

## [Finding Opportunity: How two entrepreneurs got their inspiration from their former occupation](#)

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*Dallas Mercer and Kathleen Mullally both launched their businesses after spotting a gap in the industry where they were employed. Brought together by the [Cisco Women Entrepreneurs' Circle](#) initiative, we spoke to them about the opportunities that inspired their leap from employee to entrepreneur, and the strategies they've used to make their businesses a success — from the services they offer to the technology they use.*

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Successful entrepreneurship always begins with a great idea. For Dallas Mercer and Kathleen Mullally, that idea came from gaining experience in their respective industries, and spotting an area where a key service was missing, or not adequately provided.

Dallas Mercer founded her eponymous consulting company in 2002. Originally providing disability management services, Dallas Mercer Consulting has expanded to offer occupational health and safety as well as industrial hygiene services to more than 460 organizations in a variety of industries across Canada.

Dallas built up her expertise in the field through a series of positions in her early career. First as a government employee handling workers' compensation, then as an advisor for employers with the Newfoundland and Labrador Employers' Council, focused on the areas of workers' compensation and occupational health and safety. Having seen both sides of the equation, Dallas recognized a problem: "Employers didn't really have the tools internally to know what they were doing and manage the system, and it was costing a lot."

After her husband's job transfer prompted a move from Atlantic Canada to Montreal, Dallas found a new role with a firm that was doing something similar to what she thought would be beneficial to employers. She launched Dallas Mercer Consulting just a few months later. "I started the business to help employers navigate the complex workers' compensation regulatory landscape and sick leave process, and that's still my focus 15 years later," she says, adding that helping them manage claim duration and escalating expenses is an easy proposition to sell. "We're actually no cost to our clients because they save much more than they spend on us, so it just becomes a natural fit."

When Kathleen Mullally opened The Small Business Specialists in 1986, she had a specific target market in mind for the accounting services her company offers. It all began with a position at another CA firm, where she found she really enjoyed working with small business clients, but couldn't convince management of the benefits of servicing them better.

"I could see that the advice we gave them was really critical for the operations of their company," Kathleen explains. "Unfortunately, this company wasn't interested in helping out the small businesses because the bottom line was their driver, and they weren't making a lot of money on them. For me, that was a mistake. When small business owners are taught what they need to know, they become big business owners. When you work hand in hand with them, they become partners with you for a very long time after that."

Kathleen has grown her Calgary-based firm on that premise — exceptional client service, offering more than just day-to-day accounting and financial statements. "My role, as I see it, is an educator. Entrepreneurs have a skill set and a vision, but don't always have all the knowledge and skills required to make a successful company. Sometimes they need an outside perspective on how they are running the company or hiring, or helping them realize they can't wear all the hats. They want to be successful, and I can help them be successful."

Dallas and Kathleen largely credit word-of-mouth for enabling them to continuously add new clients over the years. It's a benefit "that comes from doing really good work for companies," Dallas says. But how have they been able to offer the same level of service, even as their businesses have grown? Both women point to technology.

"It is critical that we keep up to date with new technology and education," says Kathleen. "It allows us to work more effectively, giving us more time to pass our knowledge onto our clients to help facilitate their growth."

The Small Business Specialists keep their internal operations running smoothly by employing a software solution for their tasking system. This enables Kathleen and her team to know where a file is, who is working on it, what is outstanding, and when it's due. Dallas and her team use video conferencing to talk to companies across Canada while being based on the East coast, keeping the costs of a national presence down. "Being able to have face-to-face meetings without flying out is pretty critical for us," she says.

While both entrepreneurs are quick to point out that the use of technology has allowed their businesses to grow and scale, they are also aware that there's more it could be doing for them. For Dallas, her ultimate goal is to employ technology "to get rid of paper." She's been working with Olivia Baker, the University of Waterloo intern paired with her as part of the [Cisco Women Entrepreneurs' Circle program](#), to get the process started.

“Olivia’s been helping us with how the individual disability managers can improve some of their systems, creating forms and digitizing them,” Dallas says. “And as we move further in this direction, it will make a big difference from the perspective of being able to have disability managers from across the country communicate with each other and access information. I can’t grow without it.”

Kathleen also hopes to make more processes in her company digital — both internal tasks and paperwork for clients — but her immediate focus is on building a website, something she never felt she needed because of her past success with referrals. “What I realized was, the younger generation of millennials go online and Google everything. They don’t take their dad’s word that this is a good accountant. They want to seek this information out themselves. Because we didn’t have a presence there, what I discovered is that we weren’t getting as many new millennial clients as I would like.”

It was a learning process for Kathleen as well as her intern, Jenny Jin. “When people think of making websites, they usually think of the technical side — styling the theme,” says Jenny. “The project taught me the importance of project management. Now, I have both the technical and communication skills to create a website.”

And what did Olivia, Dallas’ intern, learn from her participation in the program? “Seeing my entrepreneur’s success has inspired me to pursue my own projects, and possibly start a business of my own in the future,” she says.

To that end, the women have some valuable advice for those who hope to follow in their footsteps: “They really need to ask themselves why they want to do this,” says Kathleen. “What is their passion? Passion will help them move through all the obstacles they’re going to run into. Cash flow. Budgeting. Competition. It’s a really big learning curve.”

Dallas echoes her sentiments: “I don’t think it’s any one thing that makes anyone a successful entrepreneur. Certainly, I’m passionate about what I do, so I don’t ever feel like I work. I work hard, I work a lot of hours, but I don’t complain about it because it’s what I love.”