten law students.

Summer associate programs are costly. In addition to summer associate salaries, the investment time (and money) for lawyers involved in on-campus interviews and internal training can add up quickly. What is Quinn Emanuel doing with the savings? In an interesting move they will “redirect money saved on the summer associate program to signing bonuses for summers, third-year students and judicial clerks who join us on a permanent basis” according to firm chair John Quinn.

Not all firms are taking Quinn Emanuel’s approach. In fact, some seem to be going to the opposite extreme. Summer associates at some Biglaw firms earn \$3,000 a week while enjoying extravagant events like chartered helicopter tours, disc jockey lessons, cooking classes and museum nights. This year’s examples include kayaking, hiking and biking on California’s Monterey Peninsula and a day of games and food at AT&T Park in San Francisco for Wilson Sonsini summer associates and a Dave Matthews Band concert and bowling at Manhattan’s Chelsea Piers for Chadbourne & Parke summer associates.

What are the benefits of summer associate programs? The value of the experience gained by summer associates is sometimes dubious, with work assignments described by Quinn as “unavoidably unrealistic to a degree.” Traditionally ascribed benefits also include the ability to evaluate potential permanent hires, create opportunities for summer associates to familiarize themselves with the firm and build brand awareness with law schools. Quinn has achieved the latter by hosting parties and less formal interactions with law school students.

While some lawyers with fond memories of their time as summer associates may be reluctant to eschew their summer program, truly innovative positioning requires rethinking every element of a firm’s talent strategy – including recruiting. While not every firm has a reputation like Quinn Emanuel’s to attract high caliber talent, many could stand to revisit their traditional recruiting approaches to ensure alignment with overall strategic goals. If given the choice between a substantial signing bonus and a bowling event, I know which one I’d prefer.