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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

## Document Hunters

San Francisco-based Bassi Edlin Huie & Blum LLP handles complicated environmental lawsuits, and partners have taught themselves how to sift through huge quantities of evidence swiftly.

By Fiona Smith  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

**S**AN FRANCISCO — When corporate giant Georgia-Pacific LLC sued the city of Fort Bragg seeking millions toward cleanup of a polluted lumber mill, the city's attorneys at Bassi Edlin Huie & Blum LLP were up against a wall — a wall of paper. To prepare the case they had to sift through 11 million documents, the largest number the firm's attorneys had seen, and so they decided to try something different.

Managing partner Noel W. Edlin had gotten interested in using data analysis software called predictive coding to help improve the discovery process and he convinced his colleague Fred M. Blum, the lead on the Fort Bragg case, to give it a shot. The lawyers invested in the software, trained themselves on it and used it to help locate important documents.

The combination of using predictive coding and keeping the entire discovery effort in-house alerted the attorneys to key documents that put them on offense instead of defense in the case, said Blum, who is a founding partner.

During the document hunt, Blum said they spotted a real estate disclosure report that failed to mention dioxin pollution at the shuttered lumber mill, which had operated for more than 100 years in Fort Bragg. After more investigation, the firm filed a counterclaim against the mill's owner, Georgia Pacific, alleging it had fraudulently misrepresented contamination at the site.

U.S. District Judge William H. Orrick granted their request to depose the CEO of Georgia Pacific, which is owned by Koch Industries Inc. This month, a few weeks before the questioning was set to take place, the company agreed to drop its cleanup demand against the city and the case settled.

Blum wove the documents together



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From left, Marte J. Bassi, Fred M. Blum, and Noel W. Edlin of Bassi Edlin Huie & Blum LLP

masterfully, said Linda Ruffing, Fort Bragg's city manager.

"They are really fun people to work with and really competent," Ruffing said. "They really inspired confidence in our city council the whole way along."

The success in the Fort Bragg case comes as clients are putting a lot of pressure on attorneys to drive down litigation costs, said Edlin, who joined the firm in 2005.

"This firm has really tried to cut away from the pack by using technology in delivering savings to our clients, because otherwise their fates are in the hands of vendors or third parties who we have no control over," Edlin said.

The firm, first formed under a different name in 1988, likes to focus on the basics — whether that be reading and understanding the documents in a case or ensuring every brief is reviewed for style, grammar and clarity.

Marte J. Bassi, who joined the firm in 1998 from Pillsbury Madison & Sutro, co-chairs the firm's asbestos defense practice with Jeremy D. Huie but he is also the head of the firm's law and motion department.

Bassi coached high school basketball and baseball in the past and said he takes inspiration for his law

and motion work from famed UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, who had his players get down on one knee and all focus on tying their shoelace. The point was that no detail is too small, Bassi said, and so he reviews every brief before it goes out the door.

"If you put a brief into an appellate court or a law and motion court and there are typos in the first line, first paragraph, first page, the reader's going to become distracted and think that you're sloppy, and if they think you're sloppy with your ability to have a proofread product, then they're not going to trust your briefing, they're not going to trust your arguments and you're now behind the curve," Bassi said.

When he has gotten pushback from clients who see law and motion billing in their invoice, Blum said he tells them: "You hired a very good lawyer, but not a perfect one."

In an effort to prepare the associates in the firm, Bassi teaches a weekly class on legal writing.

And some partners have taken training even farther by getting certified to operate some of the heavy equipment at issue in litigation — such as 60-foot boom lifts — to be able to better understand the issues in a case and

expertly handle depositions.

About 40 percent of the firm's caseload is environmental cases, such as the Fort Bragg one, that often deal with contaminated site cleanup. Toxic tort defense is also about 40 percent of the cases, the majority of that being asbestos defense, with general business litigation taking up the remainder, Bassi said.

Associates get to work on all types of cases the firm handles.

"We don't have rigid trial teams or practice groups," said Huie. "All associates potentially work with all partners and the same with paralegals ... it helps us remain connected."

Over the years, the firm's attorneys, located in San Francisco and Los Angeles, have worked on a wide array of cases. Edlin worked on one of the larger environmental cases in recent years, defending a Modesto dry cleaner who was sued along with chemical manufacturer Dow Chemical Co. by the city of Modesto for contamination of the city's groundwater with the chemical perchloroethylene. Edlin's client was not held liable after a six-month trial.

Outside of environmental work, Blum represented family members of those killed in the 101 California shootings in a product liability case against gun manufacturers.

The firm has been steadily growing in recent years — its most recent addition was this month when the firm added four lawyers to its Los Angeles office. Now with 29 lawyers, the partners don't have dreams of growing too large.

"We like the idea of being nimble and once you're up to 50, 60, 80 lawyers you lose a lot of your mobility," Edlin said.

Surviving and meeting client demands to reduce costs "will really require people to be nimble and small," Edlin said. "Kind of like the difference between a large army and a small special operations force."