

S2.E18 - Brittany Hunter

Wed, 6/8 1:03PM 25:30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, michigan, company, business, atomic, employees, grand rapids, early, innovation, career, clients, called, support, bit, language, object, organization, software, west michigan, years

SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Brittany Hunter

A Announcer 00:02

Welcome to the Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

E Ed Clemente 00:28

Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. And I want to say welcome to the show to Brittany Hunter, she's the Managing Partner at Atomic Object, welcome to the show Brittany.

B Brittany Hunter 00:36

Hi, Ed, I'm so happy to be here. Thanks for having me on the show today.

E Ed Clemente 00:40

Well, I think you've got a lot to offer, especially with your organization. And let's jump right into that first, actually, you know, Atomic Object could mean a lot of things. So what do you tell people? If you go to a weird party, and someone comes right up to you and says, what does that mean?

B Brittany Hunter 00:57

Yeah, so Atomic Object is a custom software development company based in Michigan. We have offices in Grand Rapids and in Ann Arbor, and we're also expanding into other states as

well. Our third office is in Chicago. So we build custom software for clients from small early stage funded startups all the way up to Fortune 500. Companies. We have about 80 employees right now. And we're expanding, most of them are software developers, designers and testers, just creative people who love doing what they do and love doing it here in Michigan.

E Ed Clemente 01:39

And, you know, I thought you guys were also, you're sort of unique in that you're like, is it I'm not, I don't know, if the right terms employee owned or something we're, all of you are uniquely invested in it, I don't know how to say it.

B Brittany Hunter 01:52

You said it Ed. We are an employee owned company. Over half of our company is owned by non-founding shareholders who are employees of the company. Over, I think the latest number is 48 people who currently own shares in the company, some of them, it's a larger chunk, some of them it's a smaller chunk. But one of our values as a company is 'own it.' And this is a really cool way for our employees to influence the direction of the company and also just have a real tie to the economic impact, the benefits to them personally, of the work that they do, and to share in that.

E Ed Clemente 02:37

Is that unique for your industry, or is that something you see more and more businesses are sort of getting into? Because I know I've heard about other ones around the country, but I didn't know, you might be unique to Michigan, I don't know.

B Brittany Hunter 02:48

You know, there are there are various ways of doing it, but I think it's in the software industry, I think our founder is a bit of a visionary in that respect, in that he was thinking about succession and how to make the company last beyond him fairly early in his tenure. We've been around for, since 2001, so at the moment of this recording, it's been over 21 years. And our goal is to be 100 year old company. And to do that, we want to retain control of the company within the company. So a lot of founders of technology companies might choose to sell to private equity, or might get bought out by a larger organization. We've seen many excellent consultancies, get bought out by large banks or other corporations and get just swallowed out for shoved off to the side as a bit of an innovation arm within a larger company. But we've had those offers, and we were going to stay independent for the long haul and so that's a way for us to stay sustainable and stay in control of our destiny.

E Ed Clemente 04:00

Did you mention who your founder was?

B

Brittany Hunter 04:02

Yeah, so our founder, his name is Carl Erickson. He was a professor at Grand Valley State University in the 90s, and eventually struck out and decided, hey, struck out on his own, I'm going to put into practice the things that I've been teaching in the classroom all these years. And that's how the company was born in a nutshell. It's a much longer story, but some of the early employees were students have his from his classes, and it's grown ever since. We still have very strong ties to the local universities and the towns that we're based in. So for us in West Michigan it's Grande Valley, it's Calvin College, it's Western Michigan, it's Central Michigan, Michigan State, University of Michigan. All of these universities are important places where we hire young talent for our internal training program that we call the Atomic Accelerator. And that's a cohort based program, where we'll bring in a cohort of like four or six people every summer and not only are they working on project teams, they're full time employees, working as consultants for our clients, and then also getting extra training around consulting, emotional intelligence, the skills that you need to succeed in today's workforce.

E

Ed Clemente 05:28

That's a that's actually an excellent point. I think that sort of is somewhat unique, it's not necessarily commercialization, right? You're not doing tech transfer? Are you doing that as well?

B

Brittany Hunter 05:41

No, no, the goal of the program, I mean, that could be a unique business proposition for down the road, right? But the goal of the program for us is to keep talented people in Michigan and to grow excellent consultants to be working for our company and innovating for our customers. Hiring in tech is really difficult right now. So especially hiring later on in people's careers, you might not get a good values match, and just people have had the choice of many, many different jobs in the technical field. So for us, being able to hire people early in their career right out of college, give them the support that they need to be really, really successful really early in their career. It's a way that we're able to keep our business sustainable in the long haul. And keep great people here in Michigan and, and be able to bring innovation as a service to to this part of the country. When you hear innovation, you don't always think Michigan, you know, you might think of San Francisco or Seattle or even New York in the vibrant startup scene there. But there's actually really cool things happening right here in terms of innovation and helping both local and national companies, create new products, streamline their business, get better at what they do, and bring value to the world. And it's really cool and exciting.

E

Ed Clemente 07:11

Yeah, I'm gonna come back to that. And one of my other questions a little bit about the talent discussion a little bit. But I think also that you actually two things. One is you actually graduated from Grand Valley yourself, right? And you live in Grand Rapids, right?



B Brittany Hunter 07:27

I did. Yeah, I grew up in Southeast Grand Rapids, have deep family roots here, wanted to stay in the state for college and went to Grand Valley and loved that experience.

E Ed Clemente 07:37

But I do have to ask one thing, I noticed you majored in classical languages?

B Brittany Hunter 07:42

I did. Yeah. I had four years?

E Ed Clemente 07:44

Yeah. What languages did you study?

B Brittany Hunter 07:47

Four years of Ancient Greek and three years of Latin.

E Ed Clemente 07:51

That's, I like Latin, I don't know, Greek as well. But, you know, I think that's wonderful. Because I think that's the one advantage I think sometimes of liberal arts degrees somewhat, is that it actually kind of keeps you more open, and listening to more serendipity, than you would if you were like, kind of in a hard science sometimes.

B Brittany Hunter 08:10

Absolutely. I mean, it's all those skills of emotional intelligence of looking at problems from different angles, you know, when you're parsing through a complex, ancient philosophical text, you're, you're thinking through the the language sides of it and then also like, how do these ideas connect too? I go back once in a while and give talks to to students and talk about this and how their liberal arts can connect to careers in various fields and the mechanics of language, it lights up the same parts of your brain as computer programming, because it's syntax, you know. If it's this way, it does this thing, if it's that way, it does that thing. So yeah, the, it's just a change in the, words and the languages and how they're expressed, but all the same concepts apply.

E Ed Clemente 09:01

Yeah, no no, I remember my language classes, but our teacher would sometimes make analogies to algebra and for different tenses for example especially with the Romance

analogies to algebra, and for different senses, for example, especially with the Romance languages, and, but they would say like, you have to have this, this and this in order to get this, you know. And I could see that as a probably a feeder for people who would think that way to come up with sort of logical things for computer programming too I would guess.

B Brittany Hunter 09:27

You're absolutely right.

E Ed Clemente 09:29

Yeah, so I also want to ask, you did mention the word atomic in one of your statements earlier, so how did the name come about?

B Brittany Hunter 09:37

Hey, so as I understand that, I wasn't around, but the story goes that Carl and his early employees were sitting around you know, at the end of work day trying to figure out what to name this thing and writing various things up on the whiteboard, various programming concepts and other ideas. Somebody I wrote up a Atomic and then somebody wrote up object oriented, which is a programming technique. And then somebody else slammed them together. Oh, Atomic Object and you know, get on Google and make sure that there's nothing out there that that has that name and that domain is available and all that good stuff in it. It helps that Atomic starts with an A and word, you know, the first person on the list if you're going alphabetical order. So that's how that was born. But we have a lot of fun with it. I mean, we, we have monthly parties where we bring in a bartender and and invite our clients and our family or friends. and those are called 'Spin Downs.' We call our employees Atoms. We try and avoid project meltdowns. Our employee newsletter is called the Nucleus. Our internal rewards program, we hand out protons and neutrons for things like years of service or recognition when people are living our values and things like that. So we have a lot of fun with playing with those concepts.

E Ed Clemente 11:03

Hopefully, no dark matter.

B Brittany Hunter 11:05

Yeah, we hope so.

A Announcer 11:08

You're listening to The Michigan Opportunity, featuring candid conversations with Michigan business leaders on what makes Michigan a leading state to live, work and play. Listen to more episodes at michiganbusiness.org/podcast.

E

Ed Clemente 11:25

The other thing too, is you I don't know what is proprietary, but I know you mentioned some clients, and is there any clients that you're allowed to mention like on record? Or is there just mainly the field you talk about most of the time?

B

Brittany Hunter 11:38

Oh, absolutely. I could tell some stories. One, I'll tell you about a local one and a national one, because I think they're interesting for two different reasons. Locally, a couple years back, we worked with a company called Masterpiece Flower Company, they grow flowers for lots of big box stores throughout the Midwest. Big growing operation, big shipping operation, family owned for three generations really cool story. They came to us because they had some old software, it was over 30 years old, you know, written and added onto throughout the decades. And they needed it rewritten because the technology like, it's not supported by Microsoft anymore, and this whole thing runs their business, so it was a huge risk, right? So we were able to work together to first investigate what that software is, because as you add on to something over the years, like nobody in the organization anymore has a clear end to end picture of what that thing is. So first, it's we had to kind of go spelunking through the caves of the code and figure out like, what everything was doing, and and build them a brand new system that hopefully will serve their company for another three or more generations. And that one's cool, because they're, again, a local local company, lots of jobs here, long history, all the things that we want to be, right?

E

Ed Clemente 13:02

Where are they located again?

B

Brittany Hunter 13:05

They're located in West Michigan, right in Byron Center.

E

Ed Clemente 13:08

Okay, that's like south of Grand Rapids, right?

B

Brittany Hunter 13:11

Yes, exactly. Our national client I'd like to talk about, it's a product called Quell. It's a wearable pain relief device for people who suffer from a variety of medical conditions. Things like fibromyalgia, diabetic neuropathy and it's it's a very cool device that's based on successful medical therapy that's been around for many years. And the innovation for them was they

redesigned it, repackaged it into a very consumer-friendly wearable device that you can pick up at things like Target or Costco. And then it's Bluetooth connected to a mobile device, that's where we come in, so you can connect it via Bluetooth to your phone. And you can use the app that we built to communicate with the via device, turn it on and off, monitor your pain, increase your therapy intensity, monitor when it's time for a new therapy. So that's really cool because it's connecting back to human good and helping people feel better. I always love those projects where there's a clear connection to doing good in the world. And all the work we do, does good in some way, right? But there's when you when you're talking about relieving pain, like that's a very heartwarming thing to be involved in. So that's a that's a company out of Boston. And another thing that I love about that is the economic development that our our nationwide work brings back to the region. So we're bringing back dollars from other states right here in Michigan, creating jobs in our local economy and doing that innovation work right here.

E

Ed Clemente 14:48

Yeah, it's wonderful. I know that we've had several guests on before they've talked about wearables, and even the drone companies have talked about delivery of medicines to people like as they read stuff on their monitors, you know, like the CVS will send somebody insulin or something like that. So we know that there's a lot more of this sort of edge computing stuff going on more and more. I'm going to jump over real quick, though to the kind of more future things. And that's where I want you to dive down a little bit more, because I think you touched on some key areas as you look at future trends or disruptors, but I think talent, you've already said one of them. But why don't you say a little bit because I think that's pretty interesting when you talked about how talent you have to almost like, curate it, not just like, hire people anymore. You have to kind of like nurture it along a little bit, too sometimes it sounds like.

B

Brittany Hunter 15:46

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, as a professional service company, talent is everything to us, we're nothing without our people. So being able to have strong connections with the local universities, and being able to spot the best and the brightest students early and bring them into our organization is a real differentiator for us. And then being able to retain them through things like excellent and culture, values driven, values-aligned culture. So for us people and caring for one another, and caring for the places that we operate out of is just really key.

E

Ed Clemente 16:36

Yeah, and I would imagine too it keeps changing on you too somewhat. Like, as how you can retain people, because with different sort of generations of people and just different where they grew up might even be a bigger difference of why certain people stay longer, stay less, all those things.

B

Brittany Hunter 16:56

No, absolutely. I, especially as we look to get more inclusive, the tech industry has always had a problem with diversity being male and white male dominated. I'm proud that our company has made great strides in this area and and I think something like 40% women right now. I'm

has made great strides in this area and I think something like 40% women right now, I'm unclear on the exact statistic, but it's up there too. And looking at our industry and our company in general wanting to support people from all backgrounds having access to careers in the industry, is really important. And so part of that is becoming culturally competent, and being able to bring in the supports that people need to have an inclusive, equitable environment. So all those things contribute to retention, both in the region and in individual companies.

E

Ed Clemente 17:55

Yeah, is there any other trends you sort of, for either your industry, or that you would like to highlight?

B

Brittany Hunter 18:03

Oh, there's a few of them. I think climate tech is going to be huge in the next couple of decades. You know, we have one earth and climate change is a real thing. So figuring out how we're monitoring our energy and using it more wisely, is super important. And we're excited to work on tools and things in that space and that contribute to keeping our world and our region a beautiful place to live. I'm excited to be doing more software modernization products as well. Modernization isn't maybe exciting and shiny from the outset, but it's real businesses that create real value through tools that they've built over the course of generations. And software has been part of our business landscape for over half a century now closing in on closer to a century, right? So there's plenty of stuff out there that is old, that is frustrating to its users and needs to be revitalized, needs to be rethought for this business climate. And those projects are really challenging, really rewarding for the organizations that take them on and for us as their partner. So those are those are two other areas that are really important to me looking towards the future.

E

Ed Clemente 19:25

Just anecdotally, would you have an example of like modernization of software? Like, is that something that comes to your head real quick? You don't if you don't have one, don't worry about it.

B

Brittany Hunter 19:34

It's back to that Masterpiece project that I highlighted. That was a modernization effort, where they had something old that their business depended on and they needed to bring it back to life and rethink it for the ways their business has evolved and make it relevant for the next several generations. We've worked on a couple other ones for businesses across the state as well, who I probably shouldn't name.

E

Ed Clemente 20:01

No, that's all right. No, I but I appreciate it because I always thinks it helps with an anecdote

sometimes when you say that. The last couple of questions. One is, if you could go back and talk to your high school self or maybe go to a career day or even maybe speak to a high school graduation, what advice would you kind of give today?

B Brittany Hunter 20:24

You know, I get to interview every new young person coming into our company and work with them closely as they join us after college. One of the things that I just want to impress on all those people, and even on my younger self, is loosen up a little. They're always so worried about impressing everybody, and, you know, making sure that they're they're not failing and you know, making sure that they that we know that they know what they're doing. Its okay to fail. It's okay to ask the dumb questions. In fact, like, that's, that's part of being a human and part of growing. And I think no matter where we're at in our career, being willing to, maybe look a little bit silly, if whether it's clarifying something or sharing an idea that that might seem way out of bounds, that's where we grow the most as human and that's where some of the best innovation comes from. So my main thread if I were giving a commencement address would be like, loosen up and have fun with it. That's we only have one life, one career to live. So if you're not having fun, something's wrong, you better change it.

E Ed Clemente 21:41

Just so you know, that wasn't my problem in high school. [No, well, yeah, some people.] I was the opposite. Yeah, yeah. So one other little question, too, it's more objective, but like, is there someone historical you admire for leadership? Skill sets or whatever?

B Brittany Hunter 21:59

Yeah. So somebody I admire for leadership skill sets, is actually my grandpa. He is a person who always had time for everybody in his life. If he was with you, you were fully present. He was fully present with you. He wasn't thinking about anything else going on. And for me, that was a really important example early in my life and something that I strive to emulate. And he also had just a huge love of learning. He was a Grand Rapids native, he fought in World War Two. And he took a dictionary along and he read a page of the dictionary every day until he came home from the war. He got through the Ds, and then he got to come home. Sorry, I said read, he actually memorized a page of the dictionary. He this this man had a fantastic vocabulary and was just always like bringing me articles and sharing knowledge, and so that's another thing that I cherish.

E Ed Clemente 23:04

Yeah, being a good active listener and to be of intellectual curiosity are always strong qualities. The last question is more what do you like best about living in Michigan? And it could be anything an activity, a festival, what do you like best?

B Brittanv Hunter 23:20

Brittany Hunter 24:06

I love the variety of things available to us. Here in West Michigan. I live about 20 minutes outside of Grand Rapids on a horse farm, and you know, I have a very quick commute and suddenly I'm in the city on Wealthy Street with vibrant restaurants, vibrant culture, access to the symphony, access to plays and other culture, touring acts. You know, it's so so close together, and then another 20 minutes and I'm out to the lakeshore and enjoying the sand and the dunes and the sunset. And I don't know where else in the world you can get that with with such ease and and with such good community. So that's something that I love about our state.

E

Ed Clemente 24:06

Do you ride horses?

B

Brittany Hunter 24:07

I do. Yes. Yeah, I complete in the sport of dressage.

E

Ed Clemente 24:13

And we don't know what dressage means.

B

Brittany Hunter 24:16

Yeah, dressage is like ballet on horseback or figure skating on horseback. Compulsory routines, circles, spins, things like that, in it's judged on a scale of one to 10. It's an Olympic sport, but it's one that hardly ever gets any airtime. It's kind of obscure.

E

Ed Clemente 24:31

Oh, that's alright, though. I like obscure.

B

Brittany Hunter 24:33

It's very detail oriented.

E

Ed Clemente 24:36

I would imagine. And how many horses do you have?

B

Brittany Hunter 24:39

I have three of them, too many.

E Ed Clemente 24:41
So they're all ones that can do these skill sets.

B Brittany Hunter 24:44
Yes. Yep. to varying degrees.

E Ed Clemente 24:47
I would have guessed. Anyway, thank you very much. I want to say again, welcome to Brittany Hunter. She is the Managing Partner at Atomic Object, you did a great job today and thanks for being on the show.

B Brittany Hunter 25:00
Hey, thanks Ed, it was a fun conversation.

E Ed Clemente 25:02
Join us next week where our guest will be Dave Lorenz, Vice President, Travel Michigan. He also happens to be running the Pure Michigan campaign as well.

A Announcer 25:13
The Michigan opportunity is brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Join us and make your mark where it matters visit michiganbusiness.org/radio to put your plans in motion.