

Civil, Environmental and Geotechnical Engineering Services for Public Utilities



Charles Toran
President
Sci-Tek Consultants, Inc.

CEOCFO: *Mr. Toran, would you tell us the idea behind Sci-Tek Consultants?*

Mr. Toran: The idea is to provide engineering services in a manner which delights our clients. That is our mantra and the essence of our mission.

CEOCFO: *Where does the delight come in?*

Mr. Toran: The delight comes in trying to focus on exceeding client expectation. Every time we undertake a project we try to be deliberate and careful when we develop the scope of work and write the proposal so that we offer exactly what the client is expecting. We tell them specifically what we are providing and once we have that established then we focus on providing value-added service or maybe getting it done sooner or just find some way of exceeding their expectations. You cannot always do that because sometimes you give them exactly what they need or ask for but that's ok too. There are times when customers are delighted to actually get what they were promised.

CEOCFO: *Would you give us some idea about your projects?*

Mr. Toran: We provide civil, environmental as well as geotechnical engineering services. Within that, it encompasses a number of things. We work with a lot of public utilities on infrastructure related projects. Sometimes it is water and wastewater treatment plants, which are one of our biggest market segments and they may be doing retrofit upgrades at the facilities so we will provide some of the engineering associated with that. They may be developing long-term plans to deal with some of the regulatory requirements that they face and we will assist them with those planning efforts. We also work with a lot of architects who are working with owners or developers to put a new building in. We just worked on a recent project with a local university on a large classroom building. We did all of the site design for that facility. We will deal with things like storm water management and we will usually incorporate green infrastructure, it is a big thing these days, and also grading of the site and laying out the parking and the paving. We also do geotechnical subsurface investigations and that involves when you are putting in any type of structure. When one designs a foundation for that structure you have to know what the subsurface soil and rock properties are so we provide the service to go in and test the subsurface conditions and write a report that contains recommendations on how the foundation should be designed. Finally, we provide environmental consulting services, which will involve testing soil for hazardous materials or subsurface contamination or testing building structures for the presence of hazardous compounds like asbestos and lead.

CEOCFO: *You mentioned green. Do you feel it is because people believe it is important or more because they are required to or it looks good for their potential customers?*

Mr. Toran: I think it is more of the former than the latter. I think we are starting to see more requirements whether they be regulatory driven or just incorporated into the project by the owners because today I think people are more sensitive to the environment so they believe it is necessary. Therefore, it becomes part of the requirement.

CEOCFO: *What is your geographic reach?*

Mr. Toran: Primarily our reach is the Northeast US. We are in Pennsylvania and have offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Most of the services we provide are in Pennsylvania and surrounding states like West Virginia, Ohio and Maryland and New Jersey.

CEOCFO: Do you see any particular challenges in the climate, weather or soil in the northeast US that might not be present other places?

Mr. Toran: It is a little difficult to answer because we do not have experience in other places. Since we have more challenging winters, sometimes people are trying to work through the winter. We have had some times where we have been in the field for a geotechnical investigation and the frigid near sub-zero temperatures can make it very challenging to get the work done and stay on schedule and budget. Budget is the particular challenge when you are dealing with a situation such as that.

CEOCFO: Are there particular types of projects you prefer to work on and enjoy?

Mr. Toran: We have 38 employees so at this point it is a matter of what kinds of projects they prefer to work on. The interesting thing about us and the work we do is almost everything we do is associated with developing something, creating something and constructing something. People like the challenge of being involved with projects in the early stages and overcoming whatever challenges that are there and then seeing something actually built that is going to contribute to society some way. It could be a school or it could be a runway modification project at an airport. We get to see the contribution that the project makes to the local community.

"The idea is to provide engineering services in a manner which delights our clients. That is our mantra and the essence of our mission." - Charles Toran

CEOCFO: Would you give us an example of what you might look at when assessing a project, which others do not realize is important?

Mr. Toran: We are hitting our twentieth anniversary in March of next year. Some of the things we have learned to look for are projects that are not a good fit for us for a number of reasons. Even though sometimes it seems like it is the kind of project we should be involved with, it could be just not the right kind of owner where we are probably going to be hard-pressed to be profitable. It could be that it is a particular project that does not lend itself to our particular experience. I rely on the experience of our people so I have learned to try to avoid getting into trouble by making sure we are comfortable with the projects that we are undertaking. We will look for land mines such as the mismatch with our experience or maybe the wrong type of owner to try to avoid trouble.

CEOCFO: Is it getting more difficult to assess if a prospective customer is serious or just picking your brain?

Mr. Toran: It can be. We are lucky in that we do a lot of public sector work. That eliminates a lot of those concerns because usually public sector projects are not speculative. We also do some private sector work so we get a little nervous when we do not know them and no matter how much digging around and background checking you can do, you can only find out so much. We have been burned a couple times when we worked for clients and they did not pay. That is just part of the risk of doing business.

CEOCFO: In regards to government, how do you deal with some of the extra challenges?

Mr. Toran: The main thing you have to do is understand that even though it is a government agency whether a federal agency or a local agency, they are no different from any client. That means that they have needs that have to be met. Sometimes you have to look behind what is specifically written into the RFP. Lots of times when you work for the government sector, you are responding to publically advertised projects and they do not often state everything that you need to know. We have a chance to sit down with the agency or ask questions and we will go beyond the RFP and ask them what is truly important. We will ask questions such as if the project is late, what kind of problem will it be for them. We try to look beyond what is written the government agency's RFP and treat them like a regular client.

CEOCFO: What surprised you as Sci-Tek has grown and evolved?

Mr. Toran: I guess the main thing that has surprised me is our ability to change and evolve. You go to any business school and one of the things that they will tell you if you want to be successful in your business is that you have to monitor your environment and adapt and be willing to change. That is easier said than done because one formula for being successful in business is to stick to your knitting and be reliable and provide a good product like Coca Cola. When you go and buy Coke, you know exactly what you are getting. There is that aspect of being successful but we also have to monitor our environment and change and we have been able to do that. We have grown vertically and horizontally over the years. We have changed and there have been years in the past where most of the work we were doing was environmental or most of it civil. We have been able to be flexible and change and that has been surprising because as an owner it is my main challenge and it seems difficult when I am thinking about it and working on it but as I look back on it, we have been able to do it.

CEOCFO: *It appears business is good as you have been named in the Pittsburgh Top 100. How do you continue the trajectory and what might be different if we speak a year from now?*

Mr. Toran: I do not try to be a hot growth firm or one of the top 100. We want to grow and you have to grow to continue to provide challenges for employees and continue to be profitable and provide the rewards and basically the compensation. We never tried to grow for the sake of growth. We try to get better at what we do and sometimes that translates into growing but sometimes we level off. We actually made that list maybe six times so there were fourteen years where we did not make it. That is fine with me because I am mostly mindful of serving our clients and providing opportunities for my employees. Sometimes we find ourselves where we are more in a mode of just assessing where we are and sort of hunkering down a little bit as opposed to thinking about how to grow.

CEOCFO: *Why choose Sci-Tek Consultants?*

Mr. Toran: I think one of the reasons is we are a small company but we provide large qualifications, capabilities and experience so there is a value-added proposition there and you are going to get the same quality and the same level of service that you are going to get from some of the bigger engineering firms in the country. At the same time, we are focused and provide a lot of attention to our clients. If you are a client and you are talking to one of our project managers, he is minutes away from talking to me the owner and principal of the firm so you are definitely going to get answers and resolutions. You are not going to get the runaround. I think that is one of the things that the clients we work for, like about us.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine



**For more information visit:
www.scitekanswers.com**

**Contact:
Charles R. Toran, Jr.
(412) 371-4460
ctoran@sci-tekanswers.com**