

# From Science to Staffing

It's Not Perfect, But Bob Livonius Wouldn't Have It Any Other Way

*By Sherri Alms*

In 1991, Bob Livonius traded a 20-year career at IBM working with “99.99% error-free products” in the computer field to working in the staffing industry where the “products” are people, who are not 99.99% error-free.

But Livonius doesn't see that as a challenge so much as he sees it as an opportunity. “The extent to which a staffing executive surrounds himself with great talent in this industry is the most important ingredient for success.”

During his 12 years with staffing company Spherion Corp., where he served as chief operating officer, Livonius managed every skill sector in the industry, dealing with a range of staffing needs, from medical home care and clerical staffing to human capital consulting and executive coaching.

“He was the best boss I ever had,” says Wayne Mincey, today the president and chief operating officer of the Hackett Group, a business advisory firm. Mincey turned down a plum job as chief executive officer of a large



staffing company, he says, to work with Livonius.

"It was the hardest decision I ever made in my life," he says, "and the primary reason was Bob Livonius. I walked away from more money, bigger equity awards. When my wife and others asked what I was thinking, I told them I came across someone I can learn a lot from and I want to stay for a couple of years."

### Finding Opportunity

Today, Livonius is the CEO of Medfinders, a national health care staffing company based in Arlington, TX, and still enjoying the challenge and achievement that his career in the industry has offered him. A member of the ASA board of directors, Livonius also serves as the chairman of the health care section. "It's critical to understand the unique issues, ideas, and trends in your sector of the industry, and being a part of ASA membership sections is a good way to do that," he says.

He is a natural at what he does and he enjoys it, says friend and colleague David Gillan, senior director of strategic services at VHA Inc., a purchasing group that provides goods and services to hospitals.

"He looks at the same situations everyone else does and comes up with creative responses. My company was an early entrant in the managed service field, encouraging our members to work with suppliers through vendor management systems. But everyone wanted a \$100 million deal. Not Bob. He was happy to deal with our members at \$100,000 or \$500,000 because he came up with a cost-effective system to do that. That's not rocket science maybe, but no one else was doing it then."

Health care staffing companies face unique challenges as well as opportunities that other staffing companies do not. "Companies that provide health care

staffing are essentially in competition with our clients for a supply of employees," says Livonius. "It creates an adversarial relationship that we have to overcome. Our big challenge is to educate clients that using just-in-time professionals in health care is just as sound a decision as it is in any other business."

Livonius says that health care staffing used to be virtually recession proof, but "this time around, it's different as a result of consumers needing to think about health care as discretionary spending. If someone is unemployed or has to pay a high deductible, there will be a question of whether he or she has knee replacement surgery or makes the house payment."

He believes that "universal health care has the opportunity to provide more business for us, but at the same time it will be challenging because it will put even more pressure on the supply of health care workers."

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He sees the health care segment narrowing to "a handful of major players in the market that offer a broad range of services and act as a partner to clients, helping them best manage their total labor costs, including staff, in-house pools, and contract labor. Local and smaller companies will also benefit by specializing in segments like operating room and intensive care unit staffing and by partnering with the bigger companies."

### Finding the Balance

You might be imagining that all Livonius thinks about is health care and staffing. Not so, and he credits his mentor Frank Tomson at IBM for his commitment to balancing work and life. "He told me I may have to work long hours, but never to take anything with me when I walk out of the business door." To this day, he follows that advice. Technology has made it easier and easier to work from home, but everyone has to find a way to stop and spend quality time with those they love, Livonius says.

He is happy to tell you that he works just as hard at home as he does at the office. "I have the best marriage. It's my greatest accomplishment and best success." Livonius says that he and his wife, Linda, work hard at their marriage, including celebrating their wedding anniversary every month. "We have fun, but we realize that if we don't work at our relationship, it will deteriorate."

Kathleen Gilmartin, now CEO of Interim HealthCare, vouches for Livonius's commitment to a work-life balance. "The two of us were in a difficult management meeting several years ago that included making tough decisions. Bob had the meeting well planned and orchestrated so that we could get through everything."

Then his wife, daughter, and first grandchild, a boy then 7 or 8 months old, dropped by for a visit. It was pure Bob, says Gilmartin, to invite them into the meeting. "We all saw how delighted he was by the child. It let us see him not just as the CEO but also as a grandfather. It could have been disruptive, but it made everyone smile, and the meeting went a little better than it might have." ■

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