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Issue: March 29, 2021

Aligning your Business Strategy to IT as a Vehicle for Growth



Dawn Sizer
CEO

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CEOCFO: *Ms. Sizer, would you tell us about the overall vision and focus at 3rd Element Consulting?*

Ms. Sizer: We are an MSP, which is a managed service provider. This basically means that we do IT for companies that do not have an internal department, or if they do have an internal department, we can do something called co-managed, which means we work with their IT department and can help them out. That is what we do in a nutshell.

As far as vision, we are still a growing company. I like to think we are still a young company at fifteen. As an IT company it is difficult to mature in the early years as you are busy getting established doing what it is that we do. We are still growing; in fact, we had 200% growth last year during the pandemic. It has been a journey.

CEOCFO: *Are there typical types of companies that are turning to you?*

Ms. Sizer: There are. We see niche markets as well as specific size companies that are looking for services like ours. Typically, companies that are in the 10 to 150 employee range are our standard client. That seems to be our sweet spot. As far as geography goes, because of the nature of what we do, we can be anywhere in the continental United States.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular industries of focus?*

Ms. Sizer: We have traditionally niched into local government, especially law enforcement and public safety. Our other primary focus industries are professional service organizations, including construction, pharmaceutical, healthcare, nonprofit, insurance, and legal.

CEOCFO: *Was a deliberate strategy to choose government or did it develop opportunistically?*

Ms. Sizer: I do not know that it was a deliberate strategy. It was more opportunistic since I previously worked for a company that serviced that industry and when I left the clients followed. With municipal government and law enforcement, everybody talks to everybody else. If you do a good job for one government client, they end up speaking to everybody else.

CEOCFO: *Is there a lot of word-of-mouth in the healthcare arena as well?*

Ms. Sizer: There is. Much the same as any niche market, peers talk to each other and recommend a good experience to one another.

CEOCFO: *When an organization turns to you what might they be looking for and what might you configure for them; what solutions might you offer?*

Ms. Sizer: No matter what your industry, no one ever leaves their IT company when they are happy. The only time people are turning to us is when they are unhappy with their current provider or something is literally or figuratively on fire. Sometimes something went horribly wrong, which might have been anything from security or how they have been treated or they just simply have not been educated properly.

People are looking for education. Whether they want cybersecurity education or business application training, for instance, they are turning to us for that. They are also looking to 3rd Element when they have a cybersecurity incident to remediate, or to recover from somebody else's mistake. Those are usually the types of things that we see.

CEOCFO: *When you are starting with a new client what do you look for about their company and situation that less knowledgeable people might not realize is important?*

Ms. Sizer: We do not necessarily look at what they are doing with their IT first, we look at what they are doing with their business. We want to work with people who have a specific mindset toward their business, centered around growth. We like to start by reviewing or helping to create a business strategy with them and align IT directly to that strategy. This helps be sure that IT becomes a vehicle for growth instead of simply an expense.

CEOCFO: *Are you surprised that many of your clients do not have a well thought-out strategy?*

Ms. Sizer: Yes, I am continually surprised that so many business owners do not have a strategy. They aren't thinking about work flows or internal processes that can save them time, effort and energy. Sitting down with another business and talking through their processes brings up additional information for them to consider. This sparks ideas of where to go next with their business.

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CEOCFO: *How do you help a company with a limited budget that needs to make changes? How do you help a company prioritize what they need to do?*

Ms. Sizer: One of the things we do is sit down and build or help develop the strategy for their company. This helps create a list of things that are a priority. Everyone's priorities are going to be different, whether it is the CFO, the CEO, or Joe in HR. Determining where those priorities overlap or come together into what keeps the company safe, what is most cost-effective, and what will drive the organization forward, are the things we focus on first.

CEOCFO: *When you are coming up with a strategy for a company or technology you need to add or take away, how do you craft a program that will last for a while when there are always newer technologies coming out?*

Ms. Sizer: We come back to that strategy and continually review our long-term plan to determine whether we should stay with that, or whether we need to adjust to account for new technologies. When we have planned strategic shifts instead of huge changes along the way, it becomes more palatable for everybody. As new technologies come into the market, we help our clients review these opportunities and adjust their strategy or pivot as necessary to include them.

CEOCFO: *How have you helped your customers through COVID and how have you helped people who have not used 3rd Element before to get up and running quickly?*

Ms. Sizer: 3rd Element had already migrated to be a completely cloud based organization. We had been migrating a number of our clients that way as well, so when COVID hit, we had 90% of our clients poised to move to the cloud. The work needed was onboarding them, educating their staff on the changes, and making sure they had appropriate equipment to be up and running.

As we continued to take on new clients, we needed to adjust our processes to deal with the COVID related restrictions. Many of our clients had to implement specific processes and procedures for their organizations. We learned to deal with each one and created internal procedures as well.

CEOCFO: *I see on your website you worked with other IT firms where you were discriminated against as a woman, which lead you to 3rd Element. Do you still find that is true in the industry? How do you help combat that issue?*

Ms. Sizer: I do still see discrimination on occasion. I have been told I don't belong in some professional circles, or was questioned about my skills purely based on my gender. The simple truth is that no matter my gender, I was trained to do what I am doing. I have an MBA in IT and I am confident in my abilities at this point.

Gender bias or discrimination is somebody else's opinion. That is something that everybody needs to keep in the back of their mind if they are told these kinds of things or experience them. It has nothing to do with your skills or abilities. It is the perception of that person's reality and not yours.

Beyond that, diversity at 3rd Element includes neurodiversity. We have staff members with several challenges, including autism and ADHD. Like all organizations, we have a wide variety of interesting personalities and things that go on in the workplace. Once we acknowledged the diversity in our staff, we created an onboarding program to account for it. Diversity in hiring here at 3rd Element, isn't just gender, it's how we think too. It was a point of maturity for the company as a whole.

CEOCFO: *Giving back is important for 3rd Element. Why do you feel it is important and how do you decide, when there are so many places that need help, where to focus your efforts?*

Ms. Sizer: We located our business in the historic district of a small town called Mechanicsburg, PA. We wanted to be a part of the community, and I think when you are part of any community, you have a responsibility to that community. We have made giving back to our community part of our company culture. Several of us are Rotarians, so we are heavily involved in our community. We look at the things that Rotary helps with and partner with them to do our giving.

CEOCFO: *Are there services that you would like to add to the mix at 3rd Element?*

Ms. Sizer: We are currently adding in an audio-visual division, and looking to expand our physical security offerings.

CEOCFO: *Why now?*

Ms. Sizer: Our expansions have been driven by our clients' needs and the interests of our staff. We have received numerous requests to expand in these areas, so we are moving to meet those needs. There are few companies in our area that do AV over IT. They may have the AV background, but technology has changed, and AV now runs more as an IT function than completely separate. Much the same can be said for security.

CEOCFO: *How are you reaching out to new clients or are people turning to you these days?*

Ms. Sizer: We have always been word-of-mouth, and that has gotten us great organic growth. By keeping our clients happy, they tell other people. As another engine for growth, we hired a marketing company for the first time this year.

What we have found in our non-scientific market research was that people don't call random IT companies they found on Google and hire them. We found that prospective clients ask their peers, colleagues, and friends to find out who they use. Then they do their own research on that IT company.

CEOCFO: *What might you do for a client that would be over and above expectations?*

Ms. Sizer: We have done everything from going out to training classes with clients for their line of business applications, to having full lines of extra loaner equipment just in case it might be needed. We do disaster recovery availability for our clients and even provide office space when needed.

CEOCFO: *What surprised you as 3rd Element Consulting has grown and evolved?*

Ms. Sizer: Geographic spread. Technology has allowed us to be able to support clients anywhere in the world. Fifteen years ago, we drew a circle around our town and figured out where we could drive in a reasonable amount of time. Now we are supporting clients in multiple states across the country.