

He's the *Boss*

STEPHEN DOBROW
BS 89 (MANAGEMENT)
PRESIDENT, PRIMARK BENEFITS



*By Susan Fornoff
Photo by Ed Ritger*

The business initially: Stephen Dobrow was a part-time computer programmer starting in the 1970s at Primark Benefits, then a seven-employee company

in Burlingame that establishes and administers pensions and retirement plans for about 100 clients. In 1990, the owner decided to retire, and Dobrow bought the business, saying, “What the heck, if I’ve got to work for all these jerks in Silicon Valley, I might as well be the jerk that I work for.”

The business today:

Primark now has more than 700 clients and 24 employees. In 2008, Dobrow started PBRetire, a 401(k) record-keeping division of the business. Now he is adding Primark Fiduciary Outsourcing, which will relieve HR departments of retirement plan administration chores. “There’s a whole

bunch of things that are the employer's responsibility, and they're hard to do," Dobrow says. "There's a big call for something like this."

The GGU experience:

Dobrow graduated from high school in 1974 and had to support himself while attending college, so it was 1989 when he finished at GGU. "It took me a long time, and the whole time I was working," he says. "But I got a much better education because of that. Normally a professor who gets up to talk to a bunch of 18-to-20-year-olds is talking about things that are totally theoretical to them. But in classes with other working adults, we were ready with real-life questions and examples, so professors could give realistic information that's consumable. That's what is so unique to Golden Gate."

Work experience:

"I had a career in Silicon Valley, doing some wonderful things with startups before there was such a thing as a dot-com. I led the team that developed and marketed the world's first multi-user accounting package for micro-computers, and put together what might be one of the world's first nongovernmental electronic mail networks."

Biggest challenge:

"Trying to do business in the San Francisco Bay Area... Labor costs are so out of whack... One or two of my client businesses pull out of California every year. "

Biggest triumphs:

Dobrow immersed himself in professional development in his new field, and now he's an alphabet soup of eight credentials. He helped the American Society of Pension Professionals and

Actuaries revamp its educational programs and introduced webcasting. As president of ASPPA in 2009, he testified before Congress and got two

consuming all of my time.' I decided to write my 100 clients a letter saying, 'Sorry, but I've got to double your fee; this is a lot more work

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pension laws changed. "I'm really a retirement plan expert. ... This year I had a lobbying project, savemy401k.com, and was up and down the state on the radio telling people to e-mail their representatives so that 401(k) plans didn't go away, because Congress probably would have balanced the budget by getting rid of your retirement accounts." He was also tickled to receive the President's Award from the Society of Actuaries even though he is not an actuary.

Best advice for new small businesses:

1. "If you're going to be in business, you've got to be in a business that you're passionate about. ... It had better be something where you wake up in the morning ready to jump out of bed because you want to, not because you have to."
2. "Don't underprice your services. I was sitting at a desk in 1993 and working on a difficult retirement plan, and it was 11:30 at night, and I said to myself, 'I really miss my wife; I want to spend time with her. I've taken on this company and it's

now.' I figured I'd lose half of them, then I'd have the same amount of money and half the work and I'd spend time with my wife. Well, I lost one client because of fees. They all just paid it. I had been giving away my services at half price without realizing I didn't have to."

3. "There was a guy named Alan Shugart who ran a company called Seagate, and he said, 'Cash flow is more important than your mother.' That is true especially in a new business."
4. "You have to have enough margin, and by that I mean enough border on your page, so that if something goes wrong, you have room to keep writing. ... 2008 was actually my best year, because most of my clients had these techniques for dealing with downturns that they had learned in 2000 and 2001. Then in 2009, I joined the rest of my industry in losing 25 percent of my clients. But I had my margin, I had my techniques for a soft landing, I could adapt. You have to have room for adaptation in your plan." 