



WORK & wealth

how i did it

CLEANING UP IN WASTE MANAGEMENT

Downsized from an account-manager position in January 2000, Vickie J. Lewis was determined to control her future employment. After working for a year as an independent contractor, compiling data for waste, chemical and environmental projects, the Detroit College of Business (now Davenport University) graduate parlayed her 401(k), professional contacts and years of work experience into starting VMX International, an environmental-engineering consulting firm. The company, headquartered in Detroit, helps businesses in the United States, Canada and Mexico properly dispose of everything from plain paper to hazardous materials. In its first year VMX snagged clients like Waste Management, General Motors, Ford and DaimlerChrysler and generated \$1 million in revenue.

CONTROLLING START-UP COSTS "I borrowed 51 percent of the initial \$50,000 from my 401(k) and the rest came from my two partners. We kept costs at a minimum by performing the work ourselves and subcontracting to others as needed until there was enough cash flow to hire employees directly."

PICKING BRAINS "I knew that networking was not just meeting people but also asking a lot of questions. I called professionals in the industry, bounced some of my ideas off them and inquired about how they did it. I'd ask, 'What would I need to do this? How did you develop that department? What has made that so successful?'"

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES "Before completing a company's request for a quote, I would include a factory walk-through. That was always my opportunity to present what I knew and how I would manage the job. I made follow-up calls, saying, 'I've got some really good ideas. Would you be interested in my assisting you on another contract?'"

GROWING THE BUSINESS "Our first contract started at about \$600,000, with three staff positions and two consulting positions. Now VMX has 20 full-time employees and additional offices in Houston, Texas, and Warren, Michigan. By the end of 2003 we'll make a capital investment to expand our functions from managing waste projects to doing the cleanup as well." —PAMELA MCBRIDE ▷

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN SOBIEZAK. MAKEUP: RICHELLE ROBINSON.

