

Going for the Gold Every Day Determination and Perseverance Have Paved the Way for John Elwood

By Sherri Alms

There may be only one person in the staffing industry who attributes his success in business to ping pong. And that's John Elwood.

"I've had a passion for sports since I was a child," he says. "I had a knack and a sense of accomplishment with table tennis in particular."

In fact, he was so good that the Olympic training committee recruited him. As a junior in high school, he moved from Indiana to Colorado, where he lived and trained with other Olympic hopefuls.

"Being there definitely instilled a sense of independence and confidence in me," Elwood says.

It was grueling to train 25 hours a week and keep up with his schoolwork, and although he didn't make the Olympic team, he does credit the experience with the determination and perseverance he has today as a business leader.

Elwood is the president of a family business, Elwood Staffing, located in Columbus, IN, with 38 offices in seven states. The company's primary focus is light industrial and office administrative support, along with some professional placement.

Founded by David Elwood, the company is now headed by his three sons, John and his brothers, Mark and Mike.

My Three Sons

"We refer to the TV show 'My Three Sons' a lot," says Elwood, who serves on the American Staffing Association (ASA) board of directors. "We think we're extremely fortunate to work together. Because we all have varying backgrounds and different life experiences, what we bring to the table is different but complementary. It's been really fun, and we've been able to grow our business.

"My brother Mark, who had been working with my dad for a decade when I came to work here [in 1996], is the one who recruited me. He told me that the business was gaining momentum and it could use my work ethic. So you can either blame Mark or give him credit for getting me involved in the business. "

The third and oldest brother, Mike, is the newest family recruit to Elwood Staffing, having joined the company about four years ago.

Their father has no qualms about leaving the company in his sons' hands. "It's rewarding to see your adult children being respectful of each other, getting along, communicating, and enjoying each other," he says.

In John, he sees someone who has integrity, compassion, intelligence, and a good set of values. One of the most notable aspects of John's personality is his sense of responsibility, says his father.

"When he was just a little kid and the family would go on an outing to a mall or store, he would occasionally ask us to buy something. His mother or I would say sure and give him the 50 cents or



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dollar or whatever. When we got home, John would immediately go to his room to where his savings were and try to pay us back."

Who First, Then What

The success that Elwood Staffing has enjoyed comes down to one thing, Elwood says: its people. "It's who first and then what. If you get the right people in the organization, then execution and strategy happen next. You can't get the execution and strategy right if you have the wrong people. Elwood Staffing focuses on recruiting and retaining top talent so that we can do a good job of making sure our temporary employees and clients have a good experience with us."

It is that top talent that has given the company a reputation for customer service, something Elwood's father insisted be a cornerstone of the company's strategy.

That dedication to service extends to their employees as much as to their clients, says Lia Elliott, corporate counsel for the company.

"When I first came to work for Elwood Staffing, my commute took about an hour and a half. I decided to relocate and found a house I was thinking about buying. When I told John about it, he took me on a tour of Columbus right then in the middle of a workday. That willingness to step away from his computer and the phone to drive me around for an hour and describe the neighborhoods reflects his personality."

Elwood describes staffing as "a great business to be in" with a what's-not-to-like tone to his voice. "We help people find jobs and help businesses solve some of their human resource and personnel challenges."

He has been involved in every aspect of Elwood Staffing, which has given him the chance to see the business from every angle. Working his way up, he says, was a great way to understand what employees do. "I can relate to almost every position we have here."

It's a can-do sensibility that Alicia Hitchcock, Elwood Staffing's director of safety and risk management, appreciates. "John doesn't work as a boss but as a member of the team. He does what needs to be done, whether that's answering the phone at one of our branch offices or placing job orders."

Connie Whisner, director of talent management at the company and a staffing industry veteran, appreciates Elwood's forthrightness. "John has an honesty you don't always get. He tells clients when we have made a mistake and explains how the company will do better. It's refreshing to have a conversation with him and walk away knowing there isn't more to the story."

True Grit

Elwood's first job in sales shaped the personal and business philosophy that guides him today. In college, he was recruited to sell educational books (technically, he says, they were not encyclopedias) door to door during the summer. The company sent him to Oklahoma. "They shipped students off to see a different part of the country and to make it more difficult for us to quit," Elwood explains.

In his case, the company didn't have to worry that he would quit. "Selling door to door was a brutal lesson in grit and determination," he says. "Enough people told me no that I kept at it to prove that I could do it."

He went back for a second summer in Texas. And he not only made money for college, but also had to find his own lodging, a company rule. "We literally had to find someone to take us in."

Time Out

Elwood admits that it is easy to get wrapped up in the family business and the satisfaction that its success brings. He's been careful, however, to keep a work-life balance that includes spending time with his wife, Amber, and their young daughter and son, and taking time for community activities.

He serves on the board of the Columbus Park Foundation, the fund-raising arm for the city park system. "We help promote active and healthy outdoor choices for everyone." He is also a board member of Su Casa, which promotes education, understanding, and respect for different nationalities and groups, mainly Latino.

"I am someone who has an innate desire to leave things better than I find them. Whether in business or other activities, I strive to have a positive impact on the people I interact with, small or great."