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Special Edition: Winter 2021

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Karla Zehnder, CEO Of Hodgson Consulting & Solutions, Ltd.

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Business Feature**

Karla Zehnder

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HOW KARLA ZEHNDER'S "PRICED RIGHT" APPROACH TO IT HAS MADE HODGSON CONSULTING THE MOST TRUSTED MSP IN CHICAGOLAND

Overpricing. In a word, that's what inspired Karla and Robert Zehnder to start their own IT services business.

Karla, co-founder and CEO of Hodgson Consulting, will never forget the client, whose IT horror story drove her and husband Robert to start their own IT company.

"Bob was at a professional and personal crossroads back in the late '90s. We wanted to grow our family, which meant we needed to grow our income," Karla explains. "But as it happens in many corporations, Bob was at the end of a long line of 'lifers' with seniority and zero chances of a promotion."

So, Bob took on IT break-fix work on the side to make extra money. That's when he first ran up against the bad actors of IT who are fueled by greed.

"He got a call from a small business owner who was looking for a second quote to install a network for a seven-person office," Karla recalls. "This other IT 'professional' quoted him \$10,000 to \$15,000. The real price to install it was less than \$1,500. That's what Bob charged him."

Next door to the first client was a five-person company that was quoted \$5,000 to fix a single component. Bob was able to do it for \$600. "He kept hearing the same story – overpricing and underservicing – over and over again," says Karla. "We're entering the age where tech is taking hold, and there isn't anybody there to advocate for and help small business owners, he told me."

That's when he went home and asked Karla to leave her stressful municipal job and help him start this company. But... she would take a little convincing.

"Are you crazy! That's what I remember saying to him," Karla says. "I don't know anything about tech OR running a business. But when I saw his frustration at these so-called professionals, I also saw his passion for helping people who were being pushed into enterprise systems they didn't need. I know how much it bothered him to look them in the eyes and tell them they'd been ripped off."

In 2000, Bob and Karla launched Hodgson Consulting & Solutions, providing break-fix services. They quickly became the "good guys" of tech to those underserved small clients who just wanted someone "to come in and make this stuff work."

Going From Break-Fix To MSP

Bob and Karla's original break-fix business model kept them busy. But as quickly as new, more complex technologies emerged, they saw their clients struggling to keep up.

"We realized that not every small business had the resources to effectively manage their IT tasks in-house," says Karla. "That's when we expanded into managed services that offered a more long-term IT strategy. Now, we monitor, maintain and focus on their IT so they don't have to – not just when something breaks."

"I didn't want to run a company that lived by the burn 'em and churn 'em model..."

They have added their own data center and expanded into cloud computing and cyber security services by offering secure and scalable access to their clients' data, across multiple business locations. But their philosophy has always remained the same: offer right-sized solutions – not too big for overkill and not too small for constant upgrades.

On Becoming The SME For Multilocation Businesses

From the beginning, Karla realized that to be a trusted IT advisor for their clients, they needed to be a subject matter expert (SME) in their business. That's when they found themselves the IT expert for growing businesses with multiple locations or off-site workforce.

"Bob spent part of his career working for a company whose core business was connecting people on the go with places around the world, so it felt natural," says Karla.

Modern businesses with multiple locations or remote workers have unique challenges, not only managing technology, but maximizing productivity, security and their pocketbook.

Hodgson Consulting & Solutions have invested hours gaining knowledge and understanding about their clients' workflows and processes to provide centralized IT solutions that help eliminate the frustrations, obstacles and inefficiencies that come with remote collaboration. Bob holds over 20 industry-recognized certifications, including Microsoft, Citrix and Cisco, and is a recognized Citrix Subject Matter Expert. He has repeatedly been recognized for his strategic role in developing certification exams for Citrix Systems – a company that specializes in combining digital workspaces and networking technologies.

It Takes 2 To Make An IT Thing Go Right

It's been quoted more than once: The strength of the team is each individual member. That's what makes Bob and Karla the perfect business partners.

"He's the tech. And I don't know tech," Karla says. "And our clients don't always know tech; they just want the stuff to work. In human-speak, I'm able to make the connection between the tech and the business in a way that makes sense to them. We've all had that experience with a tech when they rattle off acronyms and talk so fast that your eyebrows get blown off. That's why we keep Bob focusing on the technology, where he makes the magic happen. We just shove energy drinks under the door!"

Karla also put her energies into creating a business culture where people want to come to work. She drew on her own experience of how employees should and shouldn't be treated.

"I didn't want to run a company that lived by the burn 'em and churn 'em model – work employees so hard, they burn out and then you replace them and start the cycle over again," Karla says. "I know what that's like."

Karla had spent years working for a municipal housing program, where she managed a caseload of over 1,000 clients. Between qualifying applicants, dealing with landlords and addressing housing concerns, she had to make sure that every "i" was dotted and every "t" crossed – or face the wrath of management. "It was a crushing workload" that would eventually land her in the ER with an anxiety attack.

"One day I was sitting at my desk," she recalls, "when I started having really bad chest pains. My supervisor had to call an ambulance. My first thought was, I'm having a heart attack. But I'm only 20-something!" At the hospital, it was diagnosed as a panic attack. That's when I realized, I didn't want a job where that type of pressure was even possible."

Today, Hodgson Consulting & Solutions prides itself on creating a great company culture that truly cares about their employees like they do their clients.

"I tell our staff that we're beyond 'family.' We're a team, and teams work together," says Karla. "Everybody knows their role on the team and their strengths as individuals; a team has a mission, and everyone works toward accomplishing that mission."

Recognized In The Tech Industry And Beyond

Not only have Bob and Karla grown a successful IT business from the ground up, but they also provide guidance and support for other small business owners in the IT industry and beyond.

Karla is a designated Registered Practitioner, trained in CMMC



KARLA ZEHNDER, CEO

methodology. She specializes in helping companies that contract with the DoD prepare their organizations' cyber security programs, policies and procedures for compliance with CMMC.

Most recently, she won the 2021 C-Suite of the Year Award that honors C-level executives for their leadership, business and civic contributions to the suburban Chicago community. Karla is also a highly sought-after speaker on the subjects of cyber security, leadership, company culture and entrepreneurship.

A Certified High-Performance Coach, Karla is also the founder of 10X Training and Development, a small business and group-coaching service that teaches executives and entrepreneurs throughout Chicago advanced achievement principles and strategies.

At Hodgson Consulting & Solutions, Karla combines her entrepreneurial skills with her people skills to connect the tech to the business, the people and the process, helping her small business clients overcome the technical challenges they face in today's digital world and empowering them for growth and success.

Bob has been recognized by the National Academy of Best-Selling Authors for his book *The Business Owner's Essential Guide to I.T. & All Things Digital*, and he is an in-demand, national speaker on the topics of national security, virtualization, and mobile and cloud computing.

Reflecting on their success as IT entrepreneurs, Karla says, "It just comes down to passion. Seeing Bob's face turn red with frustration when he told me about that first customer he saved from being ripped off, I knew he was meant to help other small business owners. And I was meant to ride alongside him."

For more information on Hodgson Consulting & Solutions, visit <https://hodgsonconsulting.com/>. ■