

Answering the call

Employment agency finds solutions in clients' needs

DAVID HARRIS
MANAGING EDITOR

To survive a recession, a small company should cut back to its core business, slash services where possible and wait out the storm. Or at least that's the conventional wisdom.

But don't try to prove it by Debby Millhouse.

As dozens of local employment agencies are scaling back, if not going out of business, her Carolina Employment Opportunities Inc. is thriving.

The 12-employee agency is on track to generate \$2.5 million in revenue this year, up from \$2 million in 2001.

And that has come during a time when the number of human resources agencies in the region has declined by more than 25%.

To overcome the downturn, Carolina Employment — an eight-year-old firm that brands itself as CEO Inc. — decided to offer more services, not fewer.

"A lot of agencies in Charlotte have gone out of business this year because ... they didn't provide something that was valuable to their client," Millhouse says.

Even during a recession, "employers still need top talent, and they're still not able to get what they need from an ad in the paper," she contends. "They still need to work with somebody who knows how to do old-fashioned recruiting. Top talent isn't out on the street."

CEO has been on a full-service path since its founding in 1994, combining temporary placement of office personnel with executive-level recruitment. The company's temp segment specializes in accounting, legal, administrative and engineering personnel, working primarily in Mecklenburg County. The recruitment segment for mid- to senior-level execs is national.

More recently, the company has added or expanded such services as worker assessment, training and testing, as well as conducting a range of seminars for clients, covering sexual harassment and federal hiring regulations, among other topics.

QUICKINFO

CEO INC.

Business:

Temporary personnel placement, executive recruitment and other HR services
HQ: 301 S. McDowell St., Suite 1003, Charlotte, 28204

Principals:

Debby Millhouse, president; Dan Shively, retiring this month as chairman

Founded:

1994

Revenue:

\$2.5 million

Phone:

(704) 372-4701

Web site:

www.ceo-inc-usa.com

Millhouse says CEO made those changes simply by asking clients what they needed, and then paying close attention to the response. "I think a lot of people say, 'I really want to provide value to our clients,'" she says. "But a lot of times they forget to be quiet and listen to what the client says."

Especially among its small-business clients — and especially during a recession — CEO views its services as vital, says Millhouse, who joined the company in 1996 and now holds an 80% ownership stake. (Founder and partner Dan Shively retires this month.)

"Clients don't want turnover," she says. "Particularly with a small firm, every single person they hire is a strategic hire. It better be right."

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