

Company Leader Q&A

EYE ON THE PRIZE

By Symone C. Skrzycki

What is the key to future growth for your organization?

How does your approach to challenges influence your company’s success?

What is one of the most unique aspects of your business?

BizVoice® posed the above questions to four leaders whose businesses were named 2015 Indiana Companies to Watch. Their observations are telling. Regardless of industry or size, the honorees focus on people, performance and plowing through obstacles as a team. The ability to adapt is a shared strength.

The quartet includes: A “gentle giant” (DK Pierce & Associates, Inc.); a company dedicated to “improving people’s worlds” (Design Collaborative); a firm focused on “tapping into talent” (Gibson); and a business that delivers a “Division 1 college experience” through student housing (Annex Student Living, LLC).

The leaders reflect on steps to success and share their visions for the future.

Annex Student Living

Kyle Bach, president/CEO; Founded: 2009; Employees: 12
Annex Student Living, headquartered in Indianapolis, is a student housing developer focused on providing a “Division I experience” at smaller educational institutions (e.g., regional campuses, community colleges) throughout the United States.

Annex Student Living: A \$32 million community in downtown Indianapolis is scheduled for completion next August.



From concept to construction: Ideas begin to take shape at Design Collaborative.

Design Collaborative

Pat Pasterick, president; Founded: 1992; Employees: 54
Fort Wayne-based Design Collaborative is an architectural, mechanical and electrical engineering, and interior design firm that serves clients in higher education, health care and corporate markets.

DK Pierce & Associates

Denise Pierce, president/CEO; Founded: 2000; Employees: 20
DK Pierce & Associates, headquartered in Zionsville, is a certified Women’s Business Enterprise that provides strategic consulting services for biopharmaceutical companies whose drugs are used for catastrophic diseases such as cancer and rare disorders.

Gibson

Tim Leman, chairman/CEO; Founded: 1933 (Leman joined the executive leadership team in 2008 and became CEO in 2011); Employees: 110
South Bend-based Gibson is a 100% employee-owned regional insurance broker and risk management services firm. It also has operations in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne and Plymouth.

Q. What is the key to future growth for your organization?

“The key for any organization – in particular ours – is the ability to scale. We’re currently going through an implementation of how to scale up our business. In fact, we have a third-party consultant helping us through that procedure because it will require significant amounts of upgrades to our current processes and systems, how we evaluate opportunities and how we track various aspects of our business.”

- Kyle Bach, *Annex Student Living*

“Our ability to adapt to change is probably the biggest thing. There’s a saying that change is mandatory, progress is optional. In the world in general, but particularly in the world of architects and engineers, we’ve seen some dramatic changes in the last six to eight years. In our business, we’re likely to see more changes in the next 20 years than we’ve seen in the last 300 years.

“The needs of our clients are changing. The methods and materials of construction are changing. The speed of delivery is changing. Societal expectations regarding what buildings need to be able to do and how they affect the environment and what their energy requirements should be – that’s all (changing).”

- Pat Pasterick, *Design Collaborative*



“For us, it will be technology. We want to stay a relatively small company. ‘Relatively’ is defined differently by different people, but we want to stay smaller in that the only way for us to really get growth is to use some technological advances to enhance our efficiencies as well as create new products for our clients.

“Right now, we have so much work, we are literally at work threshold. Growth over the next year is going to mean hiring some highly-skilled people to get us to that next level.”

- Denise Pierce, *DK Pierce & Associates, Inc.*

“There’s no question about it: It’s talent. We’re a services business. We don’t have any assets. We don’t make widgets. It’s all based on the talent and relationships our people form with our clients.

“Our workforce now is about 30% millennial, which in our industry is very different than most of the other firms. We also invest a lot in all of our current team in development and training. We created a leadership academy. It’s all about people for us.”

- Tim Leman, *Gibson*



It’s all about people – customers and clients alike – at Gibson.

Q. How does your approach to challenges influence your company’s success?

“Not only in our little niche, but (also with) a lot of other real estate developers and certainly some of the multi-family developers, we’re seeing a drastic increase in construction costs. To use that challenge in particular, we’ve taken a few unique situations where we’ve actually started looking at building modular apartment communities. Staying in front of those challenges and being able to adapt before they actually occur is what allows us to succeed.”

- Bach, *Annex Student Living*



“Part of the key for us is we have a really strong can-do attitude around here and a willingness to consider new ways of doing things so that we’re riding waves instead of being pounded by them. The other thing is that we have a pretty diverse group in terms of their strengths and abilities. No one of us is as smart as all of us. Our name is Design Collaborative – we try to work together and recognize that anybody can have the right idea and that people have strengths in different areas. We try to tap into that.”

- Pasterick, *Design Collaborative*

“We’re well known for pivoting pretty quickly. Whether it’s a challenge or an opportunity, we can pull the right people together, assess what’s going on and make a change.

“I’d have to say the second thing is our transparency. Whether it’s good news or bad news, I try to share it all. I like to include the voice of the entire company. If there is a challenge, I want people to tell me what they think we should do about it so they can help design the resolution.

“Another one of our success factors is, not that we like failures, but we embrace them. Any good business goes through failures. We’ve learned so much simply by failing and have made a lot of changes based on those failures. It’s really important to be able to do that. It truly becomes something that we learn by.”

- Pierce, *DK Pierce & Associates, Inc.*

“We’re a very resilient organization – and we have to be. Our economy up here (in South Bend, Fort Wayne and Plymouth, where three of the firm’s offices are located) in particular was just shredded during the Great Recession. We were very dependent on the RV business. Elkhart led the nation in unemployment (for a period of time). We’ve had all those kinds of challenges. Students (upon college graduation) don’t necessarily see some of those places as destination cities for where they want to have their careers.

“Those all provide challenges to us and we have to work extra hard to make sure that we are that kind of place (that would attract talent) and everything is sustainable and so on. Part of that is our commitment to the long haul. In fact, that’s one of our core values: being committed to the long haul. For us, that means a couple of different things. We’re obviously committed to our team and employees. We’re committed to our clients. We’re committed to our community.”

- Leman, *Gibson*



What is one of the most unique aspects of your business?



“Oftentimes, we’ll meet with the institutions and communities that we serve, and express to them what it is that our culture looks like. That’s served us very well with our clientele, which in most of our communities consists of the students we serve, the parents, the institutions where we’re located and the communities we’re in.

“I had a tremendous collegiate experience.

That’s not just from the social aspect. It was the ability to be out on my own for the first time and meeting lifelong friends that I’m still friends with today. (It was) being able to take advantage of various resources that larger institutions provided me. It would be selfish of me to keep and bottle up some of those experiences I had in college. It’s (the company culture) all about the camaraderie and the experience that we’re able to provide internally and then externally to our clients.”

- Bach, Annex Student Living



This Design Collaborative project houses health care.

“Our mission is to improve people’s worlds, and that’s something we address with our people. It’s on the walls in the office and it’s something we talk about on a regular basis. Culture is a huge issue for us. It’s something we really work at. Everybody wants to feel like they make a difference.

“Each of us each day can have an impact – a positive one – on improving somebody’s world. There are parts of everyone’s day that are mundane or less fun than others, but in the big picture, our people are engaged and excited because they’re thinking, ‘What I’m doing is making a difference.’”

- Pasterick, Design Collaborative



Innovation and collaboration drive success at DK Pierce and Associates.

“There are two things: No. 1 is our specialization. We are very niched. We focus on cancer and rare diseases in our business focus. Our reputation within that specific area is what gets us a lot of business.

“The second aspect is – and I know people (at many companies) talk about this – but the culture is cool. I had students from Butler University here today, and we were talking about the entrepreneurial spirit and about how cool it was on campus. We have dogs on campus. We literally are like a family. How did one of my team put it? He said that I hire unbelievably different people – totally opposite ends of the spectrum, yet we all have the same values and get along so well. I think that’s it: Everybody engages in the vision and the values, and our culture is unbelievably tied to that.”

- Pierce, DK Pierce & Associates, Inc.



“We put the ESOP (employee stock ownership plan) in place in 2010 and the participants have seen huge increases in the value of their balances. Every one of our employees gets to participate in ownership of our company. That means it’s even more paramount that we continue to be a successful, growing company. It’s not just a couple of partners that can decide between them if it’s a tough year. We have the responsibility and burden of all of

these families that are counting on us to be successful. The stakes are higher, and we take that really seriously.

“We have a unique culture because everyone is an owner and thinks like an owner.”

- Leman, Gibson