

Geotechnology, Inc. Celebrates 30th Anniversary

By John O'Connor

Foundation Drilling magazine has been featuring Contractor and Associate Member Companies in which generational continuity is a key factor in the company's longevity and success. In this instance we present the "story" of an ADSC Technical Affiliate Member, geotechnical engineering firm, Geotechnology, Inc. The series will continue on through 2014 and 2015. The next article in the series will appear in the July, 2014 issue. (Editor)

Getting Started

In 1984, (the year, not the book) Apple releases the Macintosh computer in the U.S., the prime rate is 13%, AT&T's 22 Bell system companies divested into eight companies, and some 70 U.S. banks are driven out of business by the continuing recession.

In St. Louis, Missouri, Mike Alizadeh is working as a technical engineer in a branch office of a successful Seattle-based firm. Alizadeh and his wife, both civil engineers, had moved to St. Louis from Iran in 1959 after a year in graduate school at the University of Michigan. After arriving in the Gateway City, Mike worked for a construction company and a consulting company, before joining the engineering firm.

1984 would prove to be a watershed year for Mike. He and five co-workers saw an opportunity to fill a void in the industry and provide services focused on geotechnical engineering. They were John Baker, P.E., geotechnical engineer and laboratory manager, Ron Eckelkamp, senior geotechnical engineer, Don McQueen, senior environmental scientist, and Richard Frueh and Pat Goeke, both geotechnical engineers. The company was named Earth Technology, Inc. for about a month when they received notice that the name was already being used by another firm and therefore couldn't be used. Feeling it was important that the firm name reflect the focus of their services they agreed upon *Geotechnology, Inc.*

In its first year of business, Geotechnology, Inc. had revenues of \$350,000. "In little over a year we had purchased two drill rigs and formed Geotechnology Services, Inc., a totally owned drilling subsidiary. The rest is history," says John Baker. A few years later, Geotechnology began offering environmental services and geophysics which really provided a springboard for growth.

In 1984, while Mike Alizadeh was busy getting his new company off the ground, his son Ed was graduating from the University of Tulsa with a degree in petroleum engineering.

While his dad offered him a job at Geotechnology, Ed resisted and went to work for a major oil company. By 1989, Geotechnology was expanding their services to include environmental engineering, which is Ed's passion. Ed and his wife Brenda, moved back to St. Louis and Ed came to work at Geotechnology.

Ed came aboard as a staff engineer in the company's environmental group as Geotechnology was just entering the underground storage tank (UST) assessment and remediation market. Ed's oil company experience played a critical role in helping Geotechnology become a "go-to" firm for UST assessment and remediation.

In 1994, Ed became the firm's environmental department manager and maintained that role while earning a law degree at night from Saint Louis University. Shortly thereafter he became Geotechnology's President, taking over for his father.



Original founding members (left to right) Ron Eckelkamp, P.E., Don McQueen, P.E., Mike Alizadeh, P.E., Pat Goeke, P.E., John Baker, P.E., and Rich Frueh (not pictured in the corporate photo).

Like Father, Like Son

With Ed at the helm, Geotechnology has grown to become a leading provider of geotechnical and environmental engineering, geophysics, water resource management, materials testing, and drilling services throughout the Midwest and Mid-South. Employing 160 associates, 18 of whom have ownership in the firm, Geotechnology has offices in Overland Park, Kansas, Fairview Heights, Illinois and Memphis, Tennessee in addition to its St. Louis headquarters. Geotechnology's revenues for 2013 topped \$20.6 million.

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Ed Alizadeh, President and CEO,
Geotechnology, Inc.

“We believe growth is necessary, but managing it is imperative,” says Ed Alizadeh, P.E., President and CEO of Geotechnology, Inc. “We’re not interested in becoming a national firm. However, expanding geographically in the way we have allows us to quickly and economically serve clients in 14 states.”

Ed says his dad once told him “You can have all the degrees in the world, but it’s a person’s ability to display good judgment that’s critical. Times change and you have to be willing to change with them.”

Investment Pays Off

That good judgment is clear when looking at the firm’s capital investments, particularly in equipment, technology and people. “You have to be prepared to invest in training and constantly updating your equipment and software,” says Alizadeh. “We research and invest in the things that will enable us to work more effectively and efficiently, which ultimately benefits our clients.”

“One example of many the firm has embraced is Pile Dynamic Analyzers (PDA). Instead of recommending buildings and other structures be built on piles down to a certain formation, this technology can measure the specific capacity of each pile. Not many of our competitors have invested in the technology and hardware,” notes Craig Kaibel, P.E., Project Manager for Geotechnology’s deep foundation testing services.

Another key investment in hardware came in late 2013 when Geotechnology purchased a 20-ton Cone Penetration Testing (CPT) Rig, becoming the only geotechnical services firm in the region to own such a rig and equipment.

The CPT provides a constant, rapid, and reliable means of determining soil stratigraphy, relative density, strength and hydrogeologic information (static and dynamic pore pressure, hydraulic conductivity).

The all-weather, 20-ton tracked rig combines the testing equipment and drilling platform, and can be mobilized for many terrains or be positioned on a floating barge, without having to be anchored. The rig is also equipped for shear-wave subsurface testing, which normally requires separate equipment and crews.

“Given the amount of work we do on levees, around rivers and in floodplains, owning this critical piece of equipment instead of having to rent it means faster deployment and improved efficiency, which results in our clients saving time and money,” says Alizadeh.

In 2013, Geotechnology was the first in the area to provide GeoPortSM, their Field Information Management System (FIMS). This client interface and document management system provides clients with clear, legible, consistent Construction Materials Testing reports 24/7.

An Important Milestone

Geotechnology is celebrating its 30th Anniversary this year. A big part of that celebration involves taking pride in having worked on many high profile and challenging projects in the areas where it serves clients. Some of those projects include:

- The new Busch Stadium, St. Louis
- The Stan Musial/Veterans Memorial Bridge over the Mississippi River, St. Louis
- The current Gateway Arch “Lid” Project
- The Memphis Pyramid Seismic Retrofit
- Beale Street Landing, Memphis
- Hollywood Casino at Kansas Speedway
- Blue Parkway Town Centre, Kansas City
- Enbridge Pipeline from Wisconsin to Oklahoma

“It’s great being a part of something that makes such a big impact and enhances the community. It energizes me. It’s because of a whole bunch of good people working together. Without them it wouldn’t work,” Alizadeh says.

Mike’s Legacy

Following the death of Mike Alizadeh in 2007, the Alizadeh family established the “Mike Alizadeh Graduate Studies Scholarship Fund.” Administered by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) St. Louis Section, Geotechnical Committee, the annual scholarship is awarded to a graduate student pursuing a Master’s Degree in Civil or Geological Engineering, with a geotechnical or environmental emphasis, at a Midwestern University. In the six years since Mike’s passing, ten recipients from five universities have received a total of \$22,000 in scholarships and the fund is well managed to make awards for many years to come.

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Some of Geotechnology’s New Busch Stadium team L to R: Ed Alizadeh, Rick Pershall, Doug Drummond, John Baker, Steve Fultz (no longer with the firm).



Geotechnology earned two prestigious awards for work performed on the Memphis Pyramid Seismic Retrofit project, a 2014 Grand Award for engineering excellence from the American Council of Engineering Companies of Tennessee (ACEC-TN), and a 2014 Honor Award from the ACEC of Missouri (ACEC-MO).

Another aspect of Mike Alizadeh's legacy comes from John Baker, who on his retirement from Geotechnology in 2012 penned some "lessons learned" throughout his career in the military and at Geotechnology. His "Baker's Dozen" are as follows:

1. Always try to do your best and be on your best behavior, someone will invariably be watching and taking notes.
2. Things don't always go as you had planned.
3. War is hell, but dire poverty is worse.
4. Employees compensated un-equitably will not hesitate to resign and go to work for your competition; they may even decide to start their own firm.
5. Not all clients are good clients.
6. Do not use mixed fill.
7. The purpose of load testing prior to construction is to verify your design, not modify it.
8. The final two or three days of report preparation can consume the profit margin on your project.
9. Not all business is good business.
10. Losing a partner and best friend to cancer is devastating (Geotechnology co-founder Ron Eckelkamp).
11. Don't be a clock-watcher; arrive a little earlier and leave a little later than what is expected.
12. Don't throw trash over your neighbor's fence.
13. Be passionate about your profession.

STEM—The Foundation of Engineering's Future

While Ed Alizadeh and his company work with several civic and charitable organizations, nothing is more important to him from a professional perspective than the future of engineering. That's why one of the organizations Geotechnology supports is the Engineering Foundation of St. Louis, which was established by

the Engineers' Club of St. Louis in 1978. The foundation's mission is to further the purposes of the engineering profession through technical excellence, moral responsibility and community service.

The Foundation supports educational programs and services for engineers, engineering supervisors and managers, business, government and the general public. Access to these programs is independent of race or sex.

Geotechnology also supports the Gateway STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) High School of St. Louis. This inner-city school is committed to preparing its students for future educational and career success by offering challenging academic and specialized STEM programs. The firm provides several employees to the school's Engineering Advisory Group.

"While I'm encouraged that more and more young people are considering STEM careers, the challenge is creating more diversity within the STEM workforce, which is why our work with Gateway High School is so important."

Alizadeh says young people coming out of college are bright, energetic and want to make a difference.

This is why he's not afraid to hire workers right out of school. In fact, Geotechnology hired Joe Cravens and Samantha Nutt, both of whom interned with the firm as soon as they graduated from Missouri University of Science and Technology.

"One of our core values is opportunity and we are committed to providing a safe, exemplary workplace with opportunity for growth," says Alizadeh. "A perfect example is Duane Kreuger, R.G., our St. Louis Branch Manager. Duane started with us 21 years ago as a driller's helper, then became a staff scientist, Project Manager, Environmental Group Manager and now he is the first branch manager for the St. Louis office."

Says Ed, "Good companies have leaders who believe in what they're doing, they walk the walk and the employees believe in it."

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Geotechnology, Inc. St. Louis headquarters.