

## The Payoff May Be Just Around the Corner

Many of us dream of starting our own business; this was certainly true for me. In August 1985 I started an executive search and recruiting business in Austin, Texas, with myself as the only employee. The area of specialization that I chose was placing computer salespersons and sales managers with major computer companies.

One major obstacle was that I only had \$6,000 for both personal and business expenses. I moved into a 20- by 20-foot apartment (more like a tiny room) to cut down on expenses. There I lived and worked, saving money by not running the air conditioner during the day. August is very hot in Austin, and I was working 12-hour days in a pair of shorts, T-shirt, and rubber thongs. My office equipment consisted of a cardboard box with manila file folders, some business cards and stationery, a desk, and a telephone.

I had been an executive recruiter, but I had little experience and few contacts in the computer industry. Looking for job search assignments, I began making cold telephone calls to computer sales executives. When I conducted business locally in Austin, I would meet employers in their offices or with salespersons at restaurants. Most of my contacts were out of town; I conducted business with them by telephone. No one had any idea of the conditions in which I was living and working. Shortly after I moved into this tiny apartment, I discovered rats were also living there. Nothing like a little unwanted companionship!

Five months went by and not one of the sales representatives I recruited was hired, although many had been interviewed. I was on the verge of going broke. Occasionally I would stand in front of a full-length mirror and give myself motivational pep talks. Sometimes I felt discouraged; other times I just laughed at the ridiculousness of my situation.

One day while I was on the phone with an employer, a rat fell through a hole in my ceiling, squealing as it fell. It landed with a thud behind my stove, and then I heard it trying to eat its way through the wall. Unnerved, I continued talking to the employer in my best businesslike manner as if nothing unusual was happening. I'm sure the employer on the phone could never imagine that the owner of an executive search business was working under these conditions. My business—my *life*—had reached a critical juncture. It seemed that all of my hard work wasn't going to pay off in time for the business to survive. My dilemma: Should I continue with the business or start looking for a job?

Just when the hour looked the darkest, there was a breakthrough. A computer sales manager hired one of my sales representatives. The next month two more were hired. In another month, three more were hired. My hard work and persistence under trying circumstances had built momentum, and they began to pay off. Checks seemed to be flying into my P.O. Box. I went from earning zero income in 1985 to a six-figure income in 1986—with very low overhead!

Looking in the mirror one last time, in my best James Cagney accent, I said, "Goodbye, you dirty rats!" I moved to a new place with pleasant living and working conditions. When you create work that you love and want to do, there will be obstacles to overcome—internal ones (such as fear) or external ones (like undercapitalization). I faced both of these obstacles and many others.

Success is often right around the corner if you persistently work toward your goals. I share this story in the hope that it will encourage you to pursue your dreams in

spite of the obstacles. Certainly there are appropriate times to change course, to stop pursuing a particular goal. But there are also many examples of people who gave up shortly before they would have reaped great rewards from their efforts. The road to success is paved with failures or temporary setbacks, and the payoff is often just around the corner.

Summary of lessons learned:

1. Obstacles to your dreams can be internal or external. Internal and external obstacles that appear to be insurmountable can be conquered with persistence.
2. A sense of humor—the ability to poke fun at yourself—can serve as a source of strength during difficult times.
3. You can withstand difficulties and persevere in spite of obstacles when you have a clear vision and a strongly desired goal.
4. Starting a business under ideal conditions with plenty of capital is best, but that scenario is not always necessary to succeed.
5. Many times people give up shortly before they would reap the rewards for their efforts. The payoff is often close at hand and might be experienced if only they will persist in their efforts.

Questions to ponder and discuss:

1. What are some internal and external obstacles to my dreams?
2. What are some of my ideas for overcoming these obstacles?
3. What is an example of a time when I gave up shortly before I would have reaped the rewards for my efforts?
4. What is an example of a time when I thought of quitting but persevered and received the payoff for my efforts?