

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Owner 'saw something' in a young employee, and now he's president of the firm



Jim Hahn says the transition from an employee of Foppe Technical Services to its president had rough spots, but he succeeded with the guidance of owner Larry Foppe.

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Ernest Coleman

Jim Hahn was just out of graduate school when he was hired as a staff geologist at Foppe Technical Services. Fifteen years later, he's running the company.

Thanks to the help of mentor and former owner Larry Foppe, Hahn is now president and owner of Infrastructure & Development Engineering Inc., the renamed environmental engineering firm he took over earlier this year.

Transition from employee to owner wasn't always smooth. The company, which once employed 40 in Forest Park, now has 15 workers after struggling to survive the recession.

Hahn, 41, recently discussed the challenges of running a business with staff writer Mike Boyer.

DID YOU HAVE any second thoughts about buying into the company in the midst of the recession?

Oh yes, there were some sleepless nights. But my thought was with no risk, there's no reward. I've always believed in the company. I believe in our approach to clients and the service we provide. If you believe in something, you can achieve the goals you've set.

WHAT DID THE COMPANY do to survive the recession?

We cut overhead, and everyone felt the pain. We developed a business model that reduced everyone's pay when sales shrank and restored pay when sales increased.

We also changed the business because the market was changing. We're a full-serv-

ice environmental-engineering firm, but we also do civil engineering, land surveying, geotechnical engineering and construction material testing during building development.

We've broadened our services to do infrastructure engineering for the Metropolitan Sewer District, which is upgrading its storm and sewer lines as part of a consent decree with the EPA. We signed a master service agreement with MSD last year and geared up to become experts in storm water and sanitary sewer design work. The company is also certified as a small-business enterprise with the City of Cincinnati and Hamilton County.

HOW IMPORTANT WAS Larry Foppe in your transition from employee to owner?

He saw something in me that I didn't see. When I came here, I never thought for a moment I'd one day own the business. It was just a job, but along the way it became a career. Larry and a lot of people here and in my life helped me. Larry has a knack for sales, and I learned a lot from him. Some of the things he did I didn't always agree with, but I learned from that as well.

WHAT ARE YOUR plans for the business?

We're a small business but don't intend to be one forever. ... Sales are up 25 percent this year from last year. I'd like to add between \$3 million and \$5 million in business over the next five years and \$5 million to \$10 million over the next 15 years.