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One good deed ...

HireSynergy's generosity in helping people find jobs for no charge after the Enron collapse has been rewarded in the form of business and referrals from those it assisted

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Craig H. Hartley/HBJ

Birgit Kamps of HireSynergy: Compassionate approach paid dividends.

In the aftermath of the 2001 collapse of Enron Corp. and the later dissolution of Arthur Andersen LLP, many companies were busy trying to figure out how to capitalize on those firms' demise.

But Houston-based HireSynergy took a different approach -- one that, at the time, some described as compassionate and others pegged as foolish.

The company helped former Enron and Arthur Andersen employees polish their job-search skills -- for no charge.

The collapse of the two companies, which resulted in a flood of talent entering the local job market, coincided with an economic downturn that hit many local businesses hard.

For the fledgling HireSynergy, an accounting-based executive search firm founded in 2001, it was a make-or-break period.

About two-thirds of HireSynergy's competitors had gone out of business, and CEO Birgit Kamps was determined that her company wouldn't join them.

Fortunately, she had a small cushion of savings that she hoped would help the company ride out the storm.

So the firm continued to help people find jobs -- without charging them any fees.

And, since clients would ask for her opinion, HireSynergy also became a consulting firm.

"We helped Enron and Andersen candidates with how to interview and which companies would be a good match," Kamps says.

"We were still helping people even though, at that moment, the financial gain wasn't there."

It was an approach that, ultimately, paid off.

Some of the people HireSynergy helped at the time didn't forget the firm's generosity.

When they later needed recruiting services, HireSynergy was the first company many of them called.

They also started referring clients to the company, and many of those remain as clients today.

Indeed, referrals have been substantially responsible for taking HireSynergy from 2003 revenue of about \$1.6 million to \$10.6 million in 2007 and a projected \$14 million in 2007.

According to Inc. magazine, which ranked HireSynergy No. 441 on its 2007 list of 500 fastest-growing private companies, the company has "ridden" the recent growth of Houston's economy, "expanding its client base almost entirely through referrals."

The company also has been recognized for several years in a row by the Houston Business Journal as one of the city's Best Places to Work.

Over the years, Kamps -- who is a former Arthur Andersen tax accountant -- and her partners have made an effort to display compassion in HireSynergy's work environment.

That business philosophy, in part, stems from early unpleasant experiences Kamps had with recruiters that led to her decision to become one herself.

"They sent my résumé all over town without my permission, or weren't truthful about my capacities," she says.

Meanwhile, as a hiring manager for a Dutch company in Holland, Kamps says she often would spend an hour meeting with a recruiter detailing her criteria for candidates only for the recruiter to send her "20 to 30 résumés that showed clearly they had not done any screening."

"They completely wasted my time and didn't take any time off my plate," she says.

So, from the beginning, Kamps and her partners worked hard to be "different" from other recruiting firms.

Building relationships

For majority owner Kamps, it also was important to focus on building relationships with candidates and clients.

To do that effectively, she worked within HireSynergy to make sure the company's own employees were satisfied -- a practice the firm terms "servant leadership."

Instead of a command-and-control environment, Kamps says HireSynergy is based on guiding principles such as letting employees aid in the decision-making process rather than leaders imposing strict rules and regulations.

In particular, Kamps believes that by offering a place where employees can, through effective communication, enhance their strengths and learn to identify and recognize their weaknesses, they all will prosper.

Early on, she says, she didn't do a good job of defining her company's culture, and communications were not always clear.

Now, "We spend a lot of time making sure we know how to talk with each other," she says. "As a team we're more powerful seeing diverse points of view."

To help that along, Kamps brings in a communications coach to meet with the entire company once a week. The group picks a topic and discusses it.

HireSynergy also helps employees undertake any type of education that might help them do their job better. For example, it will fund an anger-management class for someone with a hot temper.

"I don't care as long as they're growing," Kamps says.

She also makes an effort to help employees with goal-setting so as to minimize the chance of an employee being unhappy -- and consequently unproductive -- in their job.

In 2005, the notion of incorporating a healing environment into the company became personal.

Although HireSynergy was successful, Kamps was struggling with her health.

Her doctors told her that she had pre-cancerous cells and they would become full-blown cancer if she did nothing.

Believing that surgery was not the answer, she turned to the philosophies of Dahn Yoga.

Two years after the diagnosis, doctors could find no trace of cancer, according to Kamps, who today professes to be in great health.

The experience led her to make the principles she learned available to employees.

HireSynergy now offers Dahn Yoga classes during business hours and helped fund training for two employees to become instructors.

The result, she says, is a happier, less stressed staff.

According to Edie Weiner, president of Weiner, Edrich, Brown Inc., a New York-based long-term trend analysis company, while there's no real evidence that yoga in the workplace will create a less stressful, more productive work environment, there is anecdotal evidence that there are certain implications that go along with the practice.

"While it's not everybody's culture, the fact that an organization considers stress reduction and relaxation a part of the workplace might make a workplace more competitive in attracting talent -- creative talent especially," Weiner says.

Also, in the long run, she points out, stress reduction can lead to better health which could, in turn, reduce health care costs for the company.

HireSynergy

Business: Places permanent and contract financial and technology employees in Houston-area companies and consults on hiring and retention practices.

Year founded: 2001

Top Executive: Birgit Kamps, CEO

Revenue:

2003: \$1.6 million

2006: \$10.6 million

Employees: About 40

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