



# Creating Opportunity for Our People Cultivating Innovation

An Interview with Todd Stokes, Managing Partner, Baker Tilly



Todd Stokes

**EDITORS' NOTE** Todd Stokes has nearly 20 years of experience in professional services and is managing partner of Baker Tilly's metro D.C. office. Todd also leads the firm's innovation initiative.

**FIRM BRIEF** Baker Tilly Virchow Krause, LLP ([bakertilly.com](http://bakertilly.com)) is a nationally recognized, full-service accounting and advisory firm whose specialized professionals connect with clients and their businesses through refreshing candor and clear industry insight. 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 147 countries, with 30,000 professionals.

**Baker Tilly has a very nimble feel to it despite its size. How important is this to fostering innovation at the firm?**

Part of being innovative starts with a willingness to be adaptive. Our leadership has really set the tempo for this. With this philosophy in place, it's about having an environment that encourages people to bring forth ideas. The more ideas we have, the more ideas will be actionable and a big hit for the organization. This approach produces great ideas and it also leads to people who are highly engaged in our organization's success.

**It's one thing to say you're an innovative firm. How do you put it into practice?**

Innovation starts with an idea. While not every idea leads to innovation, one cannot have innovation without ideas. We've created a movement called *Ideas in Action* to nurture ideas – big and small – with wrap-around support to get to implementation.

We have an online tool that makes it easy to capture ideas and see common themes. And we have intrapreneurs – they are an active peer network throughout the firm rather than a formal committee. Their primary role is to connect and communicate. When a team member submits an idea, an intrapreneur will personally reach out and help put the wheels in motion. This is a crucial step because it demonstrates to team members that their ideas are heard.

Every day, ideas surface from every corner of our firm. Ideas bubble up in meetings. Ideas are inspired by clients. Ideas come from our team member engagement survey. Connecting and accelerating ideas fosters a workplace where people express their views and feel confident that their opinions are heard – no matter where the idea starts. That's how we're cultivating innovation.

**Where is the innovation taking place within this industry?**

In our point of view, there are two main areas of interest from an innovation perspective – user experience and advance analytics. Innovation is happening across all user touch points – this includes employees, vendors, partners and most importantly customers. Optimizing their experiences is critical to any organization's success. The second area of innovation is leveraging innovative technologies, such as AI, Deep Learning or RPA. The ability to access large amounts of data to create even greater insights is exciting and will be a game changer for professional services firms.

**Is technology changing what the workforce will look like in the future?**

Yes – and organizations must adapt. In fact, the future is now. Today's workforce is purpose-driven and socially responsible. People are learning at a faster pace and the amount of information available grows exponentially. Technology is an integral part of our lives. Employees want the same digital experience at the office as they have at home – that is, if they even go to the office. We're managing different work arrangements – full-time, part-time, contingent, and remote. To us, technology is not necessarily the change agent, rather it is an enabler.

**How important is it to keep culture at the forefront when merging with other firms?**

We're a people-centric business so culture has to be the first line of defense. It's not just one-sided – there needs to be a mutual fit that is recognized by both firms before any negotiations start. We know that great ideas and best practices exist in both firms. We believe in diversity of thought and inclusive leadership. It's the right approach and it provides the best results. ●