

Self-guided

Former administrator wants to make career choices by, for herself

By Nancy Justis

STARTING A PERSONAL BUSINESS and working from home can be a scary enterprise. Joan Ketels, owner of Ketels Contract Training, saw no other option.

"I'm through trying to lead my life," she said. "Now, I'm going to let life lead me. I run my business that way and I trust my gut completely. I don't second guess anymore."

KCT offers training for businesses and organizations, such as customized computer training, custom database development, consulting and coaching, and soft skills training in such areas as human resources, leadership development, team building and stress management, for example.

If companies don't find what they need listed on the KCT Web site, chances are Ketels will go out and find the resources for them.

To accomplish all of this, Ketels uses a consortium of other independent consultants, led by Chris Case, a computer guru, and Elizabeth Wilson, a database expert. Ketels says the biggest growth area since starting her business five years ago has been in customizing databases.

It wasn't that Ketels didn't have other choices before she launched her home business. She had worked for someone other than herself for 25 years. She received her bachelor's degree in speech communication and theology from Loras College and her master's degree in communication and training and development from the University of Northern Iowa.

From 1997-2001, she was UNI's associate director of contract training in the Continuing Education department. She was Waterloo Center director for Upper Iowa University from 1995-97 and from 1992-95, she served as program manager for guided self-study at Kirkwood Community College. She also has been a high school and college teacher.

So why strike out on her own? Ketels says it's all about being able to apply her personal business philosophy in the things she does rather than having it dictated to



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Joan Ketels started Ketels Contract Training to assist businesses with data-gathering skills.

her by someone on the outside. She bases her philosophy on the fact that she was the middle child in a family of 12 growing up on a farm with a good work ethic.

"I grew up with the understanding that if things were going to work, it was going to take collaboration," she said.

"When you look at systems of any kind that have been established for a long time, with people that have been working there for any length of time, it's human nature to carve out your niche. If somebody tries to weave their way into that niche, it's perceived as a threat. I struggled with that in many of my jobs because I don't see the world that way. I never could understand why people were threatened when I would try to get people to work together.

"Finally, it dawned on me that this is the way it is and I wasn't going to change that system. Or, I could start my own business and work the way I know how to in my heart," she said.

Ketels says being self-employed rather than working in a system allows her a lot of flexibility and freedom in setting up her schedule. She sets aside time to work on things that make her happy.

"I love getting up at 3 a.m.," she said. "It's like a magic hour for me in unleashing all kinds of creativity. I'll go in my office and start working and not come up for air until noon. I use the afternoons to play my music or cook or exercise. I leave enough space in my day to do those things, and that makes me a nice person to be around."

Still, Ketels says her biggest challenge has been managing her time.

"There's just not enough hours in the day," she said. "I probably have 500 contacts that I call upon for business. Yet I always have to keep finding new people to contact which is very time consuming. From a first contact, to developing the relationship and trust, to signing a contract actually can take up to a year.

"I also have to constantly stay up to date on all the latest training trends to stay on the cutting edge," she added. "And while my Web site has helped bring consultants to me, I still have to do my homework to understand what they teach, how they present their programs and how they work with clients."

Starting out on your own isn't easy. Ketels says she spent every day for three months just writing the copy for her Web site. She launched the Web site and business at the same time.

"Fortunately for me, this job was a job that I had been doing for somebody else," she said. "I had somewhat of a client base already established — people who knew what I did and how I work. If I were going to start the business from scratch, it would have taken me much longer to get it off the ground."

Ketels had to learn accounting to run her business. This year, she plans to change her status from self-employed to an LLC (limited liability company). She's also looking to expand the business with something called B-O-S-S Institute to be unveiled at a later date. The acronym stands for Being of Sound Spirit.

"It's all about setting your systems and making sure they're efficient and effective," she explained. She described B-O-S-S as a nontraditional, corporate-focused program.

"People hear all the time that if they're unhappy in their job, they need to change something about themselves," she said. "No one ever gives them the tools to help get centered again, to help get their heart and their spirit back on track. That's what B-O-S-S is all about."

Ketels says her biggest breaks have come when they were needed.

"It's so bizarre. About the time I'm thinking maybe I should get out of this, the floodgates open and all this business starts coming in, sometimes out of the blue. Denton (her husband) says it's never out of the blue. You've always laid the groundwork. But it goes up and down, and there are highs and lows," she said.

She believes some people can work from home and some can't.

"You have to be driven," she said. "If it's something you want to do for fun and you don't need the income, then sure, absolutely try it. If it's a hobby, great. Get out of the bad job and have some good life while you can. The advice I would give is ask yourself why you want to do it and then make your decision from there. Absolutely know your reason for doing it.

"I knew I didn't really have a choice," she added. "I knew I had to do it if I wanted to have a life and make a living."

Ketels says she's learned some lessons, "lessons better than any classroom experience I could go through to learn how to manage a home-based business."

She credits her diverse work history with helping to prepare her for the challenge.

"Knowing one's area of expertise is just one small piece of what it takes to be successfully self-employed — unless you can hire it all done (i.e. accounting, sales and marketing, technology, etc.). Though I call myself self-employed, it would be a mistake not to thank the people who helped you along the way.

"My father always believed that what goes around, comes around," she added. "I believe in karma. I believe that if you get up every morning and do the right thing, the right thing will happen. That's an inspiration in and of itself."

Ketels Contract Training can be found at www.contracttraining.com or by calling (319) 266-0703. ♦

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