

PROFILE



Empowering: Denis St. Peter

President and CEO of Haley Ward (Bangor, ME), a 100 percent employee-owned technical consulting firm, offering a range of engineering, environmental, and surveying services.

By LIISA ANDREASSEN
Correspondent

St. Peter divides his time between management of the company and project-related duties. He provides technical supervision for environmental projects and ensures appropriate resources are available to meet project goals and objectives.

“With my first job after college as a project engineer, I experienced both controlling and empowering leadership approaches,” St. Peter says. “I enjoyed my job much more and was much more successful under the empowering leadership. I found that a controlling approach minimized learning, interfered with progress, and resulted in less employee engagement.”

A CONVERSATION WITH DENIS ST. PETER.

The Zweig Letter: You led the acquisition of Summit Environmental Consultants in 2013 and play an integral role in the growth of Haley Ward. Any strategic growth

plans in the works now (i.e., organic, geographic, services)?

Denis St. Peter: After I became president, Summit Environmental Consultants was the first firm we acquired. Since then, we’ve successfully executed five more acquisitions. Strategic acquisitions are a major component of our growth strategy. We’re focused on acquiring companies that fall within our professional services of engineering, environmental, and surveying consulting; that expand our geographic footprint; that have a similar client- and employee-focused culture; that have a need for an experienced ownership and leadership transition team; and that want their clients and employees to continue meeting or exceeding their goals post-ownership transition.

Another element of our strategic growth plan is the recent company name change and rebranding. Our company

has outgrown the original name of Civil Engineering Services (or CES). We do much more than civil engineering now. With our significant growth into new areas of expertise and geographically into other states (Massachusetts and Florida), we have encountered many other CES-named firms which has caused brand and name confusion. We typically acquire the names along with the firms, and we really liked the 123-year history of one of our recently acquired firms, Haley & Ward, Inc., which provided us the ability to trademark and protect our brand moving forward.

We're also dedicated to organic growth. This generally involves performing quality and responsive professional services for our clients, so that we have repeat business and referrals, but also involves expanding our areas of expertise. For example, we've recently hired employees who have MEP engineering and design expertise; we added a survey-grade unmanned aerial vehicle or drone to complement our survey capabilities; and we've hired a talented employee with industrial hygiene expertise to supplement our environmental professionals.

TZL: Trust is essential. How do you earn the trust of your clients?

DSP: Our team works hard to understand our clients' goals and to define the scope of work, required schedules, and realistic budgets. We understand that building trust may take several successful projects, but losing trust can happen quickly by failing just once to adhere to an authorized scope, not meeting their schedule, or exceeding their budget. We strive to retain the trust of clients by not overpromising on these.

TZL: What skills are required to run a successful practice? What do you wish you knew starting out that you know now?

DSP: When I was a project engineer and a project manager, my job responsibilities involved learning and applying the practice of engineering, developing scopes of work, preparing schedules, and assembling budgets. When I had the opportunity to transition into more of a leadership role as a principal and then president, I did a lot of independent reading about leadership. I believe that quality leadership leads to overall company success. I also needed to enhance my business/financial management skills

and used services, training, tools, and resources from companies like Zweig Group.

My transition from project engineer/manager to principal/president was very quick and felt urgent at the time. One of my mentors made a joke about how I was always moving too fast. At the time, this was frustrating because I felt I needed to move fast for the clients – getting things done on schedule and within budget. This mentor was reducing his hours and working toward retirement when he made this joke, which only added to my frustration. I was also working long hours to fulfill the responsibilities of two positions.

I now know that many aspects of management, ownership, and leadership transition should be planned and implemented over a longer timeframe. Time and patience can help solve problems.

TZL: What type of leader do you consider yourself to be?

DSP: I believe I'm an empowering leader. With my first job after college as a project engineer, I experienced both controlling and empowering leadership approaches. I enjoyed my job much more and was much more successful under the empowering leadership. I found that a controlling approach minimized learning, interfered with progress, and resulted in less employee engagement.

TZL: What benefits does your firm offer that your people get most excited about?

DSP: Because we're an employee-focused company, we try hard to offer great compensation, bonuses, 401(k) matching, health, disability, and life insurance and more. We purchase salary and benefits surveys from companies such as Zweig Group that specialize in the AEC industry to make sure we're meeting this goal. We've recently become an ESOP which provides some additional benefits to our employees. However, the benefit that I hear the most excitement about is "flexibility." Our employees understand that they have time commitments to the company and to each other, as well as deadline commitments to our clients, but we provide a great deal of flexibility to their work schedules, workplaces, and tools needed for their work. This helps create a family-friendly, flexible culture within our company.

See EMPOWERING, page 8



HEADQUARTERS: Bangor, ME

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 120 and hiring!

YEAR FOUNDED: CES, Inc. in 1978
(Haley & Ward, Inc. in 1897)

OFFICE LOCATIONS:

- Bangor, ME
- Presque Isle, ME
- Machias, ME
- Waterville, ME
- Lewiston, ME
- Saco, ME
- Maynard, MA
- Fort Myers, FL

SERVICES

- Architectural
- Civil engineering
- Structural/MEP engineering
- Environmental engineering
- Environmental sciences
- Environmental compliance
- Environmental investigations
- Natural resources
- Industrial hygiene
- Surveying
- Services library

MARKETS

- Project examples
- Energy
- Industrial
- Institutional
- Land development
- Municipal and county
- State and federal government

TZL: It is often said that people leave managers, not companies. What are you doing to ensure that your line leadership are great people managers?

DSP: During our internal ownership and leadership transition approximately 14 years ago, we identified a need to improve communication between management and employees. We work hard at reminding each other of this responsibility. My senior management team meets monthly so that we cross-communicate between the different functions (technical staff, finance, human resources, and marketing) of our company. Each member of the SMT and their supervisors are responsible for effectively communicating with their team. The communication between the members of the SMT is expected to be open, respectful, honest, cooperative, and is intended to identify conflicts and encourage resolutions to those conflicts.

We also conduct formal internal and external training for our supervisors, project managers, and principals. Much of this training includes a component of people management skills. Our formal training has also included personality and behavioral assessments and training. I have encouraged and assigned leadership reading when I come across a book that I find useful and relevant (i.e., *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni). Establishing an empowering culture within the company fosters the need of our line leadership to continuously improve their people management skills. Also, after giving employees management opportunities and helping them to improve their performance, we must adjust or re-organize when these people management skills can't be developed.

TZL: Responsiveness is one of your core values. Can you share a recent example of how Haley Ward solved a client problem/challenge?

DSP: We work with several clients that purchase new properties, buildings, or other businesses. These projects typically involve several key items that need to be completed within short timeframes between the offer acceptance and the final closing. Some of the key items may include environmental site assessments (Phase I and II ESAs), obtaining landowner liability protections, natural resource delineations, American Land Title Association surveys, MEP assessments, and/or structural and civil engineering evaluations. We have the ability to perform all of these work items with professionals who are outstanding at working together, have the ability to adjust their work schedules to meet the more urgent deadlines without interfering with other clients' schedules, and can address the often overlapping scope of work in-house to save on schedule.

TZL: Have you had a particular mentor who has guided you – in school, in your career, or in general? Who were they and how did they help?

DSP: For 10 years after college, I was a project engineer for the federal government. When I transitioned to the consulting business, I really had to re-train myself. Fortunately, I had a great mentor – Shawn Small – who was one of the two co-founders of CES, Inc. We shared a similar



A former papermill property in Bucksport, ME is being redeveloped to house a land-based aquaculture facility. Haley Ward is providing a range of environmental and engineering consulting services.

practice area. Not only was he an excellent engineer, he was an outstanding consultant who understood the importance of working for our clients, building their trust, communicating with the project team, and offering effective solutions to the projects. I tend to learn from observation, so seeing Shawn in action meant he was the right mentor at the right transition period in my career.

I also had the opportunity to learn more about the business operations and finances of the company from the other co-founder, Jim Parker. He had great business and financial judgement. He processed information differently than I did which made me work harder to learn to manage the company's business operations and functions. Jim also demonstrated his huge heart in relation to a personal issue I had. It really made an impact on me and that's why maintaining our family-friendly culture is so important to me.

TZL: Ownership transition can be tricky, to say the least. What's the key to ensuring a smooth passing of the baton? What's the biggest pitfall to avoid?

DSP: Take time to make a plan. Plan on a 10-year horizon for internal transitions. This is one of the reasons we implemented an ESOP. It allows us to address the financial components which can be difficult for individuals to afford as well as the continuous evaluation of who should be shareholders. In addition to addressing the planning aspects, it provides significant tax advantages, provides all employees an ownership stake and allows our company to improve our financial performance.

For external acquisitions, there are several keys and pitfalls that will determine the success of the ownership transition. It starts with a good assessment of the company that wants to be acquired. When the two companies are not the right fit for each other, you can do everything else right, but it most likely won't work out well. We remind ourselves that one out of 10 companies may be the right fit. Walking away from the wrong fit is just as important for both companies as moving ahead with the right fit. ▀