



IT Consulting Services for Small Businesses in the San Francisco Bay Area providing Disaster Recovery and Preventative Maintenance



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“Anybody can do tech, but it takes a special blend to be able to do tech and actually explain it to somebody else. That is the crucial difference for BH Tech Connection.”- Brady Helkenn

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Mr. Helkenn, what is the focus of BH Tech Connection today?*

Mr. Helkenn: The focus of BH Tech Connection is to provide IT consulting services for businesses with fewer than 10 employees in the Bay Area, and our mission is to provide a consistent experience and resource for business owners in that niche, given the proliferation of solo IT consultants who operate purely by word of mouth.

CEOCFO: *Is it a deliberate strategy to work with companies of that size or was it more opportunistic as you recognized the need?*

Mr. Helkenn: It initially was opportunistic. It turned into more of a deliberate strategy once I realized the benefits of focusing first of all on a niche in general, but second of all at that particular level. It provided the opportunity to develop referral partnerships with managed service provider IT companies, which are more of the traditional, what you find through Google or paid Yelp advertising. But it also allowed me to work closer to the owner of each company - you go past 10 employees and it gets harder and harder, and you end up with a point person typically. And then the third reason that it ended up working out very well is that you begin to work with the same level of technological complexity. As the company grows, it requires more and more complex IT hardware. Keeping the focus within that small range allows me to focus on consumer grade products.

CEOCFO: *Is it difficult to get the attention of a small business owner when you need to discuss a strategy for them or get them to understand the things they need to know to make it easier for them?*

Mr. Helkenn: Essentially, the business owner in general is quite busy, so I cherry pick the issues that I bring to their attention based off the dynamic that we are already creating. If they happen to tell me that they are interested in security - they just never have the time, this can be improved upon, and it usually will stick in that sense. There are others who are very technophobic and do not care one way or the other, and they just want things to work. So there tends to be a spectrum that a lot of businesses fall somewhere on, between the level of convenience and the level of security you get with your services and with your practices. It turns into more of an instinct on what to bring to their attention. There are a couple of things that I will bring to their attention no matter what - one of them is backups and the other one is passwords just written down in a public place or in a publicly accessible way. Those two are the big no-no's in my business, where I will repeatedly tell them. Even if I told them five times, I will tell them a sixth, and a seventh, until they do something about it.

CEOCFO: Are you able to help your customers with purchasing?

Mr. Helkenn: Yes, it is quite common as well. Typically I recommend that they reach out to me before they buy the computer, which more and more are happy to do. What I will do is determine a base level of information from them that they would be able to give me as far as preference - like whether or not they wanted a desktop or a laptop, and if they wanted a laptop, did they value power and screen size or did they value battery life and portability? There are a few questions that I can ask them that are not technological questions, but once I have that information I can tailor the specs of the machine and send them the information on what they would need to do in order to purchase that computer.

CEOCFO: How do you stay ahead of all the changes in technology?

Mr. Helkenn: One of the secrets of my industry, which I don't mind not keeping it a secret, is that there are a lot of changes, but they follow the same simple pattern. A processor will change 10 different ways from Sunday in a matter of months, but what really matters is a couple of different statistics on the processor, and it also counts what similar processors are doing. So to give that as an example, you usually have a low range, medium range, and high range that a processor will fit into. In that example, I typically always focus on the mid range. Low models are usually too slow, the high end is usually for programmers or graphics developers; it is usually overkill. I have a simple set of rules that as long as I understand what is low end and high end, to a certain extent I do not actually need to know all the changes. That pattern holds with most of the technology as far as developing the hardware. As long as you know enough of the terms, it actually is a lot easier than it may appear.

CEOCFO: Are there particular types of businesses that turn to you?

Mr. Helkenn: I focus on a few different verticals, which helps to clarify referrals. I would say law firms would be the big chunk, also the combination of interior designers and showrooms - that kind of pairing tends to work well together. Health and wellness partnerships like massage therapists, acupuncturists, and chiropractors, where there is a lot of tight-knit cross referrals. Those would be the three categories that would be the most common. The rest of it just a random scatter plot of different industries.

CEOCFO: What is your geographic reach, and do you see that changing?

Mr. Helkenn: The reach as it stands is the city of San Francisco down the peninsula as far as Palo Alto, up in the north bay as far as Larkspur, and then into Oakland and Berkeley. I see the demographic changing as I get more employees, particularly if I can get an employee who is already based in the East Bay. I would be able to expand my reach out to cover most of the East Bay, which we do not actually do at the moment without charging a travel fee, which tends to prevent closing that kind of business, as it tends to be a little too expensive for the client.

CEOCFO: What do you look for in your people? What is important and what are the intangibles?

Mr. Helkenn: As far as employees, the biggest thing that I look for is people skills. My philosophy is that tech can be trained but learning how to talk and communicate properly cannot. It will either come naturally or it will not, and the tech can always be taught. Ones and zeroes, these are things that you can do great and comprehend given enough training, and the intangible really comes down to hand holding; the ability to explain things in simple terms without any jargon. The capacity to reach out during critical stages of work whenever there is unexpected delays or changes in direction for a project because of new information that we have come across. It seems that a lot of IT people do not do this naturally - that is the main thing that I look for to help the brand succeed, essentially.

CEOCFO: How do you reach out to people who may not know BH Tech?

Mr. Helkenn: That is still something I am discovering how to do. I have done a press release, I have done some limited form of Facebook advertising, which has been marginally successful. I am based on Yelp and I have asked for reviews, which helps to create some form of semi-regular calls, although those are not typically very good referrals because they usually are hardware repairs and they are not paying attention to the company description on Yelp, so that can cause problems. The single biggest source to this day is word of mouth referrals - one of the things that I am trying to focus on is breaking out of that pattern, because that is one of the only ways I am going to be able to get the business to grow to a size that it can be noticeable through traditional Google AdWords, Facebook advertisements, etc. the way larger IT companies are capable of doing. The latest thing that I am aiming to do is public speaking. I just did a presentation for the Small Business Administration last month, and that is something that I am looking to pursue with a bit more regularity next year.

CEOCFO: Why is this the time to grow?

Mr. Helkenn: The business has effectively only launched a year and a half ago, so it comes down to the goal, the dream, the plan for the company. I intend for the company to grow to such a size so that we become the main offering in the Bay

Area. Obviously as opportunities present themselves to go beyond the Bay Area I will take them. As far as Why, that comes down to the idea that there are too many choices and no way to find all of them. Somebody needs to create a business model - and I believe I am the one to do it - to be able to become a known presence easily for somebody to find. Right now, my client demographic is stuck finding through Google searches all the companies that are not good fits for them. They want a minimum of 10 employees or 25 employees but they will market just the same on Google, and if you look up "IT consulting businesses" you are going to find these managed service providers, not me. The journey of being natively there and available for people to find is tied into the growth idea - I am going to be attacking it from two fronts. One, I am going to be recognizable within the Bay Area from speaking service from the referrals, and on the other side of it I need to grow to the point where I can start adding into the budget more and more advertising dollars.

CEOCFO: *Why is being involved with the community important to you?*

Mr. Helkenn: The reason why I set up donations and particularly the organizations that I have donated to is right now the IT industry is too male-centric - it is too male dominated, the IT consulting field and IT fields in general are still very male-centric. I have worked in IT for 10 years and I can count on one hand the number of women in IT I have come across. That says a lot, and it says that it is too skewed. I believe that every business should exist for a purpose, and it should exist for a purpose outside of making money. The money itself is a means to an end, and the means to the end initially is to be able to pay my bills, but quite apart from that to also be able to give back to the community in some fashion. I also believe in transparency - especially something like this where I think a lot of people would go, "Hey this is a great thing you are doing". So why shouldn't I be transparent about it?

CEOCFO: *What surprised you as the business as grown and evolved?*

Mr. Helkenn: Probably the same thing that surprised many other business owners. I guess I was surprised that for as high as my rates are, I do not make more money. The amount of time that I spend meeting potential clients and networking and even just answering emails that themselves are not billable - the amount of time I am spending per week is something on the order of 50, 60 hours a week, and at the moment even now I am making even less than I made at my last full time job. Even so, I would not trade it for anything. Even now, I am looking at it and going, "I do not report to a boss, I cannot get fired." That is such a liberating feeling in the first place that I would never go back, and I have no regrets. But I think that was the single most surprising thing. I price myself out personally at \$125 an hour, and employees bill out at \$100 an hour, and in the back of my head I had a built-in assumption that I would be billing 20 to 30 hours a week - and wow that is a lot of money. The reality of it is it is much less billable hours. The billable hours that I am doing is probably something closer to 5 and 10 hours in a week.

CEOCFO: *Why use BH Tech Connection?*

Mr. Helkenn: For the humanity of it; for the personality that you get with the communication and the hand holding. The clarity that you get from being able to understand at a level appropriate to your technical expertise what is going on and how to fix it. We are as much a trainer as we are a consultant. The big difference is that people, when they get ready to grow, they look at resumes and they look at the expertise first, and then they ask for people skills second. I flip it, where I put a premium on the people skills moreso than anything else. I groom them and train them. It is proving itself. I already sent out a survey or two about my employee to see how well he is doing, and he has less technical capability than I do, certainly, and less than the average IT consultant out there, but he has been rated higher across the board than I think many IT consultants would be. I would think that if you look at a overall rating of three stars for the consulting field at large simply because of our lack of communication or tardiness or whatever the problem is with any particular IT consultant, and then you look at the surveys that I have done for my employees - they have already gotten four and a half stars out of 10 or 20 people that have reviewed them, and he has less technical capabilities. That is a smoking gun to me that it is the people skills that people go after. Anybody can do tech, but it takes a special blend to be able to do tech and actually explain it to somebody else. That is the crucial difference for BH Tech Connection.

