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The company has primarily concentrated on the advanced technology market, yet in more recent years, it has broadened its scope to include the food + beverage industry. “The food + beverage industry has advanced its expectations in terms of its facilities’ cleanliness, delivery systems, environment and so forth for them to be more aligned with some of those ultra-clean facilities we’ve designed and built for years,” the chief operating officer, Lance Nordbak, said. Although CRB was born to serve pharmaceutical, biotechnology and other life science markets, it has evolved to include challenging projects in other areas like food + beverage and mission critical.

CRB’s Design and Construction Services Groups are two entities functioning as one company. CRB has 13 offices across the United States and operations in Switzerland and Puerto Rico. It employs approximately 1,000 people worldwide – 750 on the engineering side and 250 on the construction side. CRB believes that one of its primary differentiators in the industry is its dedicated and loyal staff.

Nordbak joined CRB seven years ago and was immediately impressed with the work ethic of the people. “Our culture and the value we place on our people is totally different than anything I’ve been engaged with before, and I have been with some great companies,” he said.
CRB was founded over 30 years ago as an engineering firm, and the construction side of the business was formed 10 years later to support the sophisticated projects designed by the engineering group. CRB focused on serving the biopharmaceutical market that requires advanced facilities, and in the first 10 years, CRB had difficulty finding builders with the skills to construct what the engineers had designed. CRB’s Construction Services Group was born to fill that specific need.
Recently, when two members of the Construction Services Group were about to retire, he personally reached out to them to thank them for their service, and in both cases, he was told that without question, CRB is the best place they had ever worked. Their only regret was that they did not discover the company at earlier stages in their careers.

CRB has experienced 349 percent growth over a five-year period; its annual sales in 2014 were just over $200 million. By 2016, the sales reached $363 million and are now over $400 million. The company has also grown in size; in the last three years, staff numbers have increased by 52 percent. This growth has been recognized with a ranking of No. 3 on the 2018 Zweig Group Hot Firm award list that ranks the 100 fastest-growing A/E/C firms in the United States. While this growth is significant, Nordbak pointed out that CRB chooses its people and projects carefully. “One of the things we are conscious of is that we are not growing just to grow; we want to grow to create an opportunity for our people and to serve our clients,” he said. CRB could grow at an even faster rate if it chose to take all on all the work that is available. However, its vision is to develop through growth for the right reasons.

One of the challenges the Construction Services Group has experienced with its significant growth is the workforce shortage. The construction industry as a whole has suffered from a deficit of new, young, skilled workers. Students often look into the field of technology and are not aware of the technology that is present in construction work these days, especially with the advanced projects on which CRB works.
The construction of a strip mall or a condominium does not always require the most refined trade skills, but with the construction of a pharmaceutical facility that will produce treatments for disease, the highest level of controls and quality are required. CRB calls for skilled construction workers to develop a trade force that can complete such projects. “We install technologies that most contractors have never heard of and never touched,” Nordbak said.

Without question, what separates CRB from its competition is its employees and the quality of its work. CRB’s ability to understand the needs of its clientele and create innovative solutions for them is impressive. Often, a client reaches out to CRB with an idea of how to create a product to serve the biopharmaceutical market but is unsure of how to produce it. CRB will help find unique solutions with incredibly complex manufacturing processes.

Lean construction is the next key step driving the construction industry to be more efficient. Modularization and off-site fabrication help reduce construction timelines. Producing key elements off site saves schedule and costs.

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ONEsolution™ is the company’s trademark that embodies the mindset of lean construction. “ONEsolution, in essence, is the ultimate hybrid of design, build and delivery. Instead of bringing a builder, architect and engineer together to deliver a project, CRB acts as one integrated entity that delivers all the facets of the project, leaving only one answerable party.

When builders, architects and engineers work on a project and something goes wrong, they tend to point the finger at each other. “In our case, when we deliver work under ONEsolution where we are the architect, engineer and the builder, there’s only one company to be held accountable, and that is CRB,” Nordbak said. The single-source accountability leaves no question of who is responsible because CRB has owned all aspects of the project.

Safety is essential, which is demonstrated by CRB’s experience modification rate below 0.65. CRB and its staff truly live by its safety standards. Every week, CRB has a “Safety Moment Monday,” when an email describing a safety experience by one of the staff members is sent to every CRB employee. It includes a photograph of the staff member and advice on how to stay safe not only at work but also in other areas of life. For example, Nordbak wrote a Safety Moment last year with advice about correctly placing a barbecue away from the eaves trough of the house after a personal experience that could have set fire to his house. It is a tangible way to start every week with raising awareness about safety.

“A growing niche for CRB is the design and construction of animal health facilities. The animal health marketplace is piggybacked on what is being done in the pharmaceutical market for humans and has similar standards and operations.

Engineering News-Record (ENR), the world’s benchmark for heavy construction, has recognized CRB for its work on challenging projects. CRB ranked No. 4 among pharmaceutical contractors and No. 12 among industrial process contractors. ENR has also ranked CRB as No. 10 in its Top 20 Contractors by Market for the Industrial market sector and it was named the sixth-largest contractor in the St. Louis marketplace. CRB is very proud of this national and regional recognition.

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Another interesting safety initiative practiced by CRB is safety by design. All too often, architects and engineers create drawings for projects that are then built in the field without consideration for the maintenance staff. At times, service teams will have to stand on a 20-foot ladder to get to a valve because it was not designed in a way to get to it easily.

“We bring in our architects, engineers and estimators to review the safety conditions for a project as it is being designed so that we head off those obstructions to safe maintenance of the facility after we’ve built it and left,” Nordbak said. Safety by design is an area of untapped opportunity for owners and building operators to improve their facility operations.
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