

**BDO BUSINESS VALUE  
AWARD WINNER:  
ABL EMPLOYMENT**



PJ Ferguson, founder and president, *ABL Employment*

Jill Dee Ferguson, owner and operator, *ABL London*

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- PJ Ferguson, founder and president, *ABL Employment*

**About the  
W100 Business  
Value Award  
and BDO**

*A business creates sustainable value by building the infrastructure, client relationships, human resources, products and services that will carry it forward and generate long-term financial rewards.*

The W100 BDO Business Value Award, created in association with PROFIT and PROFITguide.com, recognizes the importance of creating sustainable value in a business. That value is not from a single factor, but rather built on a combination of factors that work together to secure future success.

With over 90 years of experience serving and building great relationships with businesses across the country, BDO is proud to celebrate the achievements of Canada's top female entrepreneurs.

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**GROWING CONCERN:  
Principles Provide a Firm Foundation**

With ten offices in Ontario and two in British Columbia, ABL Employment is no stranger to growth. But numbers don't tell its entire success story. Established in Burlington, Ontario in 1999 by PJ Ferguson, the staffing agency's progress is inextricably linked to its values, known as Foundation Principles. In essence, they combine the company's business strategy with day-to-day touchstones for the entire staff, from its executive team and internal staff of about 44 to its 1,500 or so "Assignment Employees" who work at over 300 client sites.

The first principle, focused on the company's commitment to ethical behaviour, is truly reflective. "Look in the mirror and be proud" is part of the overarching corporate culture that instills decision-making empowerment in individuals. Other principles revolve around enhancing the company to remain strong and stable, yet nimble and scalable to seize opportunities as they arise. We asked PJ Ferguson, co-author of these founding principles with her sister Jill Dee Ferguson, to elaborate on their vision, and their path to expansion and sustainability.

**What led you to start an employment agency?**

I had worked in the staffing industry since 1987, and it was clear to me there was great potential in serving the industrial and warehousing sectors with a smart, caring, practical and ethical business – one that could deploy solutions, not just fill orders. Having come from an entrepreneurial family, it was an easy decision to start a business from scratch when the timing seemed right. Shortly thereafter, I convinced my sister Jill Dee to join me.

**Explain your Foundation Principles, and how they serve your business and your employees.**

Each person is trained to make decisions based on our Foundation Principles, which are posted in each office and referred to in our daily interactions, weekly meetings, performance appraisals and reward programs. They are part of our culture, and very strong and pervasive throughout the organization, providing a direct path for establishing stability to seize opportunities and avoid the "foibles" of business life – such as an economic downturn, or the loss of a key employee or a key client. So, our relationships with clients and suppliers are deliberately multi-faceted, with no one person – not even Jill Dee or me – having a singular connection with any company. This creates fuller relationships, and staves off the

vulnerability of dependence. We sometimes refer to this as our "hit by a bus" principle, meaning that if any one of us were hit by a bus tomorrow, it would not be devastating to the future of the company. As such, because we don't want any one client to represent more than ten per cent of our annual business, we have a company that is not overly dependent on a specific customer, industry, geographic region, supplier or person.

**You serve clients who have constantly changing needs. What sets ABL Employment apart, when it comes to matching recruits with clients?**

We have very refined and well-documented processes for all aspects of recruiting, retention, productivity motivation and service efficiency. These methods are laid out very clearly, with underlying themes of diversity, process and independence. All these things lead to a good match. For employees, it means being happy and motivated by the right work opportunity, and thus being more productive. Helping them meet their goals helps make them exceptional and more powerful. For clients, it means we are able to quickly build and deploy a productive team to meet their needs, and help them become more successful. This approach truly makes a difference, and helps us achieve our goals, too.

**What challenges have you faced along the way, and how have you overcome them?**

Although ABL has largely been free from overwhelming challenges since its inception, the 2008-2009 recession was a strong affirmation that we were not yet at a volume where we would be unaffected by an economic downturn. So we were inspired to focus on growth, and our ensuing expansion created the new challenge of keeping our culture and communications as strong as we had initially envisioned. This has led to creative and fun interaction from all the players at ABL, so it was a good challenge to have. We also help clients with their challenges by meeting regularly to review current usage and analyze trends, and to ensure we are aware of upcoming

issues, such as labour market changes and additional shift requirements.

**Describe your company's infrastructure, in terms of roles, support services, and relationships with clients.**

Our structure is visualized as a wheel. Senior managers are at the hub of the wheel, with each geographic area "spoking" out from this hub. The outer rim is comprised of the various support departments utilizing shared knowledge, such as our Business Development Team taking on a variety of roles throughout the company, our After Hours Team serving different geographic areas, and our Staff Training & Development Team providing well-documented processes – all of which apply across many aspects of our organization. The whole set-up is designed to be very scalable, since it's common for a client to have seasonal ramp-ups. For instance, we utilize a VoIP phone system and share a common database, so employees throughout the company can contribute at a moment's notice, making adjustments that become seamless to our customers. This also works geographically, as regions can get busy, requiring last-minute orders for a few hundred people, for example. With well-documented processes, cross-trained staff, and a continually diversifying customer base with strong multi-level relationships, our abilities and agility continually contribute to our company's overall value.

**Having had your company consistently ranked among Canada's top 100 female entrepreneurs, what advice would you offer other female entrepreneurs seeking to increase the value and sustainability of their businesses?**

Embrace the "hit by a bus" principle. Even at the very early stages of your company, I would suggest taking less money for yourself, and investing in building a team. Develop and empower staff as soon as possible. That is how you create a future with opportunity for you and your company. Grow a good team around you – if a business can't run without you, then it has no independent value, so always strive to create that value. It will make you, your life and your company stronger.