

The Boston Globe - Obituary
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William O'Brien
CEO of Hanover Insurance at 69

William J. O'Brien, who headed the Hanover Insurance Companies for more than a decade, died Saturday after a long battle with prostate cancer. He was 69.

Between 1979 and 1991, when Mr. O'Brien was Hanover's president and chief executive officer, the firm rose from the bottom of the insurance heap to the top. By 1994, Hanover was "one of the top 10 underwriting companies," according to a McKinsey and Company report released that year.

Mr. O'Brien was born in Yonkers, N.Y., graduating in 1950 from St. Cecelia's High School in Englewood, N.J. He received a bachelor's degree from Fordham University in 1954, then served in the Army until 1956.

In 1960, Mr. O'Brien joined Securities Insurance of Hartford, where he rose to vice president. After eight years at the company, he joined the Glen Falls Insurance Company as a vice president.

He began working at Hanover in 1971.

As President and CEO of Hanover, Mr. O'Brien refined the company's vision, emphasizing a lean corporate structure and an open system of management. His deep interest in framing Hanover's governing ideas led to a series of booklets that set forth the company's philosophy.

After he retired in 1991, Mr. O'Brien helped other companies perform better, promoting a "systems thinking" approach to solving business problems.

Mr. O'Brien was founding member of the board of governors of the MIT Center for Organizational Learning and was a founding partner of Generon Consulting.

He served as a consultant to the Covenant Group, a start-up property and casualty insurance company recently acquired by Arbella Insurance. He also served on the board of directors of Shawmut Bank, NStar Corp., Claims Outsource Inc., and Blue Cod Technologies.

Mr. O'Brien was also active in the community, serving as president of the Worcester Economic club and chairman of Adopt-A-Student, an organization that raises scholarship funds for children of needy families to attend Worcester Diocese Catholic schools.

Mr. O'Brien leaves his wife of 39 years, Catherine (Kay) Kelaher of Southborough; two sons, William V. of Brookline and Christopher J. of Boston; one daughter, Kathleen O. Pagano of Worcester; and five grandchildren.

Funeral services will be held at St. Matthew's Church in Southborough on Wednesday at 10 a.m.