

# CEO profile:

BY KERRY PIPES

## Right Place, Right Time

Right at Home founder sees continued growth



**A**s a hospital administrator, Allen Hager had personally seen the anguish that families faced when searching for safe, appropriate, quality home care services for their family members returning home.

“There was a gap between the transition of care that was needed and given in the hospital and care that was needed when the patient transitioned back home,” says the 54-year old founder and CEO of Right at Home. His desire to create a healthcare resource to fill this gap led him to launch the in-home senior care and assistance company in 1995, based in Omaha.

That “can do” attitude has been a part of Hager’s makeup for a long time. The West Virginia native’s first career follow-

ing college was in state government. It’s where he first was exposed to healthcare and social programs. It’s also where he learned that the wheels of government turn slowly.

“I like to try to improve things and make things better,” he says. “The longer I was in government, the more I discovered I was more suited to the efficiencies and directness of the business world.”

So he walked away from public service, earned an MBA, and went to work in the private healthcare system, first in West Virginia and then in Nebraska. From 1986 to 1994, he poured himself into healthcare administration. But by the early 1990s, he had begun to consider the plight of the elderly he saw discharged from hospitals every day, returning home with few, if any, resources available for their homebound future.

“The whole healthcare world was changing, and I began to study home healthcare and how I could build a business model to address these growing needs,” says Hager. He was so dedicated to the cause that he became a certified nursing assistant so he could enter the front lines of home healthcare and really see what was going on. He was on a quest for solutions. With the information he collected, Hager put his plan into action and opened Right at Home in 1995.

He spent the next five years living and breathing the daily management of the company. He oversaw every aspect, from hiring caregivers and making cold calls to managing receivables and nurturing its growth. It was not until later that he realized franchising might be a good way to expand his fledgling company.

“I saw the franchise model as providing a way to build scale, how it provided local ownership and contact with clients, and how people could get into this at a relatively low cost,” he says. Hager sold his first Right at Home franchise in 2000.

Today, with 243 franchisees in 5 coun-

tries (the U.S., Canada, U.K., Brazil, and China), the company’s big strategic push is international growth and expansion. Hager says he’s excited to be taking Right at Home’s services to other parts of the world. “People are really the same all over the world, and caring for the elderly at home is not limited by boundaries or borders,” he says.

Hager says a relationship-based culture is one of the organization’s foundational cornerstones. “It’s important to us to be in close, open communication with our franchisees and that we nurture this kind of culture.” This two-way street allows the corporate team to “distill all the good ideas coming in from the franchisees and make the best ideas work for our company,” he says.

Another key to the company’s sustained growth has been its ability to “create a nimble organization that can adapt and change now and moving into the future,” says Hager. “The franchise system will grow if you award franchises to business people with the right motivations, and then treat them as long-term, individual business partners rather than just another number.”

That strategy, a great executive staff and infrastructure, and a growing need for home-based healthcare in the U.S. and abroad put Right at Home in the right place at the right time.

### Leadership

#### What is your role as founder and CEO?

My core role is to create success for the franchisees and the corporate organization. My key areas of focus are strategic planning, organizational culture, and financial management.

#### Describe your leadership style:

Clearly agree on what’s possible, then get out of the way as you challenge to go beyond that.

**Name:** Allen Hager

**Title:** Founder, CEO

**Company:** Right at Home

**Units:** 243 units in 5 countries

**Age:** 54

**Family:** Wife Vivian, two daughters, 20 and 18

**Years in franchising:** 12

**Years in current position:** 12

**What has inspired your leadership style?** I have had great mentors in my life, and read widely on the subject. As well, I have had some negative experiences that have taught me the real world issues that can get in the way of success.

**What is your biggest leadership challenge?** To ensure that I am communicating enough at every level of the organization.

**How do you transmit your culture from your office to front-line employees?** That is the essence of leadership. Great ideas only happen as they move throughout the organization. First, you work as an organization to have a clear vision of what you want. Second, leadership at every level walk what they talk and hold ourselves and staff accountable. This is what staff, franchisees, and their employees respond to.

**Where is the best place to prepare for leadership: an MBA school or OTJ?** I think it's different for each person. An MBA can provide a huge amount of relevant information. Most important is a persistent commitment to learning, to growing, and to taking personal risks.

**Are tough decisions best taken by one person?** That is a final test of leadership. The *process* of getting to the decision should involve much positive collaboration. If your management structure and trust with franchisees is good you will have that. In the final analysis, however, someone has to have that "buck stops here" sign on their desk.

**How do you make tough decisions?** I first seek to clearly define the problem. Often, this is the first stumbling block. Next, I seek to listen and understand the pros and cons and the arguments that buttress competing positions. Finally, I do my own homework and seek out counsel from wise individuals who are not a part of the issue.

**Do you want to be liked or respected?** Nearly everyone wants to be liked, and I am no exception! But the key to effective leadership is earned respect. That is

your first responsibility as the leader of an organization.

**Advice to CEO wannabes:** Find something you are passionate about, and give it everything you have. Then, as you gain mastery of the business, begin to master the craft of leadership and effective management.

## Management

**Describe your management style:** Direct, supportive, and demanding.

**What does your management team look like?** Strong leaders in their own right who are willing to disagree with me and fight for their ideas. We have a great blend of personalities and backgrounds, but all are smart, dedicated, and forward-thinking.

**How does your management team help you lead?** They are in many ways smarter and better at what they do than I am. We agree on a vision and the outline of how to achieve that. Then I try to stay out of the way and get involved at appropriate points.

**Favorite management gurus and books:** My favorite business author is Peter Drucker. He was a genius in understanding the dynamics and the craft of management and leadership.

**What makes you say, "Yes, now that's why I do what I do!"** For our business, it is when I see another instance of a story of growth and great success by our franchisees. And that usually means a story about the great home care we have provided to families in need and the difference we are making in the quality of life for the many thousands of families for whom we are caring.

## Personal

**Exercise in the morning?** I like to get it in early. My wife and I go at 5:30 a.m.

**Wine with lunch?** During the workday, no. Sometimes on weekends.

**Do you socialize with your team after work or outside the office?** I enjoy that very much. Everyone is so busy we don't do enough of it.

**Last two books read:** *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, and *Taking People with You* by David Novak.

**What technology do you take on the road?** iPhone, iPad, and laptop.

**How do you relax, balance life and work?** I love to bike, read, and travel.

**Favorite vacation destination(s):** Fort Myers, Florida; Bangkok, Thailand.

**Favorite occasions to send employees notes:** I like to surprise them.

**Favorite company service:** It's difficult to point to one specific thing. We provide a myriad of valuable support services to families and those in need.

## Bottom Line

**What are your long-term goals for the company?** Right at Home will be recognized as a global leader in innovative care solutions for families dealing with aging parents and disability. We are in four countries besides the U.S. (the U.K., Brazil, China, and Canada) and expect to be in many more as societies around the globe deal with aging issues.

**How has the economy changed your goals for your company?** The economy's challenges have not affected us greatly.

**How do you measure success?** Providing great service to our customers, creating successful franchisees, and providing a place for employees to succeed.

**What has been your greatest success?** My two daughters.

**What can we expect from your company in the next 12 to 18 months?** We continue to work on innovations that will position us perfectly as health reform unfolds in the U.S., and to continue to see strong international growth. ■