

# Dallas Business Journal

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Ideas in Action

## Vignon Inc. offers businesses work development expertise

At Vignon Inc., startup Information technology pro Kathy Blanck targets industries with work force development needs

Dallas Business Journal - by [Shashana Pearson-Hormillosa](#) Staff writer



### Biggest Problem

The recession and a decline in contracts forced Kathy Blanck, who started her professional IT services and solutions company, **Vignon Inc.** in 2001, to lay off eight employees in the fourth quarter. By building relationships with companies working with the federal government and focusing on emerging and green-energy technologies, Blanck is positioning Vignon to obtain more projects and eventually hire back her former employees.

**Kathy Blanck** is no newbie to starting a business. In the mid-'90s, she started two IT consulting companies — one for the public sector and one for the private. Her latest venture is Vignon Inc., a certified woman-owned business enterprise that provides IT services and solutions. She incorporated the company in 2001. Starting with just \$20,000 in personal funds, Blanck quickly lined up new contracts. Last year, the company grew annual revenue to \$5 million.

Born of an Irish-immigrant father, Blanck is a first-generation American with a strong work ethic. She earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Texas at Dallas. After selling her first two companies in 2000, Blanck began looking for the next megatrend. She narrowed her scope to the aging work force, which she expects to peak in about seven years.

"There will be 76 million baby boomers leaving the work force," Blanck said. "There's a 44-million-people difference between who's coming in (to the work force) and who's going out."

Blanck focused Vignon on the public sector, government and utility companies — segments where she saw the greatest need for qualified employees developing because so many departing baby boomers using antiquated technology had remained in jobs, primarily for the pensions.

"As people leave, you have to replatform. You have to have the products," she said.

Vignon partnered with SAP, a business software manufacturer that developed a specialty billing product for utility companies in 2000. Her employees help other companies implement it.

"SAP is a world-class enterprise management solution that is quite expensive to implement with the larger consulting firms," Blanck said. "Vignon makes SAP doable for many cash-strapped or smaller companies because it can cost-effectively and efficiently implement it."

Blanck aligned herself with larger companies to bring in bigger contracts and to be sent out on jobs for the other companies.

“It’s an effective way to get your name out, by partnering with other entities that have a larger client base,” Blanck said. “Then, their relationships become your relationships.”

One alliance was with Virginia-based BearingPoint Inc., a global management and technology consulting company. Steve Obosnenko, sales director of the utilities practice at BearingPoint, has been working with Blanck for three years.

“She brings account relationships; she’s got a good stable of people with a lot of experience. When we team with Kathy, we know we’re getting quality,” he said.

For large firms like BearingPoint, Obosnenko says, subcontracting to minority and women-owned business enterprises can sometimes be risky business.

“What we’ve seen from Vignon is that, unlike a lot of the small minority businesses that don’t add value, Kathy’s firm really does add value. They’ve helped reduce the risk on projects where we’ve worked together, because we know we’re getting quality individuals and her people are always affordable. With others, it’s a crapshoot.”

Blanck measures her company’s success not by how much revenue it produces, but by how satisfied her customers are.

“I keep score by how successful a project is and how successful a relationship is. If you do the right thing, the money follows,” Blanck said. “Success is when my customer is happy, and they ask me to come back.”

Blanck expects her customers to do just that. But despite the positive outlook — Blanck expects to see growth in 2009 — even Vignon has been hit by the recession. The company had to let eight employees go in the fourth quarter of 2008 as some projects were put on hold.

“The one thing we didn’t anticipate was the bond market being frozen, because that’s what funds these projects,” Blanck said.

But she remains optimistic, stating that those markets are starting to come back, and when they do, she plans to rehire those who were let go.

She is looking at new product offerings within the green energy space and is focusing on breaking into federal government contracts.

“There’s going to be a lot of work in the federal government, so it’s a positioning tool,” she said.

Blanck recently partnered with a business certified by the Small Business Administration as a “small disadvantaged business enterprise,” which applies to socially and economically disadvantaged minority and women-owned business enterprises. The designation helps small disadvantaged companies compete for federal contracts.

The partnership plans to help businesses solve their problems using new technology, she said.

“My expectation is that we’re going to grow because the entities looking to solve these problems are growing every month. We are well-positioned.”