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SBA's Assistance Helps 2010 West Virginia Top Small Business Succeed

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – Things have changed over the past 20 years for Craig Hartzell and his company, Azimuth Inc. The Service Disabled Veteran-owned Small Business specializing in engineering, fabrication and engineering services in support of the U.S. Department of Defense, struggled mightily during those early years.

“It was a pretty typical, grim startup,” said Hartzell, who jokingly refers to himself as Serial Number 001, as Azimuth’s first employee. “I was doing everything but painting yellow lines on the parking lot to keep the lights on.”

But as time passed, Hartzell’s persistence and leadership abilities have grown Azimuth into a company of nearly 100 employees and to be considered among the leading small businesses in the eastern half of the U.S. when it comes to fulfilling military contract obligations.

It is these qualities and experiences that have led Hartzell to being named West Virginia’s 2010 **Small Business Person of the Year** by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Azimuth was founded by Hartzell’s desire to remain in West Virginia and to create a company that could successfully compete for, and win, Department of Defense contracts. Being a U.S. Army Special Forces veteran, he was very aware of the business opportunities that could be generated through support of the military. But, he also knew as a one-person operation, he couldn’t do it alone.

“Early on there were a lot of people who either took pity on us or, for their own amusement, helped us out,” Hartzell said. “It was tough being a company trying to break into the government contracting arena in West Virginia in the early 1990’s. The focus was on natural resources and the high-technology ‘push’ hadn’t evolved.”

Hartzell can recall a few incidents where he received assistance, one being the time his insurance agent loaned him funds out of his own pocket to pay for a liability policy to enable him to obtain a contract. Another was when a lender pushed Hartzell’s small loan request through his loan committee when he didn’t have hard assets to secure it.

Another early key to success was the arrival of Electronic Warfare Associates (EWA), a large prime contractor for the Department of Defense, in the state. EWA identified Azimuth as a company they could work with and subsequently provided Hartzell a \$79,000 sub-contract enabling him to hire his first full-time and part-time employees.

“That was really the start of Azimuth,” Hartzell said. “Through that relationship, we obtained the necessary clearances for secure high-level government contracting. This was also about the time the West Virginia High Technology Consortium was formed. With the support of Congressman Alan Mollohan, the Consortium was the impetus behind the creation of the I-79 high-technology corridor. His goal was to lay the groundwork for mature companies like EWA to come to West Virginia to act as mentors for our small businesses.”

Hartzell believes the mentoring aspect of this initiative was one of the most significant and valuable events in the history of Azimuth.

It was during this period the Department of Defense created a pilot Mentor/Protégé program under which Azimuth/EWA team was accepted.

“The experience under the DoD Mentor/Protégé Program really set us up for growth and how to perform properly on government contracts,” Hartzell said. “If you don’t perform well on government contracts, you aren’t going to make it.”

The contracting and sub-contracting opportunities obtained through the Mentor/Protégé Program made Hartzell realize he was in need “a very large stack of financial assistance” if he was to perform.

“We obtained two large SBA guaranteed loans which allowed us to purchase the equipment, software and tools we needed to successfully perform on those sub-contracts,” Hartzell said. “Through experience I’ve discovered without proper tools and test equipment, you can’t perform successfully.”

Hartzell is proud of the fact he never missed a loan payment and jokes when networking with SBA officials, “These guys were foolish enough to loan me half a million dollars and the punch line is ‘I paid them back!’”

Guaranteed lending was only one of SBA’s programs utilized by Azimuth.

“Barbara Weaver, SBA’s small business contracting specialist, played a very key role in our survival, like she has and continues to do for so many other West Virginia small businesses,” Hartzell said. “Her contracting expertise and guidance has led to increased contracting opportunities in the state.”

Another factor is an alliance that evolved among businesses in the high-tech corridor that led to the success of not only Azimuth, but of those businesses as well.

“We helped each other succeed,” Hartzell said. “We cooperated and helped each other right down the line. We competed against each other, and still do, but we’ve always helped each other. Those relationships were and are still very powerful.”

West Virginia’s work ethic and values are looked to by Hartzell as the real key to Azimuth’s success.

“We’re able to recruit and retain very talented and loyal people,” Hartzell said. “When asked by others about our success I say, ‘I could not have done this anywhere else in the country. The West Virginia values are what make Azimuth the company it is today.’ There are no doubt bigger and more profitable companies, but no one works harder or has more fun than we do.”

As a veteran and successful entrepreneur, Hartzell is always willing to provide advice to younger companies on the nuances of small business ownership.

“I’ve provided advice to many companies, not only here, but all over the country,” Hartzell said. “I tell them to know their goals and motives. Find your local small business development center, your procurement

technical assistance center, and your local SBA. Seek out those individuals who can help fulfill your objectives.”

Hartzell is very happy to be selected as West Virginia’s top entrepreneur for 2010 stating he “accepts the award on behalf of the individuals at Azimuth and all those out there who have helped us over the years.”

Craig Hartzell was nominated by Sharon Stratton, center manager at the West Virginia Small Business Development Center in Morgantown.

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