

Member Spotlight

Thomas R. Uhler, PE

Occupation:

I always say my occupation is as a professional engineer. I'm also the president and CEO of TTL Associates, a mid-size engineering & environmental firm.

Age: 61.

Education:

Bachelor's degree in engineering technology, University of Toledo. Graduate of the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Graduate of the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Characterize your current occupation:

TTL Associates was founded in 1927 as Toledo Testing Laboratory. With my assuming the majority ownership in 2003, the company has evolved into a service-disabled veteran-owned small business, as well as a certified Ohio EDGE firm. We've grown into a full-service environmental, testing and geotechnical engineering firm serving the private and public entities throughout the Great Lakes region.

With 104 full time employees at offices in Toledo, Cleveland and Detroit and Plymouth, Michigan, we really have two divisions — our environmental and testing divisions — performing services nationwide. Though our environmental division, we perform environmental and industrial hygiene investigations. Through the testing division, we perform geotechnical investigations, construction inspections, testing and subsurface drilling.

Overview of career:

When I was a senior in high school, they were constructing the interstate system in Toledo and building the I-75 bridge over the Maumee River. I was fascinated watching them perform the construction – particularly the foundations of the bridge. That’s what first got me interested in civil engineering.

I enrolled at Ohio State in civil engineering. At the end of my first year, in 1965, I took a summer job at Toledo Testing Laboratory. I was hired to perform concrete and soil testing. As a result of that experience, I decided to stay on as an employee and I enrolled as a part-time student at the University of Toledo where I completed my degree.

I was drafted in 1969 and went into the Army. I went to the Artillery Officer Candidate School and later became an Army Corps of Engineers officer. After commissioning, I was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division and completed airborne training and Ranger School. I served all over the world as a company commander in the 82nd and was discharged after four years.

I maintained my membership in the Army Reserve. I became the commandant of the U.S. Army Reserve Forces School in Toledo where I provided training in construction operations and leadership for many soldiers throughout Northwest Ohio. In 1998, I retired as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

My career took a turn in 2003 when our management group at TolTest decided to split the company into two separate unrelated companies to better focus on two primary core businesses, construction and engineering services. The construction business stayed with TolTest and along with four other professional engineers, I created TTL Associates which performs environmental, geotechnical engineering, drilling and testing services for our clients.

TTL has since looked at broadening our markets and has vigorously pursued federal clients such as the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Energy, NASA, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Administration.

How has the profession changed?

The technology has advanced to the point where a lot of tedious calculations I learned to do on a slide rule are now done by sophisticated software. Also, now, there is a lot of emphasis on business practices and problem solving. There’s a lot more speciality areas so that it’s more difficult to grasp all the different disciplines involved in engineering.

What does the profession need?

It needs individuals that are dedicated to the profession itself. That's certainly one of the biggest differences I see between the way the profession is now and how it was 30 years ago. Then, a lot of engineers spent time contributing to the profession through technical organizations. That has diminished significantly.

Biggest challenge for public policymakers?

It's real simple: they need to develop programs to ensure the survival and advancement of our infrastructure. Since dollars have not been readily available to repair our infrastructure, it has been crumbling before our eyes. We can't let it continue or our standard of living will be tremendously diminished. On the transportation side, an increase in the gasoline tax would be a quick but relatively temporary solution. More allocations need to be made for wastewater and water treatment plant construction improvement. I think the new president will look at this as an opportunity for stimulating the economy and putting unemployed construction workers back to work.

What is your management style, philosophy?

It starts with surrounding myself with the best qualified people available and letting them utilize their talents to expand and operate the business.

What makes an engineering leader?

I think it is a person that understands the basic fundamentals of engineering and applies them to really create a better product, method or project. Also, an engineering leader must recognize the importance of getting students interested in math and science so that they are not only prepared, but excited about, pursuing a career in engineering. An involvement of engineers in economic development organizations is essential to promote the improvement in our infrastructure.

Tell us about your family

I enjoy spending time at my cottage on Lake Loramie with my wife Marlene who's a volunteer coordinator for the Wood County Committee on Aging office. Marlene is also a docent at the Toledo Museum of Art and volunteers for many non-profit organizations. I have one son who's 21 and he's a nursing aide at Rosary Care Center in Sylvania, Ohio.

What do you do to relax?

I don't really do anything to relax! I spend a lot of time participating in organizations that I believe in.

I'm the Northwest Ohio coordinator for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. I have traveled around the world serving as an ombudsman for our Reserve Force troops that have been deployed overseas.

I participate in Partners in Education of Toledo. TTL Associates brings interns on from Toledo Public Schools to learn about business and the engineering profession. We place them in the work environment. One of our biggest projects is the quality control testing and inspection of 57 new facilities for the Toledo Public Schools. It gives our student interns an opportunity to work on their own schools being built.

We try to create our own engineers from the local public high schools. And for some of the student interns, we are able to assist them in paying for the college education – we have a program that allows us to do that.

Since economic development is so important to everyone's prosperity, I try to stay involved with community and regional development organizations. As a director of the Lucas County Improvement Corporation and the treasurer of the Northern Wood County Port Authority, I am able to assist in both brownfield and greenfield development efforts.