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TYPE OF BUSINESS
Consulting & Structural Engineering

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES
22-25

STATUS
Private

YEARS IN OPERATION
1985 - Present

ANNUAL REVENUE
N/A

PAUL FAST FAST & EPP STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS

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Interviewed by Teresa Dosh
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GENERAL ENTREPRENEUR QUESTIONS

1. *When did you start your first entrepreneurial venture and what was it?*

My first real entrepreneurial venture was in 1985, four years after I graduated from university. I was still working for an employer in the structural engineering field. I came up with a toy idea. It was basically a plastic toy in the form of a whale. It was meant as something you could store your bath toys in. You could open the mouth of the whale and stuff all the toys inside the belly. Since the whale had a perforated shell, you could close the mouth of the whale and hang it up to drip-dry. We developed this idea and ended up selling it to an American company on a royalty basis. That was my very first foray into entrepreneurship or doing something out of the ordinary.

2. *What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?*

I was motivated to become an entrepreneur because I was interested in seeking thrills and adventure. Also, I think it was ingrained in me since my late teens/early twenties that I wanted to do something on my own, and my becoming an entrepreneur just flowed naturally out of that. But what motivated me the most was a keen interest in adventure.

3. *Was there any one person who was a model of inspiration for you and in what way?*

I read some books, amongst others, by R.G. Le Tourneau. He was a very successful business man who had developed big earth moving machines. The name of the one book of his that influenced me some was *Mover of Men & Mountains*. Another source of inspiration was a guest lecturer that came for a lunch hour talk during my fourth year at university. He talked about six or seven different business ventures that he had gotten into. He was a professional engineer as well, but he hadn't just done pure engineering work. He had gotten into other ventures, and that really intrigued me because I liked variety. I don't like to just focus on one thing for eight hours a day, so that caught my attention. I said, 'That's what I'd like to do.' I realized that although a person may have one main business, you can always be open to other opportunities and ventures. These thoughts stoked my fire of desire because I wanted to get into different things in the same way that this man had.

4. *Was your educational experience (to whatever extent helpful)? If so, in which way?*

Yes, my educational experience was definitely helpful—particularly in the consulting engineering practice side. To be a structural engineer you have to have a certain amount of education, otherwise you can't take responsibility for designs; so that was definitely very useful. But in a broader sense, an engineering education also hones your skills as a problem-solver. Engineers are known as problem solvers. You're solving problem after problem in a school environment. So when I came into the workplace I had already learned something in that respect and that was helpful. I also wouldn't minimize the impact or influence that two years of Bible School had on my overall business life. It's not quite as measurable as my university experience, but it definitely had a very positive influence on me.

5. *How many different business ventures have you started in the course of your entrepreneurial career?*

I have probably started nine or ten different ventures—some smaller, some bigger.

6. *What percentage of these business ventures do you estimate were financially successful?*

I would say that all of these ventures were a success, except for two or three.

ENTREPRENEURIAL QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR SPECIFIC BUSINESS

7. *How did you identify the opportunity that led to the setting up of the business?*

The opportunity arose more out of a love that I had developed for structural engineering in university. And I had always had a desire to have my own office, so it just grew out of that. It's not like we said, before going into university, 'There's a market niche in structural engineering. Let's go into that.' I was influenced somewhat by my cousins who had become structural engineers and had established a business in Winnipeg, MB—that inspired me some. But, ultimately, opportunities arose because of my career choice. I always knew I wanted to have my own independent firm in some way or another. In choosing a career I looked at all sorts of different options. My dad was a dentist. I looked at being a social worker. I looked at being a P.E. teacher. My high school annual said I was going to be a chartered accountant. But in the end I just prayed about it and said, 'Lord, guide me and show me where my affections and gifts lie.' So, I graduated, and, gradually, I developed a love for structural engineering and went for it. It was never as though I identified a market and said, 'That's what I want to do.' It was more like a love that developed for the type of work that I would be doing.

8. *What were the critical elements you assessed before you decided to pursue the opportunity?*

I actually just went for it. I decided to go for it—do it. I didn't do any big market research or analysis to see how many structural engineers were out there or what the demand was. I just developed a love for this type of work, and said, 'Let's go do our best at it.' The only thing that I did recognize early on was that there was a market niche for creative engineering. We focus on very expressive structures, where the structure isn't covered up by finishes like drywall. The structure is actually the architecture. We saw this as a market niche in creative engineering. We said, 'That's the type of work that we want to do. We want to do unusual buildings. We want to do work that is out of the ordinary.' Many engineers would rather just go with the tried and true. We love it when there is something unusual that we can tackle. So that was a bit of a niche that we recognized, and we went for it.

9. *How much time did it take from seeing the opportunity to the first day of business?*

Four years after graduation from university was really when I established the firm—in 1985.

10. *If you had partners, who were they, and how did you find them?*

In 1989, four years after the firm was established, my partner, Gerald Epp, and I formed a corporate partnership. We've been business partners now for close to 17 years. We've actually been working together for 17-18 years. We were friends in class, and we graduated together from UBC. We kept in touch after that, and that's how we came to start the partnership.

11. *Did you have a business plan of any kind? [or any kind of written plan]*

No, there was no business plan. We just went for it. Now we do long-term planning. We make projections and we set goals—5 to 10 year goals, even 20 year targets, which are always subject to change—but at the outset we just went for it. There was no sophisticated business plan.

12. *What kind of financing did you have?*

We had no financing. We got started with \$1,000 in my bank account, and I think it drained down to a couple of hundred. But I asked people to pay right away as soon as I finished a job, and the capital rose up from there.

The service industry back then was not so capital intensive, whereas now it is more capital intensive because we're into computers. As soon as you hire somebody you have to have computers. You have to pay for the software, the desk and the furniture. When I started out I just borrowed some space from somebody else's office and borrowed their computers, so I started with very little capital. It wasn't a very capital intensive investment.

13. *How much capital did it take?*

It really only took \$1,000—it was very minimal. I just went in on a shoestring budget and we started getting work and designing from there.

14. *How long did it take to reach a positive cash-flow position?*

It took a couple of months to reach a positive cash-flow position.

15. *If you did not have enough money at the time of the start, or a low points in the business cycle, what were some things you did in order to stretch your capital?*

We occasionally used some modest lines of credit to help stretch our capital along the way.

16. *What did you perceive to be the strengths of your venture?*

We were committed to highly creative structural engineering design.

17. *What did you perceive to be the weaknesses of your venture?*

The greatest weakness I perceived to be was my age. I started off at 28 years of age when most of the guys in the business that were running companies with partners were probably in their forties. So my age and the lack of experience were what I perceived to be the weaknesses.

18. *What was your most triumphant moment?*

I would almost want to separate this out to triumphant moments outside of and within the business.

The most triumphant moment outside the core business was in regards to this toy product that was the first venture we did. The odds of successfully placing a toy in the market are very slim, as I found out after we started the venture. So when the owner of this company let us know that he was prepared to offer us a royalty and manufacture the product that we had invented, that was really a triumphant moment—a positive booster.

Within our structural engineering company, our most triumphant moment was when we landed our first big project—just after the time of Expo 86. We got the commission to design the Ebco

Aerospace Centre in Delta, B.C., and we proposed a very unique structural solution. It's an exposed tension structure where the roof is supported by tension rods from the outside of the building. These tension rods hang off the roof support columns and spin off into a spider-web structure from the outside. We were given the commission, and we successfully executed it. In the end, we got an award of excellence from the Association of Consulting Engineers of Canada. That was really a triumphant moment on the engineering/consulting side.

19. *What was your worst moment?*

Here again, I would like to divide this into two.

Within the company, the worst moment was probably when I got a call from the owner's right hand man on a larger project we had worked on for a multi-story office building on Vancouver Island. This man called up one day and said, 'Paul, I'm in panic mode here. The people inside the building have felt some tremors and some trembling, and they want to evacuate the building.' The suggestion was that it might be on the verge of collapse. So that sent shivers down my spine, as you can well imagine. Fortunately, we investigated it, and there was no problem with the building. It was structurally sound, but it was one of those phone calls that you dread—that something terrible had happened where the structural safety had been compromised.

On the entrepreneurial side, one of the low points had to do with another product we had developed, the Sun-Shell Beach Canopy for which I got a US patent. We sold that product on a royalty basis to an American company, but they didn't carry the product very long. We marketed ourselves through trade shows, and while we were at a trade show in Chicago, I came to the realization that we were not going to be successful marketing the product the way that we were in the American market. I found myself walking the streets of Chicago just about as depressed as you can get. You put all your heart, soul, and effort into something—the venture—and you spend time creating

it, manufacturing it, coming up with the design, and apply for patents. Seeing that, then trying to look at it realistically and recognizing that it was not going to pan out given the marketing strategy that we had at the time, pushed me right down to what was quite a low point—walking the streets of Chicago, coming to that realization far from home.

20. *Once you got going, what were the most difficult gaps to fill and problems to solve as you began to grow your company?*

I would say training and keeping quality staff were the most difficult. Keeping the quality control up is also one of the big challenges in our engineering business.

21. *What were the key attributes you looked for in people (partners, advisors, managers) as you grew the company?*

Character—you want to look for good character in people. That goes a long way and is probably the most important factor. The second would be passion for creative design. Third would be having a good track record—making sure they come with good references.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

22. *What are some things that you have found to be most personally rewarding and satisfying for yourself as a entrepreneur?*

The freedom and opportunity to explore and develop unusual designs in our field and to create some of the products that we've created is pretty rewarding. The financial rewards are also satisfying. In addition, we have enjoyed good relationships with many people as a result of our business activities. I enjoy that very much. It's very satisfying and rewarding.

23. *What are the three most important lessons you have learned with respect to starting and running a business that you would pass on to an aspiring entrepreneur?*

I would say be prepared to put your nose to the grindstone for ten years and learn a skill. Hone your ability to use the tool in your hand—that skill, that trade, whatever it might be that you have learned. And be prepared to work at it for ten years plus before you begin to reap the rewards. Some people may reap the rewards much earlier if they hit on something. Other people may have to work longer; but just have the long term in mind, and be prepared to work hard and put your nose to the grindstone.

Entrepreneurial success is often associated with, somehow lucking out and stumbling across something and they become very rich, very fast. The more typical process is working hard, applying yourself to learning something really well, getting respected for what you can do, and then having the success and the rewards come. That's one very important lesson—think long term. Also, invest in young talent. Train them and prepare them, and your company will reap the rewards later on.

And the third thing would be to find a niche in the marketplace. For us it was designing architecturally expressive structures. That was our market niche, and we have been very successful at that. So, identify a niche and go after that, as opposed to just competing with everybody else at rock bottom price for a product that is very easy to produce or service that is very easy to provide.

FAITH AND THE MARKETPLACE

24. *What does the term "calling" mean to you? [i.e. as a pastor is said to be "called" to the ministry]*

What the term 'calling' means to me is discerning where your God-given talents and gifting lie.

25. *Do you feel that you were “called” to entrepreneurship? If so, what does that mean to you?*

Yes, I think I was called to entrepreneurship. What that means to me is that God has given me certain gifts, and I’ve been called to be faithful with—to be a good steward of those gifts.

26. *Who, if any one, affirmed that calling?*

I would say, principally, our clients have affirmed that calling. The clients come back for more all the time, and they appreciate what we do for them. That’s a sort of affirmation that you’re on the right track. If we were mediocre at what we do, I hope that I’d be honest enough to say that I wanted to find something else to do that could really maximize my gifts.

27. *What do you believe your gifts are as an entrepreneur? [“gifts” as spoken of in the Bible]*

First, I believe I am a people person—I get along well with people. In the structural engineering business you have to be able to do that. Second, business-wise you have to have some common sense and be able to make sound business decisions. The third is that I enjoy design. I have the ability to come up with creative ideas for our clients. So, the creativity, coupled with some business sense, coupled with people skills—a person definitely needs to bring a combination of those skills to the table, and I think God has given me those gifts.

28. *How did you (or do you) integrate your business expertise with your Christian calling (and how are they complementary)?*

We want to do excellent work for our clients. If you can do excellent work for your clients, then you build a solid foundation upon which to build and share your Christian testimony. If you do work that is lousy, or if you’re not on time—not that we’re all perfect—but if you’re consistently not on time, or if you’re

lacking in integrity in your business, don’t go and tell people about Christ and what he can do for you. There has to be a deep desire to want to do excellent work. It’s important to create a good reputation, so people can’t blame you and say, ‘Look, you’re telling me to be a good Christian, but why are you doing this, and why are you doing that?’ It’s also important that when you do fall short, you acknowledge it. That goes along way towards making things good and preserving a good reputation.

My highest goal, in terms of integrating business with calling is, ultimately, to share Christ with people. Overarching everything else we do, that’s the ultimate goal and aim—to be a good testimony, first of all, in a quiet manner, and in that we do excellent work. And second, to verbalize that and share the gospel with people. To that end I can say that I’ve had probably hundreds of opportunities over the years to share Christ with people and to challenge them over lunch and on trips, locally and abroad. To assist me with that, I’ve also written a little book on a subject that is tied into the whole field of engineering. The book is called, *When the Earth Trembles: An Engineer Looks at Earthquakes from a Christian Perspective*. I looked at earthquakes that have actually taken place in the last few thousand years. Then I looked at Scripture and what it says about earthquakes, and it actually says a fair bit about earthquakes. Then I drew some conclusions from that and, basically, the gospel is contained in that small booklet about 70 pages long. I give this book to clients and to people that I come into contact with when I’m traveling. I’ve given away many of these books just at a personal level so that people can, in the quietness of their living room, read them. So that’s a tool that I’ve developed for myself that I can use to share the gospel with people. That’s the highest aim for me, really in business. Some have called me a proselytizer. That’s my reputation, but that’s okay.

29. *How have you been involved in your local church (that you now attend and the ones you have attended in the past)? (whether or not these are related to your business expertise)?*

I have been the moderator of a local church for the past 15 years, and, for 25 years, I've also been involved as a lay-leader—an elder—in our church. I've also been a lay-preacher in our church for the last 25 years.

30. *Have you been involved in your church denomination and how?*

I've not been involved very much in the broader Mennonite Brethren conference.

31. *Have you been involved in par-church organizations and how?*

I have served as chairman of the Richmond Christian School Board. I've been a board member for close to six years now. Other than that, my main involvement would just be to support numerous organizations financially.

32. *What are some examples [i.e. situations with partners, suppliers, customers, etc.] of how you have integrated Biblical principles into your business practices and thus acted differently than a non-Christian due to your Christian faith?*

First, we're committed to honesty and integrity here in our business. On occasion, even just yesterday someone told me, 'You're just going to have to lie a little bit.' We try to distinguish ourselves as being above board and thoroughly honest, so, in that respect, it's very important.

That also leads to computer programs and computer software—it's easy to pirate them. We don't go down that route. We want

to be above board and be honest in our business dealings that way.

Often you get overpaid, or double-paid, by clients, and we'll always notify them and make it good even though, occasionally, you could probably get away with it.

As a general rule, we close our office on Sundays. We ask all of our employees to take a day off and honor the Lord's Day that way.

You're also going to get shafted in business. You'll get wronged somewhere along the way. I, personally, always tell myself to never harbor grudges, never harbor bitterness if something unjust happens to you. It's very difficult to do at times, but that's a principle we live by.

We will occasionally be involved in a business dispute over money or contractual terms where it's a 'he said, she said' situation, and there's a difference of opinion in terms of the initial understanding. If we can't resolve the situation, we generally always lean towards giving the other person the benefit of the doubt and suffering some ourselves, rather than making the other person feel like he's gotten the short shrift. That's important to us.

There are certain projects that we will not get involved in. We do not participate in the design of projects such as casinos or nightclubs where there is questionable activity taking place that we can't go along with. Also, my partner and I decided that we will not provide engineering assistance on projects having to do with places of non-Christian worship. We couldn't put our hearts into something that we feel is worship of anyone other than Christ and our Heavenly Father. So that has distinguished us.

Other temptations that come up are that sometimes we do projects on an hourly-rate basis where we have to keep track of our hours. It's very easy to inflate those hours on your timesheet

without every getting found out. We do our best not to fall into that temptation.

We wouldn't enter into business partnerships with non-Christians. We hire mostly non-Christian employees—we'll even take them on in a management role; but as part of that intimate business partnership relationship, where the major decisions get made and where the control is, we feel it's important to be pulling on the same yoke. So at that level of business relationship, my partner and I are committed to working with Christians.

I would also say that you want to avoid going into business with people of poor Christian character. You shouldn't think that just because someone is a Christian that they would be better than a non-Christian. You want to be very careful if you're going to have a business relationship with a Christian partner that he's of good Christian character.

33. *What are the lessons you have learned that you believe are important for Christians pursuing entrepreneurship?*

I would say the most important thing for Christians pursuing entrepreneurship to remember is to go deep in your relationship with Christ above all else. Nurture that relationship. Know His word well because out of that flows wisdom and guidance and stability. That would be my primary advice. Always long to go deeper in your relationship with Christ, and other things will fall into place. Then you're also in a position to take on risks. You know you have a Shepherd that you have a relationship with who is going to guide and direct you. Not that everything is going to turn out as you would like, but you know it will always serve for the best in the end; that, and keeping a balance with family life. I have nine children, so to balance family life and give attention to nine kids, while at the same time knowing that the buck stops with my partner and I in business—that's also a challenge. You want to make sure you balance that and not go overkill in

spending all your time at the office, neglecting your family and wife.

34. *How could the church in general sense (i.e. a local congregation) support you as an entrepreneur in pursuing your calling in business?*

The church could support me just in praying when difficult situations arrive. If you're prepared to share those times with the church, and they can support you in prayer—that would be the main form of support I would want.

35. *What have been the biggest challenges for you as a Christian in business?*

Remaining honest, maintaining integrity in all that we do and faithfulness in providing excellent services have been some of the biggest challenges. Consistently staying true to what you tell clients that you want to do for them and giving them excellent service and creative ideas—you have to reach down deep sometimes to do those things.

36. *Who was most helpful (and why or how) in addressing these challenges: church leadership, Christian friends, etc.?*

My business partner, Gerald Epp, has been very helpful that way. He's a very fine Christian and I respect him greatly. My wife has also been extremely supportive, and on that subject, I want to bring in a quote from Philip Keller's book, *Wonder of the Wind*: 'It is a fortunate person whose life and work is safeguarded by the outpouring of some unseen, unsung soul behind the scenes.' My wife is that person, and it has a huge impact on how I conduct my business. Getting that support and encouragement and having someone to take care of the home front—that's invaluable in many respects. Never underestimate the value of having a good person behind the scenes. She's not out in the front, but she's sure back there praying and keeping the

household in order. To have that sense of peace coming home, to know that things are in order and under control and knowing that when I'm in difficulty there's somebody at home praying—it's a really big plus.

37. *Have you hired people from your church? If so, has that been a positive or negative experience?*

Yes, we have hired people from our church, and generally, it's been a very positive experience.

38. *Have you done business with other people in your church and how?*

Yes, we've done business with other people in our church. We've bought some products from them and given them referrals.

39. *Has your relationship with those people you have done business with in your church been positively or negatively affected—from a business and spiritual standpoint—by doing business together and how?*

Generally, we have had good experiences doing business with those church people.

40. *Is there any particular passage(s) of scripture that you have found particularly meaningful or that is inspirational to you?*

James 1:5, in challenging situations. So often I walk into meetings and I need ideas, I need wisdom, and James 1:5 basically promises that wisdom. Then, Romans 8:28. In business and entrepreneurship you're bound to come up against disappointments. There are valleys and there are mountaintops. When you go through the valleys and you get disappointed, or you don't get a project that you set your heart on—it is a great help in those times to know that Christ ultimately works all

things for our best so that we can conform to His likeness and that, by nature, he has goodness in mind for us and is, by nature, a loving God.

CONCLUSION

Do you have any questions or comments related to Christians in business that you would like to express an opinion on and that you believe should be included in or dealt with in future versions of this questionnaire?

We've had lots of thrills doing different things and have been to different parts of the world—China, Japan, Korea, Europe, the USA, Canada, up North in the Yukon. It's been a thrill just facing different business challenges and tough times—lots of tough times. But all in all it's a real joy to be in this type of work and be able to meet so many different people and go different places and to create, invent, and innovate. It would be interesting to hear a little bit more about some of the failures along the way, or where we dropped the ball or something disappointing happened.

I remember walking the streets of Chicago, and saying, 'Oh, this isn't going right.' We prayed about that whole venture and tried to be careful in everything we did, and yet it probably had some other purpose—taught us perseverance.

One of the things that made it difficult, too, was that this was a beach canopy which had a very dynamic advertising surface. It had a little canopy that you could lie under, or in front of, and it gives you shade on the beach. One of the big challenges there was that we were called up by some of the major tobacco companies and liquor companies that wanted to advertise and that had said, 'We'll order so many of these, if we can put our ad on there.' That would have been very lucrative, but we adopted the basic principle that we didn't want to advertise those types of products on our product. So that made me wonder, 'why didn't this thing pan out.' But they always say that the lump sum

of everything is important, and we've enjoyed success. There have been some not-so-great decisions which we've made along the way too. Sometimes there are the ones where you have a knee-jerk reaction—you're too spontaneous rather than thinking things through a bit longer. Sometimes you have to move very quickly in the business world, and, other times, you want to take the time to think something through really well. You can be too spontaneous, so finding a balance in there is important.

Sometimes we've been late delivering our designs and our product, and the best thing to do is just to own up to it and say, 'Sorry we're just going to go flat out to try and make up for this now.' But we've been late at times or there have been other things we may have done along the way that have made our clients unhappy with us. We're all fallible and human, but how you respond to those situations is really important. If you try and pretend that nothing's happened, that the worst thing you could do. If you try and always be realistic and acknowledge where you fall short and do everything you can to make it good, clients really appreciate that. That's what Christian integrity is about. We've dropped the ball many times, but we try to always make it good and acknowledge it if we're aware of some area that we're falling short on. It's important that you put your best foot forward and try to correct that. There-in lies true Christian character—not in perfection, but in willingness to acknowledge when we do make mistakes and then make them good.

