



Alan Whitman

EDITORS' NOTE Alan Whitman has had various leadership roles with Baker Tilly, including leading international services and serving as managing partner for Baker Tilly Michigan. He joined Baker Tilly in 2003 after spending 15 years with a large international CPA firm. He is Chairman of the firm's Board of Partners and is the Founder of the firm's international services platform. He sits on several committees including as chair of the firm's International Steering Committee. Whitman holds a B.S. degree in accounting from Indiana University Bloomington.

FIRM BRIEF Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP (bakertilly.com) is a nationally recognized, full-service accounting and advisory firm. With approximately 2,700 employees across the United States, Baker Tilly is ranked as one of the 15 largest accounting and advisory firms in the country. Headquartered in Chicago, Baker Tilly is an independent member of Baker Tilly International, a worldwide network of independent accounting and business advisory firms in 141 countries with 28,000 professionals.

How has Baker Tilly differentiated itself in this space?

We became the fastest growing firm in Wisconsin from 1998 to 2008, and we were met with new opportunities, one of which was globalization. I had the opportunity to join the firm in 2003 to lead the development of an international platform. We knew we had to position ourselves in this manner in order to serve globally active companies.

We adopted the global brand in 2009. There are only 10 global brands in the profession and we wanted to be one of them. It has helped us secure clients that would not have considered the former Virchow Krause and allows us to bring a cohesive story to a client or prospect and enables us to compete in the global marketplace.

We were also able to expand through mergers with other large firms, including one in

Stewardship, Integrity, Passion, and Collaboration

An Interview with Alan Whitman,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Baker Tilly

Washington, D.C., in 2009 and again in 2014 with one of our Baker Tilly friends, ParenteBeard. We're now the 13th largest firm in the country at half a billion dollars with 2,700 people and 300 partners. That, in and of itself, has raised us into a position of national recognition and relevance.

We're small enough to be nimble and close to our clients but we're large enough to get anything done around the world. We have the depth and skills that would not be expected from a firm our size.

When you're going through mergers, how challenging is it to maintain culture?

We didn't want to become an amalgamation of separate subcultures, but I love the fact that we have individual cultures. We don't upset the culture of different markets, but there is an overriding set of cultural norms in the organization that we stand by. Our core values are stewardship, integrity, and passion. We've recently added collaboration because it encompasses how we bring value to our clients.

Is there a need to have offices globally or can clients be serviced from a distance?

We are part of a network where the network manages the 130 member firms around the world, making sure the cultural connection is maintained and that the quality is high.

We are not a firm that believes we need our own partnership in every market. This is not to say we won't be global in the right strategic markets but we have to make sure the structure of our network is culturally supported.

We make sure when a client is introduced to someone in another country that they're still going to experience the same Baker Tilly way.

When you practice in so many different segments of the market, is there a sweet spot for Baker Tilly?

We play in different arenas, and provide different services in those arenas.

We're a middle-market firm predominantly serving middle-market clients, and that may be a private company or a public company.

Is innovation taking place within the profession and, if so, where?

There is innovation with a capital "I" and innovation with a lowercase "i." Innovation

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with a capital “I” is reinventing a service; innovation with a lowercase “i” is implementing something that will help us gain efficiencies.

We hear a lot about the big firms creating innovation around the future of audit or new ways to implement different solutions. There is innovation within the industry, but it's a matter of how quickly they're adopted and how public those innovations are.

Most firms of our size are actively engaging in innovative platforms in various forms and fashions based on their cultures.

Is cyber a focus for you?

We're fighting the lack of awareness of this with our middle market clients, and feel we have to get them to understand that they have to look at this. For us, this is a very focused area of expertise within our broader risk and internal consulting practice that could help us catapult our position in the marketplace. The challenge is out there and everybody knows it's out there, and we can help our clients avoid the risk.

How critical is it for your workforce to mirror the composition of your diverse client base?

We recently changed our talent strategy – previously, it was to hire, develop, retain, and reward the best people in the firm. We've evolved it into cultivating a diverse, engaged, and inclusive culture where exceptional people thrive.

Diversity and inclusive leadership are extremely important, including diversity of thought, background, perspective, and experiences.

How important is community engagement?

It's important to give back. One of our values is stewardship, which is investing for the future with the intention of leaving everything better. For many years, we have had a program called HERO – Helping Enrich Relationships through Outreach where we give our people a number of paid hours each

year to go out and volunteer. In 2016, our team members spent 5,000 hours supporting causes they care about.

When I became CEO, we implemented our first Stewardship Day, a single day of service across the firm which focused on overcoming food insecurity. It's very important that the community knows us as individuals. We're going to broaden our definition of the kind of activities our people want be engaged in.

What are the keys to leading in a partnership structure?

One word comes to mind, which is “consensus.” The minute my partners stop feeling like partners, we have a problem. As we grow larger,

that potential becomes more intense because partners can be further removed from the CEO.

Baker Tilly is the partners' firm – I have just been given the opportunity to lead it. It's important that the people around the boardroom or management committee table feel they have a meaningful say and that they won't be criticized for their opinions.

Does the profession do a good job of telling the story about how dynamic this industry is?

I live with the excitement of not knowing what is going to come about on any given day, and one can often make their own way.

We could do a better job of promoting that. The pathway in public accounting is less linear than one might assume. There are many branches from the main core to take on opportunities.

Do you worry that the human touch, which is so important in your work, may be lost with all of the technology available today?

Technology has minimized the personal touch, but I believe the biggest issue is that we've gotten away from the apprentice model. When our group of Baby Boomers retires, all that experience will be gone, so I've been pulling those more senior partners together to bottle their innate skills. We have to transfer that experience to the next generation.

How important is it to not lose touch with the clients?

Every leader has to maintain contact with clients because that is our business – if we don't do so, how can we serve them?

Do you take time to appreciate the firm's wins?

I'm a big believer in celebrating. It's a balancing act of choosing the wins to celebrate so it's taken seriously. People should be encouraged because it is their business. ●

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