

LevelOps gets award for leveling up client base

By: Sarah Terry-Cobo The Journal Record March 23, 2017 0



LevelOps Inc. electrician Manny Astorga drives heavy equipment on an oil and gas well site in southeast New Mexico. Company CEO Sid Helms said he had to learn how to reinvent his company, which began as an oil-field service provider, after commodity prices crashed in 2015. (Courtesy photo)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Sid Helms had to learn how to spin on his heels, reinventing his company nearly every six months since 2013.

At first the chief executive of LevelOps Inc. set his sights on the oil and gas industry. But as the bottom fell out on commodity prices, he had to learn how to put his employees' skills to work in other industries as well.

His agility and passion for his staff are in part why he is receiving a national business incubator award, said Fred

Green, director of Francis Tuttle Technology Center's business incubator, LaunchPad FT. Helms and his business partners made \$1 million in revenue in six months, Green said. Within a year, he hired 35 employees and made \$4 million in revenue.

Helms quit his job with a local oil and gas company to become a field services provider. Although LevelOps has broadened its concept, employees still connect computers that record drilling and hydraulic fracturing data from oil well sites to cell towers. The system sends the data to the driller's headquarters, allowing an exploration and production company to monitor field operations in real time.

Helms began with a single client. Green said he urged Helms to diversify to other companies and to other businesses. He said LevelOps Chief Operating Officer Shane Nielsen played a key part in finding those new connections, leading to a contract in 2014 with Oklahoma City Hall to remotely monitor municipal locks and dams.

Helms and his colleagues graduated from LaunchPad in 2015. Crude oil prices were already sliding from \$106.20 per barrel for West Texas Intermediate, the high reached on June 20, 2014. By mid-2015, he was confronted with the financial reality of the downturn. Helms said he and his co-founders had to think creatively about how else he could keep employees busy as work in the oil and gas contracts evaporated.

"Out of desperation, we had to figure out how to make honest nickels," Helms said. The key question was, "How shall we proceed?"

All of the company's employees were licensed electricians so they could install remote monitoring equipment in the oil field. Chad Stuart, operations vice president, suggested electrical work. Since then, the company has won contracts to install equipment used at self-checkout lanes at a handful of Wal-Marts. His workers now install the electrical equipment, lighting and the broadband fiber to connect the machines to the company's computer system, reducing Wal-Mart's overhead.

The company recently expanded yet again, adding the service of installing light emitting diode bulbs for commercial businesses. LEDs use less electricity and reduce utility bills. Helms said Nielsen was instrumental in winning an LED

installation contract with a large company, although he declined to name the firm because of non-disclosure agreements.

Green said Helms and his colleagues started the business with the industry expertise necessary, but they outperformed the growth rate of a typical incubator client.

Helms will accept the 2017 International Business Innovation Association award for Outstanding Incubator Graduate of the Year March 28 at a ceremony in Seattle.