

Why East Coast Hires Are Buying Into Manatt's Hybrid Services Strategy

By Justin Henry
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What You Need to Know

- *Manatt, Phelps & Phillips has increased its focus on its East Coast footprints in the first half of 2021.*
- *Tech and regulatory hires in New York and Washington, D.C. are among that group.*
- *CEO Donna Wilson said her firm's approach to staffing is in response to disruptor-businesses seeking to branch out into other sectors.*

For Los Angeles-based firm Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, advising disrupter-clients on COVID-era growth opportunities has made it into a disrupter in its own right.

In the first half of 2021, the self-styled "professional services firm of the future" has fueled its East Coast expansion with lateral hires from Kirkland & Ellis, Lowenstein Sandler and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld. Some of those additions said they joined Manatt to capitalize on its interdisciplinary practice model that offers both consulting and legal services to clients.

"More and more, the lawyers that are coming to us, that is how they want to provide their service offerings to clients," Manatt CEO and managing partner Donna Wilson said in an interview last week.



Courtesy photos

(l-r) Linda Elam, Matthew Reece, Donna Wilson and Blair Cantfil of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips.

Wilson said she spent more time on the East Coast since March than in her firm's native California, integrating new additions to the practice. Of the 13 lawyers and consultants added since the start of 2021, eight are in East Coast locations.

In New York, the firm's recent additions of digital technology, media and digital advertising professionals have fed into digital health, fintech and other practice areas throughout the country, Wilson said. Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the firm has built out its regulatory teams, attracting professionals working with emerging companies, health care companies and corporate transactions.

"We're always looking for ways to converge our various practices because in a digital world all these things are combining," Washington, D.C.-based lawyer Rustin Brown, a venture capital and emerging companies partner who joined Manatt

in April from Kirkland & Ellis, said. Kirkland & Ellis did not respond to a request to comment on Brown's departure.

For Wilson, this strategy makes good on a mandate she inherited when she took the reins of the firm in 2019 from former managing partner Bill Quicksilver to broaden the firm's national platform.

"One of my mandates was to grow our other offices ... outside of California, including along the East Coast," she said. "The opening of our Boston office [in 2019] is part of that growth and so is the continued expansion of New York, Albany and D.C."

Manatt's most recent lateral acquisition came in the form of real estate dealmaker Ted Hunter, who joined the New York office as a partner. Hunter was chairman of the real estate practice group at Lowenstein Sandler. A representative for Lowenstein Sandler declined to comment for this article.

Leaders at Manatt are banking on Hunter's deep ties in the industry to spearhead the development of the firm's real estate capabilities along the East Coast. Manatt has 43 professionals in the real estate practice, only four of whom are located on the East Coast.

Hunter said he joined the firm because of its hybridized approach to delivering consulting and legal services. "Manatt is today what law firms will become," Hunter said.

Brown, who practiced at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett and Davis Polk & Wardwell before his most recent time at Kirkland & Ellis, described his previous Big Law stints as "inheriting work from other partners or from the institution instead of going out and really creating new opportunities."

That wasn't conducive to his goal of finding alternate models of financing that support emerging companies owned by "new majority founders"—women, LGBT and minority entrepreneurs—who have been historically underserved by the investment community, Brown said. He joined Manatt to find new investment pools by tapping into the firm's network of entertainers and influencers, who have a history of appreciating the value of "nontraditional" entrepreneurs.

As the lines separating industry sectors become more blurred in the post-COVID era, Brown said Manatt's integrated platform allows its professionals to "play an important role in helping the

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disrupters scale and grow, and helps companies and industries that are about to be disrupted understand what's coming and helping clients that way."

One such disruptive force that has arisen out of the pandemic is the development of online engagement for sports fans, said Matthew Reece, counsel and director with Manatt who previously served as Boston Bruins assistant general counsel before joining the firm in March.

Reece said COVID-19 accelerated the trend of teams, venues and leagues adapting the fan expe-

rience to a digital platform that includes online retail and contactless payment. In his split role as counsel and director, Reece is expected to focus more on the business consulting aspect of his position with respect to advising clients on disruptions coming to their industry.

“We’re looking at opportunities that help sports clients deal with reams of data they’re taking in and the opportunity for not only how to use that data for their business but also how to protect it,” Reece said. “We’re starting to see a lot of state jurisdictions pass their own new data privacy laws and that’s something teams are going to have to pay attention to.”

The firm’s strength in digital influencer agreements, entertainment, social media personalities, esports and gaming will come in handy now that the National Collegiate Athletic Association allows college athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness, Reece said.

“You have 460,000 NCAA athletes who can join the ranks of the influencers and that’s where the action’s going to be,” Reece said.

In Washington, D.C., the firm’s health practice teams attracted former Akin Gump counsel Blair Cantfil and Linda Elam, a former Medicaid health plan executive, who joined in April and May, respectively.

Elam, who departed her role as CEO of AmeriGroup’s District of Columbia Health Plan, said she left that post to work with members of Manatt’s Washington, D.C., team, whom she held in high regard, such as health care partner Cindy

Mann and managing director Chiquita Brooks-LaSure. For Elam, joining Manatt provides her the opportunity to broaden her scope of client engagement beyond Medicaid and into long-term care.

“The idea of the policy and regulatory piece being put into practice is really important and that’s why I think this sort of model is so impactful,” Elam said. “You have people who understand some of the arcane aspects and also understand that in order for clients to be successful, these things have to actually work on the ground.”

Cantfil said she departed Akin Gump because she wanted to take advantage of Manatt’s platform, which allows her to advise clients on long-term vision in addition to day-to-day legal needs. A representative for Akin Gump said in a statement that the firm wishes her well.

“I think there’s a whole other level when you’re actually helping clients not just win on those discreet issues but actually develop their vision for the future,” she said. “That is what I enjoy and it is what I felt like at Manatt there would be a lot of resources and a unique structure that would enable that.”

Since the onset of COVID-19, Cantfil’s health care clients are focused on the development of digital health for home-based care and tracking patients remotely, she said, adding Manatt’s work with technology clients help her identify areas for innovation.

“Understanding what the tech companies can do is just as important as knowing what the statute says,” she said.