

# Project Rescue

\* Jim Stroh busts in when plans flop or tasks overwhelm.

Jim Stroh has a company with a fun little name – Proggex, pronounced *projects*.

And what his Clearwater firm specializes in is just that – projects. But we’re talking big, and not necessarily fun, projects. The biggest have budgets over \$50 million, the smallest \$50,000. Stroh is hired by companies to either fix projects gone bad or to implement new ones the right way.

His most complex to date: two facility and two data center build-outs in China’s Shanghai and Guangzhou. Besides geography, Proggex had to navigate complex Chinese government regulations, customs and procurement requirements, language barriers and a timeline that fell over Christmas and the Chinese New Year.

The massive, three-month-long project closed on budget, Stroh says, and the client is engaging Proggex for other work.

“It’s kind of like being a wedding planner,” he says. “We bring all the elements envisioned and we put them together in the exact way the client saw it.”

Proggex ([www.proggex.com](http://www.proggex.com)) formed in 2004. Most of its business is Florida-based. In the Tampa Bay area it works with large call center companies, an online education provider, healthcare systems and manufacturers. Proggex works with a mix of public and private companies with revenues from about \$15 million to \$120 billion.

Projects range from helping a window manufacturer become compliant with the Sarbanes Oxley Act to systematically getting failing project managers – employed by a global customer contact management company – back on track.

In 2007 Proggex crossed \$3 million in revenue. From 2004 through 2006, it grew at 35 percent annually, but in 2007 growth reached 50 percent over the previous year.

“Our execution is much better,” Stroh says.

The company began as a three-person firm doing

consulting for chief information officers. Stroh and his partners made an adequate living doling out advice on technology projects and strategies. But they noticed a fast-developing trend among clients: “There was more demand to manage projects than to design projects,” Stroh recalls. “If we went in to consult one project, we found there were four or five that needed to be managed.”

His two original partners, Suzanne Kelley (now the executive

Alex McKnight



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vice president and general manager) and Gwen Shivley, are still with Stroh, but the evolved company now has 18 project managers, one consultant and two operations staffers. Proggex's project managers are dedicated to their clients. The company grows as it engages clients, but isn't tied to a certain number of staffers per client or fee. One person or six could be assigned to a single client, and the Proggex managers generally are live on the client's site, not propping their feet up down the hall from Stroh.

Stroh used to be an employee at Sykes Enterprises in Tampa. Now Sykes is one of his major clients.

"We have various needs across the globe for implementation and project management," says Dave Pearson, chief information officer and a senior vice president at Sykes. "We're specifically using Jim's company for IT project management. We're flexing up and down all the time, so maintaining a bench gives us flexibility. Proggex allows us to be more dynamic."

The Proggex outsiders are welcomed, not resented, Pearson says.

"It works. To facilitate projects, you have to have the right demeanor. In some respects, being an outsider helps you be more effective."

While 80 percent of Proggex's business in 2004 was technology projects, that sector now represents less than half of its income. "Project management may have its roots in technology, but we do HR, finance, facilities management and health care," Stroh says.

True to the wedding planner analogy, Proggex attracts two types of clients:

- **Total Disarray.** "They have no idea of project management," Stroh says. "The chaos comes to us, often because they have outstripped the ability or the capability of

their existing project management team."

- **Growth Opportunity.** "Those are the best for us. They're willing to make an investment on the P&L line that says, 'This is the cost to manage the project.' That is becoming more popular."

Lindsey Jarrell is chief information officer and a senior vice president at BayCare Health System in Clearwater, and a very satisfied Proggex customer. His company had an interim opening for a senior program manager while implementing electronic medical records across nine hospitals.

"We reached out to Proggex and they've done great work," says Jarrell. "Jim's company is unique to me because, while they don't focus on a single industry, they understand large-scale program management."

Jarrell plans to use Proggex for future project management needs.

"The folks at Proggex don't focus on selling you more business all the time – they're there to get the job done first. That comes across."

They're not selling miracles, however.

"We're careful not to over-promise," Stroh says. "We're not a magic bullet. There is no magic – it's process and communication."

Take the healthcare company struggling to maintain a portfolio of more than 300 projects. In that portfolio are people demanding attention. But those responsible for the capital decisions don't know the company's own priorities. "We are there to map out a strategic plan," Stroh says.

Stroh, 49, says the origins of what his company does dates back to NASA, which created a project management institute in the mid-1990s. At the time technologists were putting organization around the dreaded computer failure at the turn of the millennium.

He learned about that concept later, after a career as a local executive at Sykes Enterprises, Bayfront Medical Center and several technology companies. "But I had this burning desire to be an entrepreneur," he says.

At Proggex, success breeds success when opportunities come crawling out of the corporate woodwork.

"When we're invited in and there is one demonstrated success, you wouldn't believe how many other projects come out from cover," Stroh says.

Businesses of all sizes and industry are used to buying outside accounting and legal services. Until now, Stroh says, few thought about going beyond the limits of their leased square footage for project management.

"We're at the cutting edge," Stroh says. "And that's the branding challenge: selling something they didn't know they needed. But once they have it, they're happy they do." ■

