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Meet Matt Kelly: Bullish about the future for ethics and compliance

By Matt Kelly and Adam Turteltaub

AT: We first met before I was at the association and when you were in the midst of a 10-year run at *Compliance Week*. What led you to the world of covering compliance?

MK: When I started writing about compliance in 2003, I was a freelance writer trying to make a living—so honestly, it was the money. But I quickly realized that corporate compliance was a fascinating subject that straddled all sorts of disciplines: law, technology, organizational behavior, finance, politics, ethics, and more.

Lots of compliance issues make for great stories, such as how a Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) enforcement action happened or what the implications of a new data privacy rule could be. I get to tease out those issues, and the people involved in compliance are always friendly and chatty. It's a great field to write about, and I'll happily do it for years to come.

AT: What were some of the surprises about the profession when you began covering it? Most people tend to have strong opinions about compliance, and then when they get involved, they find that not all their impressions were correct.

MK: Maybe that precision matters so, so much in corporate compliance. That is, you can see some headlines about corporate misconduct—say, banks opening customer accounts without authorization—and reflexively say, “Jeez, how hard can it be to prevent something like that?”

Well, many times, it can be *really* hard to find a solution to seemingly simple, black-and-white issues. Another example: Numerous times, I've had compliance officers rant to me about their struggles with setting up whistleblower phone hotlines in multiple countries that give feedback to one call center. I never paid much attention to phone numbers and how they work until global hotlines became a thing. Now, I appreciate just how complicated the work of corporate compliance can be.

And once you start talking about audits of internal controls or fact-finding in complex investigations—yikes. Every detail of every step can be enormously important. So, it's easy to see what the right thing to do *should* be, but achieving that is often far more complicated than most people understand.

AT: Did anything surprise you about the people who do this for a living?

MK: I was first going to say that “everyone is so smart,” which is true, but actually not that surprising when you remember you're dealing with lawyers, accountants, and technologists.

The surprising thing is that everyone is so down to earth when you talk to them. One of my first assignments in the mid-2000s was simply to do Q&A interviews with chief compliance officers. This was the first generation of compliance officers, so many times when I asked, “How are you going to solve this issue?” their answer was something along the lines of, “I’m not quite sure,” or, “We’ll just see if this sticks, and if it does, then we’ll keep doing it.” Like, they didn’t know the right answer any more than I did.

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