

A conversation with ... Carol Ann Schneider, CEO, SEEK Careers/Staffing

SEEK CEO Carol Ann Schneider's intention to transform the Grafton-based temporary staffing agency she started in 1971 into a national franchise entity might seem like a lofty goal. But considering Schneider's career was built on overcoming the adversity of overt gender discrimination, her company's expansion goals don't seem so unfathomable.

"When I tell my young professional women friends that I lost my first job because I was pregnant, they are just astounded by that information because it's easier for them," said Schneider, who started SEEK in 1971. "The banks looked at me and told me I was a woman ... and that my assets walked out of the door every night because I ran a service business."

Today SEEK is the ninth largest woman-owned business in Wisconsin, with 16 offices in three states.

SEEK recently announced plans to add 160 franchise locations across the U.S. over the next five years. Can you explain the reasons behind this massive expansion campaign?

"This expansion goal was set when we determined that we should focus on growing our core business. In order for us to grow corporate branches, we would have had to seriously expand our leadership infrastructure.

"However, if we franchised, branch leadership would have a more personal stake in the successful outcome of that branch.

"Being an entrepreneur myself, I clearly understand the difference between an owner and an employee."

How long has this plan been in the works?

"This plan has been in the works for two years. It takes a lot of work to organize a franchise operation; many meetings with franchise experts and attorneys.

"Prior to registering in any state, an FDD (Franchise Disclosure Document), franchise agreement, financial plans, operating manuals, training documents and the acquisition of potential vendors for everything from office supplies to office facilities have to be



(Submitted photo)

SEEK Founder Carol Ann Schneider has come a long way in the business world since losing her first job for being pregnant.

arranged."

How are things different today for women starting a new business compared to when you started SEEK?

"Very. When I started, I was treated like a 'woman' and not given credit for having the ability to run a business.

"I didn't have a bank that would give me more than a \$50,000 credit line for 21 years. I had to raise independent capital to fund (a company whose) business was doubling every five years.

"Today banks recognize that women can be successful. There are start-up loans, receivable funding and organizations that will offer - sometimes free - advice."

Employment growth in the temporary staffing industry has been pretty solid in recent years. What are some of the factors behind this growth?

"The temporary help industry is 60 years old. Business management has come to realize the value of:

"One, being able to fill in for absent employees;

"Two, having a flexible work force during busy times, seasons;

"Three, staffing for special short-term projects;

"Four, 'trying out' an employee before hiring him-her;

"Five, utilizing the testing and training that temporary services offer;

"Six, relying on the temporary service to do references and other background checks ... and for many other reasons."

"They, too, like the flexibility of working temporary and the training offered by services.

"We are in this business to 'help people realize their destinies.' We're always very excited when our temporary employees are hired by our clients.

"How would entry level workers be able to ease into the workplace if there were not temporary help services to help them do that?"

Some argue that the employment growth in your industry is hurting the economy by giving companies a tool to reduce overhead costs such as health insurance and retirement benefits. What are your thoughts on this?

"Temporary help accounts for only 2.8 million of the 146 million U.S. workers; roughly 2 percent of the population. It seems that such a small number would hardly influence the economy.

"There are laws that regulate companies regarding continuing temporary employees for long periods of time, and most companies look to have just a small percentage of people in their flexible workforces.

"It should also be noted that most temporary services provide health insurance and many also provide 401k retirement benefits."

—Tim Carpenter