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ST. LOUIS CHARACTER

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Ken Homza is a juggler. His main act is serving as a part-time chief financial officer for a half dozen companies, including some venture start-ups. After hours, he moves through hobbies that have included everything from downhill skiing, to water skiing, to karate training, to cruising around on his Harley.

"It drives my wife crazy," said Homza, 48.

At work, Homza's customers have included Renaissance Financial, medical services company Quick Study Radiology and communications software company T3, the latter where Homza briefly served as chief executive before the company was acquired in 2009.

"What I hope to do is raise their game. Most of these firms want to do more. But they don't know what more is," said Homza, whose fees range from \$4,000 to \$5,000 a month for most clients.

To be sure, Homza is not an accountant and makes certain his clients know that. He comes to his current role after years of working in finance for giant businesses, including IT company Unisys and later Lens-Crafters. He might not have landed here at all but for Ken Harrington, now managing director of Washington University's Skandalaris Center. The two worked together at Unisys, and in the late 1990s Harrington was an executive with WorkNet Communications and recruited Homza to town. WorkNet collapsed a decade ago when the dot-com bubble burst, and Homza stayed in St. Louis.

At the time, he saw many small and medium-sized companies that could benefit from his help. "I'm there not to do the same thing every month. My job is to figure out what needs to be done, who in the company can do it, and move on," Homza said.

He keeps his client relationship simple — a one-page engagement letter that either side can cancel with a month's notice. Yet most engagements run 5 or 6 years. Homza's Harley and other hobbies usually roll on weekends from University City, where he and his wife, Katherine, live with their 3-year-old son, Christopher.



Why do you make a point of letting people know you're not an accountant?

It's not the best skill set for being a CFO. The CFO is looking forward and thinking strategically about the business. CPAs can do that but are usually thinking about technical accounting issues and tax returns, and they typically are looking at the business once a year. Once a year is not enough. I'm looking at the financial results every month and the business every day. There's a lot of value in setting those forward-looking expectations. That's the value part about being a CFO.

What qualifies you to be a CFO?

I have an MBA from Carnegie Mellon University, and I've had a lot of different jobs in big companies. That big company training is important. I was with Unisys, which was a \$10 billion business at the time, and LensCrafters, which was \$1 billion. I've worked in international treasury, corporate finance, strategic planning, market development — a broad skill set. And I don't have an accounting degree. Both my undergrad and masters are in business from Carnegie Mellon, in Pittsburgh, my hometown.

Tell me about growing up in Pittsburgh.

I have one brother. I went to a Catholic grade school, Catholic high school. I grew up in the '70s when the Steelers were at their peak. My brother and I still have season tickets. My brother is in Baltimore, and he gets back more often than I do. I still get back home three or four times a year.

Did you always have a nose for finance?

I always liked numbers and finance, and my Dad pushed me in the direction of business. I've always liked figuring things out. My mom would tell me that as a kid I would dump five puzzles on the floor and put them together. Now, going from company to company to company, you see different things. I have about a half dozen relationships on my fractional CFO work and I've worked with 30 total companies over the years in industries from medical, to IT, to retail, to manufacturing. My goal is to tweak the process and constantly ask the question, How do I make it better?

How did you decide you could make "fractional" CFO work?

Truthfully, it just started working. After WorkNet, I worked briefly for Phillips Furniture/Weekends Only where I was CFO in 2002-2003. I took on a project right after that work and that became a six-year engagement. I realized I hadn't looked for a

job for some time. I was too busy. And I saw there were more businesses out there — companies in that \$2 million to \$20 million space that needed CFO services, but didn't have a full-time CFO.

Who was your first business customer?

Access US, headed by Vic Mattison. We had a great relationship, and I stayed with him for about six years.

How did you meet your wife?

Speed dating. It's what I jokingly call my homeless days. I was living at The Chase Park Plaza and went to a speed dating event at the (St. Francis Xavier) College Church. It's like musical chairs. You talk to someone for five minutes. At the end, the guys all circle the names on a list they want to go out with. The girls all do the same. If there's a match, they send you the phone numbers. I'd never done anything like that in my life.

How long did you wait for the your next date?

A week later. We went to dinner at a Greek restaurant that's now gone, Tokens. Kathy is in sales with her father's company, M&R Plating in Washington, Mo.

Why do you call that time your "homeless days?"

After WorkNet wrapped up, I was renting a place in Clayton from Rothschild Group. I was on month-to-month and they sold my unit. They then cut me a deal and allowed me to rent another unit they were selling, but one that was not going to be ready for 30 days. So I put everything I owned into storage and went to visit a friend who lived in Hawaii. When I came back, the unit still wasn't ready, so I moved into the Chase for two months.

What's the best advice you've received?

It probably came from my father. He said it's better to marry late in life. If you marry happily late in life, you'll be glad you waited for the right woman to come along. If you marry unhappily, you'll be glad for all the years of freedom beforehand. I didn't marry until I was 41. I had many years I was able to do my own thing.

What books are on your reading list?

Harlan Steinbaum's "Tough Calls from the Corner Office." I heard him speak at a financial executives convention and the book is a compilation of 39 interviews. My other book is the biography of Steve Jobs. It's not on my bookshelf. I feel obligated to read it on my iPad.

WHAT THEY SAY

"We've had one or two occasions where companies in our portfolio needed follow-on funding. Sometimes, when we've brought Ken in, within 24 hours of him working with the company, he's given us what we need to know to fund the company."
Scott Zajac, senior managing director, Advantage Capital Partners



"Ken started my 6 a.m. class in Shaw Park about 8 years ago and quickly became a close friend. In 2008, he convinced me to start a nonprofit organization to help with the rising costs of training military cadets that I was privately funding. That led to the Saint Louis Military Officer Support Foundation. Ken is more than willing to sacrifice his own needs to assist a friend, co-worker or client."
Keith Hausher, owner of Shark Fitness Training, founder St. Louis Military Officer Support Foundation.



"When he was at LensCrafters, I think he began to realize that he had an understanding of people and leadership. He had vision and was able to look around to see what others were missing and understand what was ultimately important, sensing it was not always about money. This quality helps him evaluate a company's future."
Rev. Dan Toomey, priest and childhood friend



What keeps you up at night?

A client problem I can't solve. I've been known to send emails out at 3 a.m. to 4 a.m.

What's your biggest challenge?

Balancing my own time. I love working against the clock. I'll split my day from one company to another and take phone calls in between. Unfortunately, I don't have a good strategy to balance my time. I try to get up early for a workout, grab the first hours to myself before anyone is up, and then it's off to the races. I manage to keep the weekends clear.