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Turning discarded data into a treasure

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Sal DellaVilla left General Electric with a business idea in his head, youthful enthusiasm, and most important, control of a technology the company was shelving.

GE amassed years of data about turbine performance in power plants. Manufacturers might pay for that information, he thought.

It didn't sound sexy, but for the entrepreneur, it's a 20-year business success story.

GE scrapped the unit in the 1980s. The 35-year-old statistician saw his opportunity, and Charlotte's Strategic Power Systems was born. GE gave him the data, and he wrote software to transform numbers into turbine report cards.

Now, DellaVilla and his 25 employees tell manufacturers, such as Rolls Royce, Alstom Power and others, how their products perform in real power plant settings. He's like a Consumer Reports for the industry. He keeps company performance particulars a secret, telling each how they stack up against the competition as a whole.

The company is inching toward \$4 million in annual revenues, but the energy industry is changing and so must his enterprise, he said.

On his radar: How best to assess wind power turbines?

MoneyWise spoke to the Charlotte resident about running and growing a small company. His comments were edited for clarity and length.

Q. What advice do you have for others starting their own business?

People ultimately are what drive the success or failure of your business and making sure the people in your organization understand their part in those goals. If they don't buy into the direction, then it might be the problem you have is the way you're communicating the goals. ... I could talk to you all day about how great we are, but it's the people.

Q. With such a niche product, how do you advertise yourself?

We participate in industry shows. You have to be active in the organizations at the trade show level and not just be out selling your wares but be out there showing your value. We're very much a niche company, and there's no competition specifically for what we do. The difference is that no other company has the database.

Q. What are challenges for growth?

What I keep telling my company is if you think you have a technology leadership, you better keep moving and continue to take that space. When will the (turbine manufacturers) catch up and decide they can replicate what we do? ... Who's out there that will come out and make us obsolete? ... We have to be prepared for the changes, and we have to be part of the change. ... We are actually trying to determine which alternative fuels will have what kind of reliability problems. What kind of experiences are those systems going to have? ... We see wind as a significant challenge and significant opportunity. That's the stuff that motivates me; that's the stuff I love.

Take the Lead offers short conversations with leaders of small and mid-size Charlotte-area businesses. Know someone we should talk to? E-mail sjamieson@charlotteobserver.com.