

CVE, Inc.

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The shoulders of John Brauer's shirts are as sharp and white as the corners of a new envelope. The knots in his ties are perfectly triangulated silk cushions and, if he walked a bit faster, he could probably slice paper with the crease in his pants. Brauer, who has the erect, yet gliding, carriage of a ball-room dancer seems as freshly minted at 8 p.m. as he does at 8 a.m. It is easier to imagine Martha Stewart weeping in rapture over the crispness of his linen than it is to picture him mopping a floor or scrubbing a toilet. But Brauer swears that is how Community Vocational Enterprises,

the employment placement agency he has run since 1989, got its first janitorial contract.

"I didn't really know anything about cleaning and my wife would probably tell you that I still don't," Brauer said with the giddy laugh that occasionally cracks that formal surface. Not knowing how to do something has seldom stopped him. "In a way, perhaps because I don't have an MBA, I always think I can do it," he said. "It never dawned on me that I wouldn't make money."

When he took over CVE, he didn't have a lot of experience working with people with mental

illness. Although he'd earned a master's degree in clinical psychology, he'd spent most of his life managing a series of small businesses – a restaurant, a video store, a construction company.

"I love business-y stuff," he said. "And I come from a family that is known for working hard." At 15, he got his first job washing dishes at a fancy Italian restaurant in Walnut Creek, California. Within a few years, he was managing the place. Same thing with the con-

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struction company. "I started as a flag person – you know, the person who stands on the side of the road with a flag, waving the traffic around the construction site? That was me. And I worked my way up to vice president of the company."

John Brauer

Ten years ago he answered an ad for an assistant to the director of Community Vocational Enterprises, a tiny agency launched in 1987 by the San Francisco Department of Mental Health as a service for clients who were looking for work. "The first couple years, the emphasis was on job interviewing skills and finding the occasional odd job. Most of the people who passed through the office weren't getting work."

A few months after he began, Brauer was running CVE. "The woman who hired me didn't like the business side of things and she left," he said. Now he was free to create the company from the ground up. In most people, this sort of situation would inspire sheer terror. Brauer had never started a business and his experience with people with mental illness was limited to his educational internships. For the next several years, he made it up as he went along.

Besides placing people in existing jobs,

CVE needed to set up a business that could employ those who couldn't find outside work. Brauer was looking for clients at a day treatment center when the director told him she wished she could find someone to clean her site.

"That's how we got our first job," he said. "For about three months, I did the cleaning. We were just getting started so I didn't really have anyone to send. And I figured I couldn't teach someone how to do it if

I couldn't do it myself."

Today CVE's janitorial company, Industrial Maintenance Engineers (IME), employs approximately 26 workers at 20 sites around San Francisco. Under a business plan drafted with the help of a Farber busi-

ness intern, IME, which is in the second year of a four-year expansion cycle, is expected to increase its sales from \$170,000 annually to \$1 million by 2001. To help IME get there, REDF arranged for the company to get consulting help from ServiceMaster, one of the world's largest service organizations. About a year ago CVE hired Jo-Jo Sanchez, who had her own motivational speaking company, to run IME.

Clients who sign on with IME spend a year learning janitorial skills while on the job. Around month 10, they get help finding permanent jobs. Besides IME, which is the agency's largest business, CVE also runs two coffee bars, a clerical certificate program and a driver/messenger service. Approximately 28 percent of the agency's revenue comes from the businesses; the rest, from the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Rehabilitation and foundation grants. CVE's goal is to expand the janitorial business enough to flip those percentages.

For a number of years CVE used a fairly haphazard method of finding placements for its clients. "Our old way of job development: When you're out at lunch and you see a 'Help Wanted' sign, you ask about the position," Brauer said. "It was my idea and it wasn't very good. Instead of finding out what our clients wanted to do and could do, we were trying to force them into whatever work was available."

Another method that proved more trouble than it was worth: picking up piecemeal craft and clerical projects. One Christmas, CVE contracted to glue bay leaves to Styrofoam balls; another season, they were drilling holes in nutmegs and embedding dried roses and lavender in concrete blocks. Often, only a few clients – or staff members – could master the arcane skills needed to complete the projects. Brauer’s wife went into labor midway through a 500,000-piece rush collating job for an oil company. When he checked in with the office a few hours before deadline, he discovered that the workers had punched holes in the wrong side of two-thirds of the pamphlets. In order to keep the client, CVE had to pay to have the materials recopied and collated.

“We’ve done a million projects, most of which required a lot of staff time just to break even,” Brauer said. “The last straw was the bird seed project.”

CVE contracted with an agency that wanted stress balls – those squishy rubber orbs tense white-collar workers are supposed to clench to relax their hands – to give out at a convention. Brauer’s own office was the only space big enough to hold the buckets of birdseed, boxes of balloons and the air compressor needed for the project.

The operation was a logistical fiasco. “You had to fill three layers of balloons with bird seed to make one stress ball,” he said. “If everything worked, you should have been able to do 30 in an hour. We had people who could do one. But we’d made a commitment to the client and we had to deliver. We ended up putting the answering machine on night mode and the staff did most of the work.

“Making stress balls is hardly a transferable skill. My problem was I said, ‘Yes’ before I said, ‘What?’ When I started finding birdseed in my underwear, I realized it was time to get out of the project business.”

Michele Tatos

Sometimes Brauer’s go-for-it attitude has paid off big. Nearly seven years ago, he took a flyer on Michele Tatos, an undergraduate business major from San Francisco State.

Tatos, who’d considered applying to law school and was volunteering at an adolescent day treatment center, had just been accepted into a MFCC program when she walked into CVE on an informational interview for a class. Brauer hired her to run CVE’s coffee bars and catering service.

“I don’t drink coffee and I don’t cook,” Tatos said laughing. “But the minute I walked in the door, it felt right. I loved working with the clients. And we needed someone to do business. I liked playing around with the financial statements.”

Instead of going to law school or getting a master’s degree in counseling, Tatos decided to go to night school for her MBA. Brauer let her use operations at CVE as the basis for some of her school projects. When Brauer approached the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund about investing in CVE, he turned to Tatos for help.

“John came back with his business plan all marked up with red ink,” she said. “He said,





'Jed Emerson laughed at me.' Jed made him pull all the numbers out of his head and put everything on paper. John said, 'I'm supposed to hire an MBA. You're pretty close.'

Today Tatos, 30, is director of business and finance for CVE. "Every time I think about leaving, they come up with something more exciting for me to do. There's so much more I can learn here and you couldn't pay for that. I love my job."

When CVE was accepted into REDF's portfolio, the people who worked there had to start thinking about the place more as a business than a social service agency. One of Tatos' new responsibilities was balancing the costs of doing both kinds of work.

"It was tricky," she said. "Staff didn't quite understand why I suddenly cared so much about numbers. At first, I was keeping everything private about the numbers. It was like I was a big meanie and no one else cared about the costs. Now, I give the business statements to everyone. When you tell people what you're doing and why, they're a lot more supportive."

Now that the organization was going to

be paying more attention to productivity, staff was expected to be more businesslike.

"When I used to work with clients in the coffee bars, I'd give them so many chances, but that's not realistic," Tatos said. "We've worked on developing standards that work for the business and for the clients. We're not helping anyone by giving them 25 chances because no one in the work community is going to do that for them. We're going to lose a contract if the client is not displaying appropriate work behavior."

Raising performance standards within CVE has helped the agency do better at finding the right jobs for its clients. Not long ago, Brauer turned down a contract to provide parking lot attendants for a large San Francisco hospital because he couldn't find any clients who were willing or able to drive cars. Once he might have picked up the contract regardless of whether it was right for CVE. On the other hand, he is proud that CVE's employment specialist Daryl Henline was recently able to find a position for a man who'd been cycling through the social service system for nine years.

The middle-aged client had gone through CVE's clerical training program but he couldn't pay attention long enough to master typing and filing. The man was very friendly but he had a problem staying focused and often wandered away. Henline figured out a position that would take advantage of the man's restless, gregarious nature. After nine jobless years, the client is working at a Bay Area airport.

"He meets passengers at the gate with a wheelchair and wheels them to their next destination," Brauer said. "They love him out there."

Brauer said that when CVE sharpened its focus on running the job placement service as a business, staff had to get more serious about making sure clients found work that would sustain them.

"The old social service mentality says that people aren't paid as well so you can't expect as much from them," Brauer said. "But we were operating under a different philosophy. If you're going to move towards social entrepreneurship, you should be aware that your original culture will change. And change is hard."

Vivian Imperiale, director of client services for CVE, spent 18 years working in real

estate and 12 years as a volunteer advocate for people with mental illness before joining the agency. She said the staff was not used to standards that are common in commercial offices.

“In the old days you might let a staff person come late or leave early without consequences,” Imperiale said. “You might let a client be disrespectful. It was smaller and familial to a fault. We didn’t criticize behavior.”

The changes affected workers at every level. The clerical program couldn’t train clients at the agency’s front desk anymore because CVE needed to present a professional face to new clients. And Brauer couldn’t act on every brainstorm and do the company’s books in his head.

“Now it is so different,” he said. “We have a business plan. We have a marketing study. I miss a little bit of the ‘Let’s just do it’ attitude.”

Even though the new organization has reined in his spontaneity, it has also meant more freedom for Brauer. For the first time in 10 years, he feels comfortable enough to take a long family vacation.

“I have a really tight group here and I trust them,” he said. “When you can trust your fellow employees, you can let it go.”

Not everyone was happy with the new system. “We’d had the same staff for years and years,” Tatos said. “When the shift happened, some people didn’t last. We had to fire some people. That’s not how we’d operated before. It was really hard for us. Before, change was not a part of our culture at all.”

Imperiale said that clients welcomed the more professional atmosphere. Instead of using social service terms like “hygiene”, now they talk with clients about “dressing for success,” the same as any other job placement agency. Instead of replicating day treatment models where clients sit and discuss their feelings – something they can find at mental health care agencies – they work on interviewing skills and awareness of work place issues like sexual harassment.

“We responded to what our clients said they wanted,” she said. “There is a professional air about the place and the people who work here and I feel really good about that. We don’t have any weak links now. Everything we do is related to getting you hired.”

The commitment to making CVE a successful social enterprise has led the agency to greater success in its primary mission: helping mentally ill people find good work.

“The businesses are a vehicle for us to help people,” Brauer said. “I really believe we are in the business of human potential.”

David Alan Mors

David Alan Mors said that even though the services he received at CVE cost him nothing, the staff gave him all the attention and respect a paying customer would expect at any regular job placement agency.

“They were very organized and very professional,” Mors said. “You’re in this room with all these executives who are like angels trying to find you the right job. You didn’t feel

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stupid or strange or needy at all. They made you feel very important and taken care of. You felt like you’d spent \$500 for a seminar at the Holiday Inn.”

Mors was amazed and relieved that the staff was more interested in what he could do than in what his problems were.

“It’s the first time in your rehabilitation – or coming out of this cloud of nightmare – where you don’t have to repeat all that you’ve

gone through,” he said. “They’re interested in what your skills are, not what makes you upset. It’s a wonderful question that they ask: ‘What do you want to see for your life?’ It makes you feel like you’re a whole person who has possibilities and promise.”

Mors, 35, had been interested in architecture and design since he was a boy growing up in Florida. Several years ago, he worked for a couple in Maine who let him arrange the interiors in their store and their house. This was something that he could put on his resume. Even though he suffered from crippling depression and anxiety attacks, he made the dean’s list at San Francisco’s City College, where he earned a certificate in furniture design.

“I wanted very badly to see what it was like to have a job like everybody else,” he said. “I wanted to be able to have money to take care of myself and go out to dinner and see friends. I’d worked in offices in between receiving my SSI. I’d do waiter jobs. I enjoyed the jobs because I enjoyed having someone say, ‘We like what you did here. We want you to stay.’”

When Mors met with Henline, CVE’s employment specialist, the two decided to focus on jobs that would combine his skills and interests.

“We had a very specific job search,” Henline said. “No less than \$10 an hour, part time, in San Francisco, ideally in a modern environment.”

Henline set up voice mail for Mors and helped him design his business card and rework his resume. Over several months, Mors went on about 25 interviews with no success. Sometimes he would get discouraged and Henline would let him take a week off from the job search – but he never stopped calling to see how he was doing.

“He’d call me from home sometimes at 8 o’clock at night because he’d have an idea,” Mors said. “When Daryl says something, he means it. He shows up. It was one of the first times I’d experienced somebody with that kind of integrity and devotion.”

One day, Mors and Henline got dressed

up and spent the day visiting different furniture companies in a large San Francisco showroom.

“Here we were, two guys in suits with umbrellas walking across this industrial wasteland and mud and train tracks South of Market to get to the Baker Hamilton showroom,” Mors said. “Daryl introduced me to a friend of his there. He let me talk to different people about furniture. Seeing all this stuff I’d studied out of books was fun. Daryl wasn’t testing me – he had fun seeing what I knew.

“Daryl was always looking at what was going to be fun for me and what the possibilities were,” he said. “At first I couldn’t deal with how open his mind was. He was so enthusiastic, I was like, ‘What is this guy on?’ I’d never had someone be so into a project for my sake. At first, it annoyed me, but it was inspiring too. I had so much support that there was no way I could give up.”

About a month later, Mors received an offer from a showroom specializing in high end Italian and Scandinavian furniture, sculpture and art glass. He works four days a week, making sales and consulting with designers. Some days, he’s left alone in charge of the showroom. After five months, he’s made a bonus and had his salary raised to \$13 an hour.

“It’s a really good place to be,” Mors said. “I fit with the people there. It feels really good to have a job that I’m good at.”

He can support himself on his salary and soon Henline will help him set up a budget to buy a car. Even though his file is no longer active, Mors knows he can call Henline if anything ever comes up.

“When I went to CVE, the first thing they saw in me was a possible applicant for a cool job,” Mors said. “They didn’t see a sick person. It’s very touching for me...you know, that these people are so genuine. I didn’t expect that because it’s about a job. This is powerful stuff. This is life changing stuff. That’s what it’s going to take to change the world: people reaching out to help each other.”