

NEW YORK COURT OF APPEALS

American Building Supply Corp. v. Petrocelli Group, Inc.

19 N.Y.3d 730 (2012) · Decided November 19, 2012

SUMMARY

The New York Court of Appeals held that an insured may maintain negligence and breach-of-contract claims against an insurance broker for failing to procure specifically requested coverage, even when the insured received the policy without reading or objecting to it. The failure to read the policy may support comparative negligence but does not categorically bar recovery where factual issues exist regarding the specific coverage requested and the broker's failure to obtain it.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	New York Court of Appeals
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Ciparick, J.; Pigott, J.
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	November 19, 2012
DISPOSITION	reversed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff appealed from an Appellate Division order reversing Supreme Court's denial of the insurance broker's motion for summary judgment and dismissing the complaint.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary judgment is appropriate only where there is no genuine issue of material fact; the court must determine whether issues of fact exist as to the plaintiff's specific request for coverage and the broker's failure to procure it.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published New York Court of Appeals opinion; binding statewide precedent.
PARTIES	American Building Supply Corp. v. Petrocelli Group, Inc.

TOPICS

insurance coverage

professional negligence

breach of contract

contract interpretation

commercial litigation

PRACTICE AREAS

insurance

professional negligence

breach of contract

commercial litigation

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether an insured may maintain negligence and breach-of-contract claims against an insurance broker when factual issues exist regarding a specific request for coverage that the broker allegedly failed to procure.
2. Whether the insured's receipt of the policy without reading it or complaining about its terms absolutely bars recovery against the broker.

HOLDINGS

1. An insured may maintain negligence and breach-of-contract claims against an insurance broker when issues of fact exist as to whether the insured specifically requested particular coverage and whether the broker failed to procure that coverage.
2. An insured's failure to read and understand the policy after receiving it, without lodging a complaint, does not constitute an absolute bar to recovery against the broker under the circumstances presented.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"To set forth a case for negligence or breach of contract against an insurance broker, a plaintiff must establish that a specific request was made to the broker for the coverage that was not provided in the policy" (19 N.Y.3d at 735)

"The failure to read the policy, at most, may give rise to a defense of comparative negligence but should not bar, altogether, an action against a broker" (19 N.Y.3d at 736)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

American Building Supply Corp. operated a Bronx building-materials facility where only employees entered and no retail business was conducted. Its lease arrangements required specified general liability insurance, and the plaintiff alleged that it specifically requested coverage for employees injured at the premises. The broker renewed a policy containing a cross-liability exclusion for injuries to an insured's employees, and an employee was subsequently injured. The insurer disclaimed coverage, after which the plaintiff sued the broker.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

American Building Supply Corp. sued its insurance broker for negligence and breach of contract, alleging that the broker failed to procure requested employee injury coverage. Supreme Court denied the broker's motion for summary judgment because an issue of fact existed regarding the requested coverage. The Appellate Division reversed, holding that the plaintiff's failure to read and understand the policy precluded recovery. The Court of Appeals granted leave and reversed the Appellate Division.

DISPOSITION

reversed

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Reverse the Appellate Division order, with costs, and deny Petrocelli Group, Inc.'s motion for summary judgment.

CASES CITED

- DRK, LLC v. Burlington Ins. Co., 74 A.D.3d 693 (1st Dep't 2010), leave denied, 16 N.Y.3d 702 (2011)
- Murphy v. Kuhn, 90 N.Y.2d 266, 270 (1997)
- Hoffend & Sons, Inc. v. Rose & Kiernan, Inc., 7 N.Y.3d 152, 155, 157-158 (2006)
- Busker on Roof Ltd. Partnership Co. v. Warrington, 283 A.D.2d 376, 376-377 (1st Dep't 2001)
- Rotanelli v. Madden, 172 A.D.2d 815, 817 (2d Dep't 1991), leave denied, 79 N.Y.2d 754 (1992)
- Madhvani v. Sheehan, 234 A.D.2d 652, 654-655 (3d Dep't 1996)
- Chase's Cigar Store v. Stam Agency, 281 A.D.2d 911, 912 (4th Dep't 2001)
- Kyes v. Northbrook Prop. & Cas. Ins. Co., 278 A.D.2d 736, 737-738 (3d Dep't 2000)
- Reilly v. Progressive Ins. Co., 288 A.D.2d 365, 366 (2d Dep't 2001)
- Baseball Off. of Commr. v. Marsh & McLennan, 295 A.D.2d 73, 82 (1st Dep't 2002)
- Bell v. O'Leary, 744 F.2d 1370, 1373 (8th Cir. 1984)

OPINION

CLPARIGK, J.

OPINION OF THE COURT CLPARIGK, J. In this appeal, we are asked to determine if an action for negligence and breach of contract lies against an insurance broker for failure to procure adequate insurance coverage where the insured received the policy without complaint.

We hold, where issues of fact exist as to a request for specific coverage, that the insured can maintain such an action and defendant's motion for summary judgment should be denied. I Plaintiff American Building Supply Corp. (ABS) is a business which sells and furnishes building materials to general contractors. Plaintiff is located both in Manhattan and the Bronx.

This action only concerns the premises located in the Bronx, where plaintiff is the sole tenant of a building it subleased from DRK, LLC (DRK), which had procured the property by entering into a lease agreement with the New York City Industrial Development *734Agency (NYCIDA). Pursuant to the lease agreement between DRK and NYCIDA, DRK was, among other things, required to procure general liability insurance from a carrier licensed to do business in the State of New York in the minimum amount of \$5,000,000 for bodily injury and property damage.

The sublease agreement between ABS and DRK, both owned and managed by the same person, noted that the sublessee consented to all the terms of the lease agreement. Prior to October 2004, Pollack Associates, not a party to this appeal, was plaintiffs insurance broker and procured a policy

with the Burlington Insurance Company (Burlington), an excess line carrier not licensed in the State of New York.

DRK was named an additional insured under the policy. The policy did not comply with the requirements set forth by the lease agreements and was subsequently cancelled due to nonpayment of premiums. In October 2004, plaintiff hired defendant Petrocelli Group, Inc. to replace Pollack as its insurance broker. Defendant arranged to reinstate the Burlington policy.

Plaintiff claims that in its discussions with defendant regarding a new policy, it specifically requested general liability coverage for its employees in case of injury, as required by the lease agreements. Plaintiff also alleged that it informed defendant that only employees entered the premises, never customers, as no retail business was conducted at the Bronx location.

Finally, plaintiff avers that defendant visited the premises and had assured NYCIDA that the insurance deficiencies would be corrected when the policy was up for renewal. Defendant then renewed the Burlington policy for the period of June 14, 2005 through June 14, 2006.

The policy was essentially the same as plaintiff had previously received through Pollack. The policy contained a cross liability exclusion clause that provided: "This insurance does not apply to any actual or alleged 'bodily injury', 'property damage', 'personal injury' or 'advertising injury' to... A present, former, future or prospective partner, officer, director, stockholder or employee of any insured." Plaintiff did not read the insurance policy upon receipt, nor did the broker.

In October 2005, one of plaintiff's employees was injured at the Bronx facility in the course of performing his duties. Burlington disclaimed coverage based upon the cross-liability exclusion. DRK sought a declaratory judgment against Burlington seeking a determination that Burlington was obligated to defend and indemnify plaintiff. Burlington moved for summary judgment. *735 Supreme Court denied the motion and ordered Burlington to defend and indemnify plaintiff.

The Appellate Division reversed, holding that Burlington had no duty to defend or indemnify based on the cross liability exclusion clause (see *DRK, LLC v Burlington Ins. Co.*, 74 AD3d 693 [1st Dept 2010], lv denied 16 NY3d 702 [2011]). Plaintiff next commenced this action against its broker for negligence and breach of contract in connection with defendant's procurement of insufficient insurance.

Following discovery, defendant moved for summary judgment dismissing the complaint. Supreme Court denied the motion, holding that "an issue of fact exists which precludes summary judgment" (2010 NY Slip Op 30611[U], *6 [2010]). Specifically, the court found that plaintiff testified that it informed defendant it required coverage if any employee injured himself or herself and that a jury could rationally conclude that plaintiff made a specific request for such coverage to defendant.

The Appellate Division reversed, holding that although issues of fact may exist as to plaintiff's request for specific coverage, plaintiff's failure to "read and under [stand the] policy... precludes recovery in this action" (*American Bldg. Supply Corp. v Petrocelli Group, Inc.*, 81 AD3d 531, 531-532 [1st Dept 2011]).

We granted leave to appeal (17 NY3d 711 [2011]) and now reverse. II "[insurance agents have a common-law duty to obtain requested coverage for their clients within a reasonable time or inform the client of the inability to do so; however, they have no continuing duty to advise, guide or direct a client to obtain additional coverage" (*Murphy v Kuhn*, 90 NY2d 266, 270 [1997]).

To set forth a case for negligence or breach of contract against an insurance broker, a plaintiff must establish that a specific request was made to the broker for the coverage that was not provided in the policy (see *Hoffend & Sons, Inc. v Rose & Kiernan, Inc.*, 7 NY3d 152, 155 [2006]). "A general request for coverage will not satisfy the requirement of a specific request for a certain type of coverage" (*id.* at 158).

Here, plaintiff testified, at its deposition, that it specifically requested "general liability for the employees... if anybody was to trip and fall or get injured in any way." Plaintiff also testified that defendant was aware of ABS's operations, i.e., that there were no retail sales to the public at the premises and that the only persons at the premises were plaintiffs employees. *736 Defendant, of course, maintains that the procured coverage satisfied plaintiffs request.

Like the courts below, we conclude that issues of fact exist as to whether plaintiff specifically requested coverage for its employees in case of accidental injury and defendant, being aware of such request, failed to procure the requested coverage. This would be a more difficult case if it rested on plaintiffs uncorroborated word alone.

Here, however, the evidence arguably supports plaintiffs claim. Since no one but employees ever entered the premises, the coverage defendant obtained, which excluded coverage for injuries to employees, hardly made sense. ra Defendant maintains, however, that plaintiffs claim is barred by its receipt of the insurance policy without complaint.

In *Hoffend* we left open the question of whether a plaintiff who has received an insurance policy and had an opportunity to read it and had not requested any changes is barred from recovery (see 7 NY3d at 157). Various appellate courts have held that once an insured has received his or her policy, he or she is presumed to have read and understood it and cannot rely on the broker's word that the policy covers what is requested (see *Busker on Roof Ltd. Partnership Co. v Warrington*, 283 AD2d 376, 376-377 [1st Dept 2001]; *Rotanelli v Madden*, 172 AD2d 815, 817 [2d Dept 1991], lv denied 79 NY2d 754 [1992]; *Madhvani v Sheehan*, 234 AD2d 652, 654-655 [3d Dept 1996]; *Chase's Cigar Store v Stam Agency*, 281 AD2d 911, 912 [4th Dept 2001]).

However, other appellate courts have been more forgiving and have held that receipt and presumed reading of the policy does not bar an action for negligence against the broker (see *Kyes v Northbrook Prop. & Cas. Ins. Co.*, 278 AD2d 736, 737-738 [3d Dept 2000]; *Reilly v Progressive Ins. Co.*, 288 AD2d 365, 366 [2d Dept 2001]). This may be such a case.

The facts as alleged here, that plaintiff requested specific coverage and upon receipt of the policy did not read it and lodged no complaint, should not bar plaintiff from pursuing this action. While it is certainly the better practice for an insured to read its policy, an insured should have a right to “look to the expertise of its broker with respect to insurance matters” (*Baseball Off. of Commr. v Marsh & McLennan*, 295 AD2d 73, 82 [1st Dept 2002]; see also *Bell v O’Leary*, 744 F2d 1370, 1373 [8th Cir 1984]).

The failure to read the policy, at most, may give rise to a defense of comparative negligence but should not bar, altogether, *737an action against a broker (see *Baseball Off. of Commr.*, 295 AD2d at 82). Because there are issues of fact as to whether plaintiff requested specific coverage for its employees and whether defendant failed to secure a policy as requested, we conclude that summary judgment is inappropriate in this matter.

We further conclude that plaintiffs failure to read and understand the policy should not be an absolute bar to recovery under the circumstances of this case. Accordingly, the order of the Appellate Division should be reversed, with costs, and the motion by defendant Petrocelli Group, Inc. for summary judgment denied.