



Creating a Platform

An Interview with David Foltyn,
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Honigman

EDITORS' NOTE David Foltyn is changing the business of law at Honigman, a law firm headquartered in the heart of downtown Detroit. As the Motor City experiences a resurgence, Foltyn leads a team that has enjoyed a prominent position in the city for nearly 70 years. He received his J.D. magna cum laude from the University of Michigan Law School, and his B.B.A., with high distinction, from the University of Michigan.



David Foltyn

FIRM BRIEF Honigman (honigman.com) is a premier law firm with more than 280 attorneys in seven offices, including Detroit, Chicago, and five other Michigan locations. Honigman serves its growing national clients in a broad base of legal areas including intellectual property, private equity, corporate and securities, real estate, and litigation, among others.

As Honigman has grown, how critical has it been to maintain the culture and is that more challenging as you get larger?

I distinguish values from culture. Values must be constant. For a business to thrive, culture must evolve to adapt to changing times.

Honigman's values – integrity, collaboration, community involvement, a strong commitment to the future, and, of course, legal excellence and delivering real value to our clients – are the same as they were when we were founded in 1948. These values drive cultural change within the firm not only to keep up, but to stay ahead of, a rapidly changing legal marketplace.

Law practice today is markedly different than when I began my career in 1980. We did not have computers, PDAs, or even Federal Express. Practice pace was slower and less stressful, and the work was less sophisticated. Our work environments were more club-like, and successful attorneys rarely left their firms for another firm. Diversity was a concept in the embryonic stage.

In today's highly competitive and transitioning legal marketplace, clients demand and deserve value from their attorneys. To continue to exceed our clients' needs, we must operate our law firms like businesses – we must invest in technology, project and knowledge management techniques, and client service standards.

We must understand the client's business, their strategic objectives, and their industry in order to help them achieve their goals as efficiently and predictably as possible. This requires meaningful culture change, which is a challenge, particularly for lawyers. Shared values enable us to appreciate the need for, and to achieve, this culture change.

Lateral hiring has been essential to our growth, success, and ability to deliver value to our clients. At Honigman, we have been extraordinarily successful at it. We created a plat-

form for our attorneys that allows them to deliver high-value legal services to their clients and to be successful in their careers. This makes us a very attractive place for successful and motivated attorneys at other law firms and we're very careful to hire lateral partners who share our values.

When lawyers who have spent several years at a "big law" firm in a money-market city decide to come to Michigan, Honigman is generally their first choice because of the sophistication of our practice, our reputation as a market leader, and our financial success. While we have been able to recruit many such "transplants" unfortunately, we have not been bringing enough qualified talent into Michigan to fill our needs. After a long study, we decided to enter the Chicago market in 2015 as part of our talent acquisition strategy and have quickly grown from 14 lawyers to 29 there. The complex integration of a new office is impossible without shared values.

You're focused on building a diverse and inclusive workforce. In a broader sense, how important is it that this is mirrored within your firm?

It's critical because most importantly it's the right thing, and it is good for business.

Over the years, when we addressed what we thought was a diversity and inclusion issue, we quickly learned it was a spectacular idea for the law firm in general. As an example, like most other firms, we had not been as successful in advancing women and minority lawyers to equity partnership. We reviewed our attorney development and evaluation processes and found they were deficient not only for minorities but for all attorneys. We then invested a great deal of time and energy to create what we call core competencies and hired a C-level executive, a former attorney, and an executive coach to run this program. It turns out that all of our associates have benefited from the program.

It is obvious why diversity is the right thing for a business. How can a firm without a diverse population develop a business strategy to thrive in a diverse world? Let's use litigation as an example as to why it is good for business. Juries and judges come from diverse backgrounds: age, geography, gender, preference, race, and faith, to list just a few.

We do a lot of career coaching and we have a diversity committee, which does a lot of one-on-one mentoring and is creating some sponsorship programs. Lawyers are heavy on language and, for years, our vocabulary focused on diversity. Recently, our diversity team advised us the term "diversity" no longer reflects our objectives. We are fairly diverse but we aren't succeeding at inclusion and equity, so we have expanded our internal vocabulary to "diversity, inclusion, and equity." Community involvement also helps us in our diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts. We are improving, but we have a ways to go, particularly in inclusion and equity.

As someone who has known and been such a part of Detroit, what has led to its resurgence?

When I started in 1980, downtown wasn't a great place to be. Since then, our entire riverfront has been expanded – it's walkable and beautiful. Outside investment is coming in and construction projects seem to be everywhere. We now have a downtown to midtown core (about to be serviced by a fantastic new light rail system) that is filled with restaurants, night life, retail, and art galleries, as well as renovated and fully occupied office buildings. There is a magnificent sports complex that includes major league baseball and football stadiums and, next year, will include a new hockey and basketball arena.

It's amazing to see the number of young people who work and live here. We have a number of associates who live downtown or in midtown. The residential vacancy rate within downtown to midtown apartments is zero.

Detroit, in the art world, is known as the new Berlin. Techno music started here and we are home to an important modern art culture scene. Any New York or L.A. artist who wants a loft lifestyle cannot afford it in those cities. However, we have so much industrial space that is turning into lofts at a very low cost. They are moving here in meaningful numbers.

Detroit really is happening. I'd love to give you a tour. ●