

ENGINEERING MINNESOTA

Starting Your OWN Business

**Minnesota
Engineers
On What It
Takes To
Succeed**



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COVER STORY

Starting Your Own Business

The world would have several surprises for Jack Ewing, P. E., when the Iowa State University mechanical engineering graduate started his career near Sioux City in the late 1960s. Perhaps the major astonishment is that he would have his own engineering firm within seven years. “It was not planned that way,” he explained recently. “Entrepreneurialism was not in my genetic makeup. My dad worked for the same power company his entire career and no uncles or cousins had any interest in operating their own business.”

Ewing’s ownership interest developed from a personal experience. He was fired from his first and third engineering jobs. He did not feel the dismissals were warranted and decided in the mid-1970s he would never place himself in a position where one person could determine if he received a pay check. Over 40 years later, he remains his own boss. He has worked as a consultant in Iowa, Minnesota and South Dakota.

He has concluded that to be a successful business owner, one has been to be ‘pretty darn good’ in at least one aspect of a chosen field. “I am a much better engineer than a salesman,” he explained. “But developing a good sales approach is easier than taking four years of mechanical engineering classes. I could learn to be a passable salesman. Learning to be a good engineer is far more difficult.”

Through the decades, Ewing was joined by a younger brother in working on various engineering projects but that was as far as business expansion went. “A key decision for me was to continue operating as a sole proprietor,” he explained. “I gave serious thought to expanding my business but then I sat down and asked myself what I was really good at doing. I know I was a very good engineer but had no idea as to what kind of finance guy or human resources person I would be. I was aware of the popular saying with some owners that you don’t hire people, you hire problems. I did not think I would be a good baby sitter nor did I want to have to worry about coming up with enough money every two weeks to make sure the checks I wrote to employees cleared the bank.”

Ewing is satisfied he made the correct choice — for him. Some classmates also established firms that employ many people. “We each did what was best for us,” he observed.

Interestingly, Ewing is as confident in his career choice as is Mike Karvako, P. E., although both had differing motivations for starting an engineering firm. Karvako heads Karvako Engineering in Bemidji, a civil engineering firm he started in 2006 that has grown to over two dozen employees and has branch offices in North Dakota and Michigan.

A Michigan Tech graduate, Karvako is in Minnesota as a result of marriage to a Bemidji native. “Having my own firm is something I thought about for a long time,” he explained. “I come from an entrepreneurial family. I wanted to be able to control my own destiny.”

Karvako said he enjoys the opportunity to use creative thinking in developing differing approaches to solving engineering problems. “Firms that have been around 50 years have their way of doing things,” he pointed out. “As a newer firm, it is a bit easier but also more challenging for us to come up with that different approach to problem solving. We like to think we bring a youthful energy to the job.”

Karvako said his main goal is to be able to make a difference in the lives of people. “Whether it is building a new water tower or creating a better park system, we are looking for opportunities to help people have a better life,” he said.

Josh Herzog, P. E., founder of Minneapolis-based Herzog Engineers, also easily falls into the entrepreneurial category. He worked for Larson Engineering after obtaining his degree in civil engineering from the University of Minnesota in 1998. Although he “always wanted” to have his own firm, Herzog acknowledges “pulling the trigger” can be challenging because working at a large firm provides a considerable comfort zone. Herzog started his firm in 2010 with himself and a part-time drafter. He now employs seven people. “I take a cautious approach to growth,” he noted. “I have no aspirations to become a 100-person firm.” Herzog said despite the growth he has been able to stay involved by doing engineering work. “My interest and training is connected to engineering,” he points out. “I don’t want to get too far away from that.”

For sure, not every engineering firm founder is blessed or cursed with the entrepreneurial spirit. Veteran structural engineer John Gockel, P. E. fits that category. Having his own firm never hit his



Rebecca Ellis, P. E.



John Gockel, P. E.

COVER STORY



Mike Karvakko, P. E.



Josh Herzog, P. E.

radar screen until he found himself unemployed in 1990. The Iowa State University graduate worked 10 years with Barton Malow construction company and three years with Knutson Construction before an economic downturn found him in the unemployment line. A friend gave him a phone call about working on a project and a couple of attorneys called looking for someone to testify in a court case and John R. Gockel & Associates was in business. “Having my own firm was not my intent but it has worked out very well for me,” he said. “I have been fortunate to work on some very high profile and interesting projects.” His advice to prospective firm owners is to “remain open to opportunity” and don’t immediately

rule anything out. And, he adds, “it never hurts to be a little lucky and be in the right spot at the right time.” Final advice includes the admonition to “save your money.” Gockel notes things may be going well now but that situation is not guaranteed. “Be cautious,” he said, “and you will likely be around for a long time.”

Neither entrepreneurial or unemployed, Rebecca Ellis, P. E., started Chaska-based Questions & Solutions Inc, in 2005 for another reason. She just wanted control over her life. Ellis, who obtain a Master’s degree in mechanical engineering from MIT in 1987, worked for OSM & Associates before becoming a founding partner of the Sebesta Blomberg consulting firm in 1994. By 2005, she was the mother of children four and seven years old and wanted to be able to spend more time with them. “With my own firm, I was better able to set my work schedule,” she explained. “I could spend late afternoon and early evening with my children and then work later in the night. Clearly, that approach worked out for me.”

Q&S has grown to employ 16 people and has projects throughout the United States. Much work is focused in the Washington, D. C. area as well as Texas and Oklahoma. About 60 percent of the firm’s work is done nationally.

Jim Meusey



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