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'Tailor-made' to be a general counsel

By Amanda Robert

Law Bulletin staff writer



William J. Bowe

Executive Vice President, General Counsel and Secretary
Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Law school: University of Chicago Law School, 1967

Organizations: Illinois Governor's Appointee on three groups — Education Summit, Early Childhood Care and Education Work Group, Governor's Task Force on Workforce Preparation; and General Counsel, Illinois Governor's Task Force on School Finances

Interests: Traveling and Reading

William J. Bowe remembers when Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. primarily published and sold reference books. When he first started in 1986 as the company's executive vice president, general counsel and secretary, he worked with six lawyers and more than 2,000 other employees in Chicago. Since the dawn of the Internet era and Britannica's transition from its past "print-centric" business model, Bowe now works with just one assistant general counsel and alongside 200 other employees.

"The company now, because of the radical change it's gone through in its business model, is really an Internet company," he said. Bowe spends much of his time working on cross-border, electronic licensing agreements with foreign publishers, as nearly half of Britannica's revenue comes from outside the United States. He said these copyright and trademark licenses lead to the translation of Britannica reference databases at different reading levels and the delivery of the company's curated content all around the world. In addition to offices in several countries, including Korea, Japan and Australia, Bowe said the company has expanded into China, publishing works there in a variety of languages, and into India.

"That's been very exciting to be in the middle of a rapidly growing economy that offers potential markets for us to bring our products to," he said.

Frederick B. Thomas, partner in charge of Mayer, Brown LLP's Chicago office, met Bowe more than 20 years ago and now works with him as Britannica's outside counsel. He said Bowe is "tailor-made" to work as the company's general counsel.

"He's really a versatile, well-rounded lawyer, which seems totally in keeping with a company that has a well-rounded, versatile collection of activities and matters," he said.

Thomas said Bowe's involvement in international intellectual property protection, and his inquiring and personable nature, also make him an ideal fit for Britannica. Bowe grew up in the Near North Side and followed his father and uncle into law. While they practiced together in labor and employment, Bowe said he chose to pursue a general corporate practice.

"It seemed like an interesting way to spend your working life, even though I was inclined to do it in areas that they hadn't engaged in," Bowe said.

Bowe graduated from Yale University with a bachelor's degree in political science in 1964 and from the University of Chicago Law School in 1967. He worked as an associate at Ross & Hardies until 1968, when he joined the U.S. Army and worked in counterintelligence at the Pentagon. He returned to Chicago in 1971 and practiced in corporate matters as an associate and partner at Roan & Grossman.

In 1979, Bowe began what he calls his "first of three tours as general counsel for companies." He organized the first law department at The Bradford Exchange Ltd., a multinational diversified direct marketing corporation, where he worked as vice president for legal and corporate affairs and secretary for four years.

In 1984, he joined United Press International Inc., the international newswire service, in Nashville, Tenn., where he established the in-house law department and became the vice president, general counsel and secretary.

Bowe said UPI was fast-paced and competitive, so he was originally concerned when he joined Britannica that the reference publisher wouldn't be as interesting.

"That was a briefly held fear," he said. "Once I got here, I found complexity even then in international operations. "It was clear that here was a fascinating company with substantial activities around the globe. It does take a lot of time and effort in trying to keep up with everything."

David C. Hilliard, a senior partner at Pattishall, McAuliffe, Newbury, Hilliard & Geraldson LLP, met Bowe through his work as outside counsel for the Exchange and Britannica. He said Bowe arrives at work each morning before 6 a.m., so he can work uninterrupted by phone calls or meetings.

"He's very smart, and he's very thorough," Hilliard said. "It gives him a chance to get all of his thinking and writing done before everything hits the wall."

Hilliard recalled one time at Britannica when Bowe was called into the office a few days before Christmas. Hilliard said Bowe thought he might be fired, but instead they made him employee of the year. "He has the humility that caused him to mentally prepare for the worst," Hilliard said. "But instead, he found himself the best of the company."

As the long-time general counsel for a publisher, Bowe said he watched as IP law adapted to the Internet and other digital media. When he was in law school, he said, students couldn't even take classes in patents, copyrights or trademarks. "It was a relatively minor area of the law and minor area of importance to the economy," Bowe said. "In the course of my practice, we've seen the rise of the information economy, growth of the Internet and the digital revolution."

In addition to serving in professional IP associations and teaching IP law at seminars and conferences, Bowe has worked to improve the state's educational system through service on several groups and task forces, including the governor's Task Force on School Finance and the Early Childhood Care and Education Work Group.

Bowe married his wife Cathy in 1979. The couple lives in Northbrook and has two sons, Andy, 30, and Patrick, 25. Bowe, a frequent traveler, said he's looking forward to an upcoming trip to France, Turkey and Bulgaria with his older son.