

Passion by the Numbers

To hear Penny Hulbert talk about how much she likes helping others, and to see the tears in her eyes when she tells you so, you would think she were a social worker rather than a banker.

Hulbert, an energetic redhead with a knack for numbers, found a way to marry her twin passions of people and banking by starting her own financial intermediary firm that links businesses to banking sources: Tampa's Links Financial. Another passion – the game of golf and its role in business development – explains the double entendre of her company's name.

Links began in 2006, grew quickly and added two female employees along the way. Asked if being in a male-dominated business is tough, Hulbert laughs. "When I go to financial conferences, people always remember me, so I always look at it as a way to stand out."

Over the last 20 years, Hulbert, who has math and business degrees from Wake Forest University and an MBA from the University of Tampa, has worked for myriad firms in the financial services industry, including

Bank of America, Northern Trust, and the Royal Bank of Canada's U.S. subsidiary.

She counts Alex Sink, a former boss and Florida's chief financial officer, amongst her dearest friends and mentors. Hulbert, who laughs infectiously a great deal, also isn't shy about saying how passionate she is about spending a lot of time on every golf course she can, wherever she is.

Her value system, she says, is all about helping hard-working people achieve their dreams. At Links, a fee-based business, she uses the skills she honed over two decades to help growing businesses 'link' to not only the right banking institution, but also the right banker, all the while helping them through the complexities of the transaction.

"I can explain things to the client about why banks do certain things, and look at what they are doing for what reason. The fit is very important, and I also help get the right person at the institution," she says.

Hulbert's firm (www.links-financial.com) also assists with determining a company's appropriate capital structure and financing, structuring partner buyouts, developing succession and wealth transfer plans, and forecasting financial budgets. Money involved in the transactions is anywhere from \$1 million to \$30 million, but Hulbert occasionally makes an exception with very promising but smaller transactions.

The banks receive nothing for her referrals or services, so she has no vested interest in choosing one over the other. Lacking such an agenda, she says, makes it easier to identify the most appropriate financing program for the client, provide the referrals to the funding source and advocate for the client during the process.

When Hulbert worked for CFO Sink she got the best career advice ever. "I asked Alex a good way to get ahead. She told me to seek leadership opportunities with not-for-profits, because, amongst many other reasons, those skill sets at nonprofits easily translated to your work. She was really right," says Hulbert, who boasts a host of professional and volunteer affiliations.

Hulbert's advice to a female aspiring to succeed in the male-dominated financial world: "Get educated, preferably with a graduate degree, and learn to play golf. You can learn a lot about a person by the way they behave on the fairway, a great way to see how they might do business," she says.

Next up for Hulbert: starting a fund to invest in women-owned businesses. She's begun talking to affluent, likeminded people to get 'Links Capital' started.

"There are so many women with great ideas. There is such an incredible need for such funding. Could you imagine what an impact that could make on some enterprising women's lives?" ■



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