

Scope of Practice The Inside Scoop—Being a Summer Associate at Ropes & Gray



Yoni Levy



Bethany Friedman



Adam Mohsen-Breen



Crystal Liu

Yoni Levy: Welcome to *Scope of Practice*, a podcast that opens the window for an inside look at different practice groups, and the lives of attorneys in those groups here at Ropes & Gray. I'm Yoni Levy, a partner in our asset management group based in Boston. On today's special episode, I'm joined by three recent summer associates who are here to talk to us about their experience at the [summer associate program](#) here at Ropes & Gray. I'm joined by Bethany Friedman, a 3L at New York Law School who summured in our New York office, by Adam Mohsen-Breen, a 3L at Harvard Law School who summured in Boston, and by Crystal Liu, a 3L at UCLA who summured in our San Francisco office.

Hi, everyone. It's great to be talking to all of you again, especially Adam, who sat next to me throughout the summer, so I saw him pretty regularly, which was fantastic. As Bethany unfortunately reminded me, I also had interactions with all the other offices, including losing in a *Mario Kart* tournament, which I may or may not remember. Why don't we start off with what practice areas you were interested in and what departments you were in in your respective offices.

Bethany Friedman: I had a really interesting summer. I think with a lot of corporate practices in law school, I didn't really know what that was—I wanted to try different areas. I tried a bunch of different things. I ended up really liking asset management and alternative asset opportunities, so I ended up working on a bunch of those assignments at the end of the summer. I also worked on capital markets assignments and real estate. I really tried to do as much as I could to really figure out what I liked. Again, law school, I feel, didn't really teach me about what everything actually was in practice, so the summer was a really great experience for that.

Yoni Levy: That's awesome. Yes, if only there was some sort of podcast that was focused on trying to give people insight who are in law school into what the different practice groups do, I feel like that would be perfect. Adam, how about you?

Adam Mohsen-Breen: I had been with a different firm during my 1L summer and got to try out, I felt like, a broad range of different practice areas across corporate practice. After doing a lot of assignments and getting to talk to people in different practice areas, both at my old firm and then with Ropes associates and partners, including you, Yoni—you were a really helpful resource for me as well—I think that I found at the end of that process that asset management seemed to really appeal to me, like Bethany, in a lot of different respects. I felt like the pace of the work, the substance, a lot of the areas that we got to work on for assignments really mapped onto what I enjoyed doing most in my 2L of law school, which had been securities regulation, regulation of financial institutions, and a few other courses that I had taken. So, I had a pretty clear idea of what I hoped to get in this past summer, and I think that I still was positively surprised coming into the asset management group. I was really welcomed by all of the different partners and associates, including you, Yoni. It was really nice to get to be sitting next to you, and get to also participate in the *Mario Kart* tournament, although I did lose a lot earlier than you.

Overall, I was really positively surprised by the experience in a lot of ways. I found a lot of assignments, including, as Bethany mentioned, in the alternative asset opportunities group, which I found to be an exciting way to learn a little bit more of the transactional aspects of the asset management practice, and to get to see a whole different area of work that I hadn't gotten to experience in the past. I also felt that I was really lucky to take on a lot of ad hoc assignments and get to learn from different groups. For example, I took on a few assignments with the sports group with a few other attorneys in the Boston and San Francisco offices, and I

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really enjoyed that work as well. I found that at the end, I felt like my interest in asset management was really reinforced, but I also had a much broader perspective than I did at the beginning of the summer.

Yoni Levy: That's great. I want to be clear that I was not responsible for picking who would be on this podcast, and it was not promised that everyone who'd be on this podcast would say that asset management is the best—it just so happens to be that asset management is the best. How about you, Crystal?

Crystal Liu: I was actually a summer at Ropes last year too, as a 1L, also in San Francisco. I came in knowing I wanted to do some kind of corporate practice, but I didn't really know what I was interested in, so I spent last summer exploring, taking assignments in a lot of different areas. By the end of the summer, I realized I really liked working with the tax partner Ben in San Francisco. I ended up taking a lot of tax classes during my 2L year. Then, this summer, I came in really with a focus on tax. The TEB ("tax, employment & benefits") group does a lot of different kinds of work, so in some ways, I still felt like my summer was a lot about just trying out different things, but all within the area of tax, employment and benefits.

Yoni Levy: That's great. Yes, as long-time listeners of the show will know, I'm also deeply interested in tax and considered that for a long time. So, no surprise that you're interested there. And I think Ben, you mean [Ben Rogers](#). He's a really nice guy.

Why don't we turn to: What was something that happened in your summer that was really a key defining moment, super interesting or super fun? What was the program highlight for you?

Crystal Liu: One thing that really was very heartwarming and nice was being able to come back and reestablish connections with everyone that I had met last summer. I had gotten to meet, more or less, most of the attorneys and business support staff in San Francisco last year, and so, it was really nice to come back and get to talk to everyone again. As soon as I'd gotten back, it basically felt like very little time had passed somehow, even though it was a full year, so that was really nice.

Adam Mohsen-Breen: There was a great chance opportunity where I was connected with a partner in the Boston office, [Jeff Katz](#). He prepared and then brought a group of summers to visit a hedge fund client in Boston and introduced us to the GC of the firm, who was also a Ropes alum, and that experience was really exciting. We got to have lunch, ask questions about that Ropes alum's career trajectory, their experience at Ropes, a little bit more about what it looks like to be in-house afterwards, and so, I found it to be really helpful to have that kind of client perspective, a better perspective on what it looks like for Ropes to be working with GCs at different firms, and with the in-house counsel at various clients.

Yoni Levy: That's awesome. Yes, Jeff Katz plays a big role, I think, in a lot of people's summers—myself included. He's really a genuinely great guy, and I think he goes out of his way to include people and try and find new opportunities for them. Bethany, you have a tough act to follow, but what about you?

Bethany Friedman: Yes, I do. Mine is pretty similar to both Crystal's and Adam's, but I really feel like it was the relationships built. For example, I'll always remember this: On the first day at Ropes, it was the end of the day, and [Ryan DiLorenzo](#) and Brigitte Shaw walked into my office and just said, "We are here for you for the entire summer—whatever you need. We're here and we will give you advice on everything, any assignment." It was just so welcoming because—I had four other office mates—we had just had a long day of orientation, and although it was awesome, it was definitely overwhelming, so it was really nice to have these two attorneys come to us and just be really friendly and approachable. And the whole summer they were my mentors—they really were. I really consulted with them on a lot of things. I still try to keep in touch with them.

Yoni Levy: Everything that all of you have said really resonates with my experiences too.

Can you talk to us a little bit about the assignment staffing process? It sounds like you all worked on a variety of different projects. How did those projects come to your attention and come to your plate? And what was the interaction between you and staffing, if any, and you and individual attorneys?

Adam Mohsen-Breen: I felt really lucky at the end of the summer that, looking back, I had a really wide range of assignments that I got to work on. The majority had been in the asset management department, but also not exclusively. I got to take on a few really exciting and substantive assignments, took on pro bono work, and the sports group as well. I also got to shadow in capital markets, in some of the transactional practices, and all of that gave me a really broad range of experiences that I felt like I could draw on when I was ultimately making the decision of where I hope to practice in the future. Overall, in terms of staffing and the assignment process, I think that this was something that I found to be a really positive aspect of the summer associate program here at Ropes. I felt, in general, there were two basic ways that I found that I was able to tag onto assignments. The first had been the formalized assignment process, where I was able every week to flag for the assignment staffing team and let them know that I had more or less capacity for work. Every time that I noted that I was open to new work and assignments, I was almost immediately contacted by someone who was doing a really exciting project that they asked for help on or that they offered to loop me into if it was ongoing work for a client, and that took up the bulk of my assignments.

On the other side, I think that there were a lot of really exciting ad hoc experiences that ended up being highlights for me as well. I mentioned the pro bono assignment that had been really different from the other practice areas that I got to experience on the formal side. I happened to be at the coffee machine the first week of my summer before I'd actually gotten staffed formally on anything else, and I was just chatting with another associate, and he mentioned working on a landlord/tenant case that was still in its early phases. He mentioned a little bit of the work that he was doing and offered to give me an intro and loop me into what he was working on. I ended up taking on the first set of small tasks, which were research questions at the beginning, and that ended up being a really substantive writing experience, where I got to draft a substantial section of the statement of facts that ended up being part of the filing that went out later that week. And so, it was a really exciting, cool experience.

Yoni Levy: That's awesome. I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that interactions like the one you had at the coffee machine are exactly why we think it's important for people to be in office.

Crystal, how about you?

Crystal Liu: I was staffed on these, I think, mostly because I'd either talked to someone or expressed interest in an area, because I was focusing on tax, and my mentorship pod basically ended up being just people in San Francisco who were in the tax, employment & benefits group. There were a lot of opportunities even early on in the summer for me to just get a sense of what people were working on, and if there was anything interesting that people had on their plates that they could loop me in on. I think one thing that I really appreciated was that the attorneys that I talked to, instead of just giving me anything, I feel like they were really considerate thinking about, "What kind of a project would be an interesting, maybe unusual, learning experience, and how can a summer fit in and both do substantive work, but also just get to see how things actually work around here?" I didn't feel like any of the work was busy work or made up for me. To get a sense of the different kinds of assignments I worked on, I shadowed several deals. Some of them had interesting cross-border issues. There was a restructuring deal that I got looped in on later. I also got to see a pro bono matter that was basically an exec comp matter. So, it was a pro bono client who was bringing on a new director, basically, and we were working with the client to negotiate executive compensation and other deal points for this employment contract.

Yoni Levy: That makes sense. There is a real effort, as you noted, to try to get summer associates to have really substantive experiences and to not just give them busy work—and pro bono is a great way to do that on top of the billable work. Also, it's very important for the firm generally that all of our lawyers do pro bono work. Those emails also go out to all the lawyers in the firm all the time about pro bono opportunities that you could take advantage of. So,

I'm glad you got to see both sides of the coin there. Bethany, how about you? Do you want to tell us a bit about what you worked on and how that came to be on your plate?

Bethany Friedman: Although I had a lot of interactions with attorneys out of the centralized process, I did really appreciate the weekly check-ins with recruiting. They really made sure that we all felt comfortable getting assignments and that we all had enough assignments. We would just talk it out every week and say, "Are you interested in health care still? Are you interested in asset management still? Do you want to try something new?" And they would all make sure that we really got everything that we wanted, and we tried everything we wanted to.

Yoni Levy: We try very hard to give people the opportunity to soak up as much as they can on the substantive end. But additionally, I think what comes through in all of your answers is a lot about the people, the personalities, and getting to know the people who work at the firm. From my experience, as someone who's now sitting here as a partner, I'm still very close with relationships that I made as a summer associate with other people in my summer class, which ends up being hugely helpful as you're moving through your career, both people who are still at the firm and people who have left the firm. Some of my closest friends are GCs at other places that are now clients or just contacts that I have that are great to have on top of great friendships. But also, people who were attorneys when I worked here as a summer associate. [Justin Kliger](#) and [Nicole Krea](#) are two of my partners now, and I'm very close with both of them. They're good friends of mine. I talk to Justin basically every day. I remember when I was a summer associate that I worked on a project where Justin and Nicole, as junior associates at the time, were supervising me working on that project. And actually, that project continues to this day, because it's an ongoing renewed project that happens every summer, and so, there is some real cool continuity there.

Each of you mentioned different relationships you've built. I still have people who were in my summer class who I'm not in the same practice group as them, I don't work on projects together with them, but we chat when we see each other, because we know each other from our summer, and we've maintained a relationship since. So, getting a sense for the people and the personalities, and getting to know people is really an amazing part of the summer experience that it sounds like you all took full advantage of, which is great. On that topic, if you participated in an affinity group or a forum during the summer, I'm wondering if you would mind talking a bit about that experience and what that was like, and maybe any mentorship that came out of that forum.

Adam Mohsen-Breen: That is something that I look back on as a real highlight of this summer. So far, at law school and even at college before, affinity groups had always been really central to my experience. In law school, a lot of my friends from section and my study group were all

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connections that I made through our school's Latinx affinity group. That's something that I was really looking for and valued in a firm as I was looking for where to spend my 2L summer, and it's something that really stood out to me about Ropes. A lot of firms have affinity groups or different kinds of forums, but I think that at Ropes, it really felt to me like the people that I was able to meet ahead of the summer and during the summer were really genuinely helpful, excited, and interested in connecting on different aspects of identity, work, and on their personal experiences. Everything felt like it was really helpful to me and really exciting to get to talk about. At Ropes, during the summer, I got to plug into the Latinx group, where I felt like I could connect with people from the same background, could get to hear from a really diverse range of experiences, and hear how people navigated a lot of the particular challenges that people from different communities face. I found that a lot of it really resonated with my own experience. A lot of it broadened a lot of my thinking on different aspects of identity and on how to be able to work and transition into the firm context while still holding those different aspects of identity as important and valued as well.

I also was able to plug into the [Ropes Multicultural Forum](#), which was a really exciting and a broader affinity group where I was able to meet attorneys from all different practice areas, experiences, and identities. I found similarly that I made a lot of really lasting and meaningful connections through the Multicultural Forum, including my buddy who was assigned at the beginning of the summer, who reached out before I even came to the firm and who I was able to connect with, [Jay Yi](#). He was a fourth-year associate and someone who was also in asset management, who I was able to really learn a lot from, both from his approach to his practice and to his work, but also from his personal experiences, which I found really resonated with my own as well. So, I think that I was really lucky at the end of the summer to look back and have what felt to me to be a really helpful, deep, and broad set of people whom I could call on for almost any question. Jay and I have still been in touch after the summer, and he is someone that I really look forward to getting to draw on their experience later on. I also am really lucky to feel that I had a lot of really great personal connections that I was really happy to have met on a personal level as well.

Crystal Liu: Hearing what you're saying, especially this idea of having a really broad group of people you can draw from, that really resonated with me. I was part of the [AAPI affinity group, as well as the Women's Forum](#), and the Multicultural Forum over the summer and last year, too. As someone who spent a long time on the East Coast, I was really drawn to going to law school on the West Coast and staying on the West Coast to work, in part because I feel like the AAPI community on the West Coast—but I really found this to be true in the San Francisco office—is so vibrant and strong. I really felt like I could talk to anyone—you have a variety of experiences from people who I think you don't normally typically see at the top echelons of big law practice. [Ellen Sueda](#), for example, who's an exec comp partner, and

[Chau Le](#), who is in private equity, they are both so good at what they do but also care a lot about mentoring and talking to people. Just on random days that there weren't even planned lunches, Chau and Ellen would email people and ask, "Is anyone around for lunch?" They gave a lot of great advice about how to think about your career and how to think about what it means to start in big law as a woman, as a historically underrepresented minority. They made a big impression on me and definitely played a big role in me wanting to come back to Ropes. Ellen also hosted this really fun and wonderful Women's Forum event at her house over the summer, and she had this whole scavenger hunt in North Beach, which was really fun.

Yoni Levy: That sounds awesome. I'm glad you all got an opportunity to connect with various different groups it sounds like, which is fantastic. What was the best coordinated summer event activity?

Adam Mohsen-Breen: One of my favorite events was near the end of the summer. We got to visit the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and it was something that stood out to me, because I visited the MFA a few times. I got to see it in college. I'd been in Boston for a long time, but we got to see a completely different area of the museum, got to chat in depth with partners and associates, all of whom had been really excited to share from their own experiences. I think another highlight of the summer, which came at the very end in my last few days, a few associates took a few summers, paralegals, and other associates out to lunch. We got to see a really cool roof-top view of Boston and got to explore a different area of the Back Bay that I hadn't gotten to see yet. So, both of those were really new, exciting experiences that I think will stick with me afterwards for a long time.

Yoni Levy: I was at the MFA event—I thought that was also awesome. I thought it was pretty amazing that we were sitting right next to the art and just eating in that room—I thought that was a pretty fascinating backdrop for our conversations. I also really liked that summer associates and the full-time attorneys were assigned to tables with only two per table, so that it was a mix of people at each table, which I really liked. It was a good opportunity to talk to some people. Crystal, what about you?

Crystal Liu: There were a lot of really fun summer associate events. The way that they were organized here—I don't know if it was the case in Boston or New York—were by practice group. The asset management team hosted a cooking class with all the summers. The private equity group took us out to a magic show in the Mission, and that was really fun. I think my favorite, and not because I'm biased, but the tax group had a hike in Marin County—that was super beautiful, and we had a lunch outdoors afterwards.

Yoni Levy: It's great that we got one person from three different offices here, so I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the vibe was in the office generally? I'll start with Bethany in New York.

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Bethany Friedman: I felt like the vibe of the office was very welcoming and warm, and that we could go anywhere and say “hi”—people were just very nice.

Yoni Levy: Crystal, how about San Francisco?

Crystal Liu: It might be because I had a chance to meet the attorneys last year, too, but I really felt like I knew everyone in the office, including business support staff. Gemma, for example, who works in the resource room, she’s amazing. You basically feel like you get to know everyone. You’re saying “hi” to people, even people you know you might not work with that much in the future. It feels really personable and intimate even. You’re going to see everyone at all the events. You know what’s going on in people’s lives. You hear about what people did on their vacations or their families and stuff. I really like that about it. We’re just on three floors of Embarcadero, so it’s really easy to get around and to talk to people, go to people’s offices to talk about an assignment, for example, or just to say “hi.” I feel like you get the benefits of having enough lawyers so that you have representation across the different practice groups and there’s a lot of interesting work going on, but it’s small enough that you really do get to know everyone and get a sense of who’s who in the office.

Yoni Levy: Adam, how about Boston?

Adam Mohsen-Breen: I think a lot of the same threads really stood out to me as well in the Boston office. I think the warm, professional, collegial elements really stood out to me. I remember walking into the Boston office and every door was open throughout my first week, and that’s something that continued throughout the whole summer. Associates and partners both would come into my office and just ask how things were going, ask if I wanted to be looped into shadow or into any assignments, ask how I was navigating the summer experience, and invite me to coffee or to lunch. Something that really stood out to me—that I had heard to be true before I had started at Ropes and which had been something that was an element of my decision but which I think was really hard to value until I had actually been in the environment of the Boston office and experienced it firsthand—had been the open door policy where almost everyone in my experience had been completely open to teaching, and had been excited to bring you in and show you how to navigate the summer experience.

One associate that really stood out to me was another asset management associate [Debbie McElwaine](#). She had begun hosting, just informally at first for a few summers, these kinds of summer chats where she would talk a little bit about navigating both a substantive piece of the work in asset management but also a personal element. We talked about having different activities that she had going on outside of work and would talk about how she mixed those in with her work responsibilities. All of those were encouraging notes that I wouldn’t have been able to understand or experience without having that kind of informal connection. Those

summer chats, in particular, ended up having 10 different asset management summer associates, and a few other associates in the group that all got to contribute their perspectives and share from how they were experiencing the summer and experiencing their work more broadly at Ropes. I think that Boston really stood out to me with its energy, enthusiasm, and exciting feel of the office.

Yoni Levy: Debbie is awesome. She’s an awesome associate all around, and she’s super great at mentorship, so I’m so happy that you got the opportunity to work with her. I liked what you said about open doors. I think it’s more of an attitude of we’re all always available. We recognize we’re only as good as our training is, and training has always come first at the firm and been a major priority, so I’m glad that you all experienced that.

Adam alluded to this a little bit, but I’m wondering if you can talk about why you chose Ropes in the first place as a summer target.

Crystal Liu: I originally applied to Ropes because it was really strong in private equity and asset management, and just had a strong presence on the West Coast—I knew I wanted to be in San Francisco. And I knew I made the right choice because I had just found so many people who I knew would be great mentors and seemed really invested in teaching us, helping us figure out what would be best in our careers, and helping us grow as attorneys. One experience that was really important right at the beginning was just coming back and working with Ben again and re-experiencing what it was like talking with a partner and realizing that these people who have so much going on, they’re willing to make all that time and really catch you up to a matter so that you’re not floundering. This work, I think, can be difficult at times, but it makes a huge difference if the people you work with are people you can trust and see eye to eye on.

Yoni Levy: I really do think that people at Ropes understand that fundamentally, there is no better thing to do than to be investing in our people, because that is our only asset. Our only asset is our people, and we cannot rely on any one person individually to carry the whole firm forward. Even if you were the most amazing partner who is super busy, you cannot possibly do all the work yourself—the only way you can succeed is if you’re training those around you. And so, I’m not surprised, and I’m happy to hear that people made time for you. Adam, how about you?

Adam Mohsen-Breen: One element had been the substantive piece, the work that I would be doing, and the rigor and reputation of the firm across practice areas—and that was something that I found to be really important in my career. I wanted to make sure that I was making a decision that would open me up to the highest quality of work, and that would train me to do the best possible work that I could as a lawyer and to be the best possible practitioner that I could be.

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Yoni Levy: From talking to your friends or having done summer programs at other firms prior to coming to Ropes, what was different about the Ropes program in your view?

Bethany Friedman: This was my first summer at a law firm in general, but from talking to my other friends, again, I will emphasize the Ropes culture is real. I feel that at other law firms, I've heard there's a competitiveness inherently in the summers or it's not as much of an open-door policy. At Ropes, I really felt welcomed and very wanted there, so I do want to say that that's something that I think separates Ropes.

Adam Mohsen-Breen: Something that really distinguished Ropes, to me, and that I know surprised a lot of my friends just informally in our conversations was the overlapping and distinct, but related levels, of mentorship and support at the firm. I remember coming into the beginning of the summer and being surprised when I had a few emails already after classes had ended, from my summer mentoring pod, my assigned summer buddy, Debbie McElwaine, and I also had a more senior partner mentor. I had affinity group mentoring circles and felt that before I even started in the summer program, I had a really deep roster of people who were really excited to support me and to help me make the most of the summer and navigate a lot of the challenges that they had personally experienced as well.

Crystal Liu: I definitely had experiences talking with friends and classmates who would get an assignment during the summer and feel a little bit stressed out, because they were, like, "I don't really know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm supposed to do for this." Not that they were floundering exactly, but just had a lot of questions and felt some pressure to make a good impression. The contrast that I felt—and this goes back to the training and mentoring point earlier—I realized that I actually had so many different opportunities for learning throughout the summer, and that Ropes certainly cared so much about this. The firm

just started this award for people who have committed extraordinary time and effort into mentoring and teaching. For example, [Adam Greenwood](#), who was one of the award recipients, he does this thing every Tuesday morning called Tax Break, where he just basically teaches about a topic that might come up in practice a lot, and a lot of the junior associates attend. He would hold these weekly tax article meetings where, again, he would assign maybe a couple of readings and teach us a few things about maybe topics that we hadn't encountered or things we had but didn't know that much about. There was just such a culture of learning from each other that it made it feel like it was normal to go to people with your questions and to always be learning.

Yoni Levy: That's a culture that continues throughout your career—it's really not exclusive to summer associates, junior associates, or to associates. This morning, one of my partners threw time on my calendar and the calendar of three other partners to just chat about a negotiation that's going on, and we just had a live discussion. She got an answer to her immediate question about the negotiation. We ask each other stuff all the time—there's just no way you can have experienced everything. The benefit of being at a firm is the opportunity to gain experience from other people, and so, it's really an ongoing journey. So, I appreciate that sentiment a lot.

Thank you, Crystal, Adam, and Bethany for joining us. It's really been a great pleasure hearing about your experience with our summer program. And thank you to our listeners. We hope you found this to be a helpful and insightful dive into our summer program. If there's a specific practice group or area you'd like us to cover in a future episode, please reach out to me directly—I'd love to hear from you. If you're a law student or recent graduate who would like to learn more, please visit our website at www.ropesgray.com. You can subscribe to this series wherever you typically listen to podcasts, including on [Apple](#) and [Spotify](#). Thanks again for listening.

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