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‘Treat your employees like you treat your boss’

Marconi juggles management duties, law practice at Johnson & Bell Ltd.

BY JOHN FLYNN ROONEY
Law Bulletin staff writer

When Joseph R. Marconi joined Johnson & Bell Ltd. 25 years ago, it was mostly known as an insurance defense law firm.

At the time, Marconi became the firm's 38th lawyer. He now serves as a vice president of the 115-lawyer firm.

“Our genesis was insurance defense,” said Marconi, who also heads the firm's business litigation and professional liability groups. “But it's evolved over the years.”

Johnson & Bell is now known outside Chicago as a national firm that represents businesses, including insurance companies.

The firm's client roster includes Walgreen Co., ExxonMobil, Volkswagen, Atlas Copco and Panda Express.

The firm has 10 practice groups, including one that defends against toxic tort cases throughout the country. The professional liability section lawyers defend doctors and hospitals in Illinois and Indiana and represent other lawyers in malpractice cases.

As a firm vice president and executive committee member, Marconi works with William V. Johnson, the firm's president and executive committee chair, and other committee members.

“I try to talk to (Johnson) about developing new ideas and then put them into action,” Marconi said. “You try to make things better around the edges and slowly things get better.”

Other executive committee

members Marconi works with to run day-to-day operations include Robert M. Burke, John A. Childers and Joseph B. Carini III.

Marconi and the others address business-related matters such as personnel issues, client conflicts and the firm's office lease.

“It's important to get a consensus for whatever you do,” Marconi said.

Johnson said Marconi typically arrives at the office by 7 a.m. and works there on weekends. Marconi ensures the firm's policies are up to date and he works closely with its administrative staff, Johnson said.

“He's very important to the management of the law firm,” Johnson said. “He spends a lot of time on administrative work making sure the firm runs properly.”

Marconi maintains an open-door policy for employees to drop in and talk.

“I like to deal with people one-on-one and you can get to the heart of the matter,” Marconi said. “I try to treat everyone like a professional.”

The firm's managers try to leave the lawyers alone so they can effectively represent clients.

“We don't micromanage our lawyers,” Marconi said. “We have a good group and we trust them.”

Marconi's goals for the firm include continuing to develop its national client base. He also wants the firm to gradually grow.

On average, Johnson & Bell increases its roster of lawyers by between 3 percent and 5 percent annually.

“We're not looking for quick growth,” he said.

During the recession that started



Joseph R. Marconi
Vice President, Johnson & Bell Ltd.

- **Locations:** Chicago and Crown Point, Ind.
- **Size:** Declined to reveal 2012 revenue figures
- **Lawyers:** 115
- **Age:** 63
- **Law school:** The John Marshall Law School, 1976
- **Interests:** Swimming, reading historical fiction, following the Chicago Bears and Chicago Cubs

in 2007, the firm didn't lay off any employees.

“The recession slowed us down, but things are building back up again,” Marconi said.

Johnson & Bell has between 20 and 30 lawyers with extensive trial experience. That factor, combined with the firm's competitive billing rate structure, positions Johnson & Bell to attract new corporate clients.

“They are determining that our work is as good as, if not better, than the services they get from a big firm,” Marconi said. “We have experienced lawyers working on files. They don't always get that at a big firm.”

Johnson & Bell is a member of ALFA International, a global legal network, and the firm markets itself through that group.

Marconi also works with the firm's chief financial officer and human resources director. He spends between 20 percent to 25 percent of his time on firm management matters.

“It's in fits and starts,” Marconi said.

If Marconi is trying a case and management issues arise, other firm officials step in and handle those office-related matters. In his law practice, Marconi regularly represents professionals and companies in business disputes.

“I'm a trial lawyer, but in the non-personal-injury area,” Marconi said.

He's represented clients in three jury trials so far this year.

For the past 25 years, Marconi has served as general counsel for ISBA Mutual Insurance Co. That company is owned by Illinois lawyers and provides liability insurance coverage for them.

Leonard F. Amari, a partner at Amari & Locallo, taught Marconi in law school and was an Illinois State Bar Association officer when the insurance company was formed. Amari suggested that Marconi become the company's general counsel.

Marconi's “been the company's alter ego since,” Amari said. “For the most part, every time we have a big case, a heater case, we give it to him.”

Amari called Marconi, “even-tempered, gentle, observant and mature.”

As a youth, Marconi worked in his father's family baking company in Chicago Heights. He also worked at his mother's family's towing and auto parts business.

In college, he played offensive tackle for the Iowa State University football team.

While later working as a football coach at Iowa State, he decided to pursue a legal career. He attended The John Marshall Law School and graduated from there in 1976.

Marconi initially worked for a sole practitioner and then started his own law firm. He next joined Johnson & Bell in 1988.

As for his management style, Marconi draws on advice he once received from his father.

“My dad told me you have to treat your employees like you treat your boss,” he said. “I try to remember that.”