

Melink Corporation: Where Innovation Is Core

The world see new products and services come to market almost every day. Many assume these ‘inventions’ are the result of genius, or at least a flash of brilliance. And some are. But most are the result of just a good idea coupled with good, old-fashioned hard work. As Thomas Edison once said: “Invention is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.”

So forget the notion that innovation just happens - like you know what. More typically, it is an evolution of small, continuous improvements that add up to a better solution. And then the process gets repeated – year after year. One pioneer who has mastered the art and science of innovation is **Melink Corporation**. They have been helping other firms save energy, increase profits, and make the world more sustainable for 30 years.

Melink is a global provider of energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions for commercial buildings. Their offerings include: *HVAC Test & Balance Services, Intelli-Hood Kitchen Ventilation Controls, Solar PV Development Services*, and *Geothermal HVAC Solutions*. Their corporate headquarters is LEED Platinum certified and Net-Zero Energy, and their vehicle fleet consists of all hybrid and electric cars.

Unpacking Melink’s story from the founder’s point of view

Coming from a family of eleven, **Steve Melink’s** journey of starting and growing a successful company was not a straight line. He graduated from Vanderbilt University in Mechanical Engineering. After graduation, Steve worked at The Trane Company in La Crosse, Wisconsin as Development Engineer. With plans to get his MBA, he left the company after two years and attended Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business. After that he had two-year stints with Emerson in St. Louis, Missouri as Program Manager and then Maysteel in Mayville, Wisconsin as Director of Engineering.

This storyline bends when Steve shares he discovered entrepreneurial leanings while working at large companies. He grew frustrated dealing with the bureaucracy and politics of organizations with thousands of employees and

unhealthy work cultures. From this he concluded that the only way to be truly happy building a career was to start his own business. He decided to leverage his cumulative experiences in the HVAC industry, and was open to whatever might happen after that.

Steve founded his company in his home basement in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1987. Today, he has 110+ employees, exponentially growing sales, one of the greenest corporate offices in the U.S., and a customer list that includes many of the largest and most successful companies in the world. Humble beginnings have morphed into the belief today that he and his team have only just begun.

On the personal side, Steve is happily married to his wife Mary Frances, and is enjoying watching his four children Matt, Monica, Katie, and Laura grow up. Though he had potential successors in them, he always encouraged his children to pursue their own passion. “I did not want them to feel either obligated or entitled, and I am very proud of how they have developed as young professionals, concerned citizens, and good human beings in their own right,” says Steve.

At Melink, problems equal opportunity

During the course of his company’s growth, Steve had to evolve to keep up. “One of the biggest challenges,” Steve narrates, “was learning how to reinvent myself from engineer to manager as I began hiring our first employees. And then again from manager to leader as we became a larger company and faced existential questions like: Who are we? What is our purpose? And where are we going?”

Steve adds, another challenge that exists to this day is educating and inspiring the industry, market, and community on the holistic benefits of a clean energy future. Most decision-makers are fixated on simple-payback, and so trying to get them to recognize the long-term benefits of clean energy relative to their operations and brand as well as our economy, security, and environment can be daunting. The good news is that more and more companies are coming around to this view. Leaders know that to attract and retain the best customers and employees, they need to have a vision, mission, and values that align with the world’s best interests. To him, clean energy is being on the right side of history.

Niche energy solutions grow into industry standards

Melink focuses on niche technologies and services that can become industry standards for select vertical markets like restaurants, supermarkets, hotels, and schools. Their over-riding mission is to help their customers save energy, become more competitive, and reduce their carbon footprint.

Melink has four business units with a fifth being explored for a possible launch in 2018.

The first business involved – and still involves – **Testing and Balancing** HVAC systems for restaurant chains like Wendy's and Chili's across the U.S. Within a couple years Steve was hiring technicians and eventually built a national network. This allowed the company to win additional customers who value the convenience of working with one professional T&B provider nationwide. Today, they continue to work with many restaurant chains like *McDonalds, Darden, and Starbucks* – as well as retailers like *Wal-Mart, Walgreens, and PetSmart*, among others.

Along the way, Steve invented and patented a variable-speed controller for commercial kitchen ventilation systems and began the long and arduous journey of developing a product, creating a market, changing building codes, and becoming a manufacturer. Today, they have over 10,000 systems installed and their **Intelli-Hood Controls** are the industry standard for the foodservice industry. They sell this product to hotel, supermarket, and restaurant chains, including *Marriott, Hilton, Google, Cheesecake Factory, Whole Foods, and Publix*, as well as hospitals, schools, and military bases around the world.

In 2005, they designed and constructed their super-green headquarters. The surprise was, hundreds and eventually thousands of people from across the city, state, and country wanted to tour and learn about the building technologies and strategies Melink used - as well as learn about the associated costs and benefits. This naturally whetted Melink's appetite, so they continued to push the envelope with other energy efficiency and renewable energy features. *It now holds an Energy Star rating of 99 out of 100 points which is widely considered by many as one of the greenest buildings in the U.S.*

This was the launch pad for their third business as a **Solar Photo-Voltaic (PV)** developer. As a result of installing solar panels on their own building, they acquired the expertise to engineer, construct, and finance solar arrays for other building owners. In the last several years, they have developed projects for the *Cincinnati Zoo, Urbana University, Cedarville University, Indianapolis Power & Light*, and property owners across the Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast.

During this time, another seed of an idea was germinating. Steve had specified a geothermal heating and cooling system for his new new building and happened to observe the custom nature in which the pumps, drives, and many other components were installed in the mechanical room. It was apparent to him that for this technology to go mainstream, the industry would need to make it easier for an engineer and contractor to design and install. Therefore, in the last two years, they have developed and patented the **Manifest** pre-engineered pump station. And now this factory-assembled and pre-tested unit is being marketed and sold across the U.S.

Culture is king

“As the saying goes, culture is king ... and eats strategy for lunch,” asserts Steve. Nothing is more important than creating a work environment where people can feel safe, healthy, and comfortable, as well as respected, appreciated, and being given responsibilities commensurate with their knowledge, skills, and potential. “Many people at Melink refer to the ‘Melink Family’ because some of their closest friends work here and the trust and love for one another is very real and special,” adds Steve.

He further adds, “Our culture is also closely intertwined with our vision and mission relative to sustainability. For example, in addition to providing a super-green building for our employees, more than half are provided hybrid vehicles and electric cars. Being a leader in a bigger cause than ourselves helps build even stronger bonds of purpose and passion.”

Plans for the future

Melink wants to continue advancing the green building movement and developing new energy-efficiency and renewable energy solutions. In fact, they

desire to become the Apple of the clean energy industry – where commercial building owners buy their products for their world-class designs, services, and real energy savings.

Their goal is to grow 30% every year and achieve a 15% operating profit. As the world population increases from 7 to 10 billion – a 50% increase – in the next 50 years, Melink believes this kind of success will be necessary to positively impact our future economy, security, health, and environment.

Leaders should always lead with integrity

Steve advises budding entrepreneurs and managers to make ‘integrity’ a part of their company culture and core values. Based on his experience, nothing fosters a healthy work environment like leaders being respectful, honest, and fair to everyone. This, in turn fosters a mutual response that allows the very best in people to come out and multiply downstream. The alternative is unproductive and wasted time, money, and emotions. Leaders need to set the tone and remove those who do not embrace the ethic that integrity is everything.

Want to learn more about innovation and leadership? Read Steve’s book

Steve recently authored and published *CEO Power & Light: Transcendent Leadership For A Sustainable World*. In the book, he makes a compelling case that sustainability and clean energy are natural extensions of integrity-based principles and values. Moreover, that long-term investments in these areas will excite our top and bottom lines, as well as improve our global economy, security and environment.

Steve says he had one goal in writing this book – inspire chief executive officers to embrace sustainability for its strategic value. He believes that those who do will compete more successfully in the 21st Century and make the world a better place at the same time.

The book’s intended audience also includes other business leaders who have the influence and resources to make clean energy a top priority in their firms.

Cumulatively, they can empower the private sector to succeed where

government has failed. According to Steve, the resulting clean energy revolution will transform the United States and the world.

Quote 1: “The world will only get greener by necessity and we aim to make a difference”

Quote 2: “We want to advance the green building movement and develop new energy-efficient and renewable energy solutions”

Company Name: Melink Corporation

Management: Steve Melink, Founder & CEO

Description: Melink Corporation is a clean energy solution provider for the commercial building industry.

URL: www.melinkcorp.com