

PUTTING HISTORY TO WORK

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By Ross Kippen

Fred Hosking and his partners at Public History Inc. are part of a new breed of young entrepreneurs, those who have had little choice but to start their own business.

With limited job opportunities for anyone without a computer background, how were a bunch of history majors going to get a job? Four enterprising liberal arts majors, all still in their late twenties and early thirties, made their own job. They founded a historical research firm.

Public History conducts archival research for a wide range of public and private clients on a variety of topics, but they specialize in aboriginal history. They have conducted numerous studies for dozens of native organizations across Canada, on a host of issues from land claims to residential schools.

Recently the Department of Indian Affairs contracted them to review a claim filed by the Flying Dust First Nation of Saskatchewan. The Canadian Pacific Railway had taken land to build a rail line in the late 30's and there was some question as to the way in which the land was expropriated.

Once they had reviewed all the documents that had accompanied the claim, they proceeded to search for any other relevant information. As is sometimes the case, information gets lost over time. Public History has to track it down by scouring public archives, old newspapers and historical societies, anywhere there may be written accounts of events.

When their search was concluded, they classified and analyzed the collection of documents and presented their report to Indian Affairs.

Mr. Hosking, who has a master's degree in public history from the University of Waterloo, was working as a contract researcher at Indian and Northern Affairs for 18 months when he came to a startling realization.

"As a contract employee, I had no benefits. I went from one three-month contract to another, and I had no flexibility or free time.

"I had come as far as I could go as a contract employee, so I had to look for alternatives."

He talked to Eric Angel, another researcher at Indian and Northern Affairs in a similar position and who has a masters degree in history from Queen's University. He convinced him there was an untapped market.

"Most historical research is done by individuals, not companies. There are young people who do it to get by, for the money, and there are older people who do it because they enjoy doing it.

"But, there are very few companies in Canada doing it because researchers are not risk takers," said Mr. Hosking.

Mr. Angel knew Gerard Hartley, another Queens's alumni and fellow Indian and Northern Affairs researcher.

"For me the timing was perfect, I was ready for a new challenge," explained Mr. Hartley, who was working with the litigation management branch.

The three felt they needed at least four partners in order to share all the administrative and research duties, so Mr. Hosking recruited Shelly Garr, a sociology major from his home town of Grimsby, Ont.

They wanted to incorporate a strong business approach to their traditionally academic field. With an emphasis on professionalism, organization and marketing, and with an eye toward exploring new markets, they believed they would have a critical edge over the competition.

They took several courses offered by the Ottawa-Carleton Entrepreneurship centre, such as bookkeeping, marketing and time management.

"We used the resources of the entrepreneurship centre to the maximum. We used their library, took their courses and we used their access to legal

and financial advice. What we learned formed the guideline for our business plan," said Mr. Angel.

That 40-page business plan, and the professional advice, helped them land a New Ventures loan, which covered about half their startup costs. The rest of the financing came from the founding partners. After four months of painstaking preparation, they opened their offices on Nepean Street in January 1996.

"We had nothing but an office, we had no contracts but we knew where to go. We knew who to go to in the department (Indian and Northern Affairs)," said Mr. Hosking. "Things started to get rolling in February. We knew it was going to be rough, but we got through."

"We were surprised at how much is contacts, and building references one reference at a time," added Mr. Angel. "Even for the small contracts, you have to bend over backwards to make the client happy, so you get a good reference. We tried lots of marketing ideas, building references worked best."

Public History has experienced tremendous growth since its inception. This year they will more than triple their revenue from their first year. In addition to the four partners, they now have an office administrator and more than 20 full and part-time researchers.

In recognition of their quick success, the Ottawa Carleton Board of Trade last year gave the company the "New Business of the Year" bronze award.

With success comes expansion. Mr. Hartley is off to Winnipeg to open a new office to accommodate the increasing demand for their services in Manitoba.

Even with the new office, they feel that they are only just beginning to scratch the surface of the enormous potential in western Canada." The more work we do, the more opportunities we see," said Mr. Hosking.

Despite their success, academic historians still view them as a "fringe element" and don't know quite how to take these young upstarts. There is

still a divide among those academic historians who spend their careers at universities, and applied historians, who attempt to use history as a guide to planning the future.

"I was giving a talk at the University of Waterloo about what we did, and I was trying to convince them of the important role of applied history, and afterwards a professor came up to me and said, "But are you making any money? And another asked me, "How can you be making a living?" recalled Mr.Hosking.

Even the business community doesn't know how to take them. They are referred to as "those history guys" by the other members of the Ottawa Carleton Board of Trade.

One of the unanticipated rewards of their success is the feeling that they are giving other history majors an opportunity that might not have been available to them otherwise.

When Shelley Garr left the firm to pursue a career with the Ontario Provincial Police, Jodi Pegg, who has a Masters in history from Queen's, replaced her. Ms.Pegg began as a researcher and now has a position and challenge that would not have been available in the public sector.

Even with their early success, they still face obstacles. Last summer, they accepted a contract that they thought would either make them or kill them. The project was difficult because they had to hire and train six new people in a short space of time.

They learned from that experience that finding the right people and training them is their biggest challenge.

Although Mr.Hosking concedes it requires a conscience effort not to burn themselves out, they like the challenge of running their own business and controlling their futures.