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- Associate Survey Results
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- Vault/MCCA Law Firm Diversity Database
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Acknowledgments

Thank you to the partners and associates who took time from their busy schedules to provide thoughtful answers to our questions about their practice areas.

Special thanks to Claudia Grillo, Eleanor Jaeckel, and Erika Arroyo for their invaluable assistance in creating this guide.
# Table of Contents

**INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. xi

**PRACTICE AREAS** .............................................................. 1

**ANTITRUST** ......................................................................... 3

  Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP ........................................... 4

**APPELLATE LITIGATION** ......................................................... 9

  Mayer Brown LLP ..................................................................... 10

**BANKRUPTCY/CREDITORS’ RIGHTS** .......................................... 15

  Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP ......................................... 16

**CLEAN TECHNOLOGY/RENEWABLE ENERGY** ......................... 21

  Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP .............................................. 22

**ENERGY, OIL, AND GAS** ....................................................... 27

  Bracwell LLP ........................................................................ 28

  Norton Rose Fulbright .................................................................. 32

**FINANCIAL SERVICES** ........................................................... 37

  Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP ......................................................... 38

**GENERAL CORPORATE PRACTICE** ....................................... 43

  Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP ......................................... 44

  Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP ....................................................... 48

**INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY** .................................................... 53

  Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner, LLP .................. 54

  Morrison & Foerster LLP ............................................................ 58

  Ropes & Gray LLP .................................................................... 62

**INTERNATIONAL** ................................................................. 67

  Allen & Overy LLP .................................................................... 68

  Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP ........................................... 72

  White & Case LLP .................................................................... 76

**IP BOUTIQUES** ..................................................................... 81

  Desmarais LLP ......................................................................... 82

  Knobbe Martens ......................................................................... 86

  Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein & Fox .................................................. 90

**LABOR & EMPLOYMENT** ....................................................... 95

  Paul Hastings LLP ..................................................................... 96

**LITIGATION BOUTIQUES** ...................................................... 101

  Kobre & Kim ........................................................................... 102

  MoloLamken LLP ..................................................................... 106
MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS ................................................................. 111
  Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP ........................................ 112
  Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz .................................................. 116
  Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP ....................................................... 120

PRIVATE EQUITY ................................................................. 125
  Ropes & Gray LLP ................................................................. 126
  Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz .................................................. 130
  Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP ....................................................... 134

PROJECT FINANCE ............................................................... 139
  Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP ........................................ 140
  Shearman & Sterling LLP .......................................................... 144
  White & Case LLP ................................................................. 148

REAL ESTATE ................................................................. 153
  Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson LLP ................................ 154
  Paul Hastings LLP ................................................................. 158

SECURITIES ................................................................. 163
  Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP ....................................................... 164

SECURITIES LITIGATION .......................................................... 169
  Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz .................................................. 170

TECHNOLOGY ................................................................. 175
  Cooley LLP ............................................................................. 176
  Fenwick & West LLP ............................................................... 180
  Morrison & Foerster LLP .......................................................... 184

WHITE COLLAR DEFENSE & INTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS .............. 189
  Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP ....................................................... 190

INDEX .............................................................................. 195
  Index By Firm ............................................................................. 196
  Index By Attorney ...................................................................... 197
Introduction

Welcome to Practice Perspectives: Vault’s Guide to Legal Practice Areas, the insider’s guide to what it’s really like to be a practicing attorney in 20 different areas of the law.

Whether you’re preparing for on-campus interviews, about to begin as a summer associate, or looking to make a lateral move, Practice Perspectives is a vital career exploration tool. In this guide, you will find more than 30 interviews with attorneys who are at the top of their fields at some of the most prestigious law firms in the country. We asked these partners and associates all about their specific practice areas—the types of clients they represent, the best and worst aspects of working in their chosen fields, and what misconceptions exist about their specialties.

Choosing the right firm is only part of the equation for a successful and rewarding career. Attorneys at the same firm may have very different experiences and career paths, depending on their practice areas. Unfortunately, law school doesn’t do much to help students figure out what it’s really like to be a real estate attorney, labor and employment specialist, or securities expert. That’s where Practice Perspectives comes in.

How can this guide help you?

No matter what stage you’re at in your legal career, this guide can help by:

- For student job seekers: preparing you to speak competently about different practice areas during recruiting season, and helping you to focus your search on firms with strong departments that interest you
- For summer associates: giving you the insight and knowledge you need in order to focus your summer assignments within the groups that will be the best fit for you
- For potential lateral associates: getting you ready to interview with an insider’s look at what different practice areas are like at different firms
- For pre-law students: helping you to determine whether the day-to-day life of an attorney is a good match with your goals and skills

How should you use this guide?

Each question we asked the partners and associates featured in this guide was carefully selected to give you the most important information you’ll need to select a practice area and firm. Each attorney answered the following questions:

What, substantively, does your practice area entail? The answer to this question will give you a high-level view of the type of work involved in each legal specialty. Some practice areas involve a great deal of client development and networking; others are more academic and a good fit for introverted types.

What types of clients do you represent? The clients you work with have a meaningful impact on both your day-to-day life at the firm and your long-term career path. Advising large banks is very different from working with pharmaceutical companies, and spending your days on calls with technology start-ups will not feel the same as dealing with large multinational companies. Moreover, many attorneys who move in-house after practicing at a law firm do so after establishing a relationship with a client. In other words, your client might become your employer one day!

What types of deals and/or cases do you work on? The types of cases and deals you’ll work on as a practicing attorney may be very different from those you studied in law school. It's important that you understand the substance of what you'll be working on day to day.

How did you decide to practice in your area? This section will give you insight into what factors you should be taking into account when choosing your specialty.

What is a typical day or week like in your practice area? Do you want to spend your days in court, on the phone, or writing briefs? Are you okay with a constantly changing schedule, or do you like routine and being able to plan ahead? Here, you’ll get
the inside scoop on how attorneys in different practice areas structure their time.

What is the best thing about your practice area? Here, you’ll find out what makes these lawyers so passionate about their chosen fields.

What is the most challenging aspect of your practice area? Every practice area has its challenges—it’s important to be familiar with them up front. For example, some specialties are more dynamic than others; keeping up with constant developments in the law can be exhilarating for some and stressful for others.

What training, classes, experience, or skills development would you recommend to someone who wishes to enter your practice area? Here, you’ll learn what partners in each practice area are looking for when they interview—and how you can set yourself apart from other candidates by being as prepared as possible.

What misconceptions exist about your practice area? What do you wish you had known before joining your practice area? Appellate lawyers only work on appeals. All M&A attorneys are male. Antitrust is a niche specialty area. These are just some of the types of myths that are debunked in this section.

What is unique about your practice area at your firm? Read the answers to this question carefully—your practice may look very different depending on the firm you choose. Are attorneys within the group generalists or specialists? Is the group small or large? Does the firm specialize in this area? Is the department a derivative practice, in that all of its work is generated by another group's deals? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions—but think about what will work best for you.

What activities do you enjoy when you are not in the office, and how do you make time for them? Attorneys work hard and put in long hours. Take tips from the pros about how to balance a successful career with life outside the office.

How were the firms in this guide selected? We invited the top firms in each practice area, as rated by more than 17,000 associates from across the country in our 2015 Vault Associate Survey. Each year, Vault ranks law firms in a variety of practice areas based on the perceptions of associates practicing in those areas. In our annual survey, associates are allowed to vote for up to three firms in their practice areas; they are not permitted to vote for their own firms. For example, associates who identify themselves as corporate attorneys are only allowed to vote in corporate-related categories (securities, financial services, etc.). We invited the top ten firms in each category to participate in Practice Perspectives. So rest assured—each attorney profiled in this guide is a true expert in his or her field.

We hope that this book assists you in finding a legal practice that is a good match for your interests, goals and strengths. The importance of finding the right practice area for you can't be understated—switching fields down the line, while not impossible, is not easy. Take the time now to do as much research as possible, and don’t rule out areas outside your comfort zone—a field you don’t know much about yet might turn out to be the perfect fit for you.
PRACTICE AREAS
We welcome the opportunity to let you know what all the buzz is about!

Maybe you’ve heard of us...

“Best Places to Work”
- Washington Business Journal

“Top Workplaces”
- The Washington Post

“USA Leading Firm”
- Chambers & Partners

“Patent Prosecution Firm of the Year”
- LMG Life Sciences

“Innovative Law Firm”
- Financial Times

“Firm of the Year”
- Managing Intellectual Property

“Recommended Firm”
- IAM 1000 Patent 1000

“Intellectual Property Hot List”
- The National Law Journal

“IP Star”
- Managing Intellectual Property

“We’ve been dedicated to the development, protection, transfer, and enforcement of intellectual property since 1978.

We welcome the opportunity to let you know what all the buzz is about!
Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein, & Fox P.L.L.C.

DEBORAH STERLING, DIRECTOR—BIO/CHEMICAL GROUP; DANIEL BLOCK, ASSOCIATE—ELECTRICAL GROUP

Dr. Sterling is a director in the Bio/Chemical Group at Sterne Kessler. She has a B.Sc. in Biochemistry and a Ph.D. in Molecular and Cellular Physiology. Originally from Ireland, Dr. Sterling brings an international perspective to her work. Her intellectual property experience has been principally in technical areas such as biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, molecular biology, analytical instruments, agrochemicals and clean technology. In addition to her practice, she chairs Sterne Kessler’s professional development committee.

Mr. Block is an associate in the Electrical Group at Sterne Kessler. Prior to working at the firm, Mr. Block worked as a software developer in the software-as-a-service space. He earned his law degree from University of Minnesota, and earned a B.S. in Computer Science from Rochester Institute of Technology.

Please provide an overview of what, substantively, your practice area entails.

DS: My practice is focused in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries, where I am involved in all areas of patent procurement, exploitation, and enforcement. That means I counsel clients on a complete intellectual property strategy. That strategy can involve evaluating patent portfolios, e.g., for invalidity, non-infringement, freedom-to-operate, and due diligence; patent litigations, both in district court and in front of the Patent Office; and building strong portfolios.

DB: I work with both defendants in patent lawsuits and patent owners in district court litigation and post-grant proceedings at the Patent Office. Regardless of which “side of the v” I’m on, I always first perform a deep dive review of the technology at issue, which is always one of my favorite parts of a case. I’ve worked in a wide range of technologies, such as advanced network routing, semiconductors, and movie special effects. After I understand the technology, I work on the substantive case, which may involve filing or responding to post-grant proceedings, finding prior art, or preparing an infringement or non-infringement case.

What types of clients do you represent?

DS: I’ve represented all kinds of companies, from start-ups to large multi-nationals, and across technologies too. For example, I have worked with pharmaceutical companies, animal grooming products, biofuels and other clean technologies, next-generation sequencing, biologics, agrochemicals, dental implants, 3D bio-printing, and lots of other exciting technologies.

DB: I’ve represented a wide range of clients, including some of the largest, and well-known companies in the world, ranging from auto manufacturers and software companies to leading edge start-up companies. For example, I recently represented a company that operated in a niche technology space: virtual-machine backup. The client has a great reputation for being innovative, and due to its success, raised the ire of a much larger competitor that sued for patent infringement. The case ultimately involved two district court litigations and 10+ inter partes review proceedings. In the end, the patent office invalidated all of the remaining asserted patents in the case, giving our client a complete victory.

What types of deals and/or cases do you work on?

DS: My work varies based on client needs. For some clients, I will advise on building a patent thicket around an innovative technology. For others, we strategize enforcement on a U.S. and sometimes global scale. Recently, a lot of my work has involved challenging or defending patents in post-grant proceedings at the Patent Office, including handling appeals to the Federal Circuit.

DB: When I started out at Sterne Kessler, I worked primarily on patent prosecution, which is drafting, filing, and negotiating with the Patent Office for the grant of a patent. More recently, my practice has focused on post-grant proceedings at the Patent Office and district court litigation. I continue to work on some patent prosecution and application drafting with a focus on technology areas that I’m passionate about, such as 3D printing, home automation, and computer networking.
How did you decide to practice in your area?

DS: I was, and still am, first and foremost a scientist. After getting my Ph.D., I considered staying in academia, but was concerned that I was becoming more and more focused on a very specific scientific field. I heard that patent law was a great way to stay at the forefront of science in many different areas. Not only that, practicing law requires similar skills as science—good research and creative problem solving. Once I realized that, I knew I was on the right path.

DB: Prior to law school, I had the opportunity to work on a class-action lawsuit as a consulting witness. In that case, I developed a program that helped calculate the damages. After this experience, I realized that someone with my skillset may be valuable in the legal field, and began to research different facets of a career in law. From this research, I was naturally led to patent law given my background as a computer scientist. This turned out to be a great choice for me. I am enjoying the unique intersection between law and science that you get with IP law.

What is a typical day or week like in your practice area?

DS: I lead several teams, so I will check in with them frequently to strategize the next steps needed to best serve our clients. Some days I can be engaged in taking a deposition or doing an oral argument in a post-grant proceeding. Other days, I’m brainstorming with inventors about some cutting-edge innovation that they want to protect. When we are facing a big deadline, we can typically work very long days for one or more weeks. So it is important to make sure to take some downtime to recharge your brain after being in such an intense process.

DB: My work focuses mostly on litigation and post-grant proceedings. I may spend my day searching for prior art, talking with experts, reviewing technical documents, and preparing documents, such as Markman briefs, IPR petitions, or Patent Owner Responses. For example, I recently spent a day tracking down a telephone that we could use as prior art in a litigation. Ultimately, I found it in a museum in California, and we were able to have them make copies of the phone’s manual and take pictures of the phone. They sent them to us, and those documents ended up being an important part of our case.

What is the best thing about your practice area?

DS: It is constantly changing—both the law and the science. You need to be as innovative with legal arguments as scientists are with their inventions. It is also satisfying when you see a product that you work with displayed on the shelf in the supermarket, or to see pharmaceutical products that you handled matters for advertised on television. The best feeling, though, is when your team makes a client happy. Helping a client achieve a goal is really what we’re all about.

DB: Learning about the technology. I absolutely love learning new things, and it is really neat to get paid to become very knowledgeable in a particular subject matter. It is also amazing to interact with people who are true subject-matter experts, such as inventors and experts. Brainstorming litigation strategies with other associates and partners is also pretty fun. It is certainly satisfying to know you played a role in a strategy that got a great result for a client.

What is the most challenging aspect of your practice area?

DS: Life has become quite frenetic with email and smartphones making you constantly accessible to clients. Patent law is not one-size-fits-all, so it isn’t the type of law where you can have a guaranteed answer at the tip of your fingers. Most cases are quite nuanced. It can be hard to think through all aspects of a case when people are demanding quick, almost instantaneous answers. But you need to figure out how to do that; your client is relying on you.

DB: Patent law has changed dramatically in a number of ways over the last four years. With the ever-changing landscape, it can be difficult to keep up with all of the changes. That said, it also provides new opportunities to get smart and become an expert on new laws that affect existing and emerging technologies.

What training, classes, experience or skills development would you recommend to someone hoping to enter your practice area?

DS: Writing is a critical skill. Take writing classes—both legal and creative writing. And read books and articles written by great writers. Oral communication is another key skill. One thing that can be fun that wouldn’t necessarily come to mind as a professional development opportunity is an improv class. This is a fun and effective way to improve your confidence and will help you learn to think on your toes too.

DB: I would recommend taking a course on patents. It’s good to have a solid base of some of the major cases that have been decided in patent law. I also suggest taking the patent bar exam during law school. It can make things less stressful during your first year as an associate, and it is nice to have the credential under your belt when you are looking for your first job. Finally, have fun! For example, I took a Reiki healing class in law school, and I’ve been just fine.

What misconceptions exist about your practice area? What do you wish you had known before joining your practice area?

DS: That IP is boring. It isn’t! Think about it—intellectual property rights surround some of the most important aspects
of our daily lives: from Apple’s patents, to Coca-Cola’s trade secrets, to Lego’s trademark, to David Bowie’s copyrights. We get to work with cool things all the time.

DB: I agree! It is a misconception that IP is boring and slow-paced. First of all, underlying any patent work is technology, and that is dynamic and ever changing across so many areas from computers, to health care, to consumer products. Secondly, there are aspects of patent law that likely appeal to most lawyers. For example, if you are interested in transactional work, there is patent licensing. If you are interested in administrative law, there is post-grant work at the Patent Office. And, if you are interested in litigation, there is patent litigation, which is often highly contentious and complex across every conceivable industry and business sector.

What is unique about your practice area at your firm?

DS: I have always been involved in inter partes work; that is work where two parties are fighting over a patent right. At the Patent Office, that work has included interferences, inter partes reexaminations, and now, the new post-grant proceedings that arose with the passage of the America Invents Act (AIA) in 2012. While the underlying premise is similar, the proceedings have evolved, bringing a new set of exciting challenges.

DB: As noted, the patent law landscape has changed dramatically since I’ve been at the firm. Since the passage of the AIA, Sterne Kessler has been at the forefront of the new proceedings, and most associates are involved at some level in these proceedings, whereas prior to the passage of the AIA, these proceedings didn’t even exist. It has been a great way for me to get hands-on experience working with clients and senior directors while handling depositions, arguments, and other work that my peers at other firms don’t necessarily get to do at this stage of their careers.

What activities do you enjoy when you are not in the office, and how do you make time for them?

DS: I’m an adjunct professor, teaching PTAB litigation at George Mason University School of law. So I get to meet new, upcoming patent lawyers every year. I have two kids and two dogs that keep me busy. I also like to run—I’ve run several marathons and ultra-marathons—and I hike. I make some pretty fine chocolate and stout ice cream too! Making time to get it all in is tough, but I’ve started adding my fun activities to my calendar as must-do appointments, so that I can make sure that important aspect of my life gets the attention it deserves.

DB: Beside keeping up with colleagues and former law school classmates at bar and alumni functions, my hobbies tend to be more “nerdy.” For example, I’ve recently installed a home automation system in my house, which allows me to control my house from anywhere in the world. I also contribute regularly to open source software projects.

STERNE, KESSLER, GOLDSTEIN, & FOX P.L.L.C.

“Practicing law requires similar skills as science—good research and creative problem solving.”

Deborah Sterling, Director
INDEX
## Index By Firm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen &amp; Overy LLP</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracewell LLP</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleary Gottlieb Steen &amp; Hamilton LLP</td>
<td>4, 44, 112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooley LLP</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis Polk &amp; Wardwell LLP</td>
<td>38, 164, 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desmarais LLP</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fenwick &amp; West LLP</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett &amp; Dunner, LLP</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver &amp; Jacobson LLP</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knobbe Martens</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobre &amp; Kim</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayer Brown LLP</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milbank, Tweed, Hadley &amp; McCloy LLP</td>
<td>16, 140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoloLamken LLP</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison &amp; Foerster LLP</td>
<td>58, 184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norton Rose Fulbright</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orrick, Herrington &amp; Sutcliffe LLP</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Hastings LLP</td>
<td>96, 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ropes &amp; Gray LLP</td>
<td>62, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shearman &amp; Sterling LLP</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein &amp; Fox</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen &amp; Katz</td>
<td>116, 130, 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weil, Gotshal &amp; Manges LLP</td>
<td>48, 120, 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White &amp; Case LLP</td>
<td>76, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney Name</td>
<td>Firm Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aiello, Michael</td>
<td>Weil, Gotshal &amp; Manges LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres, Greg</td>
<td>Davis Polk &amp; Wardwell LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argaez Wendlandt, Dalila</td>
<td>Ropes &amp; Gray LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballack, Karen</td>
<td>Weil, Gotshal &amp; Manges LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernardo, Nathalia</td>
<td>Paul Hastings LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanco, Maurice</td>
<td>Davis Polk &amp; Wardwell LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block, Daniel</td>
<td>Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein, &amp; Fox P.L.L.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondor, Paul</td>
<td>Desmarais LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownstone, Daniel</td>
<td>Fenwick &amp; West LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassidy, Karen</td>
<td>Knobbe Martens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan, Michelle</td>
<td>Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer US LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choi, Anita</td>
<td>Morrison &amp; Foerster LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chung, Dan</td>
<td>Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett &amp; Dunner, LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis, Robert</td>
<td>Cleary Gottlieb Steen &amp; Hamilton LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunne, Dennis</td>
<td>Milbank, Tweed, Hadley &amp; McCloy LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estevez, Roland</td>
<td>Milbank, Tweed, Hadley &amp; McCloy LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewing, Elaine</td>
<td>Cleary Gottlieb Steen &amp; Hamilton LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feder, Philip N.</td>
<td>Paul Hastings LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldman, Lauren</td>
<td>Mayer Brown LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hart, Taylor</td>
<td>Ropes &amp; Gray LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hughes, Paul</td>
<td>Mayer Brown LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huynh, Dao</td>
<td>Orrick, Herrington &amp; Sutcliffe LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jebb, Brian</td>
<td>Allen &amp; Overy LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kesler, Jarom</td>
<td>Knobbe Martens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim, Charles S.</td>
<td>Cooley LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lam, David K.</td>
<td>Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen &amp; Katz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee, Austin</td>
<td>Bracewell LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipton, Alissa</td>
<td>Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett &amp; Dunner, LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margolis, Sara</td>
<td>MoloLamken LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massari, Jai</td>
<td>Davis Polk &amp; Wardwell LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayo, Julie</td>
<td>Norton Rose Fulbright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic, Jonathan L.</td>
<td>Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver &amp; Jacobson LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowierski, Lauren</td>
<td>Desmarais LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nussbaum, Andrew J.</td>
<td>Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen &amp; Katz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odell, Francesca</td>
<td>Cleary Gottlieb Steen &amp; Hamilton LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Padrés, Alexandro</td>
<td>Shearman &amp; Sterling LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pham, Hansel</td>
<td>White &amp; Case LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pidot, Emily</td>
<td>Paul Hastings LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rathmell, Robin</td>
<td>Kobre &amp; Kim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reilly, Carrie M.</td>
<td>Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen &amp; Katz</td>
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<td>Paul Hastings LLP</td>
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<td>Milbank, Tweed, Hadley &amp; McCloy LLP</td>
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<td>Soler, Jonathon</td>
<td>Weil, Gotshal &amp; Manges LLP</td>
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<td>Sterling, Deborah</td>
<td>Sterne, Kessler, Goldstein, &amp; Fox P.L.L.C.</td>
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<td>Wiener, Christopher</td>
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<td>Wilson, Bradley R.</td>
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<td>Wohlfeld, Clark A.</td>
<td>White &amp; Case LLP</td>
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<td>Yashar, Jennifer</td>
<td>Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver &amp; Jacobson LLP</td>
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