

thinking **BIGGER** BUSINESS

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Boom Times

The aging of Baby Boomers is a huge opportunity for savvy small businesses.

POWERING UP

“If you have a good team,
you can move mountains.”

Ike Nwabuonwu

chairman and CEO // Alpha Energy and Electric Inc.

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Capital Financing



TURNING GREEN WITH ENERGY

Ike Nwabuonwu and Gabriel Okafor eventually want most of their projects to involve renewable energy sources. The company is especially proud of a 100-kilowatt solar panel system that it built with Kansas City Power & Light and Brightergy at the Paseo Academy of the Arts in Kansas City, Mo.

Despite being relatively small, Alpha Energy and Electric has accomplished big things. The founders give credit to their team, which is expected to grow from 23 to 32 people by this summer.

"If you have a good team, you can move mountains," Nwabuonwu said.



Powering Up

Alpha Energy & Electric has become a key player in the city's biggest construction projects.

By Tammy Worth

ENTREPRENEURS

Ike Nwabuonwu and Gabriel Okafor

COMPANY INFORMATION

Alpha Energy and Electric Inc.
1100 E. 34th St.
Kansas City, MO 64109
(816) 421-6767
www.alphaee.com

TYPE OF BUSINESS

Renewable energy solutions provider and electrical contracting

YEAR FOUNDED 2005

EMPLOYEES 23

KEYS TO SUCCESS

"Resilient attitude—providing our clients with an uncompromising level of excellence with integrity from planning to implementation."

Ike Nwabuonwu, chairman and CEO

LEFT // **Ike Nwabuonwu**, chairman and CEO; **Marqell Stinson**, administrative assistant; **Ike Nwabuonwu Jr.**, director of operations; **Nichole Fulton**, branch manager, Whiteman Air Force Base; and **Gabriel Okafor**, president. RIGHT // Conduit work at the base level of the Sprint Center. (photo courtesy of Alpha Electric and Energy Inc.)

When Ike Nwabuonwu and Gabriel Okafor started Alpha Energy and Electric Inc. in 2005, the operation was small, to say the least.

It consisted of three people in two little rooms at 18th and Vine. Nwabuonwu and Okafor shared an office and had to walk sideways to squeeze between their desks. Because they had invested all of their money in the company, they pooled funds to buy boxes of crackers for lunch.

They can now look back and laugh at the early days of the company, which has experienced impressive growth in its seven years in business. Alpha Energy and Electric has been part of some of the region's highest-profile construction projects.

The company's portfolio of services for its commercial, industrial and residential customers includes design/build, systems installation, energy audit and retrofitting, consulting, and design and installation of solar panels and other "green" energy products.

Though the organization may come from humble origins, the owners have never had trouble dreaming big and planning for growth from day one.

"We were looking for a sector that had potential, and we identified renewable energy and electrical," Nwabuonwu said. "Back then, only a few people really knew about the burgeoning industry."

Today, they don't have to squeeze between

desks anymore: they recently renovated a 10,000-square-foot space in Kansas City for their headquarters and opened a second office.

Plugging In

Nwabuonwu, who is chairman and CEO, came from a background in information technology. Okafor, Alpha's president, formerly worked in real estate development and municipal service. Neither one had a lot of experience

with the energy and electrical sector when they decided to go into business for themselves. Nwabuonwu said both men had to learn quickly, and they did. It was only about six months



after the company's inception that they began to see growth, Nwabuonwu said.

Some of their major projects include Sprint Center, Arrowhead and Kauffman stadiums, Schlitterbahn Vacation Village, the new JE Dunn headquarters and the Miller Nichols Library at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

They installed all of the underground cables, the emergency generator, cable tray, site lighting and some of the suite and concourse lighting at the Sprint Center. Their second office, located in Knob Noster, Mo., was opened to cater to an important client, Whiteman Air Force Base, where Alpha has a contract to perform maintenance.

RIGHT // Project manager/estimator trainee **Melvin Wilson** and **Kevin Lee**, electrician/technician, go over upcoming project plan estimates with **Ike Nwabuonwu Jr.**, director of operations. **BELOW** // Final installation of solar panels on the roof of the Paseo Academy of the Arts. Alpha Energy and Electric Inc., in collaboration with Kansas City Power & Light, the Kansas City Missouri School District and Brightergy, installed one of the largest solar (photovoltaic) systems in the Kansas City metro area to date. (photo courtesy of KCP&L and Brightergy.) **BELOW, RIGHT** // Conduit work and cabling installation at the Sprint Center (photo courtesy of Alpha Electric and Energy Inc.)



Nwabuonwu and Okafor started the company with the idea that a large part of their work would be related to green energy, which Nwabuonwu said is the future. But because it was, and still is, a growing and fluctuating industry, the two men decided at the beginning not to place all of their eggs in one basket.

Instead of focusing solely on renewable energy, they decided to add a traditional electrical component to their services. The business today relies about 35 percent on renewable energy projects and about 65 percent on traditional electrical projects. Nwabuonwu said their goal is to reverse that number to 60 percent renewable energy and 40 percent traditional electrical design/installation.

Nwabuonwu is particularly proud of their work at the Paseo Academy

of the Arts. Alpha's team worked in partnership with Kansas City Power & Light to design and Brightergy to install a solar panel (voltaic) system. The school's 100-kilowatt system is one of the largest thus far in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The panels are expected to produce enough energy that any excess will be returned to the grid.

"Kansas City Power & Light is a leader in green energy, and we are fortunate to be able to work with them," he said.

Alpha's collaboration with organizations such as JE Dunn and KCP&L have been a key component of the company's success. Alpha has continued to work with KCP&L on other projects as well.

The first was the installation of energy-efficient appliances for homes involved in KCP&L's Smart-Grid project. Soon they will begin in-

stalling "energy-smart" thermostats in more than 2,000 area homes.

This kind of collaboration is the result of a decision in 2009 to make Alpha a prime contractor, working with other major organizations in the area. Alpha's team hit the pavement—sending e-mails, making phone calls and giving presentations to business owners.

Another strategic move by the company in early 2011 was to expand its services outside of the Kansas City area. Alpha Energy & Electric has done work on a federal building in Lincoln, Neb., and on a U. S. Department of Agriculture building in Ames, Iowa.

Alpha also has recently taken on projects as the general contractor and construction manager. Alpha Energy and Electric self-performs energy and electrical scopes and subcontracts work other than energy and electrical to other organizations.

Rules for Growth

As Alpha Energy and Electric's workload has grown, so has its staff. The number of team members increased from three to five and then to 10. Currently, they have 23 team members, and they plan to expand to 32 by summer.

The company prides itself on being able to recruit young



ABOVE // Discussing new projects are **Gabriel Okafor**, president; **Kevin Lee**, electrician/technician; **Ryan Lee**, electrician/technician; **Nichole Fulton**, branch manager—Whiteman Air Force Base; and **Ike Nwabuonwu**, chairman and CEO.

“If we can build power plants and capture a significant amount of solar and wind, we would be doing a lot of good for the environment and giving employment to the area. It really is an area of need.”



Ike Nwabuonwu // chairman and CEO, Alpha Energy and Electric Inc.

talent—individuals who want to work for smaller businesses where their ideas will be appreciated and where they have the technology to do their job, Nwabuonwu said.

Nwabuonwu looks for people who bring their own talents to the table and provide a fresh viewpoint for the organization.

“If you have a good team, you can move mountains,” he said. “I always tell my management, ‘If I have to tell you what to do all the time, I don’t need you.’”

They also try to provide team members with the tools they need to do their best work, including but not limited to cutting-edge software and state-of-the-art equipment. Each team member has a laptop and smartphone. The business has its own server, which is somewhat unusual for a company of its size.

A commitment to customers has helped fuel the company’s growth. Their motto is to provide “an uncompromising level of excellence and integrity from planning to implementation” on all of their projects. They have an internal policy of returning all phone calls by the end of each business day.

“The one thing we don’t want to do is have any client wait,” Nwabuonwu said. “And clients have told us that they appreciate our efficiency.”

Completing projects on budget is a priority. In seven years of business, Nwabuonwu said, they have completed every project on time and on budget.

Nwabuonwu said they are able to keep costs low for a handful of reasons. First, they believe that you don’t always need expensive equipment to do the job. They do

have high-end technology when it is necessary, but they don’t purchase it when it’s not.

Second, their headquarters is an old building they purchased and remodeled at 1100 E. 34th St. It fits their staff and has plenty of room for them to grow.

And, finally, none of their senior management “makes \$60 million a year,” Nwabuonwu said.

“We are able to give clients what they want because we have low overhead,” he said. “And, unlike bigger companies, we bring a more personal touch. Clients know they can call us at any time.”

Charging Ahead

Alpha Energy and Electric continues to dream big and may delve into emerging markets. Nwabuonwu said they are researching the viability of creating a factory to build their

solar panels. They also are looking into the possibility of building power plants in Third World countries that use solar and wind power.

“If we can build power plants and capture a significant amount of solar and wind, we would be doing a lot of good for the environment and giving employment to the area,” he said. “It really is an area of need.”

As for the overall business, Nwabuonwu said they hope in the next five years to double the amount of work they are doing now.

“If we give clients what they want, they will continue to use us—and they do,” he said. ■

Tammy Worth is a freelance writer in Kansas City, Mo.

www.tammyworth.com