

Pillsbury Debacle: Can You Hear Me Now?

By: Vanessa Vidal

If you commute via public transportation, this Pillsbury Debacle: Can You Hear Me Now story will resonate with you. You have probably sat next to some annoying person on the train having a cell phone conversation that everyone can hear. When that conversation is from a law firm big wig shouting off the names of associates his firm is planning to layoff, sparks are bound to fly.

Not only is this sort of behavior irritating, but I remember as a young attorney my partners cautioning me about working in public places or speaking on the phone about client matters outside the office. "Be very careful," they said, "you need to think about confidentiality at all times."

Imagine my surprise when I read a post on Above the Law this morning reporting that an unidentified tipster claimed to have overheard two top lawyers at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman discussing planned attorney layoffs in a loud cell phone conversation on a crowded train.

Pillsbury Winthrop confirmed the tip and issued the following statement Thursday morning: "We apologize for the unfortunate manner in which our deliberations about reductions have become public."

What were they thinking?

The call apparently took place between Robert Robbins, head of the corporate and securities practice, and COO Richard Donaldson. Robbins reportedly named out loud at least some of the 15 to 20 attorneys the firm was talking about laying off in four offices by the end of March. The conversation apparently took place on an Amtrak train between Washington, D.C., and New York.

Worst yet, Robbins purportedly stressed how necessary it was to keep the layoff a secret. Well, when you are shouting it into a Bluetooth, that's just being ridiculous.

How about those poor 15-20 associates being laid off? I can only guess what they must be thinking. The callous and cavalier manner in which this was handled – on a commuter train, over the phone – just goes to show how little thought and importance the firm gave to these attorneys.

Perhaps Pillsbury Winthrop should rethink it's numbers up by one; after all, low billable hours is one thing, poor judgment is quite another.

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