

QUESTIONS

Mark Malerba

Vice president, Metropolitan Maintenance

Mark Malerba is vice president of Metropolitan Maintenance, a company his parents, Mike and Joanne, started in 1980. They remain active in the business, as does his sister, Emily, and his wife, Caterina. Malerba, 34, attended John Paul II in London and then went to Western, earning a

BA and an Ivey HBA. He is vice chair of the Better Business Bureau of Western Ontario board of directors. When he's not working, he likes to spend time with his children, Luca, three, and Mila, nearly one. He also goes to as many concerts and sports events as he can squeeze in to his schedule.

You joined the family business eight years ago, 25 years after your parents founded it. How has the business changed in those eight years?

In 2005, my parents were approached by a potential buyer. At the same time the consulting group that I was working for was moving to Toronto. I had no interest in moving to Toronto and we decided as a family not to sell and I joined the family business on a full-time basis. That same year, we grew by 30% and we have grown every year thereafter. Since 2005, our sales have grown by 70%, our staff has grown by 50%, we have won six business awards and we expanded to a new location in March 2011.

How big an operation is Metropolitan? How many employees? How many buildings does your company clean in a given week?

The company has grown to approximately 150 employees. We clean over 100 locations, everything from airports and educational facilities to office complexes and retail centres. The frequency of cleaning depends on the needs of the client—most sites are cleaned five days per week and there are some locations that are cleaned seven days per week.

How large a geographical area do you cover? Have you considered expanding to other cities?

We service London and area. When I graduated business school, I was eager to explore expanding to other regions, and my father, who has never had any interest in a geographic expansion, told me to wait six months and see if I felt the same way. The risk in any geographic expansion is the loss of control and difficulty in maintaining the level of your service performance. I learned very quickly that my father was right. In order to be successful in this industry you have to be fully engaged, invested and hands-on in order to provide the personal touch that clients truly value. Our focus always has and will continue to be to grow in this region.



What's the biggest challenge running the business? Many would assume hiring and retaining workers. The most challenging aspect of running this business is finding the right people. We don't just fill a position as soon as possible for the sake of doing so. Our business would be nothing without our amazing team of employees, so we take a lot of pride in our thorough recruitment and selection process. The average employee turnover rate in our industry is over 250% annually. Ours is less than 9%.

You compete against firms that lower costs by using independent contractors who do not receive the benefits of being full-time employees. How do you cope with that challenge? In most if not all industries there are companies that do not do business the right way and, unfortunately, our industry is no exception. Many of the firms that use independent contractors are larger companies. The reason these companies do this is essentially to save costs and therefore submit very low bids.

Often these independent contractors do not have both liability insurance and WSIB coverage. This not only puts themselves at risk in the event of an injury or property damage, but also the building owner or tenant where the cleaning is performed. It is an important question to ask your janitorial service provider—are the individuals cleaning my site employees or independent contractors? We let our track record of over three decades speak for itself as well as the almost 30 reference letters we provide to potential clients.

Your workers do their work out of sight of most people and often are unappreciated. How do you motivate them? We have several employee recognition programs that we have implemented over the past several years. We are proud of the fact that we have many long-term employees who have been with our company for over 10, 15, 20 and even 25 years—something that is very rare in the janitorial industry. In addition, employees value informal feedback just as much as the formal recognition. A simple phone call to say thank-you to someone who covered for an employee off sick or passing along an email from a client praising the efforts of staff who turned in a lost engagement ring go a long way in showing appreciation and respect to the front-line people who represent your business.

When the economy sputters, is your service one of the areas where businesses cut back? Did you feel the effect of the recession? Fortunately, cleaning is a service that all businesses require and for the most part our service is fairly recession-proof. We have achieved year-over-year sales growth since the company's inception in 1980. Clients know that a clean workplace results in healthier and safer work environments by protecting against illness, increasing productivity and ultimately increasing occupant satisfaction. That being said, if a client is experiencing a challenging time, we work with them by tailoring our service to meet their needs.

What will Metropolitan look like in 10 years? It is our goal that Metropolitan Maintenance will be double the size of what we are today by continuing to provide unparalleled service to so many great organizations in the London area. We will continue to develop long-term relationships with our clients that have been built on integrity, honesty and trust. **Ω**

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER CLARK

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