

10 QUESTIONS

for

David L. Cohen

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF COMCAST CORPORATION

INTERVIEW BY HAROLD K. COHEN

David L. Cohen is executive vice president of Comcast Corporation, where he is responsible for corporate communications, government affairs, public affairs, corporate administration, and serves as senior counselor to the CEO. Before joining Comcast in July 2002, he was a partner in and chair of Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP. Cohen served as chief of staff to Philadelphia Mayor Edward G. Rendell from January 1992 to April 1997. He is a graduate of Swarthmore College and the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

HAROLD K. COHEN: When you were 13, what did you want to be when you grew up?

DAVID L. COHEN: When I was 13, I wanted to be a lawyer. I'm told that from when I was 4 or 5 years old, I said I wanted to be a lawyer. From the earliest days when people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, when kids typically said fireman, major league baseball player, or basketball player, I said I wanted to be a lawyer. Neither of my parents was a lawyer. But my father's father was a lawyer and a judge in New York. We had a unique relationship, although he died when I was very young. So that was always I said what I wanted to be.

During your school years and your early years in practice, did you have any idea your career would take this arc?

If you asked me if I ever thought my career would go the way in which it has, the answer would have to be no. I hope any adult

who answers that question would say no. It's almost impossible to predict what your career is going to be like over the course of a long period of time. If anything, and this may sound surprising, given what my career has looked like, my assumption was, I would go to college, go to law school, graduate law school, go to work for a law firm, and then work at the same law firm for my whole life. My father worked for almost 60 years for the same company – the Bulova Watch

Company. I spent a lot of time trying to figure what the perfect law firm was. My friends kept teasing me, saying, "What does it matter? You try one and if you don't like it, you go to another one. It's no big deal." Even when I was looking for a summer job after my second year of law school, I really wanted to find the perfect law firm. I basically said to myself "I'm going to pick a law firm, I'm going to go to it, and that's where I'm going to be for my whole life."

And at almost each step of the way – I clerked for a year, I went to Ballard Spahr, I took my leave to work with Ed Rendell and the administration – I always assumed I'd return to the practice of the law and in all likelihood to Ballard Spahr. I never made that a formal commitment, but when I knew it was time for me to leave, there wasn't any thought that I'd go anywhere else but Ballard Spahr. Looking back on it, I think it's pretty clear what my mindset was and what I wanted to do. And when I went back to Ballard Spahr, I assumed I'd be there for the rest of my career.



But then the Comcast opportunity came up – and it seemed irresistible. And, of course, since I’ve arrived at Comcast, I’ve never had any regrets.

I think the lesson from my career is be careful about choosing a place where you work. I ended up choosing a career I really liked and enjoyed and choosing workplaces where I felt very comfortable and firms that would support what you’d call a lot of extracurricular activities and then being open to what happens to you when it comes along. And you should also be willing to take some risks over the course of your career. You have no idea where they might take you.

What’s a typical day for you?

It varies more now than it used to because I travel so much. I’m probably out of Philadelphia three or four days every week.

When I’m in Philadelphia on a typical day, I get up at 4:30 or 5 o’clock and try and go to the gym two days a week. On the days I don’t go to the gym, I try and get into the office by 6:30 so I have a couple of hours to do work when the phone isn’t ringing and meetings aren’t occurring. And the rest of my day is a series of telephone calls and meetings during the traditional working hours. Then, especially in Philadelphia, but increasingly in Washington and New York, I turn to my evening schedule – I tend to do at least one event every night, maybe two or three events – whether charitable, political or just having a business or a social dinner. And when I get home, I do my reading and my writing. I bring a folder or a briefcase of what I didn’t get to during the day.

I’m a religious email user and responder. I get somewhere around 600 emails a day. I deal with what I can during the course of the day, but I save anything that might require thought or more work until either that early block of the day or that late in the evening block. I try and get through all of my emails and my reading and writing before I go to sleep, and then I start all over.

When I’m not in Philadelphia – I try and sleep at home as much as I can – it’s much the same schedule. Most people who want to get me either go through my assistant who will track me down or just send me an email and say can you give me a call when you get a chance. I’m more likely to read that on the BlackBerry and be able to react to it. (By the way, for the record, we’ve been here 15 minutes and I haven’t looked at my BlackBerry once!) Even though I’m pretty good at multitasking, a couple of years ago, I reached a conclusion that sitting in a meeting and going through emails is just rude.

I don’t really like it when other people do it, so when I’m in meetings now, I generally do not look at my BlackBerry. I wait until the meeting is over.

Where did you get your work ethic?

The honest answer to that question is, I don’t know. My father worked hard, but he had what I call a normal working-hard existence. He was home for dinner with my mother virtually every night and would see the kids before they went to sleep. When I was in high school, I worked hard, but I didn’t work ridiculously hard. Rhonda loves to tell the story that in college

I had to set an alarm clock to make sure I was up for the kickoff of NFL games at 1 in the afternoon.

Of course, I think my work ethic has clearly grown over time. I think I worked a lot harder in college than I did in high school and a lot harder in law school than I did in college. In all of the professional jobs I’ve had, I’ve worked extremely hard. It’s just something that’s grown on me and something I’ve become more comfortable with.

Some of that is the people who you work with. Whether you’re at Swarthmore College or Penn Law School or Ballard Spahr there are a lot of really smart people who work very hard. In all those environments, it was a bit of a cultural expectation.

I think the other advantage is that I’ve absolutely loved every job I’ve ever had. I can’t remember waking up a single day since I’ve been working and saying “gee whiz I’m tired, I don’t feel like going to work today.” Every day, I’m excited about getting up and going to work and doing whatever it is that

I have to accomplish that day.

My work ethic also comes from a part of the answer to the last question, which is having jobs that you love and that you’re passionate about and working with people who are smart and share a passion for the profession and whatever it is that they’re working on. I never consider work a burden. It may sound like an unusual thing to say, but it’s part of my entertainment for the day.

Now, I’ve learned that everyone doesn’t work the hours that I do. Everybody shouldn’t work the hours that I do. I try really hard to make colleagues aware that to work with David Cohen you don’t have to work 20 hours a day.

As my career has developed, I think working hard and being prepared (even overprepared) and reading a little bit more than you have to read or doing one extra draft of every letter or document, all of that has served me very well in life.



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I've heard over the years that you have a prodigious memory. How has that helped?

As you get older, your prodigious memory starts to get less prodigious. I've always had a good memory, and what particularly scares people is I have a good memory for odd facts. I have a pretty good memory in general, but if I'm in a meeting or having dinner with someone and they mention that their son is going to Rutgers, five years later I will say something like "has your son graduated yet from Rutgers?" People just sort of look at me and think how in the world does he remember that?

The famous Buzz Bissinger story, which really is a true story, comes from the transition when Ed Rendell was elected in November of 1991 and the resumes were pouring in. I think by the time of the inauguration we had 10,000 resumes. I didn't look at all of them, but a lot were coming across my desk and I'd pass them along to the transition team. I was at Reading Terminal Market on inauguration night and Buzz was with me. Someone I knew slightly came up to me. He said it was totally embarrassing and there's no way for you to remember, but I have applied for a job with the administration and I was hoping if you could look out for my resume, I'd appreciate it. I looked at him and said, "I remember the resume. It was on buff paper." I had a picture of the resume in my head. And he looked at me and said "that's exactly right. How did you know that?"

I'm fortunate enough to have a very good memory. And it's served me well in a number of respects. I've been a lawyer for most of my career, and I remember training clients to be careful about notes that they take and keep. Since I've become a client, I am known for not taking notes. I might take notes if there was specific follow-up things that had to do with a meeting, but when I completed the task, I cross out the task and throw the paper away.

So when I was deposed or testified as a witness in a trial, I'd get asked "do you know what a request for a production of documents is?" And I'd answer yes. "Did you know there was a request for production of documents in this case?" "Yes." "Did you know that request included a request for handwritten notes?" So I said "yes." And then I was asked, "do you know that the request

for production of documents included you?" I said, "I didn't know specifically but I'm not surprised." "Would you be surprised to learn that in 67,000 pages of documents produced by the city, there are no handwritten notes from you?" I said, "I wouldn't be surprised at all." "Well, why not?" "I don't take notes." That always makes people pause. "What do you mean you don't



take notes?” “I don’t take notes.” That’s one of the reasons I was always the Law Department’s favorite witness.

You graduated from Swarthmore. Did that Quaker education affect you?

I went to Swarthmore at a pretty funny time. I got there in 1973, so we were still in the Vietnam War and Swarthmore was the Berkeley of the East. Other than Berkeley, it might have been the most radical, not liberal, but radical, college in the country, and that included professors as well as students. I was, at the time, a registered Republican, but I think I was a pretty moderate and rational person. That made me a real outlier at Swarthmore. So, yes, Swarthmore is a Quaker institution, and yes there are real Quaker values that infuse the institution, but a far-left liberal theocracy was by far the most dominant influence at Swarthmore in the 1970s. In retrospect, within five years of graduating Swarthmore, I thought that I got the best possible education I could receive from Swarthmore. And not just because Swarthmore is an excellent institution of higher learning, but also because I was put under pressure in almost every class to defend my thinking and to defend my views. While I felt almost persecuted when I was at Swarthmore, with a little bit of distance and time, I figured out that many professors saw in me a thirst for work and a capacity to reason and argue that was a little unusual. They were trying, in the best possible way, to educate and teach, and they were challenging me to do more on the theory that I would end up, after a Swarthmore education, having learned even more than I would have otherwise learned with a “traditional” education. I feel very fortunate as a result of that.

Most of the publicity you’ve received has been overwhelmingly positive. How will you react when you receive negative publicity that is strong?

I’m a public person and there are times when that’s nice and there are times when it’s less nice. I’ve been very fortunate to enjoy largely positive treatment by the press, including the Philadelphia press, national press and trade press. The good news is I take the positive press with a grain of salt. I try not to let nice things that are written about me and said about me turn me into a different person. There’s also been plenty of negative things written about me (and Comcast). I think having lived through not only the six years in City Hall working for Ed Rendell, but also a career that has involved working with a number of prominent public personalities, whether elected officials or elsewhere, you have to develop pretty thick skin. I think I understand the way this game is played. But when the tough things are written about you, you

never like it. You’d much rather read a wildly fawning and favorable article. But you have to recognize that that’s not always going to be the case. Sometimes, there are going to be people who disagree with you and who, given the opportunity, are going to take shots at you. Sometimes, there will be things that you do that make all the sense in the world and may be the right thing to do but they may not be popular and there may not be positive things said at that time. And sometimes, you make mistakes. And everybody makes mistakes. And, when you make a mistake in something that’s very public and that’s passionate for people, you’re likely to get bad things written about you. And all of the above has happened to me. I try to learn from the mistakes that I make and try not to repeat them. I do believe, and I give this advice to other people all the time, and I should take it myself, that working really hard

to have a positive relationship with the media and having a good strong relationship with people who don’t agree with you is a good way to go through life.

In my opinion, I have the best job in America today. I can’t imagine anything would be sufficiently attractive that would cause me to have any interest in leaving Comcast.

I bet you get a lot of advice on what you should do with your career. What kind of advice do you get?

The most common question or suggestion that I might get is to ask me if I would do public service again or might run for public office myself. My answer, by the way, is that, even though my mother taught me never say never, I am essentially prepared to say that I will never run for office. One thing I have learned is to follow my mother’s advice – it’s almost always good.

Does that include appointment to office?

It does. I think there’s a difference between running for office and being appointed to office. But

in my opinion, I have the best job in America today. I can’t imagine anything would be sufficiently attractive that would cause me to have any interest in leaving Comcast. Of course, if you go back 10 years, and if you asked me whether I’d have any interest in leaving Ballard Spahr, and taking another job, I would have said that I had the best job in law, the mix between being chairman of the firm and practicing law, and doing it in a firm that is so fully and publicly engaged and committed to service as Ballard Spahr was, that I couldn’t imagine going any place else. So today I can’t imagine that I would go anywhere else. And I also have an intense feeling of loyalty to the people I work with and the institutions that I’m involved with, so all that is a really big hurdle to see me doing anything else other than what I’m doing now.

You’ve kind of touched on it, but what do you find most satisfying of all the things that you do?

So, I'm going to answer that in two ways. I'm very proud that every organization I've been associated with and every team that I'm involved with performs at an extraordinarily high level. And in the business world, I can't tell you how proud I am to be associated with Comcast and with visionaries like Ralph Roberts and Brian Roberts, and my colleagues like Mike Angelakis and Neil Smit and Steve Burke. These are the smartest business people I've ever seen. They're the most effective team that I've seen in corporate America. To be a part of that team, and producing the business results, the innovation results, and the financial results that as a company we are able to accomplish quarter after quarter and year after year is just a remarkable enterprise, and I'm enormously proud to be a part of it.

Second, I'm almost equally proud of the time that I've been able to spend and the commitment that I've been able to make to non-work related causes. All of my employers have actively encouraged this community engagement, including the incredible commitment that Comcast has to community investment, which is what we call our philanthropy. This is not really giving things away, it's making investments in communities to make them healthier and more vibrant places for our employees and our customers to live and work. So I can walk around this city, and I can see ways in which Ed Rendell and his administration, and Comcast and its community investment activities, Penn, United Way, the Red Cross, Federation, the Urban League, City Year, the Chamber of Commerce, or any of the many other organizations I've had the privilege of being involved with, have had a real and positive impact. And so I have an enormous amount of pride in seeing the impact that these organizations have been able to make in the quality of life in Philadelphia and across the country. And I find that work incredibly rewarding and incredibly important. ■

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