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ArchScan finds success in disorder

Baby boomer puts retirement on hold to organize construction documents

Kate Milani
Staff

Being laid off just as you are about to receive AARP membership could devastate many people. But for Ginny Williams, 52, other elements seemed to be working in her favor.

Call it being at the right place at the right time. Call it knowing the right people. Call it Divine Intervention. Three days after being laid off from a local reprographics firm where she was a regional sales manager in April 2001, Williams received a call from the Archdiocese of Baltimore, a former client that wanted paper construction documents of all its parishes and schools -- thousands of them -- on CD-ROM.

"We had a large inventory of all the construction projects for the last 15 years and it was taking up a whole room," said Nolan McCoy, director of facilities planning for the Archdiocese. "It takes a long time to figure out what you have."

Williams had planned on retiring in five or six years but after completing the Archdiocese's project, she realized she could fill a niche that would allow her to run her own company. After 9-11, she believed many companies would be thinking about disaster restoration and whether they stored their documents safely or would be able to find them in an emergency. She formed ArchScan LLC and since May 2001, a month after being laid off, Williams has had a steady stream of clients. She has worked for Sheppard Pratt, St. Joseph's Hospital and some Johns Hopkins schools.

"Who knows how long I'll be working now because I really do envision this company taking off," Williams said.

Business function: ArchScan (archscan.com) organizes the documents, sends them to a vendor in Ohio to be scanned and puts them on CD-ROM in TIF or PDF read-only format. For clients that would rather access documents on the Internet, Williams works with another Ohio-based company, Adenium Systems, to create an online database.

"Organizing the documents is really our niche," said Williams. That's the most frustrating part for companies, she said.

"It's like doing a big puzzle," Williams said. "Most companies don't even know what they have. You have a little piece over here, a big piece over there, another big piece over there," and ArchScan merges it all together.

Williams spent about four months in a room at the Archdiocese's Cathedral Street headquarters organizing between 10,000 and 12,000 documents. At the end, she handed former facilities director Louis Baird 12 CDs incorporating all the documents. The paper documents and copies of the CDs were then sent to the each parishes or school.

Cost: ArchScan charges between \$30 and \$35 an hour per person (Williams uses two independent contractors) to organize documents, making sure they are all there and in the right order. For scanning, Williams charges \$1.25 per document.

Storing documents off-site -- and out of the basement, where companies often store them -- could cost about \$35,000 for 10,000 documents; ArchScan would charge about \$14,000, Williams said.

ArchScan spent about three weeks organizing about 5,000 documents for the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Dave Kempner, facilities manager for the school, said "due to the number of people we have working for us, the project would be difficult to do in-house."

Though there are no laws mandating the school to save documents for a certain number of years, if Kempner can't find a

document he has to find the consultants who worked on a project.

If an emergency occurs, that could take too much time. Sheppard Pratt, an ArchScan client, almost lost all its construction documents when the building housing them was struck by lightning and caught on fire. The health system had a contract with ArchScan in place and called her the next day to get started.

Employees: Williams is not ready financially to hire permanent employees but expects to take on two more contractors this year. The contractors organize documents, while Williams finds the clients. "I'm always thinking about what will happen or where I should go," says Williams, who depends on referrals and networking for business.

Going with the flow has served Williams' career well. She began her career managing a dentist's office and has since run a wall-covering business, an interior designer and then in reprographics, the process of reproducing graphic material. She gained management skills and made contacts in the construction industry. "It was a natural flow, something that just worked out," she said.

The challenge is waiting for budgets to be approved, which has taken a year for some projects. But, Williams says, "I've been very fortunate. I know a lot of people."

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