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2015 Corporate Counsel Awards (SLIDESHOW)

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Atlanta Business Chronicle on Friday held its fourth annual Corporate Counsel Awards, highlighting in-house attorneys who help companies navigate significant transactions, address litigation, advise colleagues and manage risk.

Event slideshow on the right.

The stories, below, of these top achievers demonstrate how the role of corporate counsel is evolving from one-time advisers into today's strategic business partners.



BYRON E. SMALL

The Corporate Counsel Awards, sponsored by Atlanta Business Chronicle and the Association of Corporate Counsel Georgia Chapter, honor individuals in the categories of Lifetime Achievement, General Counsels Large and Small, Non-General Counsels Large and Small, Solo Corporate Counsel, Diversity Champion and Rising Star. In addition, this year the program added new categories for specialist corporate counsel in the fields of Employment/Labor, Intellectual Property and Litigation.

The awards' size categories are based on attorney staff size, with small being a staff of two to eight attorneys and large being a staff of nine or more.

Winners must be employed as a lawyer by a company, members of ACC Georgia, based in Georgia and have at least one year on the job with the same company.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Sewell finds pro bono commitment rewarding

Rule 6.1 of the American Bar Association's Rules of Professional Conduct states that, "Every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. A lawyer should aspire to render at least 50 hours of pro bono publico legal services per year."

Attorney George Sewell exemplifies this responsibility.

"I don't want to get to the end of my legal career and find that the only measures of my professional life were the cases I handled or how much money I made. That would reduce lawyering to being just another business rather than a profession," said Sewell, the 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award winner in the Corporate Counsel Awards. "For me personally, I volunteer with Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta because it provides an endless source of opportunities to do pro bono work for the organizations that serve individuals in need. In addition to my professional responsibilities, my faith teaches me that we live in a broken world and are called to serve those in need."

Through Pro Bono Partnership of Atlanta (PBPATL), Sewell is able to participate in the network of charities that work directly with those in need.

"In 40 years of lawyering, I have yet to derive the same satisfaction from working for paying clients as I do from working for PBPATL clients," Sewell said.

Sewell began his legal career as a member of the U.S. Air Force Judge Advocate General Corps, where he served as staff Judge Advocate General at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., and in the National Guard Bureau at The Pentagon. He later joined the law firm of Smith Currie and became a partner specializing in construction claims and litigation.

Sewell's career as in-house counsel spans 15 years, including five years as general counsel of Facility Group Inc., senior corporate counsel for OHM Remedial Services and contract representative for Aramco. Currently, Sewell serves as acting general counsel of ThyssenKrupp Industrial Solutions (USA) Inc., Resource Technologies Division-Atlanta, a division of ThyssenKrupp, a German manufacturer.

Sewell has also been a leader in the Atlanta legal community, serving the Association of Corporate Counsel Georgia Chapter as a board member and officer.

Sewell's generosity in providing legal services pro bono distinguish him as a leader in the legal profession, said Teresa Kennedy, associate general counsel for Cox Communications Inc., who has known Sewell 15 years.

"George has donated a remarkable amount of his time over many years to provide expert legal support to charitable organizations," Kennedy said.

OUTSTANDING GENERAL COUNSEL LARGE

A look at Cathy Hampton's resume indicates the Atlanta city attorney could most likely have landed any job she wanted.

A graduate of Spelman College and Harvard Law School, Hampton began her career as an associate with the New York law firm of Shearman and Sterling in New York City after graduating, where she practiced corporate securities and international finance law. From there, Hampton worked in marketing, advertising and general corporate law at the National Basketball Association. She later served as vice president and assistant general counsel for EarthLink Inc. Before going to work for the city of Atlanta, Hampton was vice president, general counsel and secretary at RARE Hospitality International Inc.

The Magnolia, Miss., native chose Atlanta because she said the city has been good to her since the day she arrived as a 17-year-old freshman at Spelman.

"Atlanta, like other municipalities across the country, must consistently maintain infrastructure, offer high-quality constituent services and drive a healthy fiscal posture," Hampton said.

According to Schiff Hardin partner Leah Sears, who has worked with Hampton on some key cases and projects within the city of Atlanta, in her six years as city attorney, Hampton has defended the city's pension reform plan, which is projected to save Atlanta more than \$270 million in the next 10 years; public financing for the Atlanta Beltline as well as the new Atlanta Falcons stadium; and the many lawsuits arising out of the opening of the international concourse at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, to name just a few.

"Cathy is smart and skilled, but more importantly, she's a gifted manager," Sears said. "Her people skills and intuitive leadership style have also earned her a great deal of respect in her department and throughout the city. Cathy's energy for law and justice is not only passionate and palpable, but it excites those around her and inspires all to do better."

According to Sears, Hampton mentors young men and women interested in law and works to promote equal access initiatives for young people while working to develop the next generation of public service lawyers through internships and her department's summer associate program.

"I take great pride in developing young talent and spurring career growth. Developing young talent secures the future ability of the department to continue providing excellent service to the city," Hampton said. "These young lawyers have worked on a variety of substantial legal work, from litigation to bond finance to novel film projects. Junior private sector lawyers are rarely exposed to this breadth of work as quickly as these young lawyers have been."

Hampton also serves as board director for the Women's Resource Center, as an advisory board member of VOX Teen Communications and on the board of Planned Parenthood in addition to chairing the Atlanta Women's Foundation Economic Justice Program.

"While in corporate practice, I never lost focus on giving back to the community; however, my current role allows me to give in a special, hands-on fashion," Hampton said.

OUTSTANDING GENERAL COUNSEL SMALL

Since accepting the role of general counsel for Arby's Restaurant Group Inc. in 2005, Nils Okeson has helped steer the company through some significant legal transformations, including evolution of the company's then-NYSE-traded corporate parent, Triarc Companies Inc.

While serving as Triarc's general counsel, Okeson helped lead efforts to transform the company into a pure-play restaurant company through the sale or disposition of unrelated businesses and business interests owned by Triarc. In 2008, Okeson guided Arby's through a merger with Wendy's International Inc. to form the Wendy's/Arby's Group Inc. He also helped lead the subsequent integration of Wendy's and formation of a shared services center in Atlanta, providing corporate support to both brands.

In 2011, Okeson facilitated the sale of Arby's to private equity firm, Roark Capital Group, after which he remained with Arby's and took on additional executive management responsibilities. In addition to this merger and acquisition activity, Okeson also spearheaded multiple nine-figure financings—all while battling the recession's impact on corporate credit and consumer spending.

"Managing through change is part of doing business," said Okeson, who had spent 15 years in private practice as a transactional attorney at Alston & Bird prior to joining Arby's. "The key to managing through change is alignment among leadership. When the leadership team is fully aligned, anything is possible."

Lisa Storey, Arby's franchise and litigation counsel senior director, said Okeson's leadership has helped her grow professionally and personally.

"Over the years, I have worked with many strong and competent general counsels, but none more impressive than Nils Okeson," Storey said. "During my seven years with Arby's, Nils has tirelessly collaborated with his team to provide superior legal service while cognizant of the needs and goals of the Arby's business, all done in an expedient fashion and with high integrity every time. He always conducts himself with professionalism and an unwavering commitment to Arby's core values, particularly 'work hard, get it done and play fair.'"

Okeson's primary goal is to provide objective, thorough, precise and well-communicated explanations of legal risk, to enable the team to get back to business, all while not losing sight of the big picture, he said.

"I recognize the need to provide actionable legal advice in real-time during business meetings and strategy sessions so that the wind is not taken out of the creative process by answering questions with, 'I'll get back to you,'" he said. "Sometimes that answer is unavoidable, of course, but I try to minimize it so the pace of business decision-making does not get bogged down."

One of the most impactful things any corporate counsel can do to improve personal job performance, as well as the company's, is to learn as much as possible about accounting and finance, Okeson said.

"It is the universal language of business," he said. "It transcends functional areas and even borders. It is what is spoken at executive team meetings and in board rooms."

Beyond that, Okeson said, corporate counsel should treat colleagues in other departments as clients who deserve excellent customer service just like the best clients of a law firm.

“Even though you have a captive client in-house, you still need to earn their business every day,” Okeson said. “There are lots of other lawyers out there who would love to have a chance to do it better than you.”

OUTSTANDING NON-GENERAL COUNSEL LARGE

In the heavily regulated field of insurance, the stakes are high and mistakes can be costly.

That is why it is more critical than ever for insurance company corporate counsel team leaders such as Jensen Melton to effectively manage legal issues and the litigation that can sometimes follow.

“High-profile security issues haven’t just affected my job, they affect my sleep,” said Jensen, who heads the internal operations counsel team for Aflac Inc. in Columbus. “Being in the health industry, protection of data has always been a priority. However, the stakes continue to rise. It’s no longer just knowing and implementing the best practices, technologies, and frameworks. It’s also knowing that all of those could fail you, and having a plan for the company when that happens.”

Melton is the Non-General Counsel Large award winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards.

When she joined Aflac in 2007 as a staff attorney, then moved up to associate counsel, Melton worked on marketing-related legal issues such as sponsorship and advertising agreements, and helped finalize a multi-million dollar sponsorship agreement with Roush Fenway Racing, in which Aflac became primary sponsor of the Roush Fenway No. 99 entry in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series.

“When we embarked on a NASCAR sponsorship, that was something Aflac hadn’t done before,” Melton said. “I had to learn how to negotiate and how to speak the language on the fly. I also had to educate my colleagues about the contracts — that a sponsorship is not a blanket right to do whatever you want. It was a demanding, and ultimately rewarding, process for all of us.”

In 2013, she was promoted to counsel and head of the internal operations team in Aflac’s U.S. Legal Affairs, where she has primary responsibility for managing claims-related litigation and providing advice and counsel on claims payment practices. She also assumed responsibility as primary counsel for the business units of product development and internal operations, including compliance with information management and records retention policies and procedures.

Melton is also experienced in HIPAA. With security issues making headlines, she was recently tasked with helping guide Aflac through cyber-security and information governance initiatives. She has also improved her team’s turnaround times.

“I’m part of a team, and I have the time to truly know and understand the people I’m working with,” Melton said. “I also have the time to research issues thoroughly and make cross-functional inquiries. People are not just looking at me to give a legal opinion. I am able to look at issues holistically and present varied options.”

Christopher Bazzell was hired to work as associate counsel on Melton’s team in 2013.

“She consistently organizes and facilitates activities that bring our team of lawyers and non-lawyers together,” Bazzell said. “She also takes a team approach to reporting our team’s performance and improving our performance. For example, on a weekly basis, she creates and distributes graphs, charts and metrics in the form of a scoreboard for our internal operations team.”

OUTSTANDING NON-GENERAL COUNSEL SMALL

As vice president and deputy general counsel for Consolidated Container Co. (CCC), Matt Patterson’s contributions can be illustrated through figures:

He has achieved a greater than 90 percent win rate on the company’s labor arbitrations;

He has reduced outside counsel fees on commercial and labor and employment litigation by more than 60 percent;

Under his supervision, CCC’s open reserves on workers’ comp matters have been reduced by more than \$700,000.

But the significance of his work at the plastic packaging and recycling manufacturer goes further than numbers can illustrate, according to Owen Hill, partner at Littler Mendelson, who has known Patterson since 2004 when Patterson was an attorney in the labor and employment group at King & Spalding.

“Matt is one of the smartest, hardest-working people I know. He has a practical and real-world approach to problem-solving and creating solutions which makes him both a wonderful counselor and critical business partner,” said Hill, who has also worked with Patterson in Patterson’s current role at CCC. “What sets Matt apart from his peers is his ability to think and act as a strategic business partner.”

Patterson has served in multiple business roles at CCC in addition to his legal responsibilities. From 2012-2015, he co-led the company’s human resource department and has led numerous HR initiatives, including implementation of “Fast Track”, a training/on-boarding program for new plant managers; a comprehensive learning management system; and he led a cross-functional team on the creation and implementation of a crisis prevention and response program.

Since 2013, he has also led the company’s risk management department and in that role is responsible for managing the company’s insurance portfolio, risk-avoidance programs and claims filed under CCC’s worker’s compensation, property and casualty policies.

“Put simply, the business roles helped me become a better solutions provider in the legal role,” Patterson said. “After serving in these business roles, I have a much better understanding and appreciation of the challenges and complexities of the business and stronger partnerships with the business leaders. This allows me to offer better, and more strategic legal advice that helps the company achieve its business objectives.”

In 2012, Matt played a pivotal role in Bain Capital’s \$800 million acquisition of Consolidated Container and again in 2014 with CCC’s acquisition of Envision Plastics.

“The sale process was challenging and time-consuming for many individuals in the company, but it was a great learning experience,” Patterson said.

Patterson's role also includes resolving a large percentage of commercial and employee disputes pre-litigation, handling all labor arbitrations, leading cross-functional teams on labor contract negotiations, preparing administrative charge responses and providing guidance and support to the business units.

SOLO CORPORATE COUNSEL

Eric Broome was named first internal general counsel at Georgia's Own Credit Union in 2008 and has single-handedly created the company's corporate legal department, an integral piece of its infrastructure as the company has grown through mergers, acquisitions and general field of membership expansions.

The 65 percent rise in assets, 58 percent increase in membership and growth of assets from \$990 million to \$1.9 billion since that time has also necessitated significant operational investments in technology and capital alike, placing Broome in the position to protect the credit union's short- and long-term interests in the related contracts.

Broome is the Solo Corporate Counsel award winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards.

"Eric has not only provided exceptional corporate counsel for Georgia's Own Credit Union, but he has played a fundamental role in the organization's strategic development since his arrival in 2006," said Georgia's Own CEO David Preter. "In short, we would not be the credit union we are today without his innumerable contributions."

Broome has been involved with the credit union's mergers from a due diligence perspective and has also headed the regulatory approval process with both the Georgia Department of Banking and Finance and the National Credit Union Administration (NCUA). He has also helped manage contract negotiations with vendors.

"Those negotiations can always be difficult, and working to come to a mutually beneficial agreement is something I think I have played a big role in, and actually excel at doing," Broome said.

One reason for Broome's success within Georgia's Own stems from a holistic understanding of the company's operations and business objectives, according to Preter.

"For the first year Eric was with the credit union, he completed an exhaustive upper management trainee program, which included stints within branch and call center operations, lending support, collections, payment services, accounting, marketing, new business development and human resources," Preter said.

In addition to his responsibilities as legal counsel, Broome also oversees compliance requirements for the credit union.

DIVERSITY CHAMPION

When Alison Danaceau met Sloane Perras at a continuing education event five years ago, she noticed that Perras asked thought-provoking questions about workplace diversity.

After getting to know Perras better, Danaceau recognized that Perras, now chief legal officer for The Krystal Co. and On The Border, wasn't just giving lip service to diversity issues, nor did she simply support diversity by sponsoring and hiring diverse attorneys to work with her.

"Sloane appreciates that diversity initiatives are evolving. They aren't just about hiring and promoting women, alternative lifestyle or minority candidates any more," said Danaceau, an attorney with Atlanta firm Bodker, Ramsey, Andrews, Winograd and Wildstein who served as a mentor to Perras. "Rather, (she has) an increasing appreciation that we thrive best as a society if all people are offered the opportunity to succeed. Sloane promotes diversity by ensuring that each attorney she engages with has opportunities."

Perras is the Diversity Champion winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards.

At Krystal Co., Perras is responsible for all aspects of legal practice, including franchise, intellectual property, mergers and acquisitions, employment and vendor management. Last year, on her one-year anniversary of joining the company in May 2013 as its first general counsel, she also assumed responsibility for the risk department. In that position, Perras has developed and implemented short-term and long-term legal strategies for crisis management, reducing the number of claims for the company.

Perras has worked to control Krystal's legal spend, stay abreast of the restaurant industry's regulations — including health insurance, menu labeling and minimum wage requirements — and ensure Krystal's profitability. She has reduced outside legal costs significantly through insourcing and partnerships with outside lawyers, firms and vendors.

The Krystal Co. is part of an industry facing a more insistent regulatory environment. As time goes on, the regulatory environment worldwide will be affecting the industry, said Perras, who has served as the vice president of special programs for the Association of Corporate Counsel Georgia Chapter.

RISING STAR

A little less than three years ago, Paula Briceno joined Crawford & Co. as a legal intern through the University of Georgia School of Law's Corporate Counsel Externship Program.

Since then, Briceno has been part of Crawford's legal team. Today, in her capacity as corporate counsel, Briceno advises the company on a diversity of matters ranging from commercial transactions to data privacy and security.

"As a junior attorney joining the ranks of a team of seasoned attorneys, demonstrating the value I add to the organization seemed like an insurmountable task," said Briceno, Rising Star award winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards.

However, Briceno's determination to go above and beyond the regular scope of her duties allowed her to identify opportunities to improve the company's sanctions screening process, develop a corporate framework to expand social media presence and enhance the company's data privacy and security practices through enhancement of its third-party risk management practices.

"I leveraged the power of teamwork and connections to build strong relationships across the enterprise, engaging stakeholders in information technology, human resources, marketing and procurement to advance these initiatives,"

Briceno said. "As a result, Crawford now boasts a home-grown, state-of-the-art sanctions screening system, and we are making great strides in the social media and data privacy fronts."

The results Briceno delivered within the data privacy field led to her to become Crawford's first privacy legal counsel.

A member of the Association of Corporate Counsel Georgia Chapter, Briceno has taken leadership roles with the organization's special programs committee.

"Paula plays a key role in planning upwards of 20 programs annually as a volunteer member of our chapter," said Sloane Perras, chief legal officer of The Krystal Co. and On The Border.

Briceno has been nominated for the board of directors for the Atlanta Bar Association Corporate Counsel Division for 2015-2016.

Her advice to young attorneys? "Know your company inside and out."

EMPLOYMENT/LABOR SPECIALIST

Defending The Home Depot Inc. (NYSE: HD) against employment litigation while keeping outside legal fees down has earned Stephanie Aferiat the admiration of her peers.

As Home Depot associate general counsel of employment law, Aferiat is responsible for managing in-house and outside counsel defending employment litigation, agency charges, claims and related matters, providing advice on wide range of employment law issues impacting the company's large work force and developing initiatives to manage costs and risk.

"Spiraling legal costs is an ever-present challenge facing in-house legal departments," said Aferiat, the Employment/Labor Specialist winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards. "Over the last eight years, I have worked to develop, implement, and refine an innovative alternative fee platform for managing our outside legal spending while aligning outside counsel's interests with our internal goals."

Through the process, Home Depot had firms bid for handling a portfolio of work, typically a type of litigation and related matters in a particular territory, for a one-year period for a fixed fee. Another platform was for all employment class-action work. The company had initial success in the employment arena and then rolled out similar programs across other parts of the legal department. Ranging from employment and benefits to general liability, commercial litigation, patents and a long-standing, fixed-fee program for merger and acquisitions transactions, the arrangements share the basic principle of using a core group of retainer counsel to handle a portfolio of cases or corporate/transactional matters in their area of expertise for a fixed fee, Aferiat said.

As a result of the program, Home Depot has reduced annual legal fees by 45 to 55 percent since 2008 and can predict approximately 70 to 75 percent of annual legal fees.

"Her business acumen is spot-on," said Home Depot Assistant General Counsel Wanda Morris. "Stephanie's efforts helped The Home Depot's employment law group design one of most successful alternative billing arrangements with its outside counsel."

Prior to Home Depot, Aferiat worked at Paul Hastings in Atlanta.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (IP) SPECIALIST

In 2007, Cox Communications was sued for patent infringement by Verizon Wireless.

"It was the first patent case filed by a competitor, and it was a bet-the-company type of case," said Cox Assistant General Counsel Marcus Delgado, the Intellectual Property Specialist winner in the 2015 Corporate Counsel Awards.

The case was filed in the Eastern District of Virginia, which utilizes a "rocket docket" where even large patent cases can go to trial within a year. Verizon was seeking significant damages from Cox. In addition, it sought an injunction to shut down Cox Communications' VoIP telephone service.

"I managed the case for Cox and worked with the business team to determine our defenses and look for possible alternative technologies," Delgado said. "Fortunately, our attorneys from Kilpatrick Townsend won the case at trial for Cox, and invalidated two of their patents in the process."

Though that was one of his most memorable contributions during his time as an intellectual property attorney, Delgado has over 21 years of experience as an IP attorney, having worked in private practice and for large telecommunications companies in their in-house legal departments. Since stepping into his current role with Cox 11 years ago, he defines the IP strategy for the company, created and oversees the patent prosecution program and manages all of its IP-related legal matters.

According to Audra Dial, partner at Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP who worked with Delgado on the Verizon case, Delgado has a wealth of knowledge in intellectual property law, including patent prosecution, patent litigation, patent licensing, trademark and copyright litigation, IP due diligence, IP transactional counseling and IP training.

"He is creative and strategic in assessing opportunities for IP protection and in creating strategies for resolution of IP disputes," Dial said. "He works tirelessly to ensure that Cox's IP needs are met and that he is thinking about ways to take the IP strategy further. He has single-handedly set the path for the growth and expansion of Cox Communications' intellectual property portfolio."

Delgado frequently speaks on IP protection and IP strategy at conferences.

LITIGATION SPECIALIST

After taking on the role of chief litigation counsel for Crawford & Co. in 2012, Elizabeth Robertson immediately began to look for ways to refine the company's litigation management procedures.

"Internally, I initiated a project to transition the internal management of our pre-suit and litigated matters into an electronic matter management system," said Robertson, the Litigation Specialist winner in the 2015 Corporate

Counsel Awards.

The system allowed her team “to view the different dimensions of our claims and proactively manage our cost of risk through analytics, dashboards and other data management tools,” she said.

Externally, Robertson launched a request for proposals in 2013 to select a law firm to serve as Crawford & Co.’s national coordinating counsel. “My goal was to select a law firm with whom we could develop a long-term relationship so that we could together develop the most effective and efficient litigation strategies to successfully resolve our cases,” Robertson said.

Crawford & Co. launched a partnership with Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz PC in March 2014.

“We are already reaping the benefits of streamlining routine litigation and discovery activity through the use of one law firm to coordinate and maintain consistency across our nationwide docket of cases,” Robertson said, adding that the partnership has “positioned us to implement value-based fee arrangements to better control spend and improve predictability of our legal expenses.”

Since joining Crawford in 2008 as corporate counsel, Robertson was appointed chief litigation counsel in 2012, was later promoted to vice president, and was appointed a corporate officer by the company’s board of directors in 2014.

In her role as vice president — chief litigation counsel, she manages all aspects of disputes and commercial litigation for the independent claims management company.

Robertson’s rise at Crawford & Co. is a testament to her litigation expertise, according to Key Wynn, corporate counsel for YKK Corporation of America, who serves with Robertson in the Georgia Chapter of the Association of Corporate Counsel

Association of Corporate Counsel Georgia Chapter

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