



Eric Kunkel

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Leading from the front: How Eric Kunkel created an award winning business

When Eric Kunkel set up CCK Strategies 25 years ago with his business partners, John Curzon and Terry Cumbey, little did any of them suspect the firm would become one of the top 250 accounting firms in the US – and win prestigious awards for their work to grow exports in the country.

But that's what happened – CCK Strategies is now the 232nd largest CPA firm in the country. "When you consider how many thousands of accounting firms there are in the US, that's kind of ridiculous because we didn't have anything when we started," Eric recalls.

And along with his success, Eric is very humble. CCK Strategies' growth during the past quarter century is down to a lot of hard work and delivering on its promises to clients.

While the founders didn't necessarily aspire to build a large company – the focus was on making a decent living – as more work came in they embraced the growth and continue to do so. As Eric says: "If you stand still, the tendency is to slide backwards."

It is that attitude that has helped to ensure that CCK Strategies continues to thrive: "We call ourselves a boutique firm. When we started this practice, it was a conscious decision for the three of us to aim at the middle market entrepreneur as that was where we felt we could create the most value.

"Our clients are ideas people; they own and operates businesses that they were involved in forming or took over in a generational succession, but typically private business, family or otherwise closely held.

"We wanted to provide a consistent relationship with our clients and make a difference to them and help them to be successful, rather than just doing their taxes on a one-off basis.

"We like to meet the person, find out their goals, and help them to accomplish them. That kind of stuff is really fun."

Today, CCK Strategies' clients cover a range of sectors including oil and gas, manufacturing, aerospace, real estate, construction, development and professional services, many of them across borders.

International expertise

The firm helps clients with their international activities, whether that is overseas businesses with US operations, or a US company that is looking to expand into other territories.

It is the international work that has garnered CCK Strategies plenty of praise in recent years including the President's 'E' Award that recognises those companies that have made a significant contribution to the expansion of US exports.

Only a small number of businesses are recognised each year. Usually, they are involved in manufacturing or retail, but CCK Strategies' work over four years to assist and facilitate exports was recognised by the judges, when it won in 2020. The company also scooped one of the annual awards in 2016.

The practice has also won the Export Champion Award in Oklahoma for

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the past seven years. "Our export is different to making a product and selling it, we provide a tailored customer solution," says Eric.

While international work can be complex, given no two jurisdictions are the same, and each client's needs are different, Eric enjoys this: "The opportunity to try to provide a solution that creates value for a customer that's uniquely theirs is really challenging and fun."

"It gets hard, and a lot of people don't want to do this, they prefer to focus on easier things, but we actually like the hard work."

Stable employment

Eric has always been a hard worker, but also practical. He came to the accounting profession while in college; while he had grown up around it – his dad had an accounting degree – Eric only decided to go into it after looking at the economy and seeing the potential for stable employment.

"In the early 1980s the economy was challenging in the country, particularly around here [Oklahoma], because the oil business wasn't doing well," he says. "I decided that what I liked about accounting was that it could embrace a body of knowledge in a profession. I would always be able to work because I could command that information. It's not like just going to work where maybe you are prone to the whims of the organisation – or the economy."

"The principles of accounting are somewhat universal and while tax may have its variance, everybody has to do it. I just decided that was the best way to have a career was to be valuable."

Mentoring

Nevertheless, he always knew he wanted to own his own business at some point, which came to fruition at CCK Strategies.

Now, as one of the senior figures in the practice, Eric likes to provide opportunities to younger members of the profession to get a foot in the door and build a career for themselves. He also looks to pass on some of his wisdom gained from his years in the sector.

"Whether they listen to me, I don't know," he laughs. "But I say to them in life if you make a decision and you move towards that decision and share that decision, you can't be stopped, and you probably will get what you want. It's as simple as being empowered in what you're doing instead of waiting for somebody else to tell you what you should do. You should hear what people want you to do, but don't feel like it's a barrier to you deciding for yourself what you could do."

Eric also looks to instill a hard work ethic into those who work for CCK Strategies: "I'm tenacious and no one is going to outwork me – and that is what worked for me. I was able to not give up and to work hard and to move towards what I wanted."

"We treat every client's trust as sacred. If you hire us, we're going to do what we say we're going to do; we're going to make you better off"

This attitude helped to make a success of CCK Strategies. As a start-up, the founders had to go out and find clients and, once they had been convinced to give the company a chance, then deliver what they promised.

"If you make your clients happy, then they'll tell their sphere of influence and some of those people will hire you and you then get bigger and more challenging opportunities."

"We treat every client's trust as sacred. If you hire us, we're going to do what we say we're going to do; we're going to make you better off. For the most part, it's been word of mouth where people will give us a chance because we got credibility when it came to them."

"You've got to create your brand in the market and then there's an obligation to fortify that brand. If you're going to say, 'here's my brand', you'd better perform when people hire you."

International expansion

Part of expanding that brand internationally has been for CCK Strategies to join IR Global. Eric attends IR Global conferences regularly to meet other members. He says it's essential to take away good contacts of people who you want to work with in the future – if or when the right project comes along.

"For example, I have some work in India right now and I need someone to be an advocate for me over there, so my first thought was IR Global," Eric says. "They had a suggestion that facilitated a conversation and will hopefully lead to a business relationship. It can be done this way, but it's also nice if its origins are person to person at a conference."

The international focus also provides great scope for continued expansion of the company and this will likely be through organic growth, which has always been the case. While Eric has no plans to retire yet, he is helping other members of the firm to take up opportunities to ensure the business is in safe hands when he does decide to step aside.

Right now, however, Eric admits he'd like to win a few more awards before that happens.

Eric Kunkel

Founding Partner,
CCK Strategies, PLLC

+1 (918) 491-4036
eric@cckcpa.com
irglobal.com/advisors/eric-kunkel

www.cckcpa.com

Eric Kunkel's major areas of practice include: income tax planning and compliance; foreign and international tax matters; business valuation; multi-state tax matters; estate and gift tax planning; audit and financial accounting services; general business consultation; and benefit and retirement planning. In addition to other sectors, Eric's practice at CCK involves companies in the manufacturing and distribution industries. As a result, his professional experience has grown to include foreign and international tax matters.



Eric holds tax and business consulting experience in connection with client business presence in the following jurisdictions: Algeria, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Columbia, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Madagascar, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Oman, Peru, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Trinidad, Turkey, Turks & Caicos, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. He is currently working with clients with tax filings and other compliance matters in 47 U.S. States.