



## **Schneider of VVA on hard work, entrepreneurship and staying one step ahead of the game**

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"There are no free rides, you work hard for everything you get." This important belief, along with an entrepreneurial spirit, was instilled upon Irwin Schneider early on by his father and is an ideology he continues to embrace. Throughout his childhood Schneider helped his father, a self-employed TV repairman who worked six days a week, fifteen hours a day for as long as he can remember, with odds and ends. "I was always working with my hands. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a HVAC mechanic, plumber, electrician or something along those lines."

For this reason Schneider decided to pursue a two-year associates degree at SUNY Farmingdale for air-conditioning & refrigeration technology, As luck would have it, the degree concentrated nearly 70% on system design rather than servicing systems. This opened a new door for Irwin. "I was always good with math and numbers, and because of this coursework, found that I enjoyed the design side. My professor at the time told me the next step would be to get a four year engineering degree and then eventually get my P.E. license." And that's exactly what he did by transferring to Rochester Institute of Technology where they had a work-study program. It was through this program he landed his first summer internship with Caresky & Associates. "They told me they wanted someone with experience and I told them I needed to get my first job to get the experience! So they gave me a shot."

Schneider began a long and successful career with Syska & Hennessy, in 1980. The firm's strong entrepreneurial spirit and a belief that fostering individual success creates opportunity and success for the firm, complemented Irwin's mantra and work ethic. At Syska he learned not to take "no" for an answer, a motto which would later shape VVA's philosophy. Within 12 years, Irwin rose through the ranks at Syska & Hennessy from an assistant engineer to sr. VP and a member of the executive committee.

He found a lifelong friend at Syska too, Sal Farruiggia. In those days, Syska had just begun doing aquarium work, including the San Francisco and Monterey Bay aquariums, when Irwin pitched the N.J. State aquarium project and won it for Syska. Enjoying this unique and challenging project, Schneider took on the Tampa, Fla. aquarium project as well, where he would join forces with Farruiggia, who oversaw the design & build of the life support systems while Schneider managed the HVAC system design and the rest of the project. This proved to be a winning team. They took on a variety of other special projects including laboratories, museums, television studios and libraries. It is this type of unique, challenging project Irwin seeks and has become the hallmark of his career.

In 1994, Lorenzo Vascotto (who Schneider had known as an intern at Syska & Hennessy) and Sail Van Nostrand, approached Schneider to join their newly formed project management firm. The timing was perfect. Although he loved what he was doing and his accomplishments at Syska, he needed a change and wanted to do something more entrepreneurial. There was, however, a

tremendous amount of risk involved, leaving a good position for a start-up company and with two young sons, a wife and a mortgage to take care of, there was a lot to lose. Schneider's favorite pastime is spending time on his boat with his family and fishing, but, with few other options he decided to sell the boat and use the proceeds to pay for his family's living expenses for the next year or so before they - hopefully - had guaranteed income. Luckily, the calculated risk paid off as the trio - who made up the newly formed, VVA - hit the ground running. In early 1997 they won their first major project, the law firm, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.

VVA quickly became known as trailblazers and immediately took a look at unique opportunities in the market, not just the tenant representation work owner's reps usually chase. VVA branched out into many of the niches Irwin specialized in, including libraries, museums and television studios but also areas newer to him, including data centers and retail stores. The trio utilized their strong engineering backgrounds and technical experience to their advantage on the more complex projects. Slowly but surely, they grew the company by hiring highly skilled, experienced people, promoting an entrepreneurial spirit and encouraging growth and opportunity within the firm.

During these early years, the team set the founding principles for which VVA as a whole, lives by today. These include a "can do" attitude and finding innovative solutions rather than following a "cookie-cutter" program. The VVA "forefathers," if you will, also agreed to certain business principles such as, continuously improving services offered, showing tangible results and never becoming a cost center to clients.

"We show our value in terms of the rate of return we achieve, our work product, and in providing the guidance and leadership to complete a project. We've created a firm with diverse backgrounds. No one can be an expert in all fields. Each member of the firm is an expert in one or a few areas and is a generalist in the rest. This way we can draw on all these resources to provide the best service possible to our clients."

Schneider has been working on one of the most challenging projects of his career, a ground-up development project for NY Law School. The challenge lies in the coordination between and appeasement of a host of entities, complicated site logistics and planning and, management of a tight schedule. Due to the limitations of the new location and the need for additional space for the school's library, a basement "bathtub" (similar to the one constructed for the World Trade Center) was built to accommodate the library at subterranean building levels. In fact, several lead engineers from the original World Trade Center development project are also on the NY Law School project team.

Schneider is also managing a ground-up development project in Harlem for a major sports entertainment organization. "These ground-up projects, working directly with a developer or end-user, represent a growing market for us and an initiative that I am leading within our firm."

And he wouldn't have it any other way. Schneider is all about re-inventing the wheel and re-inventing VVA. "It's all about being opportunistic, taking on markets we've never worked in and educating ourselves about them. This is not only what sustains the firm but also helps us be leaders in our industry. On a personal level, this is also what keeps me invigorated, motivated and looking forward to the future."