

## PROFILE



Target Field, a 39,504-seat open-air ballpark, was constructed from the inside out due to space constraints. Braun Intertec provided construction materials testing and special inspections for the site.

## Plan B

Powerhouse CEO was not able to become a Navy pilot due to health issues, but his career at Braun Intertec sure did take flight.

By LIISA ANDREASSEN  
Correspondent



Jon Carlson,  
CEO,  
Braun Intertec

**J**on Carlson, CEO of Minneapolis-based **Braun Intertec** (Hot Firm #40 and Best Firm-Multi-discipline #40 for 2015) – a 1,000-plus person, employee-owned, geotechnical engineering and environmental consulting firm – says his initial plans to become a Navy pilot after college were thwarted by health issues, but he says that may have been the best thing.

“I learned that due to a less than perfect kidney that my plans to fly with the Navy post-college were not going to be a reality, so I had to find a plan B,” he says.

Well, plan B kicked in soon after college and that plan has remained a work in progress ever since. And, while he may not have had a chance to rise through the military ranks, he certainly seized the opportunity to do so as a civilian.

Carlson started with Braun Intertec in 1988, a time when environmental consulting was becoming a hot field and geoscientists were in

demand. So, with a bachelor’s in geophysics and a bachelor’s in geology from the University of Minnesota, he started out with the firm as an environmental technician and was quickly recognized for his dedication to the company’s ongoing development. In 2000, he became a principal and vice president of the **Environmental Consulting Group**. In 2007, he was appointed president of Braun Intertec, and in 2009, was made CEO.

In 2015, Carlson was named the winner of the EY Entrepreneur Of The Year award for the upper Midwest. The award program recognizes entrepreneurs who demonstrate excellence and extraordinary success in such areas as innovation, financial performance, and personal commitment to their businesses and communities.

### A CONVERSATION WITH CARLSON.

**The Zweig Letter: What are the key strengths for an effective leader?**

**Jon Carlson:**

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- Business acumen
- Command skills
- Dealing with ambiguity
- Decision quality
- Drive for results
- Genuineness and empathy
- High ethical standards and strong moral compass
- Humility
- Motivating others
- Oral and written communications
- Vision

These leadership qualities are critically important for the success of our firm. It's important for our leaders to fully understand their strengths, and to leverage them to their fullest extent. Typically, our board and my direct reports rank me highest on my interpersonal, communication, and command skills.

**TZL: What's your leadership style?**

**JC:** Collaborative and action-oriented. I try to balance my drive for results and how much the journey/process matters. I'm also a strong believer in the value of mutually-beneficial, trust-based relationships.

**TZL: Tell me about the firm's recent acquisition of Apex GeoScience (Tyler, TX). How's it going?**

**JC:** Apex Geoscience Inc. is the largest of three consulting-group acquisitions we made in 2015. We also acquired **Peer Engineering** in the Twin Cities market, and the Kansas City office of **Kleinfelder**. Our acquisition strategy is heavily focused on integration, so cultural fit is critical. The greatest challenge with the Apex integration has been migrating them to our systems (e.g., accounting, finance, HR/payroll, field-data collection), but this is also a great opportunity to accelerate the growth and development of the Apex team.

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**TZL: To what do you most attribute your firm's growth?**

**JC:** We understand why we want to grow, and we have an organizationally healthy reason for our growth – opportunity. Our vision is to be the consultant of choice for our clients and the employer of choice for our employees. We believe you can't achieve one without the other. We also believe that growth must be sustainable, and our most important measure of sustainability is how well we are doing at maintaining and further developing our successful culture. Finally, we encourage a culture of calculated risk-taking along with the concept that if we don't make an “oops” once in a while, we are not taking enough risk.

**TZL: What's been your greatest challenge to date and how did you deal with it?**

**JC:** Navigating our way through the Great Recession with relatively few staff reductions and positioning our company for growth when the economy improved. Our diversity of services, client markets, and geographies, which we developed in the years leading up to the economic downturn, allowed us to quickly shift gears as the economic winds changed. We also were not afraid to take some risk and add talent during that time.

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**TZL: Why do you think you were given the EY Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the upper Midwest in 2015?**

**JC:** I'm blessed with a great team! Nobody could have pulled off what we have since I was appointed CEO without a great team. In addition to our story of growth (i.e., growing net revenues from about \$38M in 2009 to nearly \$138M projected for 2016), the EY team recognized our ability to establish ourselves as the consultant and employer of choice, and how well we are able to leverage those skills across multiple markets and service sectors.

**TZL: Are you married? Children? Pets?**

**JC:** I've been married to my wife, Jean, for almost 25 years. We have three children, a dog, and a cat.

**TZL: What's one thing most people at the firm don't know about you?**

**JC:** Not much! I'm a rather transparent person. For example, I keep a photo on my office wall to remind me and inform others of my angiogram in 2008 when I had a stent implanted following a mild heart attack. This life on Earth is short and special – we need to keep all things in balance.

**TZL: What's the last book you read?**

**JC:** *In a Sunburned Country* by Bill Bryson

**TZL: What's the last movie you saw in the theater?**

**JC:** *The Revenant*.

**TZL: What's the best piece of work-related advice you've ever gotten?**

**JC:** It was from my Dad: “With patience and persistence you shall prevail.”

**TZL: Who is a leader you admire?**

**JC:** Abraham Lincoln.

**TZL: What do you enjoy in your spare time?**

**JC:** Skiing: alpine, Nordic, and water; traveling the world with my family; fishing and pheasant hunting; hiking and biking; tennis and golf. ▀