

Award: 2010's Top 34 Italian Canadian Business People

Organizer: ICCO (Italian Chamber of Commerce)

Interviewer: Marta Scipolo

Editor: Denis De Klerck

In the Beginning

John Nalli's family came from the town of Rogliano, in the Cosenza province of Calabria, to College Street in Toronto in the '50s. He was born and raised in Mississauga. In 1995, John joined the staffing industry with Adecco, where for six years he worked his way through Temporary and Permanent Staffing, Business Development, Branch Management, and finally Area Management. After Adecco, he had a 3 year run with Spherion as the company's Regional Manager responsible for managing its existing GTA offices and opening a number of new offices. In 2003 he founded PEOPLEsource, and quickly grew the company to one of Canada's premier providers. In 2009 John restructured the company selling a few offices and rebranded under the name People Store, continuing the company's steady growth across Ontario. Over the years the company has won many awards, including the Readers' Choice Awards for: Best Staffing Firm.

I read that you were interested in this field because you saw a degradation of the original values that constituted the staffing business.

Well, my story is a very non-traditional story. Most stories are that you go to school because you want to do a specific job. People's paths are usually laid out in front of them. I went to school at George Brown and did business administration and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I really gravitated toward the hotel and restaurant business, as I love working with people. So I figured that after I graduated I was going to apply myself in the hospitality business. But when I graduated, I didn't want to do that anymore. I wanted to do something that would actually help people. So I answered a job ad for a company called Ecco Staffing, which later became Adecco the company that I worked for. I applied for the position of recruiter having never heard of a staffing company before that. Growing up as an Italian-Canadian, all of our job choices went through "Call this guy and he'll take care of you." Back when I started as a recruiter, I was helping people who had just immigrated to Canada find jobs and this was their first chance, the first time they ever got a paycheck from someone in Canada. Often I would employ a mother or father who came here with nothing or very little. I wanted to help the newcomers, and I found a passion for it and I fell in love with the staffing business. At the beginning of my career I noticed that big companies just wanted to make money off of people. I figured there's got to be more than just making money. We make money here too—it's a big reason—but it doesn't keep me excited every single day. What's exhilarating is helping people put food on their tables, pay their mortgages and their bills. I was in my late twenties when I realized it's not rocket science—that I can do this and do a better job if I dedicated my time to helping people instead of being greedy about the money I make—if I put it back into the community, then I can be so much bigger than all of these guys. My vision was to bring back core values into the staffing business. So I worked very hard to bring it back, and that's why I think we have been so successful. People Store is the fastest-growing staffing company in the country. We have won a lot of awards over the years. We are the ninth-best employer to work for in Canada, and there are a lot of employers out there. To be the ninth-best employer tells me I am doing something right.

How would you describe your relationship to Italian culture?

I'm fortunate that my family is very involved with the Italian community. One of my uncles, on my mother's side, runs the Rogliano Italian Social Club of Toronto. There are many events that he organizes and take time to actively participate. Everybody gets together—family, but also friends and associates—so it gets us back to our roots. When you are in Canada, as you may know, you become kind of desensitized. It is important to hold on to what really matters.

So what would you say are really the core values of a staffing company?

There are only three that I, and my staff, live by: honesty, integrity, and work ethic. Those are the three. If you have an honest way of doing business, you have integrity, so if you do what you say, and if you work hard, you will be successful.

Do you feel fully integrated in the Canadian community?

Absolutely, yes. In my profession there are not many Italians. It's a very "waspy" business where North American companies are predominant. The presidents of these companies are mostly either Canadian or American. To my knowledge I am one of the very few Italians—or Europeans, for that matter—with a company of this size.

In early 2009 you decided to make your company more specialized. Can you tell me why?

When I originated PEOPLEsource in 2003, it was from my kitchen table. I bought a computer and I started formulating this business plan. I was in the industry and I wanted to do something different. A lot of our competitors specialized in certain areas like accounting, finances, or engineering; that's all they did. I wanted to cater to a lot of different businesses, so I created a generalist firm in PEOPLEsource and we had great success. But as the years went on, a lot of my customers told me they liked dealing with specialized staffing firms because they have expertise. So I started to do some test marketing. Instead of offering only general services, I decided to expand my services to staffing in accounting and engineering. I hired accountants, I hired engineers and other specialty professionals so that they could hire and recruit people from their own profession, and they became very successful at it. I then rebranded under the name People Store. It naturally evolved, so I created other specialized divisions within my company. It is similar to walking into a big department store: every department has people that are experts in that field. My clients liked the expertise, so I developed several divisions for different industries. We call the service we offer a one-stop shop. No matter what you need as a company, we have nine different divisions, so we have it.

How would a staffing company face the problem of lack of jobs on the market?

With the 2008 recession our sales dropped \$7 million from one year earlier. This amount had evaporated because of the economy, so we had to adjust to it. It's since got back to normal, but for the first year, when that was happening, we realized we had to become more creative. Instead of hiring for a full-time role, where our clients had to pay benefits, we suggested they hire two part-time workers. During a recession most people just want to work. We were creating jobs for people, where most of the players were not—and money for our clients—while doing them both justice. Our competitors were cutting down costs, letting go of a lot of people. We did the opposite, that's how we got through it. In fact, 2009 and 2010 have been the biggest sales volume spikes in our company's seven-year history. So we did some things right throughout the recession and were able to see the benefits of that.

Do you have offices across Canada, and are you looking into expanding beyond the Canadian borders?

Yes, our reach is coast to coast. In addition to physical locations we do a lot of video conferencing and teleconferencing, as about 30 percent of our business is out west where we currently don't have a physical office. Regarding international expansion—no, I want to stay Canadian. We have an opportunity

to build a really great Canadian company, and though there is a lot of business abroad, it costs a lot of money to expand internationally. I want to build a truly Canadian success story.

Do you think your generation does business in a very different way from the previous generation?

Absolutely. It was a different era, right. Doing business for the last fifteen years has been very different from what my parents' generation and my grandparents' used to do. I think a lot of the cultures that come to North America now are in the same situation the Italians were in fifty years ago. The cultures that have been around for fifty years act like North American businesses. That's just the way it is. What makes us different is that we act like a North American company, but with a European family feel.