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EXPANSION AT A TIME OF VOLATILITY

Eric Daniels beefed up the ranks of an ambitious Robinson & Cole

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

Even during the best of times, Eric Daniels works too much, sleeps too little and has to constantly remind himself to eat enough. He juggles running a major law firm and coaching his children's youth sports teams, so stress is a constant companion. Last year, he worked himself right into a bout with pneumonia.

So it's easy to see how the anxiety meter might have redlined this fall when Daniels's firm, Robinson & Cole, was in the midst of delicate negotiations to add dozens of lawyers during a time of national economic turmoil.

He concedes that colleagues and family checked on him to make sure he was taking care of himself. In the end, it was all worth it. It appears that both Daniels and his firm have emerged in a healthy state. "It was really challenging in an exhilarating kind of way," Daniels said. "There were a lot of long days."

During a year that saw New Haven's Tyler Cooper dissolve and two regional firms – Hinckley, Allen & Snyder of Providence and LeClairRyan of Virginia – move into Connecticut, perhaps the boldest moves among Connecticut law firms were made by Robinson & Cole.

Dealing With Thelen

October 21 started as a typically busy day in the Hartford office of Robinson & Cole. The firm's partnership had spent the previous few weeks discussing the possibility of a major acquisition of lawyers.

Down the street, Thelen LLP was known to be on shaky ground, and word was the bicoastal firm was looking to merge with a national firm and expand in size. Partners in Thelen's Hartford office were uncertain whether a bigger firm would think of keeping

open their approximately 30-lawyer shop at CityPlace. They had been in contact with Robinson & Cole in late September to discuss the possibility of joining the long-established Hartford firm.

Robinson & Cole's partners were going to meet amongst themselves on Nov. 10 to further explore the opportunity and determine if the fit was right. They were not yet ready to make a final decision.

Then on that October morning, Daniels, Robinson & Cole's managing partner, received a visit from Thelen attorneys Dennis Cavanaugh and Mitchell Fishberg. Thelen's management committee had decided to dissolve the firm, acknowledging that so many partners had defected during the year that Thelen was violating its agreement with the bank. Cavanaugh and Fishberg explained everything in painstaking and emotional detail.

"I said, 'So what you're telling me is that November 10 needs to be the night we vote on this?'" Daniels recalled. "And they said, 'Yes.' That's when it really changed."

The vote passed with overwhelming support, and in mid-November Robinson & Cole expanded its roster to nearly 260 lawyers after picking up 34 from Thelen. Robinson &



Jesse Neider

As managing partner, Eric Daniels guided Robinson & Cole through an aggressive second half of 2008 during which the firm added nearly 40 lawyers to its roster.

Cole also hired 17 non-attorney staffers from Thelen's Hartford office.

It was not the first acquisition for Robinson & Cole this year. In the summer, it took advantage of Dewey & LeBoeuf's decision to close its Hartford office to focus on more major markets. Daniels and his team bolstered its environmental practice with three top-flight Dewey & LeBoeuf practitioners.

'Conscious Decisions'

Daniels said Robinson & Cole entered 2008 with growth opportunities on its mind. That strategy never changed, even as the year unfolded and some law firms became victim to a "volatility that I don't think any of us had seen before," Daniels noted.



DOZEN WHO **MADE A DIFFERENCE**

At a time when firms throughout the country were laying off attorneys or going under, Robinson & Cole emerged locally as a firm with a bullish attitude.

"The success we enjoyed this year is not just the result of dumb luck," said Daniels, noting that the firm will exceed its 2008 projections of 3 percent growth in revenue. "It's the result of a lot of planning and conscious decisions we've made."

Some of the planning involved the desire to enhance certain practice areas in certain offices, which was accomplished in both lawyer acquisitions. Daniels said the firm also benefited from its decision last year to create practice group business plans that outlined long-term growth initiatives.

The firm's success also is the result of professional connections. In both the Dewey & LeBoeuf and Thelen acquisitions, initial discussions were held with attorneys on the other side who were either former Robinson

& Cole associates or had previously practiced with current Robinson & Cole attorneys.

Environmental attorney Ronald Zdrojeski was the first point of contact at Dewey & LeBoeuf this summer. He was a Robinson & Cole associate in the 1980s and maintained contact with several of his former colleagues, including Daniels, after he left. David Greene and Peter Knight also made the move.

Growth is "one part strategic and one part opportunistic," Daniels said. "We didn't necessarily need more environmental people, but when the opportunity presented itself we didn't want to pass on it."

The first contact with Thelen came through Cavanaugh, who has longtime friendships with several Robinson & Cole lawyers. Once Thelen's dissolution was announced, said Daniels, the deal "was a fast-moving train that started moving even faster."

Daniels was a man in the middle: "On one hand, I was trying to sell Thelen partners on

Robinson & Cole and on the other hand I was selling Robinson & Cole on the Thelen partners. I was brokering both sides of a deal that was constantly changing."

Near the end, the deal expanded to include some New York-based Thelen attorneys that beefed up Robinson & Cole's intellectual property practice in Manhattan. After the Thelen agreement was announced, the new Robinson & Cole lawyers had about three weeks to be set up to practice in their new office space.

For 2009, Daniels remains "cautiously optimistic" about his firm's opportunities in the marketplace, but for now, he's making sure everyone gets settled into their positions and integrated into Robinson & Cole.

"There's nothing major on our strategic drawing board right now," Daniels said before adding, maybe only half-jokingly, "but given what's been happening, that might change next week." ■