



Elise Hernandez grew up in the Twin Cities with a deep understanding of her Hispanic roots from her father, who emigrated from Mexico in his early teens.



Her bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota included a focus in Latin America Studies.

Elise began working for a secretarial service to pay her way through college. Within a few years, she acquired the company. One of her clients, a global technology company, persuaded Elise to join its organization. "I was in my early 20s and reported to a sales manager who became a mentor. I watched her achieve significant success in a very male-dominant field," Hernandez says. The mentor advised her to leave the company and pursue a career in sales technology.

Armed with a "phenomenal reference," Hernandez acquired a sales position at a global technology company and "climbed the ladder quickly," becoming manager for the Latin American market. She continued to pursue her career in sales management with other technology companies. Meanwhile, she was earning an MBA from Metropolitan State University. Her dissertation was a business plan for the company that would later become Ideal System Solutions, a national technology solution provider. "I didn't give a lot of thought to executing the plan," she says. "But I met my husband at about the same time, and we decided to move forward." The company officially opened on January 3, 1997.

Hernandez has made a point of running her company very differently from the companies she worked for. She not only forecasts her customers' needs, but also takes into consideration the needs of employees. The company grew 17 percent in 2008, and has a goal of 25 percent growth in 2009.

"Since I understand the obstacles to overcome starting and maintaining a business, I hope I can serve as a role model for other women and minorities," says Hernandez. "I love every minute. It's been the most incredible journey." ■

*Laura French is a St. Paul freelance writer.*