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The man for the job in hand, Fisher & Phillips opens D.C. office

By Amanda Becker

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The national employment firm Fisher & Phillips had toyed with the idea of establishing a presence in Washington over the years, but the plan didn't gain traction until the right person came along to man the helm.

Former Toyota executive and Arent Fox attorney Dennis C. Cuneo signed on to open the Atlanta-based firm's first District office at the beginning of this month and will be tasked with starting and expanding a government affairs practice. With the office's opening, Fisher & Phillips joins peer firms such as Littler Mendelson, Ogletree Deakins and Jackson Lewis, which all have a presence in the greater Washington area.

"It's not Fisher & Phillips deciding to go to Washington and then finding the right guy," said Managing Partner Roger K. Quillen. "A uniquely qualified person was brought to our attention ... and it was immediately apparent that for him to do the things he's qualified to do, a Washington, D.C., office was necessary as his base of operation."

Cuneo spent the bulk of his career in the corporate world after short stints in the Justice Department and private practice. Over about two decades with Toyota, he helped open its first assembly plant and manufacturing headquarters in North America; represented the automaker during negotiations with the United Auto Workers union; and oversaw the company's legal, human resources and government affairs matters. It was this internal corporate experience that set him apart, Quillen said.

"Dennis understands the corporate boardroom at the very highest level, and it's valuable to us to have a partner who can meet and talk with board members of major companies with the insight he gained from being such a board member himself," Quillen said.

Cuneo became acquainted with Fisher & Phillips attorneys -- specifically Jeffrey A. Savarise, a partner in the firm's automotive manufacturing group -- because the firm handles Toyota's labor and employment matters. When Cuneo retired from Toyota in 2006, he joined Arent Fox, the law firm where he practiced early in his career. But he still felt strong ties to the Fisher & Phillips attorneys with whom he'd worked closely over the years.

"When I was first thinking about retiring from Toyota, he [Savarise] asked if I would think about considering them ... several months ago he asked if I'd thought about our conversation any more," Cuneo said.

Cuneo's concentration at Fisher & Phillips will differ from the practice he built at Arent Fox, where he focused on the automotive industry.

"When you look at his background, he was in charge of government affairs for a major corporation, he was involved in trying to influence laws and regulations -- that's what we're going to expect him to do on behalf of all of our clients," Quillen said.

The firm's list of pending regulatory changes that could affect corporate labor and employment practices has grown to seven pages -- and that's just proposed legislation before the House and Senate. "The climate has changed, and Dennis brings qualifications to participate in that change in a way that will really benefit our clients," Quillen said.

For Cuneo, establishing a Fisher & Phillips outpost will both draw on his experience supervising Toyota's expansion and present a new challenge. In addition, he will continue to serve on the board of two publicly traded companies and advise three firms in Silicon Valley, the attorney said.

"I'm not ready to retire ... it will be a good opportunity for me to build an office again," Cuneo said.