

HSW grows, evolves with niches

Engineering firm stays flexible as it battles the recession

BY JANET LEISER
STAFF WRITER

TAMPA — HSW Engineering Inc.'s partners know the only certainty in business, as in life, is change.

What works today may not work tomorrow, which is why focusing on a single niche could be disastrous for a business. Diversity is key to survival.

In 1988, Ken Watson, Fred Seguiti and Carol Henry decided they wanted to work for themselves. They left Geraghty & Miller, now known as Arcadis U.S. Inc., to start a firm with an entrepreneurial bent.

Today, HSW Engineering has slightly more than 40 employees who work out of three offices, including the main Tampa location. The firm reported 2009 revenue of \$9.3 million, placing it on the *Tampa Bay Business Journal's* list of largest locally based engineering firms in the Bay area.

While the firm's growth isn't fast, it has held fairly steady. Even as some competitors have closed under the strain of the recession.

HSW strives to be the best in its niches — water resources, environmental remediation and military range design.

"You have to be recognized as an expert as a consultant," said Watson, the firm's president. "You want to be known for some specialties. It reduces the competition quite frankly."

HSW began developing its newest niche, range design, about a decade ago, said engineer Dennis Peek.

The firm designs ranges, from rifle ranges to complex 8-mile urban assault courses that mimic an Afghanistan village, said Peek, vice president of engineering and manager of the range program.

HSW won its first range contract in 2003.

Clients include the U.S. Army, Marines and National Guard. Most of the ranges designed by HSW are in the states, but some are in Afghanistan.

"It's not just do it one time and you're done," Peek said. "The military has realized it has to constantly retrain forces. You're constantly modifying and changing programs."

Peek has worked as an engineer throughout his career, which he views as three careers. He spent his first 20 years in heavy industry and the second part focusing on environmental remediation, including the clean up of former nuclear weapons plants.

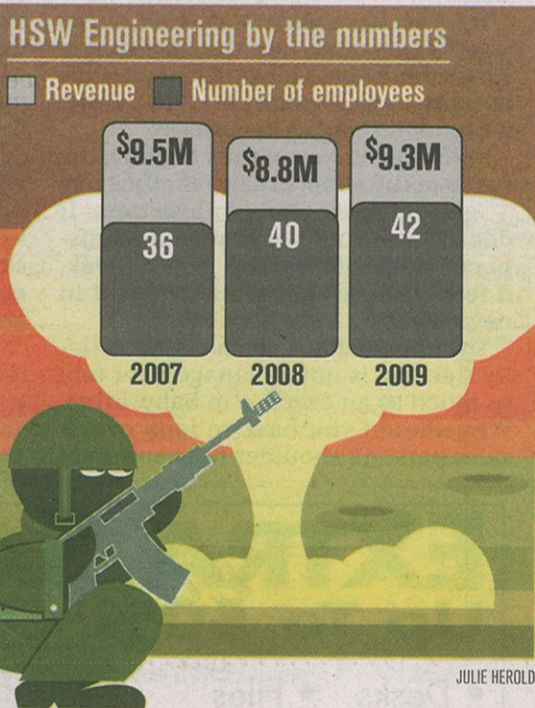
Now he's the range master. "We've learned to be flexible," Peek said. "New niches develop as time goes by."

Flexibility is key to success, said Carlos Lemos, CEO of Ambient Technologies Inc.,



KATHLEEN CAGBLE

HSW Engineering's Kelly Damato, designer, Sally Garrett, engineer, Chip Hayman, designer, Dennis Peek, principal engineer and VP, and Mike Osborne, designer, discuss a range blueprint for the military.



a St. Petersburg-based engineering firm.

"You have to focus on the horizon, not just what's happening today," Lemos said. "If you stay too focused on the short-term, you risk the strategic well-being of the company."

NO TIME CLOCKS

One of the biggest challenges that HSW faces is finding good employees.

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With the recession and rising unemployment, there are plenty of people looking for work, Watson said.

"I've not found it's any easier to find good people," he added.

And the company's leaders know its success is dependent on its workers.

"We are consultants, engineers and scientists," Peek said.

To retain staff, HSW offers competitive pay and benefits, even during the recession.

"We have given bonuses for 22 years now and never missed a year," Watson said.

In addition, the focus at the firm is on productivity, not time keeping.

"We're not a punch-the-time clock type company," he said. "We don't officially have flex time. At the same time we know people have family needs."

The firm plans to continue its deliberate growth, Watson said. "You at least have to try to grow," he said.

HSW plans to open an office in West Palm Beach later this year.

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