

# The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel®

National Edition

www.metrocorpcounsel.com

Volume 22, No. 3

© 2014 The Metropolitan Corporate Counsel, Inc.

March 2014

## A Client-Friendly Firm Philosophy Spurs Growth

*The Editor interviews Peter Kellett, Chairman and CEO, Dykema LLP.*

**Editor:** Describe your practice, your activities as you moved up in the firm and how they contribute to your role as Dykema's chairman and CEO.

**Kellett:** My practice was historically a litigation practice with an emphasis on class action and consumer products-based litigation. It was a very active trial practice for many of the larger manufacturers of consumer goods and other products. I had roles within the firm in various leadership capacities, starting with being on our firm's professional personnel committee, becoming a practice group leader for one of our litigation subgroups, and then more recently being the department director for our entire cross-firm litigation department. Those roles prepared me to have a good appreciation of the business of law, of the operational aspects of the firm, and of some of the competitive pressures and other challenges that law firms face. They helped prepare me to step into the CEO role.

**Editor:** Could you describe the overall structure of the firm and how it contributed to its success? I noticed you have numerous offices throughout the country.

**Kellett:** Our overall structure is very much practice group driven. We are a practice group-managed law firm first and foremost. That has tended to promote good cooperation and cross-selling among our offices. So, while our office footprint is important, the primary driver of our professional development, our business development, and our practice management is the practice group structure. That has helped us be more of a one-firm firm and an organization that is not necessarily geographically driven in terms of how we



Peter Kellett

serve clients. This has served us very well in terms of both growing the firm and our ability to integrate professionals in other geographic locations into both practice groups and the management of the firm.

**Editor:** You have stressed paying particular attention to client feedback. How do you measure client satisfaction on the basis of those findings? How are they used to retain clients and grow the firm?

**Kellett:** We have a very committed and regular client interview process conducted both by ourselves and through third parties from which we, on a regular basis, identify issues that need to be addressed and opportunities to better serve our clients. These are comprehensive interviews with some of our key clients and with different clients over time – it's not just with the same clients year after year. We attempt to measure how they perceive us against very important criteria. These criteria we believe are

the most important to distinguish us from other law firms and to provide to our clients the best value from their point of view.

Among those key criteria are the following: How well do we understand the client's business? How focused are we on the client's needs as opposed to the needs or desires of the law firm? How committed are we to helping the client solve problems and effectuate its business objectives? And finally, does the client feel that we provide value for the dollars that it spends for our services? Those are our key measures of how we are doing. We obtain numerical ratings from our clients measuring the extent to which we meet these criteria and plot those over time to determine the extent to which the firm is improving in the eyes of our clients. We ask ourselves, are we in acceptable ranges on those measures? And, what can we do to improve our performance? We then meet with our client service teams – even when we're doing well – to determine ways to improve our levels of performance.

**Editor:** You also attribute the growth of the firm to maintaining a dialogue with its non-attorney staff. In a recent article, you state that investing in your staff "is a powerful message." What kinds of human resource investments have you made, and how would you describe the impact on your employees, both legal and non-legal?

**Kellett:** The impact of making an investment in our non-attorney staff has been very profound. In my view, all our employees feel much more connected to the performance of the firm when they feel that they are important providers of client service. Just to pick an example, the accounting staff serves the lawyers in the firm in terms of billing collection and other accounting functions, but it also interacts with our external clients. It's extremely important that they approach their interaction with clients in the same manner

*Please email the interviewee at [pkellett@dykema.com](mailto:pkellett@dykema.com) with questions about this interview.*

that lawyers are being asked to. We make it clear to all members of our staff that they are really important to the organization and will be rewarded for excellent service in performing their functions.

**Editor: You have many offices in the U.S. When you add an office, what does that additional office contribute to the total firm? Last year you opened an office in Minneapolis. What opportunities does that city offer?**

**Kellett:** Our many offices allow us to provide a more comprehensive service offering to many of our clients. We have a number of clients that are national in scope that are prepared to provide more opportunities for us if we can serve them with a greater geographic diversity. That's certainly been a consideration in the expansion of our footprint. We have looked to add offices and lawyers where there is either a collection of key clients or a practice group that is very complementary to our core strengths. For example, Minneapolis offered us an opportunity to expand our financial institutions practice, which is already an important practice within the firm, and our intellectual property practice, particularly in the area of biotechnology and medical devices. It has a relatively strong economy with a highly educated workforce and is a market in which a number of our clients have operations and legal needs.

**Editor: Your firm received a perfect score of 100 percent on the Human Rights Campaign's 2014 Corporate Equality Index (CEI). Describe some of the steps the firm has taken to create a truly diverse law firm.**

**Kellett:** Several years ago, we adopted a strategic plan for diversity and inclusion. Among other things, the plan sets forth specific strategies in the areas of recruiting and retention at the firm. Members of the firm's diversity and inclusion committee oversee the implementation of that plan. To

advance the goal of diversity and inclusion, we as a firm have made significant changes to our employment benefit and EEO policies, including healthcare services and other benefits for same-sex and transgender partners and the inclusion of gender identity and expression in our EEO policy. We've created a firm-wide employee resource group for LGBT employees. We have an active women's business initiative in both the Chicago and Detroit offices with plans to expand that further across the firm. We've improved our flextime policies in the last few years. A number of our partners have participated as speakers or panelists at conferences aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion in the profession. We've partnered with a number of our clients on several local and national diversity pipeline programs for young students, particularly high school students. We award a diversity scholarship each year at both the University of Michigan and the University of Illinois law schools. Those are the major ways in which we have taken the steps that led to the award you mentioned.

**Editor: Tell us about your firm's pro bono efforts.**

**Kellett:** We have a robust pro bono program, which is overseen by an attorney who is devoted full-time to running that program. We believe that the practice of law is a privilege that carries with it the obligation, regardless of professional prominence or workload, to participate in providing pro bono legal services. We expect each lawyer to devote not less than 40 hours per year to pro bono. Some lawyers devote substantially more than that. Those hours are credited to the professional's total contribution on a yearly basis. We have for many years been 100 percent compliant with the Pro Bono Institute's definition of acceptable pro bono service as adopted by the American Bar Association.

**Editor: Tell us about Dykema's top areas of industry focus. Do you see these changing in the future?**

**Kellett:** The top areas of our industry focus have included automotive, energy, financial services and healthcare. Some of our office expansion has been structured around work in one or more of those industry groups. I don't see that those will necessarily change in the near future because they're strong and important practices.

We have recently formed a hospitality and gaming industry group reflecting our strength in those areas. That group's clients are served by our offices in Michigan, Illinois, and, most recently, Texas. We expect that this new group will provide the basis for some expansion of that practice. We're excited about that.

**Editor: Is the firm looking for opportunities to expand into new practice areas or parts of the country?**

**Kellett:** It could. I don't have a readily identifiable or ready-to-announce area that I would identify right now, but over the last ten years we have expanded into four new markets and have become involved much more significantly in a couple of practices, such as energy and financial services. I believe that we will over time likely continue that trend, but it's just hard to predict when and exactly where.

**Editor: You are located in the U.S. with 13 offices. How do you handle global issues that may come up with particular clients?**

**Kellett:** We have an important and strong affiliation with a network called the World Services Group. We are the U.S. member whose primary geographic identification is the upper Midwest and in particular Michigan. There are other firms that are affiliated with that Group in other parts of the U.S. It is a virtual network of firms across the world, as the name suggests, that are outstanding firms that serve as a network through which we're able to and do refer clients with a high degree of confidence they will be well-served.