

## Iowan realizes significant gains in Web job posts

### Firm's success tied to niche services

By PATT JOHNSON

REGISTER BUSINESS WRITER

Marc Sampson isn't surprised by the success of his company 10 years after he started it, but he isn't stopping there.

MEP Jobs, a Web site aimed at mechanical-, electrical-, and plumbing-related jobs, has gone from 70 clients a few months after it started to 1,900 this year.

Sampson, however, sees the growing online job posting industry as just beginning to realize its potential.

"I never doubted that this business would be a success," said owner, 54, of Industry People Group Inc., which operates MEPJobs.com.

The small Urbandale company is one of thousands of job-board sites on the Internet, but its success is in part due to its focus on a niche market in the three fields, said Mark Mehler, co-author of CareerXroads, a directory of job Web sites.

"Job seekers like niches, associations and organizations with sites that give them value and response to what they are looking for," Mehler said.

He said that 12 years ago, there were 300 job sites on the Internet. "Today, there are tens of thousands of them," Mehler said.

He said employee referrals remain the No. 1 way companies find workers, but Internet job boards account for 12 percent of new hires.

Sampson continues to refine and expand the company's offerings to help it grow. A year ago, MEP Jobs began offering to track and screen candidates, presenting participating employers with five qualified potential job seekers.

It's a convenience service for companies that don't have the time or resources to sift through the endless job boards for candidates, Sampson said. The program, which has proven to be a lucrative revenue stream, has a success rate of 80 percent, he said.

Another new service the company offers is job alert, in which job hunters can sign up to receive cell-phone text messages listing available positions as soon as they are posted on the site.

MEP Jobs has about 1,900 clients, while traffic to his Web site is about 50,000 unique visitors a month. Those numbers pale in comparison to the major national job boards, such as CareerBuilder.com, which has 23 million unique visitors a month and about 300,000 clients.

"We always see competition in the niche fields," said Jennifer Sullivan, a Careerbuilder.com spokeswoman. Careerbuilder.com is based in Chicago and is owned in part by Gannett Co., parent company of The Des Moines Register.

Sampson operates his Internet business on the fourth floor of an office building near Merle Hay Mall. His corner office has a wide view of the nearby residential neighborhood. Neatly stacked on his desk are an array of construction industry-related magazines, in which he advertises his business. A large dry-erase board holds notes from a previous brainstorming session.

About 26 workers fill cubicles and other offices. They maintain the Web site, solicit companies to buy services

## ZOOM



HOLLY McQUEEN/THE REGISTER

Marc Sampson owns MEP Jobs, an Urbandale-based Web site aimed at generating mechanical, electrical and plumbing-related jobs, which has gone from 70 clients about 10 years ago to 1,900 this year.

### Multi-pronged approach

**FOR JOB SEEKERS:** MEP Jobs caters to a niche market- mechanical, electrical and plumbing. This means people looking for jobs in these specific industries can go to one Web site to access openings in their fields.

- Job seekers can receive text messages on their cell phones when a new opening is posted on the MEPJobs.com.

**FOR EMPLOYERS:** MEP Jobs offers clients a list of five qualified, pre-screened job seekers. This service is offered to companies to save them the time sifting through job-seeker boards in search of the right candidate. The success rate of the service is 80 percent, according to owner Marc Sampson.

**FUTURE PROJECTS:** Sampson is hoping to offer online training courses for people in mechanical, electrical and plumbing fields.

and handle customer calls.

Sampson, a Fort Dodge native, launched his business in April 1997 with a skeletal crew and zero clients. He financed the venture with mostly his own money and a \$50,000 line of credit from his bank.

"By the time Sept. 1 rolled around, we had 70 customers," he said.

The business continued to grow until early 2000, when a downturn in the economy translated into a slowdown in commercial construction, Sampson said.

"We pulled back on marketing and advertising and downsized our work force 20 to 22 percent," he said. "We refocused our business to residential construction, where there was still some activity."

The strategy paid off. The company has had double-digit sales increases in each of the last four years, he said.

Sampson is planning to add another Web site that would offer online training courses for people in the mechanical, electrical and plumbing fields.

"It would be aimed at companies who want their employees to gain (continuing education unit) credits, additional accreditation or technical training," he said.

While he would have to buy a small company with expertise in online training, the potential payoff is great.

"That's a \$10 million-a-year business," Sampson said.

His long-term goal is to partner with a national construction-industry publishing company to expand the scope of MEPJobs.com. He plans to provide magazine Web sites with private label job boards, which MEP Jobs would construct and operate under the magazine's brand.

Currently, Sampson has smaller, similar arrangements with national companies such as Carrier Corp., which makes heating and air conditioning products.

Des Moines-based Schaal Heating and Cooling signed up with MEP Jobs two weeks ago. The company is paying about \$1,300 for the service for a year.

"We were having a hard time finding good quality people," said Roger Fouche, president and owner of Schaal. When he advertised in the newspaper or on radio, 90 percent of the people who applied weren't qualified, he said.

Job seekers who go online to find positions are generally proficient in using computers and "are a little sharper," Fouche said.

In the short time he's been with MEP Jobs, he's had two qualified applicants that he's putting through drug and other testing and is hoping to hire.

"They made it easy for me to get good candidates," Fouche said of MEP Jobs.

Reporter Patt Johnson can be reached at (515) 284-8367 or [pjohnson@dmreg.com](mailto:pjohnson@dmreg.com)