

## Despite Tough Times, PE Finds It's the Right Time to Start a Firm

William Kent, P.E., always wanted a business to call his own. Last year that dream came true. Kent opened Innovate Engineering Solutions, in Valdosta, Georgia, after gaining 17 years of experience as a traffic and city engineer and as an engineering firm vice president.

In December, Kent's firm, which provides land development planning, civil engineering, site design, and environmental services, won a competition sponsored by the Valdosta Chamber of Commerce. The competition rewards new businesses that can help revive the local economy. The Kansas native recently shared with *PE* what he has learned while pursuing his entrepreneurial aspirations and the skills it takes to succeed in a challenging business environment.

**PE: The U.S. economy is slowly recovering, but times remain tough for small businesses. Why did you choose to take a risk and start your own firm last year?**

**Kent:** The owner of the engineering firm I worked for prior to opening Innovate had discussions with me about the possibility of buying him out of his company. We spent over a year in negotiations and were unable to come to mutually acceptable terms. Despite the slowdown in the economy, I felt that the timing was right to start my own firm. Part of it was a feeling that the economy couldn't get any worse. I know that's not wholly true, but my gut told me to jump forward. As with any new company, that first year was an eye-opening learning experience.

**PE: What lessons have you learned from owning your own firm?**

**"It goes without saying that you can't just wake up one day and be a great leader. Those qualities take time and considerable effort to foster. You have to have certain unbreakable values that you can convey to those around you." —William Kent, P.E.**

**Kent:** It is clear to me that the engineering profession will have to change after this economic recovery. When I started working in private practice, I could prepare a full set of construction plans for a site development using five to six sheets. That same site today takes at least 25 sheets. Layer upon layer of regulations has required the engineer to be so much more knowledgeable during the last 20 years.

I chose my firm's name, Innovate, as an action verb and not just an adjective. Clients always expect more service for the same, or sometimes less, fees. The only way to make the work profitable is to be efficient and use the latest technology and techniques. We strive to do that here.

**PE: Why did you enter the 2010 Guardian Bank Business Plan Competition and how has your participation and award helped your business?**

**Kent:** The annual competition is an initiative of the chamber, in partnership with Valdosta State University and Wiregrass Technical College, to foster new business development that will better the quality of life in the area. In support of the mission of the competition, the business plans must provide evidence of the potential to create employment requiring a technical college diploma or university degree, and with profit and revenue growth.

I started my company without a technically "complete" business plan. I knew by entering the competition, I would get the professional assistance required to put all of the details in there I was missing. While the financial award of \$15,000 for winning the competition has been a tremendous help, having a business plan that has been

reviewed by other business leaders will be the most beneficial to me. I now have a road map of where I want to lead this company into the future.

**PE: What advice would you give to a professional engineer who wants to open a small business?**

**Kent:** An engineer who wants to start a firm must research and seek outside professional services, especially from an attorney and accountant. Running a business is so much more than just taking on a design project and producing a set of construction plans. You've got to know that there is enough room for another company within your community. Too many engineers go into business hoping the clients will come calling. A solid business plan can be the guiding document for any new company.

**PE: What traits do you believe an individual must possess to successfully lead a firm?**

**Kent:** It goes without saying that you can't just wake up one day and be a great leader. Those qualities take time and considerable effort to foster. You have to have certain unbreakable values that you can convey to those around you. You've got to hire the very best people around you to create a winning team. You must also listen and act accordingly when your team needs direction.

**PE: How do you make sure that you continue to be a top notch professional?**

**Kent:** Continuing education is a must. The nature of our profession is changing rapidly and we've got to be prepared to meet those challenges. Learning doesn't stop the day you receive your diploma or even when you achieve professional licensure. The insights and knowledge you gain through a solid network are invaluable. Being a member of NSPE and the Georgia Society of Professional Engineers has allowed me to accomplish each of these efforts.

