
Coffee and Conversations - featuring Paul Freedman

For the last twenty years, Bank of Ann Arbor's Technology Industry Group has watched the local tech scene grow and change. The group, led by Michael Cole, has created relationships with the innovative and creative people who have helped to shape Ann Arbor into a nationally recognized tech-hub.

Coffee and Conversations is a series of candid conversations with some of the influential tech leaders of Southeast Michigan. Each edition features Michael and a guest, talking about all things tech – innovation, changes, successes and failures, tools of the trade and much more.

This month, Michael is joined by Paul Freedman, Co-Founder and Board Chairman of LimnoTech, an environmental science and engineering firm providing water-related services to clients throughout the United States and internationally.

Michael Cole: Thanks for coming out and having a cup of coffee with me, Paul. You and I have been working with each other for quite a while – how long has it been now?

Paul Freedman: I'm delighted to be here, Michael. We've had a business relationship for twenty odd years, so I'm glad to sit down with you and chat!

MC: It's been a while, tell me about how LimnoTech was founded?

PF: LimnoTech was founded in 1975 from an outgrowth of research that I did at the university. At the time there was kind of the co-occurrence of two big societal changes. One was the environmental movement – Burning Cuyahoga, Dead Lake Erie, the environmental legislation – and a computer revolution. I was doing computer models of lakes and rivers at the university and spun off the company to provide that service. It was an exciting time to do it. Here we are, forty some years later and still having fun.

The vision when I founded the company was to accomplish four things: I wanted to do cool exciting, innovative things. I wanted to work with really good people; and I wanted to be a player in developing a new environmental field, which at the time didn't quite exist yet. Today we would call it environmental engineering. And last, I wanted to save the world – save our water.

Over forty years later, I'm still having fun. I just stepped down as a CEO, but I'm staying active in the company as the executive chair. I'm passionate about the work we do and the people, so I plan to stay engaged for a while.

MC: Will you give us a quick overview of what the company does?

PF: Our roots were in computer modeling, but the needs for innovative science and technology in the water field were high, so we diversified our work quite a bit. In a nutshell, I describe our work using six "R's" and an "S."

The first "R" is Resource Management. We help with managing large watersheds or lakes, like the Great Lakes, the Chesapeake, the Ohio River, the Huron River.

The second "R" is Remediation. We've cleaned up and worked on a number of Superfund sites. We have done a lot of work on contaminated rivers, contaminated sediment, and on B sites – as I always call them, the "Billion-Dollar" sites – big sites with PCB contamination like the Hudson, the Kalamazoo.

Restoration. We restore rivers or harbors and bays, restoring their natural function and utility for society and environment.

Redesign, which involves working for cities, redesigning how the hydrology becomes part of the fabric of the communities and protecting them from flooding and other hazards – which leads to the last two “R’s,” Resilience and Regulation.

MC: Wow, that’s quite a service area. I know you work with some corporations, which I find really interesting, but do you mostly work with municipalities? Could you describe your typical client?

PF: We have quite a diverse clientele, so we’re not a highly specialized, focused firm. In terms of our clients, we work with large cities – Washington D.C. is our longest-standing client, since 1977, I think. We have also worked with Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, Toronto, and similarly large cities. We have worked for federal and state government and all the big federal agencies: Army Corps of Engineers, EPA, NOAA. We have done quite a bit of corporate work, particularly in corporate water sustainability, but also environmental remediation. We have worked with large soft drink companies and beer companies, some tech companies, chemical companies, and lots of nonprofits. We have worked with the World Wildlife Federation, Nature Conservancy, and lots of different NGOs and university institutes. So, depending on the context, the projects are quite varied. For instance, we manage over two dozen buoy sensors out in the Great Lakes monitoring water quality and various conditions with high tech sensors and information networks, developing water stewardship plans for major corporations in hospitality, food and beverage, and the tech world. So, it is quite varied. Here in Michigan, we’re working on the removal of the Peninsula Dam and the plans for restoration of the historic flow of the Huron River.

MC: It sounds like your work is hitting all the marks of your initial vision.

PF: It is. I’ve been really fortunate that the good people that I’ve partnered with over the years have really helped me create something that I could never have imagined in 1975. We’ve worked with good people and clients with good ethos, good attitudes, and smarts. We always want to be at the cutting edge of the science, being thought leaders and technology leaders. That’s to our credit and our fault – our fault in the sense that it’s much easier to grow a business, establish a certain procedure and technology, and then do it over and over again, rather than constantly reconceptualize and innovate. That’s been our passion – innovating and saving the world, saving the water environment. We’ve worked in all fifty states. We’ve worked in six continents and in 78 countries, so we’ve helped shape the industry. We’ve had an impact and we’ve had fun at the same time.

MC: One of the questions I’ve been asking all of my guests, how did you evolve through the pandemic? What is the size of your team?

PF: We have around 90 employees currently and were rock solid initially the first year of the pandemic. Since, we’ve actually grown quite a bit, approximately 15-18% in 2021, and we’re growing again this year. A lot of companies that we worked with had to take the PPP funding from the government during the pandemic, but we chose not to take the funding. It took some effort, but since we’re such a computer savvy company, it wasn’t a big struggle to transition to working from home and working remotely. The last two years during the pandemic were among our best years. There may have been a pandemic going on, but water problems and water environmental issues were still there, and the demand was still there, so we did fine.

MC: I know you mentioned earlier that you were stepping down as CEO and clearly, this company is like your baby. You really care about what happens when you move on from your full-time leadership position. Are you torn about leaving?

PF: I am. When I formed the company in 1975, I did have a vision of shaping the industry and so forth, but I just imagined we would be a small consultant team of three-to-five people. My business plan was to pay the rent and have enough money left over for beer, burgers, and dog food, but as I began to embrace and partner with more staff, we began building a bigger vision for the company. It's been a collective effort. We have built a career and a company together, so it's hard to walk away from that. These people have formed a solid work community - they're like family. I'm still very passionate about the work, and I have to hold myself back not to ramble about all the cool things we're doing. I have other interests - I have seven grandkids, I have a cottage, I enjoy being outdoors. Right now, I am staying on as an executive board chair, advising the transition and helping with some strategic planning, and it keeps me in the game, but still gives me the flexibility to focus on other things.

MC: You're on the board at the Michigan Theater. Are you planning to do similar volunteer work when you fully retire?

PF: I'm kind of feeling my way around. Many of my friends have volunteered full-time for nonprofits when they retire. I'm active in a local environmental group, the Wolf Pack. I'm not sure how much I'll engage in other things. I might get drawn towards other things over time. Right now, I want to slow down to reassess my priorities and focus more on my wife and family.

We wish Paul the best in this next phase of life and innovation!