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Michael Sutton, president and CEO of Infrastructure Engineering (right), and members of the Infrastructure Engineering team celebrate a donation to the Chicago Parks Foundation.

Planning for Success

Minority-Owned Engineering Firm Attributes Success to **PLANNING, PERSISTENCE AND A PROVEN TRACK RECORD**

By Sarah Magargee

Infrastructure Engineering Inc. (IEI) grew from humble beginnings in 1997, when Michael Sutton acquired then UBME Inc., a small engineering firm with a modest portfolio of work. “I was working as vice president of UBME Inc. at the time, and they offered to sell me the engineering portion,” he said. “I didn’t have any money at the time, so of course, I said yes,” laughed Sutton, who today serves as president and Chief Executive Officer of IEI. With a little luck, a lot of hard work and a well-researched business plan, Sutton has grown IEI into a leading consulting engineering firm with nearly 80 employees.

With capital from a loan, and cash from the sale of his home, Sutton acquired the company and went to work preparing for success. “It is strange, but sometimes the right people walk into your life,” he said. “When I was starting, I met a man who gave me a bunch of manuals about the business. I read them all and learned every aspect of going into business on my own. I learned everything about accounting, pro forma statements, venture capital, our competitors, and more. I ate it all up. When I felt ready, I wrote a detailed five-year business plan and stuck with it. I still look back at that first business plan today.”

IEI started with just two employees: Sutton and a CAD operator. During the first year, Sutton hired a recent civil engineering graduate and his daughter, who had an accounting degree. Initially, the company took whatever work came its way. Sutton explained that IEI’s early jobs were not exciting. He said: “We would get things like a water sampling job, but I took it. My business philosophy was to make money doing the things we didn’t necessarily want to do forever, and then reinvest into doing what we did.”

By 2005, IEI had grown to 50 employees; and in 2006, the company opened a second office in Indianapolis, Indiana. Today, IEI has four offices, including headquarters in Chicago, Illinois; Indianapolis; Peoria, Illinois; and New York City – and has grown revenue from \$200,000 in 1997 to \$12 million in 2015. The company’s portfolio includes work in airport, highway/roadway, site development, traffic management, harbor, mass transit/railway, structural and water management.



Michael Sutton, PE, president and CEO of Infrastructure Engineering

Roots in Transportation

IEI has expertise in delivering projects as a prime consultant, sub-consultant and joint venture partner. Today, more than 60 percent of the firm's work is as a prime consultant – a business move that helped establish IEI as a leader, especially in the highway and bridge sector.

Highway and bridge work, Sutton explained, are at the heart of IEI. "I worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) for 10 years before taking a leadership position at UBME Inc.," Sutton said. "Transportation work is where our roots are, and we love it; even if it's the sort of stuff that most people take for granted. It's not glamorous work, but it is necessary."

Currently, IEI's Chicago office is working with C*NET, a joint venture of IEI and Civiltech Engineering Inc., to implement numerous transportation improvements around the South Lakefront Framework Plan, which includes the Obama

"I have always said that you treat people like you want to be treated. And I want to be treated GOOD."

Michael Sutton

Presidential Center in Jackson Park. This \$60 million project is slated to be completed in 2022.

This year, IEI will complete a \$16 million road rehabilitation project in Indianapolis, and in 2020 the company will finish the Kensico-Eastview Connection Project in New York City, a massive project supplying clean drinking water to nearly 10 million New York residents.

Sutton said that IEI is known for delivering innovative solutions to complex challenges. One highly

visible example of this ingenuity is the massive Maggie Daley Park in Chicago. This world-class park was constructed atop an existing parking garage, meaning the design was restricted by the structural capacity of the garage slab. IEI worked on the project, addressing numerous challenges in designing the foundations for the playground equipment, including: 14 55-foot-high specially designed steel light masts; a 55-foot-tall expert climbing wall; a 55-foot bouldering climbing wall; a 125-foot suspension bridge; and more.

IEI PROVIDED RESIDENT ENGINEERING AND CONSTRUCTION INSPECTION SERVICES FOR THE ADVANCED RELOCATION OF PUBLIC UTILITIES REQUIRED PRIOR TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE WACKER DRIVE VIADUCT PROJECT, A REINFORCED CONCRETE MULTI-SPAN STRUCTURE IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN CHICAGO.



Persistence

Since the initial acquisition 22 years ago, Sutton has grown IEI organically, opening new offices and building client portfolios from scratch. Sutton explained that this organic model comes with risks. He said: "I'm not afraid to admit that some worked and some didn't. This is just part of being a business person. You have to be comfortable with taking risks, and you have to be OK to fail. In the end, if you are making money and satisfying clients, then everything should be OK."

Sutton graduated from the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Program just as the great recession of 2008 hit, and IEI was forced to downsize half of its workforce. Despite uncertain times, Sutton and his team stuck to their business plan, continuing to offer innovative solutions and exceptional customer service. Together, the firm survived and thrived, eventually rebuilding the staff to pre-recession numbers. "Don't let your failures derail your ultimate goal," Sutton said. "Always go back to that business plan."

Sutton's business focus has always been rooted in company growth and providing growth opportunities for his employees. "If you don't grow, where is the opportunity for your employees to grow?" he asked. "If you have young, eager employees and don't provide growth opportunities, then they will leave and go elsewhere."

This focus has fostered employee longevity at IEI, with many of his employees staying with the company for more than a decade. Also encouraging employee loyalty is Sutton's focus on treating his employees well.

"I have always said that you treat people like you want to be treated. And I want to be treated GOOD," Sutton said with a laugh. "I want to have a good salary, work on good projects and have opportunities for advancement. I want to work in a comfortable office with furniture that is ergonomic. If I want all of this for myself, I need to make sure all my employees have it, too."

Proven Track Record

Sutton and IEI have a proven track record of success and are known throughout the industry for their innovation and excellent customer service. Sutton explained that differentiating themselves from the competition is an essential element of his business plan. "In an Indycar race, a car only wins by a fraction of a second. Our competition is that stiff," Sutton said. "With that in mind, we are constantly analyzing every aspect of our operations to see how we can improve. Constantly tweaking every element of our business helps us keep ahead of the competition by that necessary fraction of a second."

Giving back to the community is also at the heart of IEI's work – and is another way the company stands out. In 2009, Sutton established Universal Agape Foundation (UAF), a charitable organization that gives back to economically challenged communities. UAF provides toys for children with economically-challenged families in Chicago at "Christmas in the 9th Ward" and Peoria at "Heart of Christmas." UAF also supports a food pantry for students at SENSE Charter School in Indianapolis.

Sutton is particularly passionate about supporting and inspiring other minority engineering firms throughout the country. In 2011, Sutton founded the National Organization of Minority Engineers (NOME) to promote the advancement of minority-owned and operated engineering firms. Through NOME, Sutton holds an annual speaker series and a leadership summit that mentor and support other minority-owned firms.

When asked what his advice is for fledgling engineering firms, he encouraged hard work and never “resting on your laurels.” He said: “I heard a quote somewhere that the only place where success comes before work is the dictionary. You have to be ready to work hard for what you want and always looking for ways to improve.”

As for Sutton, he is still looking for ways to improve IEI, having revised the

company’s mission and vision statements to guide future growth. “They are funny things, mission and vision statements. Once you write them down, they become a part of you and everything you do,” he said. “For IEI, we want to spread our brand globally and develop more new offices.”

“When I look back at the last 22 years and see everything we have

accomplished, I’m pretty content; but it is not over yet,” he said. “My goal is to work another five years. Some people would say I could coast into retirement, but I don’t think that is in my DNA. I am a dreamer. I am a visionary. Someone has to dream, right? ... I am excited to see how much I can accomplish during the next five years compared to the last 22.”

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