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## FASTEST GROWING PRIVATE COMPANIES

### Professional Alternatives places Denverites in a job

By LAURIE DiBATTISTA

Special to the Business Journal

**D**iane Blau, CEO of Professional Alternatives of Colorado, runs her company like the board game Risk.

"I take every dollar and invest in the company to fortify my existing businesses," said Blau, who founded the staffing firm in 1998. Her strategy seems to be working. Revenues skyrocketed 722 percent for the young Denver firm in the past two years.

From the outset, Blau knew she wanted to establish a firm unlike the rapidly growing Fortune 500 staffing firm where she earlier served as regional vice president. "I'm not into market domination. I don't want to be all things to all people. I'd prefer to be a resource for a select group."

A month after launching Professional Alternatives, she opened the first of its operating companies, Accounting Alternatives of Col-



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**Professional Alternatives of Colorado**

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orado. By year's end, three other limited liability companies were off and running in the state: Office Alternatives, Technology Alternatives and Legal Alternatives. Since then, the portfolio has grown to include staffing for human resources, insurance and sales.

Each of these specialty staffing companies — or "boutiques," as Blau calls them — shares the same investors and company name but are otherwise independent. Accounting Alternatives, for example, fills positions that require accountants, bookkeepers, analysts, planners and other professionals.

Its president and chief operating officer, Gina Robertson, recalled the business climate three years ago

when the company started up. "We probably couldn't have timed it any better. We capitalized on the market" when Front Range businesses were struggling to fill jobs. Despite today's slower economy, Robertson said, her company "hasn't seen a huge fall-off" in staffing demand.

Blau anticipates Professional Alternatives will bring in revenues of \$9.2 million this year, up nearly 20 percent from a year ago. Though strong, revenue growth is on a slower pace than the 1998-2000 period when it grew over sevenfold, from \$952,177 to \$7.8 million.

Blau is waiting in the wings to open another operating company, this time in the engineering field. She'll take her cue from the mar-

ketplace. "I won't open any new businesses with the economy like it is in Denver now at this uncertain time. Possibly in the third or fourth quarter, if the economy is OK." The need for architectural and civil engineers is evident, she said, because firms are hiring engineers from out of state to keep up with demand.

"Denver is a competitive market in the staffing industry," said Blau, "but we haven't had the challenge I thought we would."

Professional Alternatives places contract and temporary workers, as well as direct hires. Last year, 130 people were placed in permanent jobs and 709 W-2s were generated for hourly workers.

One of the driving factors in the company's success is its philosophy of offering Denver businesses high-quality candidates, Blau said. "People who are throwing out candidates who can fog up a mirror aren't going to make it. If I don't have a (capable) person, you're not going to get a B player. We have walked away from opportunities because we don't have a top-notch person."

Ryan Smith hit the ground running when he became president and chief operating officer of the new Technology Alternatives of Colorado in 1998. Smith, who has a background in technology, networks with programmers and developers to create a strong client base. Echoing the firm's viewpoint that quality is better than quantity, he said, "If I don't have an excellent fit for the job, we don't send anybody, and if we get a good candi-

date in the loop, we'll let a good client know." Preferring a proactive approach, he often directly markets job-seeking candidates to potential clients.

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In the current job climate, Smith believes revenues for Technology Alternatives will continue to grow due to a strong client base, repeat business and the availability of good candidates to place. "This year there are a lot more good candidates," Smith said, acknowledging that it will take more effort to find good jobs for them. "It's a reverse from when I started two-and-a-half years ago."

In the three years since Blau founded the firm — with only three employees, no clients and no job candidates — it has grown to 30

employees. Blau, with a background in accounting and finance, also heads up the insurance and legal companies in Professional Alternatives' portfolio.

Besides Denver, the firm has taken its locally owned-and-operated approach to other cities with comparable job markets, including Albuquerque, Atlanta, Austin, Dallas, Houston and Phoenix. As in Colorado, the niche staffing companies are run by professionals who worked in the industries they now serve.

Early on, Blau registered 23 trade names with the secretary of state, including a business that relates to the health-care sector. Like the strategy in the game of Risk, it appears that Blau plans to move into new territory.

## Professional Alternatives

**Address:** 1600 Broadway, Suite 1250, Denver

**Phone:** 303-861-8865

**Percentage of revenue growth, 1998-2000:** 722 percent

**Employees locally:** N/A

**Description of business:** Executive-level placement firm