



Interview With Brooke Tassoni

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For over 150 years, Cargill has been helping farmers prosper, connecting markets and advancing the food and agricultural business to sustainably nourish the world. Today it's the world's largest privately held company, with customers in 70 countries and regions and 155,000 employees. And because Cargill touches every part of the global food chain, the company's legal department contends with a vast range of issues and risks every day, from bio-industrial issues to animal nutrition to workplace safety.

Brooke Tassoni is a senior lawyer and litigation practice team lead at Cargill. She received her J.D. from the University of Minnesota Law School after graduating from Carleton College. After five years at Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi in Minneapolis, she started working at Cargill in 2006. She leads the company's six-person United States litigation team and is the lead lawyer for their global insurance group.

She agreed to an interview with Corporate Policyholder to talk about how lawyers work at Cargill.

CP: Can you talk a little bit about your role at Cargill and what falls under your purview?

Brooke Tassoni: I lead our litigation team in the U.S. and support our global insurance function. The legal issues Cargill faces are very diverse, and our litigation portfolio is diverse as a result. Our team deals with multiple areas of law on any given day.

CP: What are the most significant legal issues confronting Cargill today?

BT: As business becomes more global, our issues become more complex. At Cargill, we're focused on maintaining excellence in our core business areas – ensuring that products we produce to nourish the world are safe and that

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we're operating in a responsible, ethical manner. Like other global businesses, however, we face increasingly complex issues in managing cross-border relationships, global compliance, data privacy and cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence.

CP: What are your own principal concerns and those of Cargill's legal department?

BT: Safety is a huge priority both in terms of the products we produce and our environment and business operations. It's a key concern, if not the key concern, for our business professionals and our lawyers.

CP: What's one responsibility or issue that you put energy into each working day and why?

BT: My focus each day is managing risk in a way that's both cost-effective and pragmatic for my clients. That effort bleeds into all our work, whether it be litigation, contracts, regulatory, or general advice and counsel.

CP: Who manages the defense of a lawsuit that's covered by insurance?

BT: Because of our unique insurance structure, we typically manage our own matters and choose our own counsel, cooperating with our carriers at various levels, when necessary. For the most part, coverage is not typically established until after a matter is over, so we run some coverage risks with that kind of structure. We're fortunate to have carriers with whom we have had long, successful relationships, and we're typically able to solve issues without resorting to litigation. On occasion, however, we do find ourselves in a dispute, particularly when legacy policies are in play.

CP: Talk about the client-law firm relationship, how it's evolving and what Cargill looks for in its outside legal counsel.

BT: What we seek is value – the optimum balance between cost and results. For some companies, the focus may be more on cost certainty or cost reduction. Given our diverse portfolio and our matter composition, we're focused on finding firms and lawyers who deliver a high-level, strategic performance at the right cost. We value partners who really understand our business, our culture and our goals. We have some unique needs, so it's important that our services are tailored and right-sized. We also need lawyers who can push a matter forward, which Barnes & Thornburg has done well.

CP: What does a diversified workplace mean to Cargill?

BT: We aim to have a workplace that is welcoming of people from all walks of life. Being a global company, Cargill actively recognizes that a diverse workplace makes good business sense by improving outcomes and workstreams. Diversity is becoming part of Cargill's culture – more and more each day.

CP: How does Cargill approach diversity to ensure that it's implemented at all levels?

BT: We have a global team and regional subgroups that address D&I in our own environment, as well as our procurement efforts. They sponsor education, policies and procedures that help us build more diverse workplaces at Cargill and in the larger community. We also participate in diverse lawyer resource groups like Diversity in Practice, among others.

CP: How can in-house counsel help minority lawyers

advance within the legal industry?

BT: In-house counsel can have a significant impact on diversity in the legal profession. First, corporations can align to retain firms who are consistently meeting diversity goals and who've demonstrated success with hiring and retaining diverse professionals. Second, in-house counsel can invest in diverse lawyers in the community by participating in the aforementioned resource groups, by mentoring diverse associates, and by seeking out diverse talent at all levels of practice. In-house counsel can also impact change at a matter level by insisting that diverse lawyers, both partners and associates, perform a certain percentage of work on individual matters.