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Building on others' strengths

Skadden's Duwe proud of firm's attorney lineup; he sees job as blending talent with future goals

BY JOHN FLYNN ROONEY
Law Bulletin staff writer

In the 1980s, lawyers helped Brian W. Duwe restructure parts of his family's construction-related business. They also showed him a legal career was something he wanted to pursue.

"I found myself liking and enjoying what they brought to the table," said Duwe, who now leads Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP's Chicago office. "I decided to shift gears and go to law school."

After graduating from Dartmouth College in 1982, Duwe was chief financial officer of his family's company for several years. In the early 1980s, the company struggled with high interest rates and fuel costs, prompting him to hire attorneys to help retool the business.

Three decades later, Duwe now has a practice focused on mergers and acquisitions and corporate finance matters. He's only the second head of the firm's Chicago office, which opened in 1984 and now has 150 lawyers.

He succeeded Wayne W. Whalen in 2010.

"I came into the role with the approach of, if it isn't broken then don't fix it," Duwe said. "We're trying to continue to build on the success that Wayne and many others developed over the years."

Skadden is a global firm that originated in New York and has about 1,600 lawyers working in 23 offices.

The firm's corporate group is a core practice area. The Chicago office also has a finance practice

group, a tax group, a real estate group and about 20 lawyers in its restructuring group.

But its largest group involves its litigation practice, with about 40 lawyers here. That roster includes Patrick J. Fitzgerald, the former U.S. attorney in Chicago, who joined the firm as a partner in 2012.

"With the addition of Pat Fitzgerald two years ago, we are very excited and enthused about where that practice is going and how it's developing," Duwe said. "In some ways, I think the reputation has yet to catch up with the talent we have on the ground here."

The main challenge Duwe faces is balancing his client and management duties. He spends about 60 percent of his time on client matters and the remainder on firm issues.

"It seems like two full-time jobs some days," he said.

Duwe said he works collaboratively with the firm's lawyers.

"I see my role as serving our clients and serving our lawyers and our staff," Duwe said. "I think you need to come at the role of leading this kind of group with a good dose of humility and understand that you need to more often serve and support than direct."

To that end, Duwe came up with the idea for the partners in the Chicago office to serve breakfast to employees on an annual staff appreciation day.

Duwe's goals for the Chicago office include further developing already strong practice groups. That effort would include focusing on developing new client relationships.



Brian W. Duwe

Office Leader, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Revenue:** Declined to reveal 2013 figure
- **Lawyers:** 150
- **Offices:** 54
- **Law school:** University of Chicago Law School, 1987
- **Organizations:** Member of the board of directors of the Chicago Urban League, Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession, Chicago Shakespeare Theater and member of The Commercial Club of Chicago and Economic Club of Chicago
- **Interests:** Sailing in Michigan, photographing his five children and landscapes, playing golf, cooking Thanksgiving dinner

"I would like to see each of our practices in Chicago recognized as the go-to practice in the Midwest," he said.

Another important goal is attracting more diverse lawyers. In the past several years, Skadden's Chicago office experienced a significant increase in the diversity of its new lawyer hires, Duwe said, though he declined to provide specific numbers.

"You need to have diversity in the early classes of new lawyers coming in," he said. "But it is also important for us to continue to foster diversity at the senior levels and among our partners.

We look forward to doing that as these younger classes progress."

After taking over as leader of Skadden's office, Duwe immediately focused on diversity, said Charles F. Smith Jr., a Skadden partner who also attended the University of Chicago Law School with Duwe.

"It's evidence of his thoughtfulness and his business sense," Smith said.

Duwe has gained the respect of the Chicago office's lawyers and support staff, he said.

"I think Brian naturally builds bridges between people and helps bring out their individual strengths," Smith said.

Duwe "is very good at making sure that each of his partners sees the strengths of the other partners and not just the differences," Smith said.

Skadden lawyers work closely together across practice groups and firm offices, Duwe said.

Duwe was born and raised in Oshkosh, Wis. When he went to law school in the mid-1980s, the M&A business was in the midst of a boom. Whalen hired Duwe during an on-campus interview at the University of Chicago Law School. Duwe started with the firm as a summer associate in 1986.

At that time, Skadden's Chicago office had about 20 lawyers.

Among Skadden's current clients in M&A deals are Ball Technologies Inc. and 21st Century Fox. Skadden's Chicago office clients include Archer Daniels Midland Co. (ADM), Hillshire Brands and Wisconsin Energy Corp.

"There has been a tremendous surge in M&A activity in the first half of this year," Duwe said.

"The simple way to think of it is as pent-up demand."

Since the recession, M&A activity has been depressed because of the political climate both in the U.S. and internationally, he said.

"I think there is a greater confidence among executives in the current climate, even though we have a degree of political instability around the world," Duwe said. "From my perspective, we expect (the M&A

activity level) to continue, at least in the near term.”

Along with ADM, Duwe’s clients include Kemper Corp., Exelon Corp. and Kraft Foods.

In 2010, Duwe represented CF Industries Holdings Inc. in its unsolicited \$4.7 billion acquisition of Terra Industries, both fertilizer makers, and its simultaneous defense of a hostile offer by Agrium Inc.

“That was a chess board in three dimensions,” Smith said of the CF Industries matter. “Brian has a very good ability to be the calm in the center of a storm.”

Douglas C. Barnard, senior vice president and general counsel for CF Industries, continues working closely with Duwe.

Skadden’s work on the CF

Industries transaction was “widely regarded as an innovative approach to a well-publicized takeover battle,” Barnard said.

He said Duwe shows good judgment and is thoughtful and creative.

“He’s not afraid to speak up and tell you when something’s a bad idea,” Barnard said.

Skadden’s Chicago office is

celebrating its 30th anniversary by focusing on 30 acts of giving, both by in-kind and money contributions. The details are still being finalized.

“The goal is to have 30 discrete charitable- and community-focused events to give back to the community that has embraced us as one of its own these past 30 years,” Duwe said.