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Alternative Board can offer peer experience

BY ANNA LAZARUS

John Dini never met a small business he didn't like. Mom-and-pop stores, or small, ambitious start-ups, he appreciates their stories. Dini revels in a company's challenges. In short, this businessman loves the business that he's in.

It's a good thing, because as owner of the South Texas franchise for The Alternative Board (TAB), Dini has created a diverse network of companies, and for the past three years, he has made them his business. Literally.

"I have a strange work history," Dini said one recent afternoon. "I've never owned a company where I didn't know the name of every person in the company."

A longtime business consultant who first made a name for himself turning companies around, Dini has always been interested in the struggle of small business. In running his TAB chapter — there are currently more than 85 chapters across the U.S. and Canada — he has made it possible for local business owners to meet and discuss work-related issues in a noncompetitive environment.

TAB is a privately held organization comprised of business owners and executives who participate in peer advisory groups conducted by professional facilitators. The meetings are much like think tanks in which members share their collective experience to discover practical solutions to business problems.

As one of his chapter's three facilitators, part of Dini's job is to lead discussions at the groups' monthly meetings. Dini aides in helping these small businesses meet their goals. And by being involved with TAB, these companies are aiding the success of Dini's outfit: This local chapter of TAB is the largest chapter in terms of membership in North America, and arguably, the most successful.

"I like working with smaller companies," Dini says of his work with TAB, which is specifically geared toward helping small and mid-sized businesses. "We can make a difference with smaller companies.... It doesn't show up in the stock price, but it makes a big difference in the life of the business."



John Dini, owner of the local chapter of The Alternative Board.

Quality of life

A New Jersey native, Dini spent a good deal of his life there and in Los Angeles. San Antonio became a factor when he was looking for a place to raise his kids. But three years after his 1994 move, Dini wasn't quite sure about South Texas living.

"I had gotten the quality of life for them, but not for me," he says.

A self-described "generalist" by trade, up until that point, Dini had spent the bulk of his professional life working as a business consultant. In L.A. he built large physicians' groups, and owned medical management companies and then turned them around. His educational background had prepared him somewhat for these undertakings. (He had already secured a bachelor's in accounting from Rutgers University, and then an MBA from Pepperdine University.) But looking back, Dini says, his real education came in his real-world acquisitions, when he "learned from" his mistakes.

Dini frequently talks about how a positive professional life yields a positive personal life. For instance, his local TAB chapter specifically aims to increase the quality of business owners' professional, and personal, lives.

"For a small-business owner or operator, those are intertwined," he says.

The same holds true for Dini, too. He operates a consulting business through his own company, Management Performance Network (MPN) Inc., in addition to owning the local TAB chapter.

Besides being a nice place to raise his kids, San Antonio was an attractive place to the low-maintenance and oft-traveled Dini because, as he says, it "had an airport." The city's NBA team in the Spurs came a close second. But basketball games and airports didn't make Dini any friends.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA BARNES

"After three years of living here, I still knew no one," he says.

Now, three years later, Dini's TAB sports some 60 member-companies. It's a lot of names for him to remember, but Dini seems to be doing just fine.

Members only

The businesspeople who make up Dini's local effort in TAB run the gamut. Young and old, proprietors of small companies and overseers of budding-conglomerates, this professional peer group is split into seven boards whose members meet once a month. Dini, who personally assigns members to specific groups based on their personalities and insights, says that he doesn't place businesses with competing interests together. Each meeting lasts four hours, and according to participants, the monthly assembly is something to which they look forward.

"(At TAB meetings) people will tell you if your baby is ugly," asserts George Santos, owner of local computer firm TRC Computer Services Inc., referring to someone's business ideas, of course.

Kidding aside, kids can truly mean two things to these proud parents who regularly flock to TAB functions, eager to show off the fruits of their business labor. In other words, the presidents and owners of these businesses are quite attached to what they do.

"TAB isn't for everybody," says Dini, who adds that his board probably isn't for stagnant businesses, not looking to make changes. "Most members bring in experience ... they have a real commitment to what they do."

Members quickly return the compliment.

"I think it's a great format," says Jim Poole, president of Royal Window Fashions.

Despite Poole's specialized industry, he is able to draw from fellow business owners' input at the sessions to the benefit of his own company. "We don't look for someone to solve our day-to-day problems," Poole says, "as we look for direction to chart our own course."

As for charting TAB's future course, Dini is aiming for expansion, adding two more discussion groups (also called boards) in the coming months. Any more than 10 of these boards, says Dini, might defeat the purpose of TAB's mission.

Dini's own mission lies in keeping tabs on TAB, and he's obviously up for the task.

"I don't want an organization where I don't know the business of every single company," he says.

John Dini

Profession: Owner, San Antonio Chapter of The Alternative Board. Also operates a consulting business, Management Performance Network Inc.

Area of expertise: Business startups and turnarounds of early-stage companies.

Education: BS in accounting, Rutgers University; MBA in strategic planning, Pepperdine University



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