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Staying aloft takes work

NASA contracting is a good fit for the owner of J & P Technologies, who scours the space agency galaxy for jobs for her consulting staff

By SANDRA BRETTELL
 HOUSTON CHRONICLE
 April 26, 2010, 1:15PM



Johnny Hanson Chronicle

"My goal is to keep my overhead low, because that's money I can spend on my employees," said Jennifer Lewis, owner of J & P Technologies.

Eight years ago, Jennifer Lewis, the 2010 winner of the U.S. Small Business Administration's Small Business Person of the Year award for the Houston district, crossed her fingers and hired her first employee.

The computer programmer had just secured a contract with Science Applications International Corp. to provide safety and mission assurance for NASA. When certain computer programs were modified, Lewis and her employee checked to make sure the change was safe. NASA was a natural fit for Lewis. Her father, a mathematician and computer scientist, worked on the Apollo and space shuttle programs.

Fast-forward to 2010, when Lewis and that lone employee have evolved into a staff of 13 full-time consultants working with SAIC. Sixteen more of Lewis' consultants work with Lockheed Martin, both on the grounds of NASA in the Clear Lake area.

"I'm an engineer, not a human resources professional, so one of the biggest challenges for me has been how to manage the human resources portion," Lewis said. "My goal is to keep my overhead low, because that's money I can spend on my employees."

Today, J & P Technologies — named for Jennifer and her husband, Phil, a mechanical engineer who provides Lewis with management assistance — has gross annual revenue of roughly \$4 million.

According to Jennifer Lewis, several things helped propel her company. Among them are being certified as a woman-owned business with the federal government, and being certified as a small disadvantaged business because of her Native American heritage.

Small-business loan

Another catalyst for propelling her company forward was a small-business loan secured with the help of the University of Houston's

Small Business Development Center.

"I had no history in business, really, so I turned to the development center at the University of Houston when I was trying to secure a loan," Lewis said. "I needed to make sure I had adequate reserves to take care of my employees if anything should happen."

In 2005, Lewis secured a \$100,000 loan with the help of SBDC business consultant Carmen Strong.

"It's never easy for a small business — and especially a service business — to secure a loan," Strong said. "That's because they don't have collateral to back up their request. But what Jennifer did have was a wonderful executive summary. You could tell she had really done her homework."

Six years later, Lewis' philosophy of always having working capital on hand paid off. Johnson Space Center was temporarily shut down in the wake of Hurricane Ike. Lewis still was able to make payroll and keep up on her employee benefits.

"I had to make sure I had the cash flow to take care of my employees at all times," Lewis said. "Back when I was an individual consultant, it was no big deal because it was just me who would be affected. Now I'm responsible for other people's livelihoods."

Emphasis on benefits

One of Lewis' goals is to provide the same employee benefits her staff would find at a larger company.

"I've tried to emulate a big company in the benefits I offer," Lewis said. "By maintaining a low overhead and doing a lot of the work myself, I've been able to add to our benefits package."

Lewis spends her time seeking consulting contracts for her employees. With changes coming at NASA, she is cautious but not overly concerned.

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"Nothing lasts forever," Lewis said. "My job is to come up with a plan to put my people to work. It's a constant battle to find and acquire more work."

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- Shuttlegirl** wrote:

I think this is an excellent example of planning for the future, instead of "what can I get out of this today". I think Ms Lewis could give Wall Street and our current government a few helpful hints.

4/25/2010 4:47:43 PM

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Whatgives wrote:

"Safety emissions assurance"? Er, I believe you meant, "Safety and mission assurance". You were close. Sort of.

4/25/2010 7:29:28 AM

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wasserball wrote:

ding ding ding. She fits all the government requirements for being a middleman, lady, I mean.

4/25/2010 8:51:10 AM

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FloLake wrote:

NASA needs all the new ideas that will bring in more funding. Private contracts are a positive...

4/25/2010 1:31:00 AM

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- ramaco** wrote:

You go, Jennifer. Congratulations. More business owners should be concerned about their employes rather than themselves. You are an inspiration.

4/26/2010 8:01:50 PM

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CherokeeTribe wrote:

Mrs.Lewis sounds amazing!

4/26/2010 3:52:21 PM

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SJS2107 wrote:

Chickasaw

4/26/2010 1:54:46 PM

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Spycats wrote:

Congratulations, Jennifer! You've worked hard and taken a lot of risk, but it's turned out well. Taking care of your employees has built team cohesiveness. Again, great job!

4/26/2010 12:58:33 PM

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CherokeeTribe wrote:

What Native American tribe, nation or band is Mrs. Lewis a citizen or member? Anyone know, please?

4/26/2010 12:38:19 PM

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