

Like father, like daughter; Paul Lloyd, who inherited a call centre his mom started in the '70s, hopes in turn one day to pass it on to daughter Dana; [ONT Edition]

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Full Text (1509 words)

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If Dolly Lloyd stepped inside the Toronto office of AnswerPlus, she probably wouldn't recognize it as the answering service company she started more than 40 years ago.

Sure, two of the old-time telephone switchboards she used to start the business, with their multitude of plugs and thick cables, are on display in the lobby.

But the equipment that keeps the sophisticated operation going today - the computers and high-tech networks - would be unrecognizable to the woman who passed on in 1972.

No doubt, seeing a familiar face or two would give Dolly some comfort. Her son Paul, 56, is president and chief executive officer.

And with Paul's daughter and son, Dana and Dean, now working in the company and preparing to take the reins one day, the family business is entering its third generation.

As a call centre, AnswerPlus defies expectations. The industry is typically pegged as impersonal, with high turnover among customer service reps. But AnswerPlus measures average staff tenure in years not months.

As a family business, it's not what you expect either. The children weren't always expected to work in the family business, and they didn't for a while. But now they do, and they love it.

"I was blessed that they both decided to come into the business," said the proud father. "And I was blessed that they're hard workers, they're conscientious, they've got a good strong work ethic."

At this point, Dana, 30, is further along the succession track than her brother. She has worked in the company for four years and serves as vice-president of sales and marketing.

Father and daughter have a professional, but easy, rapport, sometimes looking to one another for the right word or finishing each other's sentence.

How do they make it work? In this family business, a little distance, and a lot of space, seem to add up to great communication.

Dolly Lloyd started the business in 1961 as a way to support her ailing husband and seven children. In those decades before answering machines and voice mail, she saw an opportunity.

Using \$1,000 she borrowed from two daughters and their husbands, she started a small answering service in a Hamilton office building - so small, in fact, that she was the only employee.

At home, Dolly put her older children in charge of the younger ones and moved into the office to man the switchboard 24 hours a day, 7 days a week so she could get her business off the ground. She was away from home for 14 months until she could hire other operators to help.

Paul began working in the business in 1971, a year before Dolly passed away, but by then one of his older brothers had bought the company. Paul inherited the business from his brother's estate in 1976, and hasn't looked back.

Today, the company has three divisions AnswerPlus, a bustling call centre with offices in Toronto and Hamilton; a security and alarm monitoring division called Pasword Protection; and a paging service, Pasword Paging. (Spelling

Pasword with one "s" is Lloyds' way of maintaining Dolly's legacy. Her company was called Professional Answering Service, or PAS.)

Paul's son Dean, 28, is a sales executive at the security division.

Back in the 1960s, doctors accounted for about half of the company's business. When it was 1 a.m. and your baby was sick, you called the answering service and an operator would take down your information and pass it on to the doctor.

That type of service now accounts for just a fraction of AnswerPlus's business. "It evolved," Paul said. "I'd like to say we planned it, but we didn't."

The company has about 1,100 clients. Its 135 employees can take as many as 8,000 calls a day, dealing with everything from rape crises and roadside assistance to 1-800 questions from consumers on product assembly or a food's ingredients.

"We have a saying in our company," said Paul. "Our customers come third. Everything we do is for the caller."

Second to the caller is AnswerPlus' highly trained workforce of customer service reps. "They're the key to our success," Paul said. "We pamper them, but we have very high expectations."

The company is constantly training its workers, and offers performance bonuses, profit sharing, and perks like on-site massage. The average staff turnover in the call centre industry is about nine months. At AnswerPlus, it's about 10 years.

Dana credits her dad with teaching her about how to work with people. "He has this ability to motivate people and he has a lot of respect for the employees and, in turn, they love and adore and think the world of him."

As children, she and her brother would clean pagers, stuff envelopes, or help out with the billing. The exposure seemed casual, but wasn't really, as she discovered when she formally joined the company.

"Going in, I didn't think I knew a lot about the operations. But then getting into the day-to-day activities, things would just come back to me," Dana said.

Dana went to Queen's University to study business, and after graduation went into advertising and marketing. A few years out of school, the big company she worked for decided to close up shop in Canada and Dana confided in her dad that she didn't know if she wanted to move to the United States.

Dad had been considering buying a call centre in Montreal, so he sent his bilingual daughter to check it out. They never bought, but Dana stayed on in the Toronto office. But she still wasn't sure.

"I was so career-oriented at that point, I didn't want to sort of discredit myself by working for the family. It was nice to be part of my grandmother's 'baby' and my dad's passion, but I went in very hesitant. I actually went into it thinking, 'I'm going to give this a year and then I'm going to re-evaluate,' " she recalls.

"I'm also very close with my dad and I didn't know how it would affect our relationship."

It turned out to be a fabulous year. At the company, Dana saw a level of professionalism that she learned about in business school, but didn't expect to find in a family-run operation.

They also give each other lots of space - she's in Toronto, her dad's in Hamilton - an arrangement that Dana credits to her father.

"We don't have a lot of face-to-face time everyday which is nice because it allows me to grow and prove myself independently. It's sort of easy for the employees to forget that we're related to the boss because it's not always in their face," Dana said.

"The other thing that's good is that we make a conscious effort to do personal father-daughter things so we can separate between the business and the normal relationship that we're used to."

Paul says his children's drive and focus were evident from the start. He could see they were serious and eager to prove themselves on their own terms.

"They start early and finish late, work Saturdays and Sundays," he says. "I see the hours they're putting in. Work comes first."

The kids also have to work their way up from the bottom Dana started as an operator, while Dean installed alarms.

Dad always hoped his children would go into the family business, but he didn't want to pressure them.

"When you're looking at the long-term prospects for the business, in the back of my head, the kids were always there," Paul said. "I thought she was off into her career and I thought okay, 'What's my long term?'"

"You're on hold for a bit. At the end of the one year it was, 'Okay, I think I've got her, she's hooked.' Now we can do some long-term planning."

Paul says Dana's presence lends some stability for other employees. "When Dana came in, they said, 'Oh, Dana's getting the business, it's going to be long-term. I guess we've got a job for a long time.'"

There's been a learning curve for dad, too.

"I look at Dana, who likes to go at 200 miles an hour all day long, and I'm moving back down to 80 miles an hour. She wants to go a lot faster than I'm prepared to go sometimes.

"But it's not awkward, it's refreshing."

Then there are the customers who notice the same last names, and aren't too shy to ask about it, which sparks a different reaction from daughter and father.

"You put so much effort into something and a customer would say, 'Are you related to Paul Lloyd?' " Dana said. "It's like, have I proven myself to this person or are they thinking I'm just there because of my dad?"

Then proud poppa chimes in.

"That's interesting, because when people say to me, 'Are you Dana Lloyd's father?' I say, 'Yes, I am.'"

[Illustration]

Colin McConnell toronto star AnswerPlus' Paul Lloyd and daughter Dana with some of the technology used when Paul's mother started the business in the 1960s.

Credit: Toronto Star

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