

**Amy Langer**

**SALO, Oberon, and Numberworks**

Lorin: Amy, tell me how your business started and where it has gone since?

Amy: Our contract staffing business started in 2002 and was branded as SALO. From then to now we've been on a really high growth trajectory. We added Oberon in 2006 and NumberWorks in 2007. We are now just shy of \$50 million in revenue, so we've grown year after year. We have about 350 employees overall with many repeat customers, and we have good solid feedback.

Lorin: It just sounds like you've been on a crazy high growth path for a number of years.

Amy: Yes.

Lorin: Before you actually launched this business, how many years were you in it?

Amy: Four.

Lorin: What was your vision for this business? Was it what it has turned out to be?

Amy: Actually, yes it was! I started my career as an accountant and then began working with a large, publicly held company – in effect, rolling out a business for them that somewhat competes with us now. So, I had been in this type of business for a while, but obviously, as a large, publicly held company, there were limitations on where it could be taken.

At that point, my business partner and I really felt like there was a lot that we could do on our own. Knowing the business that we were running with them, we thought, "Gosh, if we could do all the things that we wanted to do, it could actually be a lot better and bigger." I would say we had pretty high expectations of what we were going to do. We wanted our company to feel different. We wanted to have amazing individuals on our team – to have a different type of culture that we'd never really seen or been a part of before. So, some of the growth we've seen, if I have to be really honest, I had expected.

Lorin: I love that you had the vision because I think that so many people don't! The fact that you had this vision is great and what is different about the feeling? That totally intrigues me.

Amy: We have a really, really strong culture. If I had to point to one thing that differentiates us from most other places, I would say it's our people and our culture — how we interact and work together. When people are doing what they want to do, in an organization that they like, with people that they like, the most amazing things happen that are far beyond anything that you could ever put on paper. We have a culture of fun, innovation, frankness, and openness. So, if you came to our office, you would see it as being like a bullpen, with positive people working together. You would see across our entire office; there are no walls. Nobody has a private office, including me. You can touch both ends of your desks with your hand and we move often. So, you don't sit by the same people or in the same place for too long.

This way, you get to know different people. It's just very, very open. You typically sit with your group or the company that you are working with most of the time, but, for example, my business partner John and I move to different places quite often.

Our office is also littered with toys! When you walk in, it's very bright. The colors are incredibly important to us. We have music and we have an amazing stereo system and speakers that pump music throughout this place. We have an area where we have video games, a pool table and foosball.

Lorin: You are totally on. That's how companies are supposed to be!

Amy: And we have a relaxation room with a really nice relaxation chair where the music goes down. Everybody is encouraged to add songs to the iPod every single month. That way, no one really complains about the music, because everybody has a little of their own musical taste on it. It's almost like if you could take an iPod and make a company out of it, this is what it would be. You can have your own personal play list, but as a group, it's not an iPod unless it all kind of works

together. From our CFO to our front desk person, everybody gets a say in what they are doing. I know a lot of companies with pool tables that don't have our culture. So it goes beyond, you know?

Lorin: You are referring to companies that are not walking their talk. It sounds like you *are* walking when you talk.

Amy: Exactly.

Amy: We did a study with the Mayo Clinic about walking in the workplace and how to get more energy into a workplace, and so we implemented treadmill desks. Right now, I am on a cordless headset, so I am literally making figure eights around our office and I have a ball in my hand and I am throwing it to people as I walk through. If I don't have to be in front of my computer, I won't, so people walk and talk! We have meetings where, if we can, we'll go out and walk. We are in Minneapolis, so we have skyway systems and in the summer, we'll go out in the park and walk. If the meeting doesn't have to be held in a private room, it's not. We have meetings that are very much out in the open. Even some things that are confidential, but sort of how you talk about them is different.

People actually tour the office! We have clients that come down and have "happy hour" here. I was talking about this last night at a party. I said something like, "Oh, yeah, it was Wednesday and we were having a "happy hour" in the office." They were saying, "In the office? Like, there was beer?" and I said, "Oh, there's always beer!"

Amy: "But," they'd say, "how could you have a 'happy hour?'" And I'd say, "Well, there might be a bid in process, or maybe we'll just have a couple of clients in, but, probably once a week, we have "happy hour!"

Lorin: That's amazing!

Lorin: So, did you see that culture, that playful, fun culture, eight or so years ago? Was it part of your original vision?

Amy: I think we thought an element of that would always be here, but we didn't realize then what that type of culture does to people and how integral it would be to our success. So, it was always something that we envisioned. That was one reason why we didn't love corporate America. Let us do what we want to do. Let's have a little fun. Let's do some other things that are different and maybe a little exciting. That is what's cool. And at first, you don't have to work on it, because it's easy, and because there are only two of you!

Lorin: Right, that's true.

Amy: I would say we spend time every week thinking of how do we do this.

Lorin: Interesting.

Amy: How do we keep it? Well, we have mandatory fun events. It's mandatory that you "must have fun!" It's mandatory that you go, and it's during the workday, three or four hours. Everybody goes. We've been to a Saints game. We've gotten Segway scooters. We did a scavenger hunt at the Minnesota State Fair. What are we doing next? We're going to the Indoor Park at the Mall of America next and, literally, everybody goes.

Lorin: And it's not mandatory that they go, but they go? Or is it?

Amy: It *is* mandatory that they go!

Lorin: Okay. Got it!

Amy: (Laughing) But, it's not mandatory that you have fun.

Lorin: I understand. You can't manage that.

Amy: That's now the joke.

Lorin: I'm curious, over the years, like eight or so years ago when you had this vision for this great, successful company, how did you hold the vision? Because, of course, like everyone, I'm sure you've had ups and downs.

Amy: Yep.

Lorin: Hard times and great times.

Amy: Yep.

Lorin: How did you hang onto the vision? What did you do to hang onto the vision so that it continued to be what you envisioned it to be?

Amy: It helped that there were two of us, so if someone starts to slip, the other person says, “No! That’s not what we want.” And although we have different ways of getting to the answer, we were crystal clear on what we wanted. I don’t think that there was any choice. Show up or go home.

Lorin: In other words, there wasn’t a choice of letting go of the vision. You had your stake in the ground so far and so deep that you were committed. You were totally committed to the vision.

Amy: Yes, completely committed to what we wanted.

Lorin: That’s a really important point, because so many people have a vision but, without the commitment, the vision means nothing.

Amy: Right! And that means that you have to fund it, and that means that you spend money. For example, we’ve moved three times and we’re looking at space again. So, when we moved into our first “real” office, John was saying, “Oh, my gosh! I want a pool table!” And I’m saying, “Are you kidding me? What the heck are we going to do with a pool table?” He says, “You know this fun that we have? We won’t have that when it gets bigger.” I’m saying, “Yeah, we’ll have fun. We’ll do other things...if the point of this business is to have clients, I mean...help me out.” He’s like, “Well, we *are* committed to this, right? We are committed to having a fun culture?” and I’m saying, “Well, pool isn’t fun for me.” He’s like, “But it is for other people. Okay?”

At this point, we were still in start-up mode. Our company was only a year and a half old. We were still funding it. I’m not even sure we’re taking a paycheck yet

but we buy a pool table – a really, really nice one. I don't play, or at least I don't play well, but it's a place for meetings and even though I don't play, I love it when other people are playing. It's fun and it creates a kind of feeling, so it's really great. Later, we got so big and we were out of space, so we had to push the pool table up against the wall.

Lorin: Oh, wow!

Amy: We were pushing it up against the wall and we were putting files on it. It was like a huge downer in our office. It was a definite take away. Now, I never once played pool in that office. Maybe once, but it was by force. But I missed it more than the people who played pool, because of what it brought. So, now, these games, even though I don't play them, or I do on occasion – lots of people *do*. We have a Golden Tee golf video game and that gets played every single day in this office.

Lorin: Amazing!

Amy: Yeah! Every day, mostly in the evenings, someone will have somebody in or people will say, "I just had a really bad client experience. Will you go play a game with me?" It's totally normal here.

Lorin: Great. So let's switch gears here just slightly. As you set a goal for yourself or your team or the company, however you want to think about it, how do you hold yourself to that goal? What's your process? Can you think about a goal that you are working on right now and what do you do to keep yourself accountable? How you do go about accomplishing big things in your business, or in your life for that matter?

Amy: Well, let me just tell you just a little bit of a personal tie in during this time. During the first three years of our business, I also had three children. I had my first son nine months after the business started. And then I had twins eighteen months later. So, yeah, it's been crazy!

Lorin: That's amazing! So, is your partner your husband also?

Amy: No, no. But my partner, John, also has twins! They're a different sex and older.

Lorin: Oh, that's funny.

Amy: So there really was a lot going on, in these first three years. A lot happening!

Lorin: I'd say!

Amy: First of all, I feel it's really important to work *on* your business versus *in* your business. So, we try to take an inventory. Part of why I was thinking of that was because when the babies were born, that forced us to ask, "Where are we spending our time? What are we doing? If I am going to be out of the office, at least in the hospital for a few days, what are we spending our time on?" So, getting people aligned to know when they are working *in* it versus when they are focusing *on* the growth and the goals and the next thing is very important. Other than that, I think it's just a good combination of being able to set where you are going, being able to understand the current state of where you are, and just putting a plan in place! You just do it!

Lorin: My sense is that when you make a decision you are 120% committed to it.

Amy: Yep, I'm in or out.

Lorin: So, what do you do when you run into challenges? Like you're climbing, you're trying... In other words, you've committed to the big goal, whatever it is, and it's like you're hitting your head against the wall. What do you do? Or, don't you hit your head?

Amy: I don't know. I don't want to say that I don't because I think that would sound awful. I just look for a different way to do it. There are clearly things that I have not been able to do or companies that we have not been able to penetrate or things that I've wanted that we haven't gotten. So, either I find a different way to do it, or find someone else who can.

Lorin: So, it sounds like "hard" is not an option.

Amy: Some days *are* hard. I think if you truly love what you are doing and if you are passionate about what you are doing, then you know where you are going and it doesn't feel as hard. I am very, very thankful for what I get to do. I get to talk to people all day. I get to put career fields together. I get to talk to clients about what they are doing. My Mom has said to me, "I cannot believe that you've found something that pays you to talk on the phone! That's so you!" And, it does!

But, yes, there are hard days... There are definitely hard days. There are people that don't work out. There are disappointments. There are trusts that you put into people that do not pan out, or people that break your trust. So, there are clearly disappointments, but for as many of those there is triple the amount of really cool stuff!

I have had sleepless nights. I have had times where I'm saying to myself, "There is no way to get around this!" But, while there are client issues and things that are hard to deal with, there's also always time and a way to work them out.

Lorin: How does your husband play a role in your success?

Amy: He has a small investment company in town, and he has a flexible schedule. It's just had to work that way. Before we had children, we were both working sixty-plus hours a week and we just could not do it. I mean, we could not! So, to be honest, I wanted him to stay home and try to make that work but it just did not work for us. He was not happy with it. So, we have a full-time nanny. But, my husband is very, very supportive. If I have an event later in the day, although we are both incredibly busy and incredibly active, we find a way to make it work, most of the time.

I feel very fortunate. I am thirty-eight years old and most of my career has been equal men and women in leadership roles up to this point. When I started work: fifty percent men, fifty percent women throughout time. Now, where I see that falling off dramatically is probably in the last five to six years. There are fewer women running big companies. There are a lot more women starting companies, but the number of those companies generating over a million dollars annually is

minuscule. There aren't a lot of big role models and there aren't a lot of women who have people who can support them or who would take on that role. That's one reason why my husband did not want to be the person at the party being the stay-at-home dad. It would not work for him. It's funny, because there are a lot of men who would say, "I would love that role!" That's what he said, too, until it was an option. [Laughing]

Lorin: Interesting.

Amy: So, I think that while a lot of people think that they want that, it's just not accepted.

Lorin: How old are your children?

Amy: My oldest is seven and my twins are five.

Lorin: So many people say that you can't have your cake and eat it, too, and here you are with your cake and eating it, too. How do you do it all?

Amy: Well, some days I don't. My house is not as clean as I would like it, but one of the things that this does afford me is the ability to have help. So, when I am home, I am focusing on the things that I want to do. But there are some things you just can't outsource. You still have to run things. And, you know, there are some things that I don't get done at the office and some things that I don't get done at home. Having three children within a short span of time, and with those twins, I always was one who wanted to do everything! Everything, everything, everything and that was just not physically possible. So, I eventually realized that you can't do everything, and you really have to ask for help.

Lorin: Was learning to ask for help a big deal or not?

Amy: Yes, it *was* a big deal! Hard, hard, hard, hard, hard! But, when you have a two year old and infant twins, tell me any person that could do that job! But, coming back to how that relates to the business was realizing what is critical. There were times, when I first had the twins, that I would say, "OK, I can do two of four

things in a day: shower, email, nap, or exercise. Those were the four things of which in a normal day, most people somehow fit in, right? In a very good or a normal day at my house, I could fit two of four in. So, if I had to check email and had to have a nap, there was no shower and no run.

Lorin: Wow! Wow!

Amy: So when that's the reality, and I sacrificed a nap that I really needed in order to work, I'd better be working on something that matters.

Lorin: Those four things were how you managed your daily life so that you could accomplish big things. The basics of life had to be thought about in a very strategic, thoughtful way.

Amy: Right! So, you think, that's normal in some people's lives, but not when you have three kids under the age of two!

Lorin: I get it. I have one and I get it, yeah!

Amy: So, then it comes down to, "Where do you have to focus your attention?" This business has to be able to be run when you are on maternity leave or when you are on vacation or when you are not there. And if it's not, you have to fix it. The babies helped with that. My partner, John Folkestad, helped with that. We came back to that today, actually. That was a conversation we had. And we bring it back to, "What are we doing? Where are we spending our time? Where should it be spent?" Because you can be as busy as anyone else and not get anything done. It's true!

Lorin: In other words, it's about clearly being conscious about where you are spending your time and intentional about what needs to be done.

Amy: Correct. And not just being busy. Everybody could be busy. And, as a matter of fact, I just sat out one year and did not compete. So, when you asked about what I was doing seven years ago, that's what I was doing. I was sitting at home and not competing. Before that, I was busy every day. I was busy with golf and swimming

and sitting by the pool and running and meeting with friends. John would call because we'd both say, "I'm not going to compete. John's my business partner." And he would say something like, "We need to get together." "I'd say, "Oh yeah, I could schedule that, but I'm actually totally full today and I'm kind of busy tomorrow." He'd say, "Doing what? You don't do anything!" He was very right, but we can all be busy, right?

Lorin: Yep, exactly, and everybody is! There's now a complaint office, the "I am so busy!"

Amy: I actually now know this about me. I will never *not* be busy.

Lorin: The difference is that now you are busy and productive and conscious and intentional about what you want to accomplish, which is very different from busy and unconscious.

Amy: I agree.

Lorin: I would think that you go to sleep at night feeling very rewarded about how you spent your day.

Amy: Yes, definitely, but, to be honest, there are more days where I am thinking, "Where *should* I have spent my time today?"

Lorin: Okay, so you're still working on it, which is great to hear! I mean, we are all a work in progress.

Amy: Right, that's true.

Lorin: What would you say are the two key things that have helped you accomplish what you have accomplished the past six years?

Amy: Well, one is a fear of failure. So, it's a negative incentive... I call it my cardboard box theory; I don't want to be on the sidewalk in a cardboard box. (Laughing) So, that's certainly a driver. I know, most people are like, are you crazy? Only the people who lived through the Depression think like that, but it's not true. I think a

lot of us do and no one admits it. The other is just like a “drive.” I want to win! I want to do great things!

Lorin: I’m curious, have you ever hired a coach; been involved in a coaching program? Have you ever done that kind of personal growth work?

Amy: We think highly of outside professionals and experts that can help us. I am part of WPO (Women Presidents’ Organization), and John is part of YPO (Young President’s Organization). I feel like getting different people’s perspective is so critical in being able to bring in new ideas and how to apply them.

Lorin: Have you received mentoring along the way?

Amy: I have! I definitely have had people who I would consider mentors throughout time; not officially, but I am a student of watching, learning, listening, adapting, and growing. So, I grab onto people who I think are awesome in what they do and really try to call on them as much as possible.

Lorin: That’s just like having a coach in so many ways.

Amy: Yes, I’m always growing. I grew up in a really small dairy town of 1200 people with no money. So, I’ve really even had to learn how to do basic things like drive a car!

Lorin: I love this story! (A gong sounds in the background.) So, did somebody hit a gong? I thought I heard one...?

Amy: Yep, someone must have closed a deal. I’ve already told you about some of the crazy things we do, and we also have a gong in our office. When a deal gets done, somebody hits the gong, and there are claps and cheers and yells of, “This is awesome!”

Lorin: It sounds like you really celebrate your wins.

Amy: Yeah, you have to! I wouldn’t stay open to just get lots of “No’s.”

Lorin: Exactly! It’s true. And you just sort of let those go.

Amy: You try to learn from them as much as possible, but you can only do so much and you have to move on.

Lorin: Yep, that so totally true!

Amy: Today, we are using a contracting system that is integral. We have three hundred fifty employees that report their time on a weekly basis and we just got word that they are going out of business in 28 days. So, that, all of a sudden, is fairly critical and high on a priority list. I could go home and think, “Oh, this is so hard! How are we going to deal with this?”

I said, “What do we need? This is critical. How do we need support? Do we need to bring people in? So, we’ve moved into action. We’ve already made five phone calls. I said to my CFO, “There’s this friend of mine that does time tracking,” and she said, “How do you always have a friend that does what we are doing?”

(Laughing) I said, “Because, that’s what we do!” We meet lots of people and know lots of people so when something happens we can call somebody and get some counsel. Let’s find someone who knows it and let’s figure it out!

Lorin: I love your story, because very few people say that they’ve had the vision of the success before starting their business.

Amy: Part of it, I think, was that we were doing a similar business. I guess that there were a lot of other people in that business who could have done the same thing, but we were putting our projections together. So, during our year off we put these projections together and we’d go to our bank or our CPA and others we knew and they would say, “These projections are crazy! There’s no possible way you could do this!” We were thinking, “Oh, they are so super conservative! We have combed these numbers and we really think we could do them.” And they come back with, “Okay, we just want to set your expectations, because businesses just don’t do this. They just don’t.” Then, my dad comes back and says, “Well, okay, half the sales, double the expenses, and you might get close.” Come on! We were looking at each other and we think *they* are crazy. I’ll just give you an idea; those

supposedly crazy projections put us at \$9 million after three years and we were actually at \$21 million after three years!

Lorin: So, you had the experts, but there you came to a place where you held so tight to your vision that you didn't even listen to the experts.

Amy: We did to a certain extent, but we just *knew* it. We knew we could do more than \$9 million! And then, when you hit \$21 million, it's not like you had projected \$9 million and you hit \$9.5. We more than doubled that.

Lorin: And the knowing comes more from that commitment to the vision.

Amy: Right, I would agree.