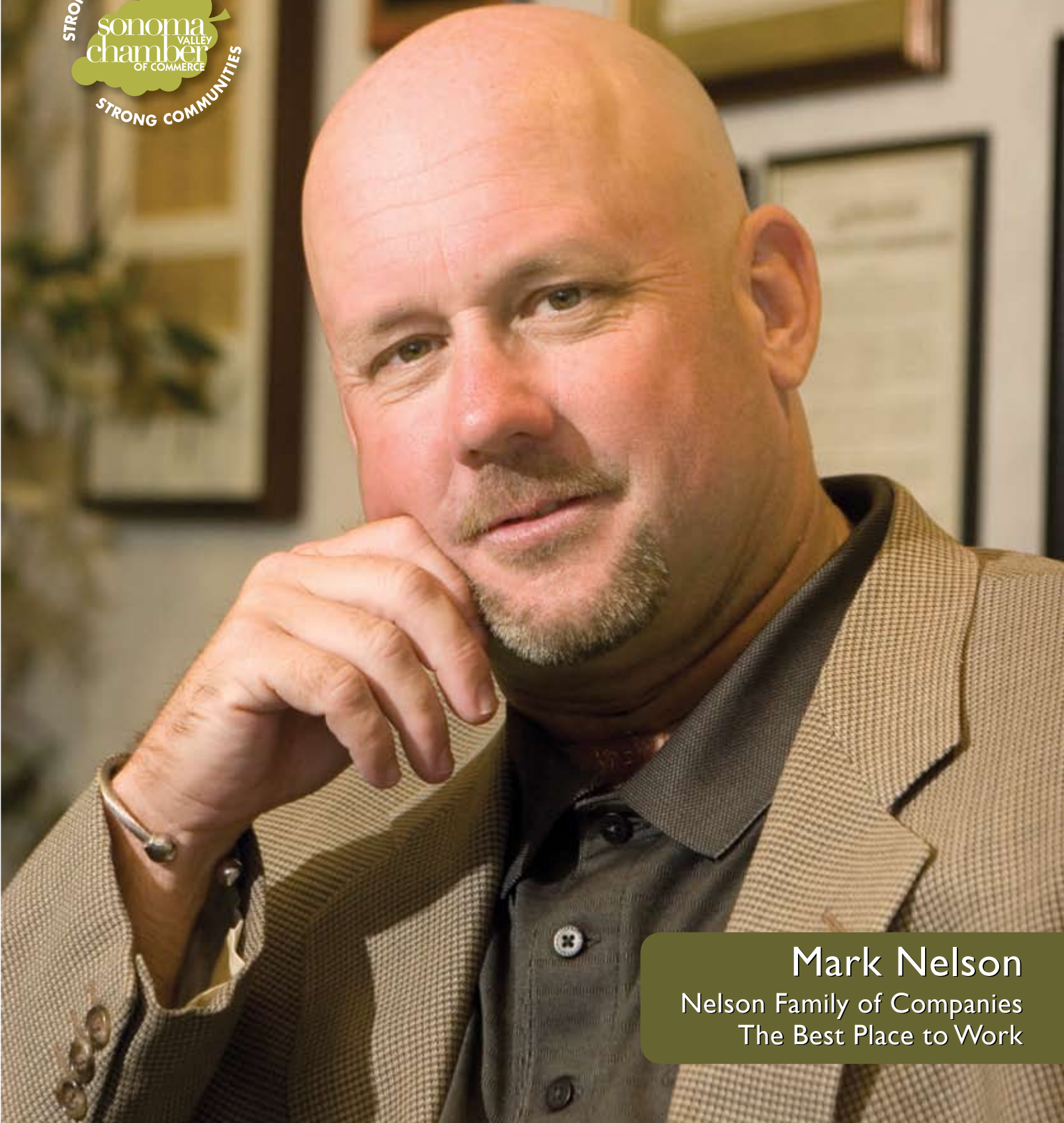


SONOMA **business**

WINTER 2007



Mark Nelson

Nelson Family of Companies
The Best Place to Work

The Best Place to W

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“Amazing,” is the word Mark Nelson uses to describe the growth of his father’s company, now tellingly called the Nelson Family of Companies, in the past four decades. He quickly follows it up with the more humble “fortunate.”

“Fortunate” definitely, but that does not mean the result of luck alone. Far from it.

Behind the attractive yet subtle gray and white buildings on Lomita Avenue in Sonoma – Nelson’s corporate offices – that you could drive by day after day and not even notice, there’s a lot going on.

To become one of the fastest-growing staffing firms in the country, to have revenues close to the \$400 million mark, to have been voted three years in a row a “Best Place to Work” in the Bay Area takes hard work, vision, strategic thinking, risk-taking and, perhaps, a tiny jot of luck.

“We’ve got some fundamental values and premises upon which we’ve operated,” said Mark. “Quality. High levels of quality. Customer service, really focusing on our clients, our candidates, our employees, our communities. . . . We’ve been in business 37 years and it’s been primarily a service business. The reputation begins to avalanche; it creates its own momentum.”

The words “amazing” and “fortunate” could apply as well to Mark himself. At 45, he is now president and COO of the Nelson Family of Companies, which comprises six dedicated entities (see sidebar), the first of which was founded in 1970 by his father, Gary Nelson, who is still actively involved as chairman and CEO.

Mark is very much his father’s son. Bright – graduating at the top of his class from USF, in accounting; personable – “I have a natural tendency toward developing relationships with people” – at ease in his own skin, positive, upbeat, multidimensional, surprising. He gives the impression he’d succeed at just about anything he turned his attention to.



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But as it turned out, the oldest of four boys, Mark grew up immersed in the staffing business. “My father’s been interviewing me since I was an embryo, it feels like,” he said. “I learned pretty quickly how to interview and how to appropriately respond to interviews. A people business was pretty natural for me,” he added.

While he was growing up, the business was developing a stable base.



(Operating Officer)

In 1980, when Mark was 18, Gary Nelson turned his attention from executive search to temporary placement.

Mark went to college and then, at his father's urging, worked for three years for Price Waterhouse. Mark shares his father's philosophy

that family members need to work somewhere else before they come into Nelson, to see how other companies do things. He started at the bottom in his father's company as a salesperson in 1988, just before the company opened its Sonoma office.

In eight years, Mark went from salesperson to branch manager to regional manager to vice president to president and COO in 1995. The following year, 1996, the company's revenues reached the \$100 million mark.

And that was just the beginning of what could only be called exceptional growth. By 2000, revenues had double to \$200 million. Today, this enterprise that began in modest quarters in San Rafael, has 350 full-time employees and has diversified into six business units: Nelson Staffing, Nelson Technology, HRHome, Nelson & Associates, NelsonJobs.com and Workforce Logic.

In 2001, Craig Nelson, Mark's younger brother, came to work at the company as general counsel. Now, according to Mark, Craig is a "reformed lawyer," and has taken over the staffing businesses.

As in most family businesses, there was a bit of tension as the new generation – Mark's generation, that is – became ready to take leadership roles. Since Mark worked his way up from the bottom, he obviously wasn't in competition with his dad until he had climbed to the top of the ladder. But, it didn't take long until they were nose to nose.

Mark describes his dad as a "phenomenal human being." He retired once, but it didn't last long. Said Mark, laughing, "He almost can't help himself. A boardmember once said, 'Your dad has five children, the fifth is his business, and it's his favorite.'"

They did bump heads a bit when their levels of responsibility became roughly the same. "For many years there was going to be a homicide," said Mark, "but in the last three years we've found our way as to who's doing what, and we've got a tremendous partnership and opportunity to run the business together strategically."

Certainly one thing they are in total agreement about is commitment to community, especially Sonoma.



Mark confers with Patty Schmidt, Senior Payroll Specialist.



Mark Nelson, leaving corporate headquarters.

“Commitment to Sonoma is a no-brainer,” said Mark. “My dad has been a pillar of the community for many years.” He cited the Field of Dreams, the Harvest Wine Festival, the Stand By Me Mentoring Alliance, the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, the Sonoma Charter School—just a sampling of his father’s footprint in the Valley.

They day we spoke, Mark was preparing for the Schwab Cup Championship, another event sponsored by his dad. Mark entertains clients there, and also at Jazz Plus, both of which contribute heavily to Sonoma charities.

Mark is convinced that being involved in the community is key to helping business succeed. “We have 15 locations across the North Bay,” he said, “and where we play a more significant role in the community is where the more significant businesses are. It is difficult to be successful without being significantly involved from time, resource and financial

perspectives.”

Taking people to the Schwab Cup Championship Tour,” he said, “is a great way to give back to the community and clients and employees.”

But Mark is very much his own man, too. He and his wife, Stacy, live in Marin with their 12-year-old son, Aidan. They probably will move to Sonoma one day, Mark said, but not until Aidan is out of school.

He’s also worked out a philosophy of life which is a product of his generation more than his father’s. At one point in his fast-moving life/career, he started to have doubts. Why wasn’t he happy? he wondered, when he had just about everything one could wish for – in his words, “a beautiful wife, a beautiful son, lots of family, friends, money in the bank, a beautiful house, cars...” With his characteristic sense of purpose, he set about what he calls “self-

exploration.” In due course, two powerful books fell into his lap: “The Art of Happiness,” by the Dalai Lama, and “As a Man Thinketh,” by James Allen. Both books made him realize that solutions were not “out there,” but within. He became an avid reader and strong advocate of the theory that thoughts create outcomes. Is he a Buddhist? “Not practicing,” said Mark, but I read a lot about it.”

But Mark’s not one to take up the lotus position anytime soon. Rather, he’s applied what he’s learned to his life and his business. He does the best he can to achieve the best possible outcome in both. “Thoughts and actions create circumstances,” he said. He’s passionate about finding balance, not on the Zafu pillow but in the real world, eyes wide open. “It’s important to try to discover truths in a myriad of way, travel, reading, walking, hiking, experiences with people, asking a lot of questions.”

So far he’s not really worried about the next generation of Nelsons. He’s encouraging his son to find his own passions, and at 12 it’s piano, soccer, golf, Play Station and school.

They do have family council once every quarter, though, that the whole family attends, with spouses, and they hash out goals and perspectives, succession planning, and occasionally bring in other experts to guide them.

And Mark has found peace with himself, “I’m a blessed human being,” he said. “I’ve got a good life. I’m having fun.” For more detail, go to www.nelsonhr.com.



Ellen Erhard, receptionist, administrative assistant.



Nelson branch managers in conference.

The Nelson Family of Companies

Nelson Staffing

Nelson Staffing is a staffing firm focused on sourcing and acquiring temporary and regular talent in a wide variety of industries and at the full range of levels to businesses of all sizes in Northern California. www.nelsonstaffing.com

Nelson and Associates

Nelson & Associates is a professional recruiting firm, focused on the areas of finance and accounting to all types and sizes of companies and institutions. www.nelsonandassociates.com

Nelson Technology

Nelson Technology is a technology recruiting firm, providing skilled professionals to perform Business Analysis, Project Management, Oracle Application Development, Quality Assurance, Technical Writing, Web Development and Network Operations. www.nelsontechnology.com

WorkforceLogic

WorkforceLogic is an innovative workforce management company focused on risk mitigation, talent acquisition management and contingent workforce planning. www.workforcelogic.com

HRhome

HRhome is a members-only Web site created by HR professionals for HR professionals. Subscribers have access to the unique content, tools and resources they need to perform their HR responsibilities on a daily basis. www.hrhome.com

NelsonJobs.com

NelsonJobs is the premier career portal and job-search engine for candidates in Northern California, providing job posting and search capabilities as well as value-added career planning content.