

Higgins International Inc.

Harnessing the power of networking to build a business

BY JO MAGNIFICO

Brenda Higgins refers to "a tailored approach, solid value, creative sourcing and exceptional quality" when working with executive search clients.

You've probably heard the adage, "There are three kinds of people: Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen and those who wonder what happened." When you meet Brenda Higgins, the managing principal of **Higgins International Inc.**, it's obvious that she's been *making things happen* with her executive search and human resources consulting business (headquartered in hometown Winnipeg), right from the start.

The Higgins career story began many years prior to the home-based business. From the 1980s to mid-1990s, she worked at executive search and recruitment firms in Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa and the Greater Toronto Area, honing her skills, gaining experience and cultivating an impressive network of mentors, colleagues and potential clients. Higgins gathered information about the industry, demonstrating that an inquiring mind, a proven record and a little chutzpah can lead to opportunities.

As she explains, "I asked dozens of people what they liked about the human resources business, what courses should be taken and what trends were emerging. I picked brains." Higgins proceeded to earn a Certified Human Resource Professional (C.H.R.P.) designation from the University of Manitoba, specializing in behavioural interviewing and profiling. She's also a Registered Professional Recruiter.

Eventually, Higgins realized it was time to make her own vision a reality. As she says, "I had done my research and homework for years." This homework also included the development, management and delivery of a three-million-dollar pilot program, called "Partners for

Careers," in Winnipeg. "After recruiting, assessing and training aboriginal post-secondary graduates for meaningful jobs, there were more than 400 placements in year one and more than 700 the following year," she says. For someone who thrives on challenges, Higgins was more than ready to tackle another one—Higgins International.

Getting started

In 1998, Higgins launched her solely owned home-based business. She started with space on the second floor of her home and quickly spread to the bedroom, kitchen, living/dining room and basement. Multiple files, papers, supplies and a determination to do it all (from meeting clients, to generating invoices and reading files in bed) made for a unique Higgins family experience. "I get more done at home," maintains Higgins. Whether Higgins International is managing professional and executive searches; developing job descriptions, policy manuals, employee performance programs and salary/compensation schedules; or conducting audits, seminars and workshops, the home office fits the bill.

Creating a strategic alliance

Higgins International revolves around a team of professionals that brings varied human resources experience to the table. With consultants Barb McMahon, Duane Shuttleworth, Gabriel Dufault, Michelle Boivin, and executive assistant B.J. Clarke (all located in Winnipeg), Higgins created a strategic alliance that mobilizes the group's distinctive skills and talents

to deliver customized solutions for clients. Most players operate their own home-based businesses in addition to working with Higgins.

Building a reputation

With expertise in government/health care, telecommunications, gaming and oil industries, Higgins International supports clients in Canada, the U.S. and Africa. The Higgins commitment to a strong client relationship—"a tailored approach, solid value, creative sourcing and exceptional quality"—is reflected in customer feedback. Carolyn Love (Unicity Integrated Logistics, Winnipeg) says, "Brenda took the time to understand our company and customized her service to suit our working environment." Adds Alan Ford (BFI Canada, Toronto), "I chose Higgins International over a number of other search firms because of Brenda's clear approach to the project and her fair, upfront compensation structure."

Word of mouth has led to a referral business marketing strategy that's quite successful for Higgins. Four years later, Higgins' image and reputation is recognized in business, government and industry circles. And the Higgins credo is still the same: "We want to do business the right way: to be a good place to work, and to make sure there's a better, highly skilled work force in the country."

Making things happen

A major part of the Higgins success story is her combination of smarts and style. She's motivated, high-energy and people-oriented. Deb Harcus, a candidate recruited for MTS Communications (Winnipeg) describes Higgins in terms of "integrity, openness and high quality service." In Higgins' words, "Do what you love to do and you'll be good at it."

Higgins builds "circles of influence" and understands that networking is not about collecting business cards or locating downtown for greater exposure—it's about connecting with people, customers, expertise and opportunities. A delegate on the 2001 Canadian Businesswomen's Trade Mission to the United Kingdom, Higgins says that networking was the most exciting aspect of the trip.

Since Higgins International was profitable in its first year, managing growth is a priority for the

company, which attracts both mainstream and aboriginal business. Another client, Jim Richardson (Business Development Bank of Canada, Winnipeg) says, "The personal touch positions Brenda well with employers and the growing number of aboriginals entering the workforce." Higgins' own Métis pride shows when she talks about helping to make a difference for aboriginal youth.

As for future plans, Higgins will continue to make things happen through the home office, yet keep her challenges open. She's moved to a renovated space in her basement and sometimes her two now-grown children lend a hand with the business.

Also important to Higgins is "giving back to the community." From boards to committees and advisory roles, she makes time for volunteer work. And whenever possible, Higgins adds, "Take the time to be a caring mentor."

Lessons learned

- Business is business, whether it's conducted from home or an outside office. Act accordingly.
- Ensure there's a dedicated and separate space for your business, and make your office functional.
- Surround yourself with the right people and expertise. Don't do everything yourself—get an assistant, bookkeeper, lawyer and learn to let go, to delegate, to trust people.
- Develop goals, strategies and action plans to help build good client relationships.
- Manage your technology and your time—invest in what you need to ensure quality and effective communication.
- Enjoy yourself—and involve your family wherever possible.

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