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Thursday, July 3, 2008

HeiTech homes in on the federal market

Despite growth, Landover IT firm emphasizes personal contact with its customers
 by Lindsey Robbins | Staff Writer

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A decade ago, after her customers at her previous job told her she needed to launch her own company, Navy veteran Heidi Gerding took the plunge — and doesn't regret it.

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Since 1999, when its executives worked without pay, HeiTech Services of Landover has grown to revenues nearing \$15 million this year. Offering services in IT, management consulting and program support, professional support services and visa processing support, HeiTech employs more than 220 people and has contracts with numerous federal agencies.

"I wouldn't have done it any other way. This is where we need to be," said Gerding, president, CEO and partial namesake of the privately held company, which is certified as woman-owned, service disabled veteran-owned and small disadvantaged business. Gerding is a former Navy lieutenant commander with 13 years of service and at least nine years of active duty.

She and James Clement, executive vice president, are the driving force behind the company.

Most recently, HeiTech received a General Services Administration version of a "fast-track" contract for consulting services.

"It's going to provide us a lot of new business," said Sonya Wilson, communications and marketing manager. The GSA contract is valued at up to \$6.25 million. About 95 percent of HeiTech's business is through the federal government.

HeiTech's other major project is processing visas at Citizenship and Immigration Services processing centers in Texas and Nebraska.

Working with its mentor business, SI International of Reston, Va., HeiTech is responsible for processing about \$47 million in visa checks monthly and must ensure each check is processed the same day it is received or face about \$5,000 in fines. The contract, which involves six other subcontractors, is for three years and is estimated at \$225 million.

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Raphael Talisman/The star
 "I wouldn't have done it any other way. This is where we need to be," says Heidi Gerding, CEO of HeiTech Services of Landover, with executive vice president James Clement.

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SI International works with HeiTech as part of a federal goal to contract at least 30 percent of a project to small businesses. SI International subcontracted HeiTech in October, which led to the two winning the 2007 Mentor Protégé Team Award through the Department of Homeland Security.

Dewey emphasized that HeiTech and SI International have a symbiotic relationship, with HeiTech personnel quickly picking up what the larger company hopes to teach. SI International provides IT services and network systems to the federal government.

A personal investment

Gerding said she decided to start her own venture after realizing her employment wasn't allowing her to deliver on her promises to clients. She and Clement left their six-figure jobs to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams, pumping their home equity, 401(k)s and savings into the business, which started in Gerding's basement.

"We wanted to be able to provide personalized service for customers. If it comes to taking money from our pocket but making customers happy, we'll do it," Clement said. He said HeiTech project managers visit their clients at least once a week.

Mark Odum, vice president of professional services and also director of the National Rehabilitation Information Center - a federally funded library whose contract is held by HeiTech - finds a way to meet this requirement, despite having a spinal cord injury and using a wheelchair.

"I think of [HeiTech] as a good-guy company and not a bottom-line company," Odum said. The center, which provides information and resources for people with disabilities, has blossomed under HeiTech, in whose offices it is located, he said.

Clement said the company's challenge now is to maintain that regular contact with its customers amid its enormous growth.

Symbolic of HeiTech's success is Clement's "money tree," a potted tree he bought when it was just 7 inches tall, shortly after the company began turning a profit. The tree now reaches the ceiling of his office and has filled out completely.

HeiTech is also noteworthy because it has an active woman owner, he said, while many companies certified as woman-owned have less involved executives.

"Heidi is a hands-on business owner; she doesn't suffer fools gladly," he said, recalling how Gerding balked when he suggested naming the business HeiTech. Her response: "Do you know how lame that is?" She changed her mind when Clements wrote it out, saying it could work.

Through her work with HeiTech, Gerding has received several commendations, including being a finalist in the 2008 Women in Technology Leadership Awards' Entrepreneur Category, receiving the 2008 Bravo! Women Business Achievement Award and receiving the 2008 Enterprising Veteran Award.

HeiTech is expanding its offices at 8201 Corporate Drive to take over the whole sixth floor, taking the business from 10,000 square feet to 15,000 square feet, plus more space downstairs.

Clement said the company also hopes to contract with the Department of Defense and expand its customer base.

HeiTech also works with veteran-related projects, a quality measure database for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Air Force History Program to better manage its archives.

"We don't just do service for our customers; we want to make their IT programs part of their goal vision," Clement said.

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