

Getting a life

KAREN OMAN CREATES CERTES FINANCIAL
WITH BALANCE AS PRIME GOAL

Karen Oman was fed up. Fed up with the 60-hour workweeks as a CPA in corporate America. Fed up with the lack of control in her life. Fed up with not having enough time to spend with her family. She knew there had to be a better way, but she also realized it would be up to her to create it.

"Professional CPAs have hard lives. Almost any other profession you go into, there seems to be a flexible way to make it work," Oman says.

(In a 2003 poll by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, 31 percent of CPAs said they worked more than 50 hours a week, with another 28 percent putting in closer to 60 hours.)

"I was working long hours," Oman says. "In one particular job, I'd come home every night after a

long day and open my briefcase at 10 p.m. and close it at 1 a.m. My husband said, 'Quit or die.'"

She quit that job and joined Cowles Media Co. (now part of McClatchy Co.) as a senior financial analyst and eventually was laid off.

"At that point, I consciously decided to leave corporate America after 15 years," says the 50-year-old Oman. "I always said I was

being pulled up the ladder, and the higher I went, the harder it was to make my home and work life mesh. Toward the end, one thing that happened was I was so distracted that I forgot about my daughter's Christmas play and she was playing Mary. I was going like 100 miles an hour from work. I missed the whole play. I knew then that I needed to change my life."

In 1990, Oman went out on her own as an independent financial consultant and interim



BY LIZ WOLF

photographs by Mike Burian

CFO. She enjoyed the work until she got too busy and was afraid she'd end up right back where she started working long hours again. In 1994, with financial help from her husband, Jim, she launched St. Louis Park-based Certes Financial Pros, a high-end financial and accounting temporary service. Jim is the company's CFO and treasurer.

Starting her own company was a big step for Oman. Many entrepreneurs claim to be born risk-takers. Not Oman.

"I'm not truly a risk-taker. I have some CPA personality tendencies. I had to see an extremely high need and the business had to be evolutionary," she explains. "My husband is a risk-taker, though, and his saying that got us through this was, 'We can always work at McDonald's.'"

"It was hard to pull myself out of the life that I had always seen for myself: as a financial executive in corporate America," she continues. "To create my own paycheck, really, was unimaginable. It seemed very scary to start from ground zero."

But armed with a need to find balance, it didn't take Oman long to feel comfortable as a business owner. "When I truly felt free to make my own decisions, and once I saw it was possible with a little bit of initial success, everything started to come easily."

In the beginning, however, some questioned the idea behind Oman's company. In 1994, other Twin Cities temporary agencies were placing entry-level accountants, but no one was placing high-end financial professionals, like CFOs and controllers.

"Everyone thought I was crazy," Oman says. "People didn't get it. I used this analogy to explain it: 'You're used to having a broom. I have a vacuum cleaner. It costs more, but it does more sophisticated work and it's quicker. Rather than a lighter temp person for 40 hours, for the same cost, you could use one of my people for 24 hours. For higher-level stuff, you'll want my services.'"

This convinced enough clients, such as Pillsbury, Star Tribune, and ADC Telecommunications, and her business

was off the ground. "The résumés of my people sold the clients. They had never seen anything like this for the price," she says.

Convincing employees to join up was easier. Like Oman, other CPAs were hungry for flexibility, and she attracted some of the best in the industry. She works hard to make her employees happy by offering flexibility and benefits. She's grown her company from two to more than 100 employees; 85 percent are CPAs. Six of her 14 people in the corporate office work part time. Even Oman takes Mondays and Fridays off to do things she's "always wanted to do."

"We say we want to work 40 hours a week during a 60-hour window because sometimes clients have needs at 7 p.m. So if you have a doctor appointment for your kid at 10 a.m., I don't care. My husband walks in and says, 'How do you make money? Nobody's ever here.' I say, 'Don't worry. They're working.'"

Employees can pick the clients they work for. Oman offers competitive pay; wages are \$30 to more than \$50 per hour. She offers a complete benefits package, including 401k with matching contributions. She allows employees to take up to a six-month leave of absence without losing benefits. Fifteen percent take summers off. Certes also offers employees free year-round use of five vacation homes.

Oman's philosophy is simple: It's possible to treat employees well and be successful. She says she can offer employees exceptional benefits and still be competitive because she has low turnover. This substantially cuts recruiting costs and provides consistency so clients keep coming back. The average tenure of Certes' employees in the field is three and a half years; it's more than five years in the corporate office.

CPA Jeff Temp was attracted to Certes. "I read an ad once about them and it struck me — that was the lifestyle I wanted. I was beaten down by the corporate atmosphere where as a high-level employee in a small corporation you were expected to work 60 hours a week. I was looking for balance and quality of life." He says he found that at Certes,

where he's been for five and a half years. "I have no intention of leaving."

Certes did almost \$8 million in revenue in 2003 and 2004 looks stronger. "For the first two months, we're up 36 percent," Oman says. "We have a good chance of being a \$10 million company this year."

Jack Militello, Ph.D., a professor of management at the University of St. Thomas, says Oman's approach is not unheard of. "There are some nice, well-meaning bosses out there. The idea that being nice to people can get you better results is not new. However, not every company can sustain a competitive edge doing that. It doesn't look like Certes has been hit by bad times. Is it due to her philosophies, her particular business, luck?"

What Oman's done, Militello says, is found an alignment of values between hers and her employees. "If you build that alignment first, then you can do nice things for your people. She knows what works for her customers, and she has employees who know what works for her customers. My guess is that she has people she can trust."

Oman, however, understands her concept is new for a lot of bosses. "It's hard for people to comprehend that backing off and letting go of control is a better management style. I think the answer is letting your employees come to you with their personal needs and how they can best contribute in the company. But you need excellent employees to do that. So if you don't have the best reputation in town, you're probably not attracting the best employees to make this happen. It starts with getting the right people on the bus and keeping them there."

The biggest challenge in running a staffing company is keeping employees busy. Rachel Hollstadt, CEO of Burnsville-based Hollstadt & Associates Inc., a management and technology consulting firm, understands that challenge.

"Recent economic factors and a backlash of Y2K affected the whole profes-

“The competition forced me to be bigger than I originally planned, and I had to speed up my agenda a bit.”

— KAREN OMAN, CERTES FINANCIAL PROS —



sional services field. Many companies cut back or have become more price sensitive.” Hollstadt laid off some workers in 2001-2002. Oman says she didn’t let anyone go during the past recession, but she agrees her biggest focus is keeping her people busy.

Hollstadt also says because the job market changed so dramatically and more people became available during the economic downturn, clients are more specific about the skills they expect people to bring to the table. “It can be a challenge to find the right person for the right engagement,” she says. “We believe that not every consultant is a perfect match for every client; it’s a cultural fit.”

Oman agrees. Certes matches for skill sets first, she says, since her employees are expected to hit the ground running. However, she says there’s an intuitive

portion of the match also because client cultures can vary. To create the highest probability for a good fit, Certes sends clients a few prospective resumes to choose from. The client chooses whom to interview or decides on a different set of skills, and Certes does another search.

Angela Lurie, senior account executive at Robert Half Management Resources, a Certes competitor, has a different take than Hollstadt on the impact of a weaker economy on staffing firms. She says an economic downturn actually can help the industry. “Strategic staffing,” she says, or using contractors versus full-time employees, “has become a strategy for many companies to avoid hiring full-time employees, and perhaps, having to let them go. It’s an excellent way of avoiding the cycle of hiring and firing.”

For two years, Oman was the only major player in town providing high-end financial temps. “I was all by myself, enjoying myself with no interruptions. Then the competition came in with big investment dollars. I hadn’t pushed the growth, because I didn’t know others would come in.” Three national/international players entered the market; the biggest was Robert Half Management Resources.

“They were all out marketing big time with glossy things. I didn’t have glossy things,” Oman says. “For me to survive in this market, I knew I’d have to continue to maintain market share and I was going to have to be out marketing. The competition forced me to be bigger than I originally planned, and I had to speed

up my agenda a bit.”

Oman says she also found a niche. “We saw the staffing industry was very sales-oriented. We decided to be relationship-oriented and act more like a CPA firm. We don’t do any cold calling. I don’t think it works to imitate your competition because then, in the clients’ and employees’ eyes, it’s just more of the same.”

Client Sue Grafton welcomes the softer sell. She’s senior director of financial accounting and reporting for Richfield-based Best Buy Co. Inc. “I appreciate that Karen doesn’t have a hard-sell approach. With Karen, there’s no pressure. Her approach is once you understand the value of her product, clients will come to her when they need her. She’s not calling me all the time. I also appreciate that she’s fair, honest and upfront with things like costs.”

Despite the challenges of starting a business, Oman says it was a good move. “In the end, if the company wasn’t going to be fun, I would’ve done something else. Life is too short to be doing something painful for a career.”

[contact] Karen Oman,
Certes Financial Pros, 5775 Wayzata Blvd., Ste 550, St. Louis Park, MN 55416; (952) 545-0952; koman@certespros.com



Truth & Certainty

[Lessons **i** learned]

Karen Oman,
Certes Financial Pros

"In dealing with the competition, think in terms of differentiating yourself with a different product, price or style. If you're different, **you can find clients and employees who like your differences best** and will gravitate toward you and stay with you."

"Tell employees individually how great they are daily; that they belong. You want them secure so they will make good decisions for you. If they're worried about what you're thinking, they're not thinking about the right things."

"Share your mistakes, so your employees understand that no one has to be perfect. Otherwise, they will cover up their mistakes, which is a big mess. It takes a lot of time to cover up mistakes. You want them to admit to their mistakes, learn from them and move on."

"If you have a big office and a neat parking space, everybody will focus on their egos versus serving the client. **Model equality, because it helps everyone model it and treat each other with respect.**"

"You never know where the best idea will come from next, and you don't want to miss it before your competition gets it."

"Work/life balance, in my opinion, is **doing something you love all the time** and not feeling guilty about it."

"My philosophy on growth is to **respond to the market,** not push myself on the market. I had no idea how fast we'd grow, but I built a company that would be able to grow at the rate the market wanted us to."

"When an employee asks for a special favor — like flex hours, part time or telecommuting — just say yes for six months and see if you can't **change your mind about controlling how employees work.** Don't worry about everybody asking for it, because once everybody understands that their particular needs will be met, everybody has different needs."

"Know that part-time is the most efficient kind of employee you can have, because you get a **full-time brain for a part-time cost.**"

"According to a recent survey, **positive communication improves employees' productivity** up to 25 percent, but negative words do nothing."

"Success for me is to **really enjoy what I'm doing every minute** and have a positive effect on the world while I'm at it."

"Give employees the space to be their best selves. Take a step back, rather than a step forward and you'll get further by leaving that space for the employees. When someone says something and you really want to say 'no,' have the discipline to just let it happen. It's like biting your tongue."

"If employees can raise families and put meals on the table, they probably can **do good things at work too without stringent work hours** and being told what to do."

"The answer to a successful company is attracting the best of the best employees. They are a scarce resource. **Excellent people are born, not made.**"