



The (tech) road less traveled

Dawn Ainger, Genova Technologies

Dawn Ainger's journey to become CEO and owner of Genova Technologies, a Cedar Rapids-based communications software consultancy, didn't exactly follow the path prescribed in entrepreneurship books or classes.

Ms. Ainger grew up on a dairy farm near Hull, a town of 1,200 in northwest Iowa, marrying her high school sweetheart and raising three sons while her husband pursued a medical degree. Wanting to get her own career started before time got away from her, Ms. Ainger began attending the University of Iowa with a specific goal in mind.

She received a bachelor's degree in computer science, becoming the first member of her immediate family to receive a degree.

"The plan was to complete my Ph.D. and teach," Ms. Ainger said. But halfway through her master's degree

program in computer science, Ms. Ainger's husband, who was performing his residency to becoming a surgeon, announced plans to divorce.

Ms. Ainger turned her thoughts to finding employment, but ultimately decided to finish her master's degree at the urging of her UI faculty advisor, Joseph Kearney, who was at the time a professor of computer science.

"He said, 'Your life is in shambles, but this is the one thing you have control over,'" Ms. Ainger recalled. "He was the reason I completed my graduate degree."

The UI is "a very large university with a very small-college concern for its students," she added.

Two years after joining Cedar Rapids-based software consultancy Genova Technologies as a developer, she came to work only to find the doors locked. Lavish spending by the company's former leader had left it on the brink of failure.

Ms. Ainger might have seemed an unlikely savior, but she had one strong motivation. If she was an owner in the company, she would have flexibility in her work hours – however long they might be – to spend time with her three

sons.

“I went to the investors and said, ‘I think I can make something of this, but I don’t want to do it for [only] a salary,’” said

DAWN AINGER

Owner and CEO

Genova Technologies, Cedar Rapids

Age: 52

Hometown: Hull, Iowa

Education: B.S., Computer Science, UI;

M.S., Computer Science, UI, 1995

Ms. Ainger. “I wanted to do it for stock.”

Ms. Ainger invested more than \$100,000 in the company “to show I had skin in the game,” slashed excessive spending that had gotten the company into trouble, and did what she could to preserve the remaining jobs.

In 2001, just as the company’s fortunes were turning around, the dot-com bubble burst, sending Genova’s markets into a dive. The remaining owner offered to sell Ms. Ainger a majority stake, and she accepted.

Within eight years, Genova Technologies was entirely owned by Ms. Ainger, and the early investors who remained had received a good return.

Unfortunately, the challenges were far from over. In 2008, the national recession hit the company’s markets, and in 2009, Ms. Ainger was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, raising the possibility she could lose her ability to walk. The latter caused Ms. Ainger to delegate duties and empower a stronger leadership team with the realization that she would need more time away.

Despite those hurdles, Genova Technologies grew to more than 200 employees and \$30 million in annual sales before the sale of its medical software division to Booz Allen Hamilton in 2014. Its growth and innovation have resulted in numerous awards for both the company and its owner, including the 2013 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award (Upper Midwest) and being named 2013’s Fastest Growing Company in Iowa’s Creative Corridor by the Corridor Business Journal.

“Try it – tweak it” is a mantra often repeated by Ms. Ainger, who was forced by the collapse of the tech bubble in the early 2000s and the global outsourcing movement to radically revamp Genova Technologies’ business model.

Among other things, she has diversified the company’s client base to include more defense and government IT contracts that could not be outsourced to other countries under current procurement regulations. The company’s medical division also developed CEHQ, a product that allows medical professionals to get continuing education credit for learning at the point of care.

As a woman leading a company in the male-dominated tech world, Ms. Ainger has been asked many times about her success. She believes it’s the combination of IT skills learned during her years at the UI, and soft skills that are often overlooked in the tech world.

“The ability to understand computer science but communicate with normal people was where I found my niche,” Ms. Ainger said. In her business, “it’s the soft skills that sell the technical skills,” she explained.

In client interactions, Ms. Ainger listens carefully to customers in order to understand how they make decisions, and what approach would motivate them to award a contract.

Nearly a decade and a half into her time at the helm of Genova Technologies, things are finally starting to settle down. The company still has about 50 employees after the sale of its medical division, and Ms. Ainger’s three sons all recently reached educational milestones, with one graduating from medical school, a second from law school and a third from U.S. Navy basic training.

Even though she is now happily remarried, the years when she was raising her sons while pursuing a demanding career has made the struggles facing single parents highly relevant to Ms. Ainger. An outgrowth of that was her sponsorship of a nontraditional Cedar Rapids summer program for parents who were unable to send their children to a traditional camp. Although it has been inactive since Genova sold off its medical division, she hopes to do something like it again.

It’s one facet of a balanced approach Ms. Ainger has taken to

her career and life.

“At the end of the day, even though you are a technologist, you are dealing with people,” she said.

- Dave DeWitte

ADVICE

to prospective entrepreneurs:

It’s the soft skills that sell the technical skills. You have to figure out how people make decisions and complete the sale accordingly. At the end of the day, even though you a technologist, you are dealing with people.