

CEP Magazine – March 2021 Meet Ronnie Kann: Moving past the desk

Ronnie Kann is Head of Global Ethics and Compliance at Energizer Holdings in St. Louis, Missouri, USA

Ronnie Kann (aaron.kann@energizer.com) was interviewed by Adam Turteltaub (adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org), Chief Engagement & Strategy Officer at SCCE & HCCA.

AT: Glad we could do this interview. As I started on it, I realized it was about 15 years ago now that we first met, back when you were working at the Corporate Executive Board (CEB), which is now a part of Gartner. You've had an interesting career in law and compliance, seeing things from a lot of different angles. What was your practice area?

RK: When I started to practice law, I worked in the litigation departments of large law firms in New York and Boston. As a junior associate at that time, that basically meant my practice area was “document review.” Along the way, I had the opportunity to learn from some of the best lawyers in their fields. These experiences improved my attention to detail, because nothing could be filed in court or sent to a client unless it was “perfect” and had passed the partner test. As my career developed, I started to expand into other practice areas, including white-collar defense, healthcare, and environmental law. Although I did not appreciate it at the time, I think that I was destined to go into compliance—I wrote my first code of conduct for a client in 1997.

AT: You then became a trial attorney at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), but unlike a lot of people we talk to in and around compliance, you weren't a prosecutor. Instead, you defended challenges to government policies and programs. I'm curious if that experience later helped you when it came to writing policies and procedures for compliance programs.

RK: That is a very interesting question. I had not thought of my role in quite that way. My time at the Justice Department profoundly influences how I approach compliance, but not in the ways I might have expected. First, what a humbling experience it is to represent the United States government. Judges, clients, and opposing counsel expect more from DOJ attorneys, and they should. I was working on behalf of something greater than any individual client. My cases often involved defending the constitutionality of laws and regulations or the legality of agency actions. Like compliance professionals, my role at DOJ was to advocate for what was right, not just what arguments could be won. In one case, we were defending an agency's decision to limit retirement benefits to former government employees. While we had the law on our side, was it fair to the men and women who risked their lives in service to the country? That's a discussion for another day! Second, I gained a deeper appreciation for the rule of law and regulations in driving clarity and certainty. Some of the cases were decided based on statutory or regulatory interpretation. I saw firsthand how a single word or phrase could affect tens of thousands of people. Perhaps, in answer to your question, yes, my DOJ experience did help me write policies and procedures, because each word matters—not because of what is intended, but because of how they drive employee behaviors.

AT: Now that takes us to your time at CEB, where you were focused on discovering best practices and sharing what you found with your members. I used to enjoy sitting down and discussing what was on the mind of compliance professionals: what was working and what wasn't. What were the areas you found that compliance teams consistently struggled with the most?

RK: I worked at CEB for nearly 15 years. It was the MBA I never officially received. I had the privilege of working with and learning from human resources, legal, compliance, audit, and risk leaders at the world's largest and best-run companies. Each day, I was inspired to come to the office or travel to company headquarters, because I knew that I would learn something new, either from my clients or the outstanding researchers that I worked with. It also represented a career change for me, as I stopped actively practicing law in 2000. (According to a few state bar associations, I "retired" in my 30s.)

When I was first asked to support our ethics and compliance clients in 2005, I was admittedly hesitant. My law firm experiences had given me a very narrow understanding of compliance, and in my mind, "ethics" referred to a lawyer's obligations to their clients, avoiding conflicts of interest, and the like. Wow, was I wrong! As I started meeting my new clients and heard them discuss integrity culture, ethical leadership, and behavioral economics, I was hooked! What was most exciting for me in working with ethics and compliance professionals in the early 2000s was that the profession was still in its early stages. Everyone had an appetite for and willingness to share their experiences. Not to oversimplify, but assuming a company even had ethics and compliance professionals on staff, they were struggling with the foundational elements: defining a compliance program, assessing risks, writing a code and policies, managing a help line, and measuring effectiveness. Perhaps not surprisingly, those issues are still on many of our to-do lists today. I say that not because the profession has not advanced. Quite the opposite. We still focus on those areas because they are critical and difficult, and are constantly evolving with the business and our employees. It's part of what keeps me engaged and challenged every day.

AT: Were there any issues that they had a better handle on than they thought they did?

RK: Nearly every ethics and compliance professional whom I've worked with over the years has a learning mindset and an interest in continuous improvement. Most are never fully satisfied with their efforts, ever: *How can I improve? What went wrong, and how can we prevent reoccurrence? Did we know, or should we have known?* In general, ethics and compliance professionals had a better understanding of legal risks and investigations than many of our benchmarking efforts would have suggested. In hindsight, that makes complete sense: Most of them were lawyers by training.

AT: Your work there focused both on compliance and audit leadership. The two professions are closely related and work side by side. Did you see ways that the two could work together more closely? And, if so, what barriers were there keeping them from collaborating more?

RK: When I started working with audit executives, it represented an entirely new experience for me and introduced me to new business challenges and an expanded business vocabulary. As with my ethics and compliance clients, auditors are also inquisitive and focused on making the business better. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from them. In any organization, there are always opportunities for different functions to partner better together. In both the smallest and largest clients, functional silos and differing vocabularies prevent better collaboration. It is rarely a lack of effort or interest in working together; rather, it is more often a function of existing organizational structure and day-to-day workflow that makes it difficult. Ethics and compliance and audit are often the two truly independent functions at a company. So while the functions have that in common with each other, it also means that we have our own distinct—and complementary—roles to play. Regardless of the built-in challenges, it is critical that the functions find ways to work together. That is obvious, but it doesn't make it easy. Like any partnership, you need to invest time, challenge each other, and work toward common goals.

AT: After the CEB, you spent some time at the Ethics & Compliance Initiative and then took the plunge, becoming the director of global ethics and compliance at Kimberly-Clark. From your previous work, you had a lot of compliance wisdom, but what did you find that you didn't really know about compliance?

RK: I realized very quickly the challenges in translating my consultant and research knowledge into practice. I had spent the previous 20 years working with and supporting other lawyers and ethics and compliance professionals. We had similar professional training, understood the same issues, generally used the same vocabulary, and tried to achieve the same outcomes. I quickly learned that success in the in-house role depends on effectively engaging—and influencing—leaders, in addition to compliance subject matter expertise. My job evolved from teaching best practices to ethics and compliance professionals to supporting leaders with practical resources and guidance to deliver results the right way. I needed to help them see that ethics and compliance is not separate from the business; it is how we do business. Fortunately, through my prior professional services experiences, I had learned the importance of a customer-first approach: “We are on this journey together, and I am available at any time to support you and your teams.” Still, working with business leaders required a new skill set and approach to my work. I expect that I will be developing those skills throughout my career.

Second, I learned to appreciate the difference between advising clients on what *they* should do and being in-house and owning and being accountable for those same outcomes *myself*. Someone who had made a similar move from consultant to in-house described it as moving from announcing a sporting event up in a broadcast booth to going on the field and playing—injuries and all!

AT: As we’re doing this interview, you’re less than six months into a new role as head of Global Ethics & Compliance for Energizer Holdings. You started that position at a time like no other in business. How are you getting to know the culture? It’s got to be difficult with so many people working remotely.

RK: First, a shout out and thank you to the human resources and legal teams at Energizer. Luckily for me, I was not the first person they had hired through a remote process, so they had an efficient, employee-friendly approach already in place. Once I was in the role, I worked with general counsel and human resources to schedule as many virtual meetings with as many new colleagues as possible. I have been on a “listening tour” since I started. Everyone has been welcoming and helpful as I get the opportunity to learn the organization. Energizer is a values-based company with a genuinely collaborative and caring culture. We are most definitely results-driven! I have also learned a lot about our current ethics and compliance program and am excited about the opportunities. While I would prefer to be in the office and have face-to-face meet and greets, I have unexpectedly found video conferences to be more authentic discussions. For example, I know what every executive’s living room or office looks like. I have seen or heard everyone’s pets, and on many occasions, I have met coworkers’ children, in-laws, and family friends. When I meet with my new colleagues without a desk or other piece of office furniture between us, I find that the relationship building happens more quickly and more directly. It has given me a great foundation to build on.

AT: And how are you getting to know the global compliance team?

RK: Thank you for asking about the global compliance *team*. Until very recently, I was a one-person department, responsible for building out the function. I have since hired two other ethics and compliance professionals and have longer-term plans to hire additional colleagues. Because of our small department size, we can be more flexible and agile in getting to know the company and prioritizing our short-term program goals. At the same time, we have needed to be more creative in networking and reaching out to other ethics and compliance professionals to pressure test our ideas and get feedback. The ethics and compliance profession continues to be generous and supportive of its fellow members. Thank you to everyone who has paid it forward for me.

AT: What advice would you give others who are making a job change in compliance in this era?

RK: When I think about my own experiences in changing jobs over my career, two thoughts come to mind. Given the uncertain and dynamic world in which we live and in which businesses operate, do not try to look too far into

the future. Look for a job that is the right role and experience for you at that time. When I was younger, I would have rejected that advice. “I need to have a plan! I have goals!” Now, I embrace the idea of one step at a time and find myself more engaged and fulfilled in my work. Second, your career path is *yours*. There is no one way to change roles or a singular definition of “success.” Do it for yourself. As I consider my own professional journey, my path was not linear nor predictable. Life happens. Each time that I made a move, I learned new skills, faced new challenges, and met new colleagues.

AT: Finally, let’s look beyond the pandemic. You have enjoyed a great perspective on compliance over the years. How do you see the profession evolving over the next five years?

RK: I really appreciate this question, except that it makes me feel old! What excites me most about the profession’s growth over the next five years is our increasing diversity. For example, when I read my LinkedIn feed, I find ethics and compliance professionals and networks from all walks of life from all parts of the world. I know that my own experience is much richer for it. We are seeing a generational shift in who is leading the functions and who is deciding to make a career of ethics and compliance. Relatedly, the profession itself is now multigenerational. We see new thought leaders, new providers, and a more diverse and global community. Increasingly, we see human resources professionals, marketers, operations leaders, and other nonlawyers entering and influencing the profession. As with any dynamic and relatively new profession, the story will be told and written by the leaders and individuals who are in the role at a given point in time. I can’t wait to see what our future holds!

AT: Thank you, Ronnie!

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