

In Search of Excellence

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Success in a Gritty Business

Inside the office of Excel Environmental Resources in North Brunswick, the president discusses the company's latest project over the telephone with an industry colleague. "I don't think we need another jackhammer to kick up production," Excel's president reasons. "We need to restore the concrete of the foundation." With that, the phone is set gently on its cradle, and Lawra J. Dodge looks across the desk at her morning visitor. Leaning forward, she confides, "Problems that people think are insurmountable really get my blood going."

Somehow, that's not surprising. Despite Dodge's tailored suit and model-like poise, a visitor gets the distinct feeling that a hard hat and overalls are stashed close-at-hand. Since 1994 Excel Environmental, an environmental consulting and engineering firm, has grown steadily from revenues of \$344,000 to \$750,000, and the number of employees has doubled from four to eight. The company counts Merck, Coronet Paper, the McCarter & English law firm and Schiavone-Bonomo, a scrap-metal recycling business, among its major clients.

At a time when the environmental industry has been consolidating, Excel Environmental has prospered. Its secret: troubleshooting. The firm has never backed down from small-to-medium size technical projects. In fact, Dodge has welcomed them. "I was trained to go into large, complex, troubled projects, clean them up and turn them around," Dodge explains.

The Waldwick native graduated from Rutgers University in 1983 with a degree in geology. Oil exploration, once a popular field with graduating geologists, was declining, but the environmental industry was emerging. So Dodge took a job with the IT Corp. in Edison, and was soon transferred to the company's Pittsburgh technical center, where she stayed from 1985 to 1992, getting technical training in areas like environmental remediation. By then she had sweated with the best of them in drilling wells and suited up from head to toe in high-hazard gear for jobs. In the early 1990s, she was transferred to Cincinnati, where, as a senior project manager, she gained experience handling complex, afflicted jobs, which she grew to relish.

One of Dodge's greatest challenges came in 1992, when she went to Philadelphia to oversee the cleanup of a contaminated 38-story building. After it

was done, she realized she had come home. "I had had enough of taking projects from other people," Dodge says.

The previous seven years had prepared her well for her next move. Melissa Dubinsky, one of Dodge's former IT colleagues, who now manages the Farmington, Connecticut operations for Environmental Resources Management, recalls Dodge's years in training. "IT had a good program for mentoring through strong performers," Dubinsky explains. "Lawra was identified as one of those people early and kept getting opportunities to stretch her capabilities. I can think of three big, really convoluted projects where the manager was totally frustrated. Lawra was brought in and turned those projects around. One after the other, after the other, she performed admirably."

That expertise gave Dodge the confidence to try something new. Leaving IT in 1992, she took a job in New Jersey as a consultant for a small environmental lab. That job, however, was short-lived because she and her new employers did not agree on how to run a business. She left in 1993 knowing that her best chance for feeling satisfied in business was to start her own. Dodge had already been extensively trained in cost control, scheduling and technical quality control. So she drew up a business plan, secured a small line of credit to pay for her environmental liability insurance and in 1994 opened Excel Environmental in a small office in West Windsor's Carnegie Center. The start-up cost her about \$18,000 in personal finances.

"In the space of two months, I had more work than I could handle," recalls Dodge. The first job was to fix a problem with an underground storage tank for the borough of Fort Lee. For that project, and those that followed, Dodge worked out agreements with other environmental companies to rent field geologists and technicians. The work kept coming because, according to Dodge, Excel Environmental has a unique approach. "Our philosophy is to go in and resolve problems, not continue them," she explains. "Clients always complain that their consultants were not proposing what would close the issue. I see these endless projects and wonder if someone is looking hard enough for a resolution."

Dubinsky of ERM has a few of her own theories as to why Excel Environmental has been successful. "Lawra has technical excellence," she says. "She knows her craft very well and stays on the cutting edge of new remedial technologies."

Dodge believes that the key to a good business is to know where your money is every day of every week. She hopes that such attention to detail will let her business expand. Her goal is to have a staff of 10 to 20 professionals in the next five years. "I've never asked anyone for opportunities throughout my entire career," Dodge says. "I've also never had a day where I felt unchallenged. I want that to continue." Now, will that be one jackhammer or two?