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HR manager Kay Walton has an eye for success

BY JERRY SIEBENMARK
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A year from now, Kay Walton plans to retire. The vice president and human resources manager for insurance brokerage IMA of Kansas will end a career that has spanned 48 years at two companies, with 28 years leading human resources departments.

In Wichita banking circles, Walton, 66, is somewhat of a legend. A former senior vice president and head of human resources for Fourth Financial Corp. --the holding company of the former Bank IV -- has worked with or hired many of the people leading Wichita's banks.

"You have to realize, I was interviewing, really, for my first job outside the farm," said Kevin Chase, whom Walton hired at Bank IV and is now the president and chief executive of Verus Bank in Derby. "But she had an uncanny ability to make me feel comfortable. I immediately took to that."

It's experiences like that that have led to Walton's legendary status. Even years after leaving the bank, Walton gets calls from former Bank IV bankers asking her to help them find job candidates.

She has developed a reputation for recruiting and hiring the right people the first time around.

"She almost had a sixth sense about people," said Marilyn Pauly, vice chairwoman at Commerce Bank. She first became acquainted with Walton as a part-time teller at Fourth National Bank in the late 1960s.

"She could almost immediately determine... whether they would be a good fit."

Compassionate nature

Walton started at the bank in 1961, after giving up her pursuit to be a veterinarian.

She attended Kansas State University to earn a degree in animal husbandry but quit when she learned "they didn't want women in the veterinary college," Walton said.

She returned to Wichita, where she was raised, and applied for an entry level job at Fourth National Bank, later renamed Bank IV.

Walton's first job was to assign account numbers to customers' checking accounts. From there she moved to the teller line and then operations management.

In 1981, she was promoted to assistant manager in human resources. It was there that Walton began to develop a reputation as the consummate HR professional.

"She was a person that you could rely on," said Vernon Wasinger, a retired senior vice president at the bank. "To me, she became one of the better counselors.

"She probably leaned more to employees and would help them in any way possible. If an employee didn't fit somewhere... she would take the next step, look throughout the organization for where the employee would best fit.

"She had a lot of compassion for employees. That's her nature."

But her greatest skill, bankers said, was her ability to spot and recruit talented employees -- from tellers to bank officers.

It's that skill that "allowed her to be a pretty successful internal placement agency," said Steve Carr, a former Bank IV vice president who is now chief executive of Community Bank of Wichita.

Tom Page relied on Walton to find new talent when he was president of community banking for Bank IV.

"Kay brought an incredible number of people, very talented people, to Fourth Financial," said Page, chief executive of Emprise Bank.

Page said there were times that Walton would identify people for jobs but didn't have an opening for them.

"She'd keep track of people, literally for years," Page said, until a position opened.

'Gut feeling'

Walton can't explain why she has been successful at finding the right people.

"It's a gut feeling," she said. "If I spend 15 minutes with somebody, I know if they are going to work or not."

There are three common qualities she looks for in job candidates: integrity, principles and character.

"You can train people to do a job but those are things that you can't teach somebody," she said.

She admits that there have been times where she thought she hired the right person, only to find out later she didn't.

"I've made some errors," she said. "Sometimes the skill set you think is there isn't."

And sometimes the relationship between the employee and the company sours, "like a bad marriage," she said.

Walton left Fourth Financial and Bank IV in 1996, after they were acquired by Boatmen's Bank. (Through a series of mergers, Boatmen's later was merged into Bank of America.)

By that time, Fourth Financial and Bank IV had grown to 4,000 employees, 90 branches in Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma and nearly \$8 billion in assets.

" (Boatmen's) wanted me to let 700 people go in Kansas," Walton said. "I just thought I don't want to end my career doing that."

But she landed a new HR job quickly. The offer came when Walton conducted Kurt Watson's exit interview at the bank.

"She's just done a phenomenal job in helping us get to the next level," said Watson, who left Bank IV as executive vice president to join IMA as its president and chief operating officer. "I knew that she could do that and that was the reason she was my first hire."

Walton, who said she plans to retire from IMA next spring, even picked out her successor: Kyle Orndorff, who worked for her at Bank IV.

"Kay has been such a special part of the growth and the success of the company," Watson said. "I don't look forward to that day (when she retires), but it's coming."

Walton said she looks forward to retirement, but quickly added that she would work part time for IMA or on special projects if asked.

"I am so blessed. I am so blessed," Walton said. "How many people do you know who had two jobs and loved them both and felt so incredibly lucky to be there?"

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