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Busy lawyers organize lives in different ways

By Amanda Robert
Law Bulletin staff writer

Kenneth M. Roberts spends nearly 90 percent of his time outside of Chicago, working in one or two areas of North America every week.

Roberts, a partner at Schiff, Hardin LLP and co-leader of its construction law practice, works with a team of 18 attorneys on what he calls “mega-projects.” In the past five years, they have handled two \$2 billion construction projects as well as three other \$1 billion projects on the East Coast, in the Kansas City area, in Ontario and remote northeast Canada.

“There is a lot of activity on each site, and when you combine two or three of those things going on at the same time, it creates a very hectic schedule,” he said.

Roberts, who said he averages more than 2,000 billable hours on these mega-projects and nearly 1,000 more as a member of the firm’s executive committee, joins many other lawyers who spend most of their time on the road, in the courtroom or at the bargaining table.

Over the years, they develop their own strategies for organizing their busy schedules. Some credit their colleagues or assistants for keeping them on track, while others rely on technological advances or even old-fashioned methods while bouncing between personal and professional pursuits.

Roberts said he calls on colleagues in the Schiff, Hardin construction law practice to point him in the right direction as he moves from project to project.

“Without any doubt, it’s what drives my ability to be in two or three cities in one week and to go from one major matter to the next without tripping over myself,” Roberts said. “It really isn’t me. It’s a by-product of a great team atmosphere, so that when I come to the table, I know exactly where I need to sit and I know exactly what I need to do.”

Roberts worked to improve this approach by participating in a

Northwestern University Kellogg School of Management program that tackled the topic of high-performing teams in 2000. He also recruited industrial psychologists to help his team alleviate stress while on the road.

They handle each project by assigning a lead partner who drafts white papers on critical issues for Roberts and then sets up meetings on those issues with the rest of the team. The partner meets with the clients, debriefs the team and creates a memo on lessons learned in the process.

“We’re probably doing that literally every week, so there is a lot of communication, a lot of trust, but also a lot of internal vetting amongst ourselves,” Roberts said. “The key, and if you look at high-performing teams in other business sectors, is that constant repetition.”

Patrick A. Salvi, the managing equity partner of **Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard P.C.**, divides his time between multiple legal interests and unique business ventures.

He opened his own personal-injury practice in Waukegan in 1982 and expanded to Chicago in 1998. He handles a small caseload, but spends most of his time managing the 10-lawyer firm.

“We will meet on a weekly basis with regard to all potential new cases and decide whether we’re going to take them or not, or what info needs to be obtained to decide,” Salvi said. “If a case is accepted, I decide who it is assigned to, both the partner and the associate.”

Salvi, in addition to leading his firm, serves as chairman of the Character and Fitness, 2nd District Committee of the Illinois Board of Admissions to the Bar and chairman of the Law School Advisory Council at the University of Notre Dame. He also teaches personal-injury litigation at the university every spring.

In April 2008, his interests took another turn when he purchased the Gary South Shore RailCats, a minor league team that plays in the American Association of Independent Professional Baseball. He spends a lot of time with the team and also

with the league as a member of its board of directors.

Salvi said he organizes his various responsibilities with the help of his assistants, colleagues and family.

He relies on assistant Patty Dalton to handle all of his legal matters and to keep him abreast of upcoming meetings and other items on his to-do list.

“On a daily basis, my assistant will electronically send everything that is on the schedule for that day, that week, that month and for a three-month period,” Salvi said.

He counts on associate Sarah A. Ferrill to work on his cases and his son and associate Patrick A. Salvi II to also assist with those cases.

“Because I’m so busy, they get significant responsibility,” Salvi said. “They’re thrown into the fire right away and have developed great reputations in their own right.”

Assistant Stacey Clark handles his schedule for the RailCats and other personal matters. She works with his 26-year-old son, David, who helps oversee the baseball team, to set up frequent business meetings with the general manager and staff.

“There really are no days off, but there are a lot of fun days,” Salvi said. “It’s fun for me to go to a ball game on Saturday or Sunday and to schedule meetings with my baseball people on Saturday or Sunday.”

David M. Harris, a partner at Greensfelder, Hemker & Gale P.C., splits his time between Chicago and St. Louis.

He started his practice as a commercial litigator at Kirkland & Ellis LLP in Chicago, but moved to St. Louis and joined his current firm in the early 1980s. When the firm needed someone to take the lead in its new Chicago office a few years ago, he volunteered to make the commute.

Harris now spends at least 40 percent of his time in Chicago. He credits technology with keeping him up-to-speed on cases and clients that he handles from two offices.

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“Without that, the most organized person is going to have difficulty accessing documents, accessing files — all of that needs to be electronic,” Harris said. “Otherwise, you’re shipping stuff back and forth and you never have the work in the office that you will be in.

“If you have your office electronic, your practice electronic, you eliminate those problems,” he said.

Harris noted that it’s important for him to carry the most recent technology, like an iPad or BlackBerry. Since he spends a lot of time in airports or en route, he wants to be able to always reach his clients.

“Technology has accelerated the response requirement for all lawyers and professionals,” he said. “You can’t just wait a day to get back to people. They expect prompt responses, so you must have that technology.”

Harris faces some logistical issues when clients contact him in St. Louis instead of Chicago, or vice versa, so he uses an automatic transfer function on the firm’s phone line and the same access code for his voice mail in each office.

“There are a lot of technology fixes to having a practice that is conducted out of

multiple locations,” he said. “It took me a while to get the trick, but once it’s done, it’s been seamless.”

He added that it also helps to work with understanding partners and staff who tolerate a little bit of inconvenience when trying to track him down.

Guy E. Snyder, a shareholder at Vedder, Price P.C., who has spent 32 years as a corporate attorney and a certified public accountant, said he maintains his fast pace by continuing to call on simple ways of interacting with clients and colleagues.

As a young lawyer, he wrote people’s birthdays and anniversaries in red ink in a paper calendar so he could call or send them a card. While that tradition hasn’t changed, he said he now uses an electronic calendar and often sends e-mails.

Each time Snyder meets someone new, he asks for their business card and suggests that they get together to discuss business opportunities, Snyder said. He later asks his assistant to call that person to set up a breakfast or lunch meeting.

“A big part of what you have to do to be good at developing business and having a presence in the Chicago business community is you have to be out meeting

and seeing people,” he said.

He said he meets someone for a business development breakfast or lunch at least five days a week.

When Snyder returns to the firm, he tells his assistant everything he learned about that person. His assistant puts those details into a database that he can use to refresh his memory before he sees them again.

“I obviously remember the business side of it, but it’s so important to have that personal touch as well,” he said.

Snyder said it’s also important to have the proper context before meeting new people. He recently attended a black-tie event with a friend and three of his friend’s colleagues. He asked his assistant to Google each guest, so he knew things like where they went to college and where they worked.

Snyder said these tactics have helped him move beyond the technical aspect of the law and into the human side of the profession.

“You have to see people and spend time with them, shake their hands and look them in the eye,” he said. “There is not a lot of substitute for that.”