

Capitalizing on Human Potential

By Heather Head

Putting the right people in the right places

When the young Debby Millhouse envisioned her future, she wasn't thinking of Charlotte, and she wasn't dreaming of running an employment agency. But those were only two surprises life had in store for her. Her quest to improve quality of life for herself, her family, and her community has led her to many unexpected adventures.

Millhouse was working as a builder in her native California when her husband, Brian Millhouse, was offered two lucrative technical positions – one in the San Francisco Bay area and one in Charlotte.

Asked why she chose Charlotte, Millhouse seems rather vague. She says at the time she wasn't even completely sure where it was located, but that, "We felt like God wanted us in Charlotte."

It was a big adjustment. The Charlotte market was not very receptive to the idea of a female builder, she remembers, and the fact that their house back west did not sell for two years after their move made matters uncomfortable financially.

With debt accruing, Millhouse sought out work at a placement agency. But her new career held another unpleasant surprise – unethical practices. "It's not always true that recruiters always tell the truth about a candidate's capabilities or about a job's description," explains Millhouse.

A friend came to her at that time and suggested she look at an opportunity with CEO Inc. Her first question: "Well, is it ethically sound?"

The company was losing money and barely afloat, but Millhouse determined that the owner, Dan Shively, practiced good ethics.

So, although pregnant with her daughter, Millhouse took a chance and signed on with the struggling company in 1996.

Challenges and Success

"I know how to build businesses," says Millhouse, and that's exactly what she set about doing. Within one year, she had taken the company from red to profitable.

"You always have to look at the books and the cash flow and see where the problems are," she explains. "You don't live if you don't have cash flow."

That same year, in the midst of the rebuilding process, Millhouse gave birth to a daughter. When she returned to work, she was greeted with another surprise – Shively announced that he was looking for an exit strategy and asked if she'd like to own the company.

"I didn't expect to buy a company a few months after I delivered a child," laughs Millhouse. Hesitantly, incredulously, she said, "Okay."

The ownership transfer was structured to phase in over five years, with Millhouse purchasing an additional 20 percent ownership each year, although they accelerated the schedule and transferred complete ownership in 2000.

"I tell you, 2000 wasn't the best year to take 100 percent ownership," admits Millhouse. It was a rough year as the economy began to spiral downward and out of control into 2001 and 2002. With hiring at a near standstill and temp placements almost non-existent, many similar companies simply closed their doors and packed up.

"But it wasn't that there weren't positions to fill, and it wasn't that there weren't firms paying fees," says Millhouse. "We always have had several large clients, and they always have needs in certain areas."

So, they did some internal training to better equip the staff to work in the new market, they worked hard, and they migrated most of their business into markets that were less hard hit. But Millhouse admits she doesn't know why they survived when others didn't.



Deborah J. Millhouse
Owner and President
CEO Inc.

“Do I think we worked smart? Yes. Do I think we did the right thing? Yes. Do I think we have great people? Absolutely. But we had good competitors that didn’t make it through. What made the difference? I don’t know, except that I’m a believer and I think that this is the Lord’s business and he wanted us to be here.”

Quality Assurance

Besides the home that wouldn’t sell in California, and the challenges of turning around a struggling company, the Millhouse family faced typical quality of life issues at home. Typical issues, with a not-so-typical solution.

A few months after her daughter was born, the Millhouses had a life-changing conversation. “We had tons of money and no quality of life, and so in frustration I said, ‘Why don’t you just stay home?’” remembers Millhouse. Her husband didn’t even blink. Millhouse laughs when she remembers his response: “Okay, I’m going shopping – you want milk, bread, what else?”

A couple weeks later, Brian came back to the conversation in all seriousness and suggested that they really do it. So, he with all his credentials left his upwardly soaring management career, to begin a new challenge – managing things at home.

Millhouse says they’ve never been happier. They had an opportunity to revisit the decision some time later when Brian received, among many other offers from companies he had worked with, one that would have paid well enough to allow Debby to stay home.

Debby said, “Well, I bought the company and they’re counting on me. I can’t just walk in and say, ‘Okay, well, I’m done with this hobby.’”

And Brian said, “Well, I’m glad because I really do like staying home with the kids.”

Millhouse’s company has taken an equal interest in building quality of life for its people and the people they work for and with. “Our company builds other companies, but it also builds people,” says Millhouse. “We sit down and talk with our people and find out what their goals are. I don’t believe they work here just because I’m a great person. They work here because we help them accomplish their goals.”

Matchmaking

Besides the people who work for her in-house (which, she admits, is the cream of the crop), Millhouse helps her clients find the right people for the right jobs through an entire battery of testing and assessing that ensures each person is matched with the right company and the right position for their goals and desires.

That is the core value that CEO Inc. provides their clients. Millhouse cites a recent study from Michigan University that demonstrates the importance of the hiring process. According to Millhouse, relying on an interview only, with no testing or assessment tools, results in a success rate of lower than 15 percent.

The study showed that employers that use employment agencies that combine interviews with reference checks and profile assessments increase the odds of success to over 75 percent.

Profile assessments involve matching an employee’s temperament and behavioral style with the work environment and job requirements. “Some people are very direct in their communication style, while others are more non-confrontational,” explains Millhouse. “Some are patient; some are urgent, structured, flexible, logical, intuitive.” These are the qualities that profiling can identify and interpret to ensure individuals are matched appropriately with employers. CEO Inc. provides clients with over 1,000 assessment tools that can be customized for each client’s specific needs.

Another thing that sets CEO Inc. above the competition is their commitment to the client even after placement. Through assessments and other techniques, CEO Inc. helps employers and employees understand each others’ temperaments and how to interact to achieve greatest productivity and job satisfaction.

But CEO Inc. begins working long before a candidate is identified to fill a position. “I know how to build companies,” states Millhouse. “This is not the first time I’ve done it.” And she uses that experience to help companies solve their human capital problems.

Early discussions with clients begin with the questions, “What will your company look like a year from now to feel like you’ve achieved success?” “What will this position look like a year from now?”

Then they help the company develop a strategy to answer those questions, even if it doesn’t always mean placing a person in that position. “It doesn’t always work out for me financially,” shrugs Millhouse, but she’s committed to always doing the right thing by her clients.

Truth and Consequences

The truth is, in her industry, says Millhouse, people don’t always do the right thing. “People lie. They lie about whether they graduated from college, they lie about

C.E.O., Inc. d/b/a

CEO Inc.

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Phone: 704-372-4701

Principal: Deborah J. Millhouse, Owner
and President

Founded: 1994

Employees: 15 in the office, 150+ with
clients on a temporary or contract basis

Locations: Headquartered in Charlotte;
additional locations planned for Ballan-
tine, North Charlotte/Huntersville and
either Redlands or Yucaipa, California

Business: Permanent placement, tem-
porary staffing, executive search, techni-
cal and human resources consulting
services that meet a broad spectrum of
employment needs in a wide variety of
industries. Currently listed as the 16th
Largest Area Staffing Service, the 8th
Largest Area Contingency Executive
Search Firm, and the 11th Largest Area
Women-Owned Company according to
the *Charlotte Business Journal*.

www.ceohr.com



whether they actually worked somewhere, they lie about why they're not going to show up for work, and they lie about how much they made." Businesses sometimes lie about the requirements, opportunities and the responsibilities of a position. And, unfortunately, recruiters often facilitate those mutual lies.

Millhouse refuses to participate. "We operate on the 'You lie, you fry!' policy." And that applies to her employees, job candidates, and clients alike.

As a result, CEO Inc. enjoys a high percentage of successful placements and satisfied clients. Millhouse's staff develops relationships with clients to ensure they truly understand the requirements of positions they fill, and they conduct extensive assessments to ensure the people they place are right for those positions. In addition, Millhouse applies her experience and intuition for a personal touch.

In addition, they provide clients with an opportunity to fill all their human capital needs in one location. Unlike many organizations that focus exclusively on administrative staff, accounting, or executive placement, CEO Inc. serves a broad range of needs, forming essentially a one-stop-shop for all a client's human capital needs.

Marching Forward

When Millhouse talks about a better quality of life, she doesn't just mean for her family and those of the people she works with. Her ethics and beliefs spill over into her company's commitment to the community. The company contributes 10 percent of net profits to local charities. In addition, the company contributes manpower and expertise to many charities supporting children's causes, homelessness, and much other work.

With the economy back in full swing, CEO Inc. has enjoyed an upsurge in all sectors of their business. They have opened a new business segment that provides staffing to the healthcare industry, and which will become its own company under Millhouse's leadership by the end of the year. Additionally, they are considering opening additional branches in the Ballantyne area and in the North Charlotte/Huntersville area within the next five years, and possibly another in Southern California.

While Millhouse holds exclusive ownership at this time, she has several key personnel who may take on incremental ownership of additional branches and segments, as incentive and insurance that they will take good care of their responsibilities.

When asked if incremental ownership is part of an exit plan for Millhouse, apparently she's already found what she needs for top quality of life: "I love what I do. I'll probably work until I'm a hundred. That's the game plan."

Heather Head is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.

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