

## Russell Disberger – Aspen Business Group

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to an amusement park in Florida. As the ride begins, some scary music begins to play. Who do you suppose helped create that musical track? It was a business consultant who's worked on music licensing and other elements of management. But he's not in Florida. He is now half a continent away in Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Russell Disberger is the founder and senior partner of management consulting firm Aspen Business Group. Russell has deep roots in Kansas, where his ancestors homesteaded near Council Grove. Russ's dad taught agriculture at Hutchinson Community College. Russell was the seventh of nine children.

With such a large family, the kids learned to work. The boys ran the family's custom cutting crew in the summer, traveling from Texas to Montana harvesting wheat. "We were up at dawn and worked until the wheat was too damp to cut," Russell said. "We learned the importance of hard work and taking care of our customer."

Russell's parents invested in and operated two hotels and a restaurant in Colby. They also took Russell and his siblings to a Howard Ruff financial conference where they learned about investing. The family learned firsthand about entrepreneurship.

Russell studied finance at K-State and started several small businesses to earn his way through school. After graduation, he moved to Colorado where he worked in the finance industry and met and married his wife. In 1991, he moved to Garden City to become assistant director of the Small Business Development Center, or SBDC. There he became a student of the quality improvement process pioneered by author Edward Deming.

In 1994, Russell moved to Glenwood Springs, Colorado to become director of the SBDC, where he expanded the client base from 60 visits per year to 300. He also worked on technology transfer, serving as volunteer CFO for the Tech Transfer Society.

In 1998, Russell founded Aspen Business Group, a private sector management consulting company. Aspen seems a fitting name for a business in Colorado, but the significance of the name went beyond the location. "An aspen grove looks like a bunch of individual trees, but beneath the ground, they are all connected," Russell said. "I wanted to make the point that we can be independent but connected to resources and each other," he said.

While running Aspen Business Group, Russell later started a venture capital business near Boulder through which he worked on licensing and contract issues for various industries. It was during this time that he was involved in producing the soundtrack for the scary ride at an amusement park in Florida.

Aspen Business Group now provides management consulting for all kinds of entities, from commercial businesses to cities, counties, and schools. His role is somewhat like a business therapist. "Some of my clients call me the Doctor," Russell said. He literally consults with clients from New York to Los Angeles. Wow.

"The key is to develop a structure that will enable companies to attract, retain, and grow talent. When you fully empower employees, amazing things are bound to happen," he said.

Russell's kids started attending K-State. Since his consulting business could operate from virtually anywhere, Russell decided to move back to Kansas. His office is now in his home which is located between Manhattan and the rural community of Wamego, population 4,220 people. Now, that's rural.

One unusual aspect of Russ's approach is that he is not a consultant who locks in long-term contracts for specific periods of time. He tells his clients: "If I'm not making a difference (for your company), don't have me back tomorrow," Russell said. That seems bold, but he's been able to deliver. "Being a consultant does require a lifelong commitment to keep my own skills as sharp as possible," Russell said.

Russell is now working with K-State to develop an executive training program, so stay tuned.

For more information, see [www.aspenbusinessgroup.com](http://www.aspenbusinessgroup.com).

It's time to leave the Florida amusement park where a soundtrack developed through Russell Disberger's work still plays. We commend Russell Disberger for helping his clients to succeed. For him and them, it has been a fun ride.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.