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Lewis, D'Amato Has New Name, Office, Partners

By Renee Deger
The Recorder
July 3, 2002

Los Angeles-based insurance defense firm Lewis, D'Amato, Brisbois & Bisgaard on Tuesday unveiled a new name, a new office and a slew of new hires from two chief competitors.

The 340-lawyer firm — now called Lewis Brisbois Bisgaard & Smith — has raided about a dozen lawyers from San Francisco's Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold and two from a New York firm.

Starting work Monday were former Sedgwick partners Lane Ashley, a former managing partner of Sedgwick's L.A. office, Kristin Meredith and Michael Velladao. The trio has brought with them eight associates from 300-lawyer Sedgwick and anticipates hiring about a dozen more, said a Lewis spokeswoman.

Ashley said Sedgwick's strategic shift toward more corporate litigation is incompatible with his practice of representing insurance companies in bad faith and other kinds of suits.

"We thought it was time to look around, perhaps for a firm more dedicated to representing insurance companies," Ashley said.

Plus, the slimmer margins of insurance defense work no longer matched Sedgwick's push for premium, corporate litigation, Ashley said.

"As Sedgwick developed more corporate clients, their rates have increased and, to some extent, they have increased to the point where we have become a bit less competitive in trying to attract insurance business," Ashley said.

Sedgwick Chairman Kevin Dunne said the departures still leave the firm with about 35 lawyers who do insurance defense work.

"It's more of a psychological blow than an economic blow," Dunne said, adding Ashley will be missed by many partners. "He's a wonderful person and an excellent lawyer, and we hate to lose him."

For Lewis Brisbois, the new hires could be just the start of the firm's growth spurt, said Robert Lewis, the firm's managing partner. The firm is eyeing other markets in Arizona and Nevada, and is currently talking to prospective new hires, Lewis said. The firm now has seven offices.

The firm's New York office, its first out-of-state satellite, opened its doors Monday with two new hires from D'Amato & Lynch, partners Richard George and Jeffrey Gaylord.

The firm's long ties to insurance giant American International Group, commonly known as AIG, and other companies in New York prompted Lewis Brisbois to open up across the county, Lewis said.

The New York presence then prompted the firm to change its name, dropping "D'Amato" because of potential confusion with the long-established New York firm D'Amato & Lynch, Lewis said.

George D'Amato, who lent his name to both the L.A. and the N.Y. firms, is a partner at New York's D'Amato & Lynch, where he retained his affiliation while acting as special counsel for Lewis Brisbois, Lewis said. The firms shared a key client relationship, he said.