

Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP

By **Ben James**, ben.james@portfoliomedia.com

Thursday, February 08, 2007 --- When BellSouth was hit with a proposed race discrimination class action suit, the company turned to the labor and employment team at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP.

Four years after the suit was filed, BellSouth now faces only five plaintiffs instead of 25,000. The head of Morgan Lewis' Labor and Employment Law Practice Group says the case illustrates some of the firm's particular strengths.

BellSouth is based in Atlanta, and the case is located in Alabama, explained Steven R. Wall, a partner at Morgan Lewis and leader of the firm's labor and employment practice. Morgan Lewis doesn't have offices in either place, but assembled a group of attorneys from Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C. to tackle the suit.

The BellSouth team exemplifies the firm's integrated approach to serving clients, Wall said, pointing to that approach as a key factor that distinguishes Morgan Lewis from its competitors.

"We're really not office-centric," Wall said. "BellSouth hired us because they believed that the team we had put together could best serve its purpose."

"Our professional services are centralized on a national and international basis," Wall added. "We're not a collection of lawyers in offices, but rather we are centralized not only in our leadership, but in how we approach the areas and industries in which we work."

Another characteristic that sets Morgan Lewis' labor and employment practice apart from its many competitors is the size and scope of the practice, particularly with regard to employee benefits litigation issues.

"None of the large multinational firms have anywhere near the capacity we have in the employment and employee benefits litigation area," Wall said, though he did concede that some of the boutique firms did have higher headcounts in terms of employment lawyers.

Morgan Lewis & Bockius employs about 1,300 lawyers worldwide. About 255 are dedicated to the labor and employment practice. Of the firm's 22 offices, 14 have labor and employment attorneys in residence.

The third factor that separates Morgan Lewis from its competitors is the firm's

reputation, according to Wall.

“Our brand gives comfort to in-house lawyers that select Morgan Lewis to handle sensitive client matters because they know about our prior results,” Wall said.

Litigation-related work, such as appearing before courts, arbitrators and various agencies—makes up about 60% of the labor and employment practice group’s workload, Wall estimated, while the remaining 40% centers on strategic counsel and advice, much of which is geared toward helping clients avoid litigation.

Morgan Lewis’s philosophy when it comes to employment and labor clients is grounded in a broad conception of the challenges such clients face.

“We try to envision our role with our clients as helping them out at each step of each stage of the lifecycle of the employment relationship,” Wall noted. He defined “lifecycle” as every aspect of the employer-employee relationship, from hiring a worker through termination or retirement.

Wall said that class action challenges over compliance with the myriad state and federal regulations were on the rise, a trend with no immediate end in sight.

“The explosion in wage-and-hour suits is really about complying,” Wall noted. “We believe that’s going to continue. 100% compliance is very hard to achieve.”

Wall also said that efforts by organized labor to reshape the legal landscape were on the increase. For example, the proposed Employee Free Choice Act would replace secret ballot elections with card-check recognition when a company’s employees vote to decide whether to be represented by a union.

Morgan Lewis is eyeing Dallas and Houston, Texas, Northern and Southern California, France, Germany and the U.K. as places its labor and employment practice might expand, according to Wall.