

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Planning and some luck

ROBERT M. KEELEY JR.

Position: CEO, Diversified Project Management

Age: 42

Education: Bachelor's degree, marketing, Bryant College, 1989

Residence: Hopkinton

Quote: "Live hard, play hard, have fun, build the family."



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BY ERIC CONVEY
JOURNAL STAFF

Talk to and about more than a few successful CEOs and a pattern will almost certainly emerge.

Friends will tell you how hard-charging he is. Customers or clients will speak to his attention to detail. And the CEO himself or herself will tell you how incredibly lucky he or she has been along the path to the top.

Robert M. Keeley Jr. is three for three.

As chief executive and owner of **Diversified Project Management**, Keeley runs a company that by many accounts is a leader in a field it helped to define. The operation, which is based in Newton and has satellite offices in Hartford and Stamford, Conn., has helped many of the region's biggest businesses and nonprofit institutions handle moves and building projects.

Keeley describes a deliberate path to his current position, but also says it's one he hardly would have predicted in any detail while growing up in Holliston.

His entrepreneurial path may well have started when he was 12 and bought a neighborhood paper route. By 15 he owned a painting and landscaping business, employing friends.

At 17 or 18, he worked for a millwork company in Wakefield.

That job offered experience on job sites and handling the books. He didn't realize both would come in incredibly handy.

"I was very lucky," he said in a recent interview.

During his time at Rhode Island's Bryant College, where he majored in marketing, Keeley worked in a ski shop. He figured that upon graduation he'd land a job in the industry.

Instead, he ended up at a commercial moving company. That business failed a few years later. At 24 years old and needing a new job, he passed up a chance to work for a competitor of the business that had failed and instead took a position at a Boston transportation company whose owner offered him an equity stake. Over a few years, Keeley bought out his partner and was free to pursue more project consulting.

"I was very lucky," he said.

His destiny in his own hands, Keeley took space in a Cambridge building that also housed something of a placement agency for unemployed late-career executives. A woman who also worked in the building introduced Keeley to Rob MacLennan, who was looking for work and had 25 years of experience managing facilities.

Describing that meeting 20 years later, Keeley said, "I was lucky."

MacLennan went out and managed projects.

At night, Keeley would take care of payables and receivables. "Just like I was running my (landscaping) business," he said.

By day, he focused on finding work. That involved selling not just his company's services but the notion of project management itself.

"It was this constant education — getting people to understand what he did," Keeley said.

For clients that were moving, that can include not just obvious issues like how to time boxing and unboxing, but far more complex matters like how to migrate or even replace telephone and computer systems. (One shelf at the Newton office has so many manuals for telephone systems that a visitor could think the place was the headquarters of a telecom industry trade association.)

The recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s provided opportunities, Keeley said, as companies were forced to reconsider how they did business. It also meant cost-cutters shed facilities professionals. Keeley hired them and essentially leased them back to their former employers on an as-needed basis.

Some jobs are simple. Others are wildly complex, like the time a manufacturing company wanted to relocate production — without stopping work for any significant

stretch of time, said MacLennan, who has since retired.

Eventually, Diversified Project added a new service — working as an intermediary between clients and companies building new facilities.

"A client will initially bring us into the process because they're afraid of the architect, afraid of the contractor," Keeley said. Diversified Project Management is never the general contractor, however.

Services can range from 50 cents a square foot, minimum, for move planning to as much as \$1.50 a square foot or construction management. For super-complicated work, Diversified Project Management's fee has hit \$7 per square foot.

To pull it all off, the company's staff brings a broad array of experience — working for many of the kinds of companies Keeley wants as clients. And for everything there is a system. Manuals abound.

"None of us is irreplaceable," Keeley said.

Rich Silton, a management consultant who has used Keeley for some big projects, said the secret to his success in part is his approach to work.

"He manages to take business very seriously without being over-serious himself," Silton said.

Diversified's staff members "clearly have a tremendous amount of experience," Silton added. "They plan better than anybody. They anticipate every contingency."

MacLennan, the former colleague, says Keeley combines "a great rapport with people" with a good mind.

"He's probably one of the most brilliant businessmen I've ever run into," the former IBMer said.

Keeley, who is married and the father of two boys, says that in addition to crossing paths with key people in his business life — he said he has been "lucky" in that regard — some of his best business advice came from his father.

"He's always been a great moral compass — doing the right thing even if it's not going to make you the most money," Keeley said.

His own motto, to the extent he has one, might be: "Live hard, play hard, have fun, build the family."

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