

Law Firm Leaders: Varnum's Ronald DeWaard

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (November 27, 2019, 11:56 AM EST) -- Ronald DeWaard took up the role of chair at 200-lawyer Michigan law firm Varnum LLP last January. The firm has expanded in recent years to become the second-largest in the state.

Here, DeWaard talks about the law firm's expansion strategy, its goals for the future, and why he thinks BigLaw hasn't found a foothold in the state that birthed the U.S. automotive industry.

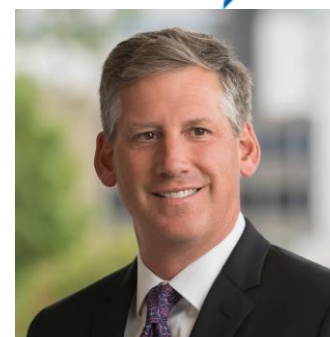
What have your law firm's goals for growth been in recent years and how have you gone about achieving those goals?

We were geographically situated for the most part in West Michigan from when the firm developed many years ago. We saw a fragmented Michigan market where you saw east side firms trying to be in West Michigan with limited success, but not really too many West Michigan firms going to the east side. So we decided we would become Michigan's firm and work across that geography. And that's what we did. We opened a Novi office, a downtown Detroit office, an Ann Arbor office, a Birmingham office. The way we went about doing it is by getting more clients over there to serve and by attracting talent.

What is your approach to attracting and retaining talent?

I think we're above the curve on health and wellness. We've had the ability to punch above our weight class on talent because we're in a place, here in West Michigan and on the southeast side of the state, where a lot of people came from here, left the state, went to great law schools, worked in some of the larger markets and then realized practicing law isn't all about generating as many hours as you can. They wanted to live in a great place and have a well-rounded practice, with the level of sophistication you can have with a law firm like ours.

Our focus attracts talent on its own. Our focus is on that well-rounded lawyer, because we want people to be healthy in terms of their emotional well-being, their spiritual well-being, physical well-being, mental well-being. All of those things make this a place they want to work, but it also makes them the



Ronald DeWaard
Varnum chair

most effective lawyer that they could possibly be, because those are the types of people who really enjoy their job and who want to serve clients.

What is a well-rounded lawyer and how do you promote that?

A well-rounded lawyer for us starts with reasonable work expectations. Reasonable expectations of where your career objectives fit into your overall life. We want people who are doing other things in addition to working here. We want them involved in community. We want them to enjoy their time outside of work. But we also want to have things here that make it a place they want to be. We have a health and wellness initiative that includes a number of programs, events and education. We have a social connections and involvement focus, we want to them on community organizations, boards. We have a program that provides referrals and resources for people to go to confidentially to deal with issues like anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, marital and family problems. We think that's important to keep people well-balanced and well-rounded, which results in the best lawyering.

What opportunities are there right now in the Michigan legal market?

There is so much activity here with the auto industry and all of the industries that spins off of that, both inside the state but also outside the state. Being geographically positioned in Michigan, we don't necessarily view our practice as a Michigan practice. A lot of our clients are in the Midwest, all across the U.S., and international. A lot of them are focused on Michigan, which is why our geography works well. As far as opportunities, the auto industry is in this watershed moment where they are starting to transition to different types of business models ... with vertical integration and autonomous vehicles, which will be here sooner or later. [There is] all of the data issues that relate to that, the technology related to that, which has spurred huge growth in related industries. Those opportunities coming from Michigan's manufacturing base in automotive provide growth opportunities for law firms. All of these issues require help on the legal side — regulatory, contracting, mergers and acquisitions, and sometimes litigation.

Has there been competition in the market from BigLaw firms?

They've tried, with some limited success. The BigLaw firms have not been successful in our region and we think we'll take market share from them. Because for what the coming market is, we're the best type of law firm. The orientation of our law firm is not on profits per partner, even though financial success results from all of the things we're doing. Our focus and our orientation is on the client. Also, we have always been efficient and have learned to become more efficient. We've been doing flat fees for years, we've done financial arrangements for years.

In addition to the service orientation and efficiency, we also are talent-rich. A firm like ours is focused on the well-being of the attorney. It's not a billing monster. It's not a highly leveraged firm where the partner ranks continue to shrink. We're seeing more and more that we're getting entrees into these very large clients where they're not going to give all their work to the BigLaw firms. It doesn't make sense [for them to do that] because of the value proposition that firms like ours provide. We don't have to feed that monster. We can do our work, with technology, from anywhere and we have a much better cost structure where we are geographically located than all of these firms in the larger areas.

Does your law firm have aspirations outside the state?

Yes, we're going to look at moving outside Michigan in the next five years. In the Midwest, but also

down South, in order to better serve our clients.

What one trait is most important for a law firm partner?

Integrity in a holistic sense. By that I mean we need our partners, first and foremost, to do the right thing. Integrity is going to result in an obligation to more than just making money, which is going to result in finding and attracting lawyers who are mentally, spiritually and emotionally well-grounded. I think that all starts with the integrity of people whose orientation is to something broader than being financially successful.

What well-known lawyer, alive or dead, would you most like to have lunch with? Why?

I'd like to have lunch with Clarence Darrow. He was probably the greatest trial lawyer of the 20th century and I've always been fascinated by him and his career. He's a Midwesterner. I'd like to ask him how he would try a case today, with e-discovery and all of the things that are around today. I bet he'd have some great ideas and it would be nice to meet him.

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.