

Georgia's Business #414

Guest: Roz Alford and Nancy Williams Owners, ASAP, LLC

Richard Warner:

Welcome, I'm Richard Warner this week on Georgia's Business, ASAP the Atlanta base staffing company started in 1989, today does 57 million in revenue, about 600 consultants on staff, ASAP is one of the fastest growing women owned businesses in the country and this week we welcome Roz Alford and Nancy Williams who are well the folks who make this company run. We've been talking about a half hour prior to now, one thing I can take away you have two remarkably different personalities. And your going to see this, how does that work, is an advantage or does it ever get in the way?

Roz Alford:

Well I think it is an advantage, I think you know we've learned to work with each other and I'm going to use the cliché that Nancy always uses and that's you know we like to be Mom and Dad. Luckily I get to be Mom and Nancy is Dad sometimes you know and we're working to make that a little different, right now I think that's the difference in personalities.

Richard Warner:

Clearly it works.

Roz Alford:

It does.

Richard Warner:

Look at the revenue growth; look at the number of employees and such. And yet being business partners and entrepreneurs is even more difficult in some ways than being married because you don't have to stay together the same way you do as husband and wife. How do you deal with conflict or difference that is so vital to the business, how do you all deal with it?

Nancy Williams:

Well we're extremely passionate about this company and the employees that work for us as team members and we have a very true friendship and I can tell you know its like any marriage, it can get heated, you know it can get argumentative, but you know at the end of the day we come together we agree and then we look at each other and go you want to go to lunch where you want to go?

Richard Warner:

Do you ever bring in consultants, I mean anybody outside to give you a fresh view of the business and yourselves?

Roz Alford:

Yes, I mean actually we're currently doing that right now, our ourselves working with us and our executive team and then eventually it will be down to our internal staff as well and sometimes you kind of need that, its almost like you know you said our partnership is like a marriage and it truly is but we do have alot at stake to break it up, so I think at sometimes its even more difficult to break up a partnership a business partnership than a marriage, you just can't walk away.

Richard Warner:

I'm interested in how you got together because Roz you had the company for ten years prior to Nancy getting involved and how did when she came to you did offer to buy it or what was the deal?

Roz Alford:

Well we were providing , well you know we were in the staffing business obviously IT Staffing and she worked for a competitor company that was much larger than ASAP was. And at the time I'm sure you heard of third tier partnering, where you through from one company to another company, we weren't they weren't taking people always direct, sometimes they partnered with other companies. And her company was partnering with many of the smaller IT companies.

Richard Warner:

Is it so that they could have a fresh supply of people?

Roz Alford:

Correct and I have some of my consultants being approached asking through other companies to work for Nancy's where she was working. And I said well I'm not letting my employees go why would we want to have tiers and layers going through if anybody is going to work with the company then its going to be ASAP working direct where Nancy works. So I called her up and I said I'd like to talk to you, I don't like what's going on , I want you to deal directly with my company and so why don't you take it from there.

Richard Warner:

And you said do you have entrepreneurial DNA?

Nancy Williams:

No, I was working for a major corporation that had offices throughout the U.S. and we were working with major telecommunications company in this city and we were one of the prime contractors and I had sub tiers and when Roz called me I said you know I really appreciate your call I don't need another vendor working for me, I really don't, I said I get thousands of these calls and I said we're very process oriented, we're very you know methodical about the approach that we take to...

Richard Warner:

Who we work with...

Nancy Williams:

Who we work with...

Richard Warner:

We have standards...

Nancy Williams:

We have very very high quality standards and so we were talking and at that time this the telecommunications company said can you help this on diversity initiative and this was in the early 90s...

Richard Warner:

And you count as diversity.

Nancy Williams:

Well, diversity nobody knew what diversity was then and they said well we think you would understand and you can help us, so I was o.k. now how am going to do this, so when she called something just registered by chance I said are you a woman owned company, yes I am, I said no no no no, I said are you certified meaning you really owned like 51% your certified you run the company not the husband in the background, yes, I said alright I tell you what I said you meet me tomorrow morning at 6:45am for breakfast.

Richard Warner:

Did you click?

Nancy Williams:

And I said you come and you tell me why within ten minutes you can be one of my key providers and how you visualize a partnership with us.

Richard Warner:

It's interesting that you did not go in to this with that in mind, you weren't staking each other out as potential business partners, was doing the deal here easy, was it if it is easy when you do the deal then there's at least an implication that is going to be a good relationship.

Roz Alford:

Well the deal was...

Nancy Williams:

The deal wasn't the partnership.

Roz Alford:

The partnership.

Nancy Williams:

The deal was working with my company...

Richard Warner:

I got that. I'm fast-forwarding to when its time to get married.

Roz Alford:

O.k., so the deal worked well and I'll go to the next step, I had done all this reading and Nancy and I had gone to a seminar and we have gone Tom Peters seminar and I want to tell you that there's like a 15 or 16 age difference between Nancy and myself.

Richard Warner:

I'm not going there.

Roz Alford:

I know I know, but I think it's important in this one. So Tom Peters at that time was talking about marketing in management and who should lead your company and one of the things that he said is if you don't have somebody in your organization that's in a leadership or a prime role that is not in you isn't younger than 32 you're missing the boat. Because of the new ideas and....

Richard Warner:

And not to mention what's the word when you leave one way or the other, a succession has to be in place. Do you think were thinking that?

Roz Alford:

Oh, absolutely not. But at that time you know, I had that in my mind and it was you know in between it about 1996 as you know thee was a whole mass of welcome to Y2K and you know alot of purchases going on of IT companies and so we were people were making offers to our company all the time wanting to merge the acquired or whatever.

Richard Warner:

And you said no.

Roz Alford:

And I said no.

Richard Warner:

That can be very wise because your first impulse is to bank it.

Roz Alford:

Correct. I said no and I said Nancy had heard because we became really good friends as well and she had heard that we that somebody was approaching us to buy us and she said if your interested in buying and selling, I'm interested in buying and I'm not interested but I went to the Tom Peters class again that we went to but you know what I think I would like to have a partner.

Nancy Williams:

So then we went through courting to make sure that...

Richard Warner:

How long do you court in a business relationship, how long do you think you need to?

Nancy Williams:

We courted for several months mainly it was more in tune to you know did we have the right philosophies in business, did we want the same things meaning did we want to grow the company to a sizeable amount, did we want to become very well known or did we just want to get to a certain amount of sell and I was into getting to a certain amount of selling, I was wanting to really take it to the next level position it correctly...

Richard Warner:

Why would you not want to sell isn't that the dream?

Nancy Williams:

You know what it is I think life if you can have the luxury, truly of waking up everyday and loving what you and I've always you know love this industry my background was computer science I worked for IBM and you know they said you really should go into SAGE, your technical and you can talk and I know alot...

Richard Warner:

That's rare...

Nancy Williams:

Yeah they said that's very rare and I owe lot to IBM for telling me that and you know we have our clients and their still our first clients my first clients Roz's first clients, their still very good friends of ours we're talking 20 plus years...

Roz Alford:

And still our clients...

Nancy Williams:

And still our clients...

Richard Warner:

O.k., so you went through you got married if you will in 96'...

Roz Alford:

98'

Nancy Williams:

98'

Richard Warner:

98', even better, 98' you got two years you didn't know it at the time you two years to make it before the bottom falls out of the market, when things got bad, when things get bad, what have you learned about how to get through it without minimal damage as quickly and successively as possible.

Nancy Williams:

Well we were very careful during that time because that was the dot com era and I can tell you that internal team wasn't very happy we didn't our focus was fortune 100 companies and they take alot longer to get into but once you can get in there forge a true alliance and a relationship with them, unless you do something, your pretty much there for a long time.

Richard Warner:

Many hallways many opportunities...

Nancy Williams:

Many hallways many intermit many discussions and when the down turn hit we turned too, we turned a great deal down.

Richard Warner:

And I want to go and that's where I want to go, as that's happening you know what did you learn now looking back at it that people should know?

Roz Alford:

Well I think that well one of the you know in hind sight I mean we tried to, we were very fortunate we had we only downsized once and that was minimal, it was probably you know it was necessity at the time you know as the clients it wasn't that we really lost the clients you lose a little you lose revenue. After Y2K came into effect you know the need for main frame programmers you know doing maintenance on the systems wasn't thee anymore, everything was correct then.

Richard Warner:

March 2000 what it is it is...?

Roz Alford:

It is and you do have to sometimes downsize, we didn't have to downsize our external staff as much as we had to really work with our internal staff and make sure that everything was o.k. and I think when you talk about the personalities involved if I said something that we probably should of done sooner is that we probably should of looked and when I said downsizing I'm talking of 10% so it wasn't anything major but we probably should of done it sooner than we did and because of my personality the way it is I kept saying no let's wait let's wait let's wait...

Richard Warner:

Entrepreneurs by nature have to be optimist, and that what makes it difficult to pull the plug faster on things that need to be done...

Nancy Williams:

Correct and that's very true...

Roz Alford:

And I think that goes for you know for alot of things and what your saying is very true, it's pulling the plug faster, I think that's probably something that most people that own a businesses don't do.

Richard Warner:

Well they you know if your working for a big company that looks at it as an excel spread sheet and says this is the number now go do it you fell more personally invested in the people who you have brought aboard to work for you, to be partners with you. What do you look for in these people who you hire since your in staffing, the real question somebody's watching who's interested who's on the bench looking for work, what do you tell somebody now to increase there chances of getting hired in this market?

Roz Alford:

We go through a whole interview session with them as for as in prepping them on how do you relate to a client but I mean first you got to get them to want to work for you even though we're a staffing company remember these people are ultimately are our employees and there going to a client site and so you really have to teach them about ASAP and make them want to feel apart of ASAP and even though there working at a client site you still have to make them feel apart everyday of the corporate our corporate environment...

Richard Warner:

Well because there really are working for two companies...

Roz Alford:

They sure are...

Nancy Williams:

They are...

Roz Alford:

And we always treat our consultants as though they were also our client I mean we treat them, it's the same way, they are our client in some respect...

Nancy Williams:

And also I think it's also in the prep, you know I tell our team I say we're like the Jerry McGuire's of talent acquisition...

Richard Warner:

Show me the money...

Nancy Williams:

Show you the money, makes sure that we get you the right job that we differentiate you when you go into a client so that you understand the project, you understand the initiative and why because vast experience your going to be right one for this clients project and then what do you do after that, what's the follow-up, you know what's the customer care, what's the level of service expectation that goes back to that client to really you know position you as a true consultant not just somebody walking in off the street and then it's also building a process to educate them on the consultant before they on the client per say before they even walk into that site...

Richard Warner:

As somebody who's hired a you know, like anybody has made some hits, made plenty of misses, how do you improve your odds that the hires you're making are hits?

Roz Alford:

Well, I can say for ASAP as a whole you know our if we get a candidate and I'm going to use them as a candidate at that point going in for the interview as would say our ratio of interviews to hires is generally high and that's because they are prep as well, we really train a person to go in there and sell themselves , we want them to ask questions, not just have the interviewer and asking them questions at the client site but them also going back and telling about themselves and asking questions regarding the project that they might be working on and I mean we even go into detail when they get back we have them even send a power point to the interviewer saying this is what understand the project to be and this how I believe I can fit.

Richard Warner:

Did read this right that you don't hire them until the client hires them?

Roz Alford:

Right.

Nancy Williams:

Right.

Richard Warner:

So you're not carrying staff that you're not outsourcing.

Nancy Williams:

Correct, but we remarket once they come off of a project we're remarketing them 45 days before a project ends so that they stay with us because there fully benefit with us .

Roz Alford:

These are new these are new candidates that we're bringing in...

Richard Warner:

Yes, Nancy you said something about the company you used to work for you were very process oriented and if you want your business to work it's got to have process...

Nancy Williams:

Very strong processes...

Richard Warner:

What's your I don't have that much time but to you know thirty-thousand foot view, what's your process?

Nancy Williams:

Its the same process that we follow with each and every hire from the interview to the references to the way we format you know our resume to if were going after our project solutions bid that's fixed priced the way that we respond to our RFP it is a very fine tune process to where our brand is how we come across to that client not only through our individual interaction with them from internal organization but also presentation on materials that goes to those clients as well as the consultant that walks in, you know a consultant when they walk into client should be you know look as though they were consultant, they should dress that way, they should act that way, and should be there to do the job help that client succeed, bring that shareholder in value back into their organization and make sure that they get the job done and then they get invited back in to do other projects as well as us.

Richard Warner:

Why would you hire them and not the company hire them?

Nancy Williams:

Well that's the old adage, I mean you we're what you might call a variable resource to where you know there's a bottom line resource number that clients have to have major corporations as well as min market clients and then there's variable meaning we got a project that's a up tick and we got to get a staffed and we got to get it out the door because its a business and that's exactly why.

Roz Alford:

And you get you know alot of times clients only want to use the resource for a particular project as supposed to bringing them on as a permanent employee...

Richard Warner:

Which is much more difficult in Wall Street eyes you're talking about fortune 100 companies, those fixed costs are really important to them, how do the employees I heard you guys talking about Queen 1 and Queen 2 and whose Queen 1 you know how...

Nancy Williams:

Richard you weren't supposed to talk about that...

Richard Warner:

How do your employees view you, how would you think you know we ever went in and talk to the rank in file to the partners what kind of management style are they getting what are the different strengths and weaknesses that add up to the whole?

Roz Alford:

I think well I hope that they would think of me as being Queen 1 but you it's alright if I'm Queen 2 as well...

Richard Warner:

Well you know you were the founder so you know...

Roz Alford:

And Queen you know as Queen I hope they don't call us Queen 1 but you know that's alright. You know I think that we just talk about this today and you know I have to explain how our businesses run. Nancy drives Nancy is our sells Nancy drives the business she...

Richard Warner:

That's logical, I'm getting that...

Roz Alford:

And my job is the fulfillment of what she's the business she's driven and making sure that the resources and everything fall into place you know so I have more touchy feely our employees and candidates and what have you because I'm very much into their face all the time whereas Nancy is really working with the client, o.k....

Richard Warner:

She rolls it in and you cook it...

Roz Alford:

I cooked it. That's the way to do it. So the different styles have to be there. She has to be tough you know with our clients.

Richard Warner:

I would you were the one who has to be tough, if you the one who's your more of the option you're more of the sells is kind of the sense I get...

Nancy Williams:

No no we both do the opts...

Roz Alford:

Well I mean I think that your kind of right because of I think the way that fulfillment

of the resources kinds of deals on the operations but I think that because of the human resource background that I might have I think that what happens is that there's more of nurturing that I do could also be age you know, I think that has a lot to do with it, so that that's my personality is nurturing and try to pull bring out the best in everybody.

Richard Warner:

You know I asked earlier and you said no no it wasn't it but yeah I think that we're talking about following behind you your going to get to the point where at some point don't want to do this anymore.

Roz Alford:

See we weren't supposed to talk about this part...

Richard Warner:

We didn't talk about what we weren't going to talk about but I'm interested...

Roz Alford:

But you know what...

Roz Alford:

You got talk about it...

Roz Alford:

We do have to and I think that we've talked about succession and planning and we gone into it in detail, what happens I mean I'll be honest I'm 60, I would like this business to continue for me most important thing is when I step down I want this company to continue and to be a company...

Richard Warner:

Because you either have to have the succession plan or you got to sell it...

Roz Alford:

Or you got to sell it...

Nancy Williams:

Correct.

Roz Alford:

So in five years you know I committed to be there for another five years and during that time I'm hoping we've put in an executive leadership team, I hoping that that becomes our succession plan not only for me because of my age but also for Nancy too, to be able to you know reaps some reward as well and let the team handle a lot of the day to day and the marketing and the recruiting and what have you.

Richard Warner:

This is hard stuff, I mean just the whole concept of turning over your baby, your 57 million dollar baby, and yet you have to if it's going to.

Roz Alford:

You sure do.

Richard Warner:

I mean we have we never gone to for in to this with guests but if you're not going to sell it, than what you're banking on is operating a very profitable very rewarding business which is even better than selling it.

Roz Alford:

And we've talked about ESOP I mean that is something that we're looking into in 2009 I mean its you know, we're talking, we're in the talking stages at this point of time you and...

Nancy Williams:

Yeah, you know I think I've always said what gets you to 10 million isn't what gets you to 30 isn't what gets you to 50, 60 and it definitely isn't what is going to get to a 100. You know our three year plan is to be well over a 100 million and with are offices throughout the U.S. as well as in India and with the leadership cover team coming into help they got time to be nurtured to understand our way of doing business, how we live, breath, and eat our client so though their very its a very personal relationship for us with our clients because if their successful, we're very successful, so I think you got a you know you have to look for the future and you got to understand what your going to believe your going to need in three or four years...

Richard Warner:

Because you won't get there if you don't...

Nancy Williams:

You won't get there. So you got to go ahead and set it up and you've got to make the investment and you got to stop the nurturing and so forth, do I ever think that you know Roz said she be gone in four years she'll get totally bored, do I think she'll want to fly around and have the fun and do all the socialization you know that takes place yes, is there always a role for you know senior executives that help build it yes, you know its putting individuals in place that can relieve and help us get to the next level.

Roz Alford:

You know if we're going to grow to the next level and if we want to grow to 100 million it can't be Roz and Nancy show alone, its going to take a team working with us and we got allow our team to also lead and mentor them to lead so they can take it to the next level...

Richard Warner:

Which is hard because no one can do it as well as Roz and Nancy can?

Roz Alford:

Right.

Nancy Williams:

Absolutely.

Richard Warner:

I got one minute, how do you get from 10 to 30 million?

Nancy Williams:

A lot of prayer...no. You know I think it, you know it was very difficult getting to 10 I even said this morning you know when your at that level people don't realize your kind of tilting, your tilting either your going to bust out and go further or your going to go backwards and we've been very fortunate to have some absolutely wonderful clients that took the risk with us and really believed in us to partner and help us grow.

Richard Warner:

Roz and Nancy it's not the Roz and Nancy show but they done a amazing job with ASAP grown at 57 million dollars, congratulations to both of you.

Roz Alford:

Thank you.

Nancy Williams:

Thank you.

Richard Warner:

Appreciate you being here and thank you for watching. That's Georgia's Business for this week, you can download the audio of our broadcast, the pod cast in fact on iTunes, you can listen on the radio on Atlanta's WCFO that's 11:60am and you can sound off to me directly at Richard Warner.com, catch us here next week here on GPB, I'm Richard Warner and now for all of here at Georgia Public Broadcasting thanks for watching and don't sell yourself short.