



Executive Insight with Kevin Hogan



Buffalo Business First publisher John Tebeau recently sat down with area business leaders to get to know them better and the following is an excerpt from one of those conversations.

Kevin Hogan draws from both of his careers in manufacturing management and environmental law to fulfill the duties of his role as managing partner of Phillips Lytle LLP, the region's second largest law firm.

Hogan has been managing partner of the firm for five years, a time that has been both exciting and challenging and will continue to be so as the firm embarks on a five-year strategic plan that addresses growth in business, attorneys, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and in innovation.

"Our clients are asking for it," Hogan said. "We are fortunate to have an incredible array of clients of upstate businesses and individuals and Fortune 500 companies that are national or globally based that want us to do more of the same and more than we have the capacity to do. We need to seize the opportunity and do that work and we need more attorneys to do it. It's not just growth for growth's sake. It's smart, strategic growth."

The firm has 300 employees, including 140 lawyers, in eight offices from Buffalo to Garden City and in Washington D.C. and Kitchener, Ontario.

Phillips Lytle has enjoyed its firm headquarters in the One Canalside building and being part of the renaissance of the waterfront. The neighborhood wasn't much to look at when the firm moved in in 2014.

"The Webster Block as a parking lot, Canalside was a hole in the ground, the former Aud foundation," Hogan said. "It was really hard to say what direction it was going to go in, but boy aren't we thrilled at the direction it went in."

Hogan, an Albany native, took a circuitous route to his career in the law. As an undergraduate he studied mechanical and metallurgical engineering at the University of Connecticut and worked at General Electric Co. for more than five years in company offices in Ohio, Massachusetts, and Vermont.

He later headed back to the classroom and graduated from Vermont Law School, which specializes in environmental law. He held a clerkship for a year at the U.S. Court of Appeals in New York City before heading to his wife's hometown of Buffalo and arriving at Phillips Lytle in 1992.

Hogan's practice focused on

environmental law, intellectual property and litigation and he had been environmental practice team leader, trial department administrator and a long-time member of the governing committee.

When former managing partner David McNamara announced in late 2016 he would step down as managing partner to return to business litigation and project development, the firm's partners approached Hogan about the job.

"They were really big shoes to step into," Hogan said. "I was honored to be asked and happy to serve. I serve at the will of the governing committee and my fellow partners."

He looks at his role as his predecessor did, Hogan said. He is at the top of the firm that across the board is made up of dedicated employees who are collegial and collaborative and who work as a team, he said.

"We have such high performing, highly talented lawyers," Hogan said. "We're just trying to clear the tracks so they can race like the thoroughbreds they are and deliver the services the clients need them to."

The firm recently wrapped up its 2021 strategic planning process that will guide its growth for the next five to seven years. It helped Phillips Lytle determine where growth and expertise was needed for bench strength, succession planning and to meet client demands, Hogan said.

There is a several-pronged recruiting strategy at hand, Hogan said.

One focus is in building a stable of young attorneys. The firm has doubled the size of its starting class in September and increased the size of its summer associates class by 50%. The firm also is recruiting small offices and groups of attorneys in communities where it has a presence.

"We have already identified who it is we need and in what specialty areas and the expertise they should have," he said.

Working remotely that came to be commonplace during the pandemic for many industries has expanded post-pandemic recruitment for Phillips Lytle. The firm has widened its net seeking personnel beyond the constraints of the geographic location of its offices. An individual's expertise has become more important than where he or she resides, Hogan said.

And though location is not an issue for some, it can be an important recruiting tool for ex-patriates who want to return. Phillips Lytle offers a remedy to long commutes, high cost of living and work-life imbalance of practicing in "big law" in places such as New York, Washington, Chicago, and the West Coast, he said.

"We have seen an increase in that kind of migration because of the pandemic," Hogan said. "The pandemic caused more attorneys who had been working for big law to ask themselves those hard question and made that decision to migrate back home."

Another attraction of Phillips Lytle is the size, Hogan said. Unlike a firm with 2,500 or 5,000 attorneys with offices worldwide, it can more leanly staff its matters within its family of 140 attorneys.

"The professional opportunities to get to know the client, to get into court, to be first or second chair on a transaction, to develop client relationships out of which new business comes are much more meaningful and come much sooner in a young attorney's career when working at a firm like Phillips Lytle," Hogan said.

"That can be a pretty compelling pitch to make to a third-year attorney who is still working as a cog and a wheel on a team of 25 attorneys when they could be on a team of three attorneys."

The firm recently was a platinum sponsor of the annual Buffalo Business First Inclusion Diversity Equity Awareness Awards. The sponsorship reflects Phillips Lytle's long philosophy, within the firm and in the regions in which it practices, of rooting inclusion, diversity, and equity in its operations.

Among firm initiatives in that philosophy are funding the diversity law scholarship awarded to students of color at the University at Buffalo School of Law, various collaborations with clients and community organizations, and pipeline projects such as promoting careers in the law to inner-city high school students.

From a gender perspective, Hogan noted, five of the eight members of the firm's management team, elected at large by the partners, are women, three of the firm's five practice groups are led by women attorneys, and two of the firm's three



Kevin Hogan
Managing Partner
Phillips Lytle LLP

executives are women.

Mentoring is a critical activity toward better retention and less attrition, Hogan said. To that end, the firm offers its youngest attorneys multiple mentors from among the senior associates and partners and has a diversity affinity group and an affinity group for women.

For this initiative to develop the next generation of trusted legal advisers, the firm needs to be deliberate, mindful, intentional, and especially persistent, he said, because the dividends of this effort will be realized long term, not six months.

Phillips Lytle similarly is addressing innovation across the firm, from internal process fixes that can help office staff work more efficiently to cutting-edge technology applied to client needs. For example, artificial intelligence may be deployed to help a client who has a lot of leases or loan amendment documents in a way that increases the quality, reduces the time, or increases the efficiency that delivers greater value.

"We might succeed doing what we do as well as we do it for a great array of clients," Hogan said, "but to really compete long term, rather than looking only five years out, to really look generations out, 20 years out, we need to be investing not just money, but mental energy and time in innovation."

VISION Buffalo - Executive Insights is an ongoing series.

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