skills." When Steve left in 1997, Julia covered his responsibilities until Heidi was hired.

In late 1997, Matt left to pursue an internship for his MBA. Dick and Julia spent two to three months interviewing candidates to find someone who would represent LFI well to its clients and whose skills and personality fit with their own. In September 1998, LFI hired Dave to assist Julia with sales. Dave fielded inquiries from potential clients and worked with existing clients to sell programs to their other departments. Selling involved a needs analysis, recommending a solution, and writing a proposal. He recalled that his job wasn't that narrow: "There was a line in my job description that read, 'Lots of other stuff as necessary,'" an expectation held of all LFI employees. This included brainstorming sessions to tweak existing programs or develop new ones. "One of the best results of my experience was that I realized I had a creative side that, until then, had been untapped." He tried two ideas: marketing LFI at a trade show and offering an incentive program for hotel managers who referred business, neither of which paid off. He characterized the decision to experiment as reflective of LFI's culture—"If you had an idea and felt strongly about something then you had leeway to try it. If you made a mistake, it was not the end of the world. I didn't think I could keep making mistakes, but trying new things was the only way we were going to grow, and the only way I was going to grow professionally." He saw that as one reason why Dick was careful about hiring: "He's the kind of person who thinks the quality and characteristics of people are just as important as the exact skill set they bring to the table."

CHANGES AND GROWTH IN STAFFING, SERVICES, AND WORK RULES

Revenues doubled from 1999 to 2000, although LFI's infrastructure was little changed. Heidi left that year to hike the Appalachian Trail. One of the facilitators, Chris, handled logistics until Heather was hired as the logistics program manager. Business boomed and Julia worked sixty to eighty hours every week not counting travel to client sites. Her work ethic was legendary among LFI's employees and facilitators. She said, "The year 2000 itself was the most ridiculous year of my life; it was just insane." Dick suggested they hire a manager so Julia could focus on Total Team Performance Solutions™ consulting, which she now preferred over LFI's other programs. Dick did most of the interviewing that resulted in Allison's being hired, albeit more on chemistry and raw talent than experience in the industry. Dick considered her "a brilliant woman and very talented in so many ways and a great qualitative kind of person." Though she was hired to be the managing director she "had only a general idea of what that meant—nothing in writing ... it was nebulous." Allison took on responsibility for bookkeeping, client invoices, management of the physical location and staff, and the day-to-day operations of the LFI.

Allison also expected to generate revenues, but the learning curve for selling LFI's unique training programs was steep. Dave noted that it could take a while, especially when coming from a different industry: "It required actually going to the programs and seeing them and understanding how they benefited the client organizations so you could sell them." Allison agreed, "There was so much content to learn ... early on it was a lot of watching Julia and listening and trying to really get up to speed on the programs so I could make client calls and write proposals. There really wasn't any archive of information to access that would give me all the stuff I'd need to know to say confidently to a corporate client, 'here's what we can offer, here's what it looks like, and here's what it's going to feel like.'" Given the exigencies of a busy office with few full-time workers, Allison was soon fielding client calls and trying to figure it out as she went along.

As the "logistics guru," Heather ensured that all program details were attended to in a timely manner once the account executive selected a program and facilitator. She tailored her help to meet the facilitators' individual needs and preferences. She developed forms to track information and rudimentary operational systems to improve program scheduling and delivery. She recruited, hired and trained support staff to aid these facilitators on-site. Allison and Julia mentored her, pushing Heather to gain more knowledge by aiding the facilitators on-site. "It got to the point where Allison said to me, 'Do you want to go to a client meeting too? Make calls? Try managing an account?' I could have done anything. It was up to me to say 'no, I want

to try *those* things, or I'd like to do *these* things.' I could do anything as long as my original job was being done." Though the core never changed, Heather's job looked a little different with each project. In 2000, she dealt with approximately a dozen programs; in later years nearly all of LFI's programs were highly customized. Heather stated:

> After the tech crash, my job became more complicated. No two programs looked the same; everything was tailored. Even our stock programs were customized. It added a ton of work for me. By 2004, my job involved so much because of customization that I definitely felt there needed to be two of me. There were two levels to my work. One was the printing and shopping and organizing. Those were my days where I could take a mental break; I could wear my jeans and sit on the floor. There was another level of coordination, dealing with the client facilities and support staff. And then there were the days I was at the programs—sometimes there were three or four programs going on in a week and I would send one off but I wouldn't get to go to it because I was going to another program. One of the things we were remiss about is that I couldn't be at every program to get all the feedback, because you learn something from each debrief.

Heather's learning came primarily from Julia and Allison; she and Dick didn't have a close relationship. He continued to work out of his other office and go in once a week for the company meeting. From Heather's view, "I didn't know Dick as well as I did Julia and Allison; he wasn't around as much as they. They were in my daily life."

Even though he wasn't on-site much, Dick felt a strong connection to LFI and its employees. He occasionally indicated to them that he "desired to capture the tacit knowledge that each person had built through their experience on the job." However, it was not "in his nature" to sit down and document his job and procedures; therefore he never pushed others to do so either. At times he would comment that LFI needed to document a procedure so that the next time they would have a checklist of what to do. "It wasn't that we didn't want to do it, but other things were always higher priority, like dealing with clients or getting a new project."

UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF LFI

In 2002, Dave decided to move west, and LFI did not replace him. By then, Julia was focused on LFI's top-level operational issues and her clients. Allison fielded incoming calls from potential clients and managed daily operations. Julia said, "Though I was sad to see Dave go, I knew that [his salary] would be better allocated elsewhere. We needed someone selling more aggressively."

The firm was doing well but needed to maintain sales. Up to that point, most employees stayed with LFI for two to five years. Turnover averaged one employee a year. Dick and Julia remained and provided stability as new people came aboard and others left (refer to **Appendix 3** for LFI's employee tenure).

Signs of major changes appeared at the end of 2003. LFI had to develop relationships with new facilitators, as its primary external facilitator was unavailable while she had her second child. In December, Allisan also announced she was pregnant. A few months later, Heather found out she had been accepted into a degree program that started in the fall of 2004 so she planned to leave LFI that summer. For Julia, the year 2004 would be her tenth anniversary, and she spoke with renewed interest about leaving to start her own company and working for LFI only on a contract basis.

And around this time, Dick underwent a transformation and engaged in a lot of personal reflection as a result of his father's death. Allison observed that, "Dick did a lot of soul searching and concluded that he needed to have a drastically different role within LFI. He told us that he and the company were in a transition phase, but it was unclear what that meant." He didn't mention he had thought about increasing his involvement on-site.

Dick reflected, "I did a lot of thinking, and had a lot of conversations with people outside LFI who had very rich points of view. I reached out to seven different high level executives and consultants, some in this industry, some in related businesses, and some whose opinion I just respect." One of these individuals was Dick's longtime friend, Court, who reviewed profit and loss statements, asked questions about LFI's structure, assessed how

things were run and the challenges Dick faced. After helping Dick think through all these, Court pointed out that the future of the company and who should be hired were decisions that were ultimately Dick's responsibility to make—but they all hinged on what Dick wanted the scope and focus of his own role to be and how he wanted to structure the company.

The outcomes of these conversations had not been shared with the employees. According to Allison, in early 2004 "Julia, Heather, and I were trying to create a plan that would allow us to phase out and not disrupt the company. We were definitely struggling with who we should hire and what they would be responsible for ... there was a fair amount of confusion about whether or not we were looking to recreate the model that already existed [hire new people to take on the existing roles] or we were breaking that model and starting all over again." Their conversations revolved around what the skill sets of new hires should look like and whether job descriptions reflected not just responsibilities but the LFI's culture, too.

They focused first on replacing Heather. Allison explained, "There always needs to be a program manager and it was pretty clear what the program manager needed to do. And regardless of what happened with the direction of the company, that job was pretty clear." They debated filling the "Heather of 2000" role or the "Heather of 2004" role, the latter reflecting the more complex job that had developed around her skills and interests as well as the additional tasks she had become responsible for over the four years. Her job in 2004 was "meatier" than what it was in 2000, so it required a more experienced person, thus a higher salary. Allison and Heather interviewed candidates, many young, recent graduates with the skill level of Heather when she was initially hired. They were good with logistics and excited to shop, pack, and coordinate program materials. Some interviewees were a closer match for the "Heather of 2004" role. Heather observed that the process was interesting, "because we described the job and company, and then said, 'but nothing is going to look like this when you are here. And here we are, two people interviewing you who, by the way, won't be here when you are here.'"

By May 2004, LFI had hired no replacements. Julia had left in April and the stress was increasing. Allison's due date approached, and she was expected to leave by July. Heather would go to school in August. As Allison contemplated the situation, "I had a clear idea of what my job description was and what role needed to be filled. I created a long list of all the tasks that needed to be attended to for the general operations of LFI, ranging from client relationships, IT, marketing, finances, office management—a very long spreadsheet, incredibly detailed—and regardless of who does it, *this stuff needs to get done.*"

Yet while Heather and Allison sought their replacements, Dick continued to work on a new company vision and his role within it. The decisions that would come out of the new vision would influence the roles that LFI needed and the responsibilities assigned to each. He even considered different business models, such as doing away with all employees and instead using a Web site to broker matches between clients and outside facilitators.

One thing was clear, though—if he kept the firm, he would do so without other investors. This self-funding limitation meant a fixed budget for salaries and benefits. If revenues remained the same, LFI could support four employees in addition to Dick. Although he always held the financial risks as an owner, his role in the firm had been limited to only those tasks that he wanted to do—mostly the creative work and handling the larger client accounts. He hadn't overseen the daily operations. "If the computers broke, somebody else dealt with it. If there was a bunch of stuff to load into a truck, I wasn't there." Dick now had a decision to make. Thinking through all this was taking time, though, and there wasn't much of that left. Julia was gone and the only other two employees would be out the door sooner rather than later. Dick realized it was time to decide the future of LFI and his job as well.

NOTE

1. "2005 Industry Report," *Training Magazine*, (December 2005), 14–28.