

BIZSMARTS



Dianne Grote Adams:
 "When I was working part-time, I was paid hourly, but there was no professional development, vacation or other benefits – so we provide all of that."

MADDIE MCGARVEY

HOW I ...

Made balance priority for my workers

BEING ABLE TO DO MEANINGFUL, WELL-PAYING WORK PART-TIME REMAINS RARE

BY LIN RICE



When Dianne Grote Adams founded Safex Inc. in 1992, she did so with two goals in mind – to fill a need she saw in the market for industrial

hygiene and safety services and to create a work space where personal and professional goals could be reached without sacrificing one for the other. In its 25 years in business, Safex has been recognized for success on both fronts.

Based in Westerville, Safex provides training for clients who must keep their employees compliant with industry regulations. Presenting that information isn't enough to improve safety, Grote Adams said – it takes a little creativity for students to retain the knowledge.

"For many people, they look at the training as something they have to do, so they don't start with the right mindset," she said. "It's our job to make sure that training is exciting, engaging, and that they understand how it impacts them."

Maintaining a competitive business that could promote work-life balance for employees took time and trial-and-error. Grote Adams recently spoke with *Columbus Business First* about that experience.

You said you saw a gap in the market between quality and affordable safety services in the early 1990s. What were you seeing? In Central Ohio, we had government services available for what we do in the environmental

IN DETAIL

SAFEX INC.

Industry: Health and safety consultants

President: Dianne Grote Adams

Address: 140 N. Otterbein Ave., Westerville

Founded: 1992

Employees: 20

Reach: Ohio and national clients

Annual sales: \$2.2 million to \$2.4 million

health and safety world through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation that dominated the market, and I'm not sure anyone else recognized that they could compete with them, other than the really big players. But those players didn't have enough health and safety work to dedicate a department to it, so there were a lot of layers of review and management in the big firms that decreased their ability to keep costs down. We have a very flat organization with a small team, so even though we have peer review on everything that goes out, we don't have those multiple layers of review that inflate cost.

Why was offering a work-life balance to employees important to you? I had been working with a young family and wanted to stay in my profession, but I couldn't find opportunities to do that

without working full-time with lots of travel. It's better now than 25 years ago, but at the time, you dedicated yourself full-time and figured out the family life or took something part-time that wasn't challenging and wouldn't pay relative to what you were making before. I wanted to create that opportunity.

How do you achieve that? We have people who work part-time for us, both men and women, either those early in their careers starting a family or those later in their careers who want to cut back, but we don't want to lose their knowledge. Also, when I was working part-time, I was paid hourly, but there was no professional development, vacation or other benefits – so we provide all of that.

What challenges did that present? The biggest challenge initially was when we started bringing on less-than-full-time people, some of the full-time employees felt they were being taken advantage of – having to answer the phone when the other person's client called, etc. So we made adjustments. Now there is always someone else who knows a part-timer's clients so when the client calls there's always a backup, which has helped minimize some of that friction. The other thing we did for the full-timers was create a work schedule with two three-day weekends a month by working nine-hour days to bring some of that work-life balance to full-timers.

Has your industry changed significantly in the past 25 years?

There's certainly more competition now. And while training has always been an important piece of what we do, it's definitely a smaller portion of our revenue now, maybe 20 percent to 25 percent. Consulting is definitely the majority of our business now. When we first started, hazardous waste remediation projects were big – there were a lot of cleanups, brownfield activities, and that was the majority of our training. But as that decreased, we had to find other sources of training revenue. Moving to our current location was part of that, where we can offer very hands-on, activity-based training.

What are some of your goals for the future? One of the things we've recently started working on is technology products, so supporting our work with web-based products. Like everyone else, we need to take advantage of technology, but that's a very small portion of our business right now, and I'd like to see that become a regular part of any support we offer a customer, web-based tools to allow them to do their job more efficiently. There are products out there now that the big companies use, but they are fairly expensive. So again trying to work with the small to mid-sized market, making sure there are products they can use and afford.

Lin Rice is a freelance writer.