

Conor Nicholson

Guided by Goals

It wasn't until he turned 25 that Conor Nicholson realized what was possible in life. Up until then, he had coasted, doing just enough to get by without really applying himself and achieving loftier goals. One day, however, all that changed. "I woke up and saw that life was going to pass me by if I didn't start taking action," he remembers today. "I wasn't anywhere close to my potential, and no one out there was going to save me. I knew it was on me to make the choices that would transform my life from mediocre to meaningful."

Conor's eyes had been opened by Jessica, the young woman he had met a year earlier. "Before her, I was aimless with no long-term vision," he says. "But then in walks this smart, successful, beautiful woman who had a long-term vision of her own. She held herself to a very high standard and expected the same of everyone else. Suddenly, I was able to envision a future. Now what did I want it to look like?"

For the first time in his life, Conor developed goals and wrote them down. He wanted to reach the top 10 percent in his field of recruiting, make \$75,000 a year, get in better shape, buy a sports car, and read more. From those big goals, he worked backward and broke them down into the smaller goals he would need to accomplish to get him there. Once he hit those goals, he made new ones, and before long, he had transformed into a goal-oriented, driven person.

"It was life changing," he says. "I went from an aimless, underperforming recruiter to a driven, focused professional who understood anything was possible if you put your mind to it." Now the founder, President, and CEO of NSS RPO, a boutique Recruitment Process Outsourcing firm based in the DC metropolitan area, Conor still lives, breathes, and leads by setting and achieving goals—the momentum that has propelled him forward to a success he never thought possible.



Today, NSS RPO specializes in providing Contract Technical Recruiters in both the Commercial and Federal space, with particular expertise in Software Development, Cybersecurity and Cloud Engineering. Conor first launched the business in 2009 as Nicholson Staffing Solutions and in his first year of business, he had no pre-set agenda or plans to start placing recruiters. Instead, he stuck with a one-man show, billing himself out until a friend's company needed a contract recruiter in the spring of 2010. "I had no sales or management experience, but we had some money in the bank, and I had a good network of recruiters," he recounts. "So I thought, why not try my hand at turning my business into an actual company? I hired someone and then suddenly realized, 'Oh my God, this is what I was meant to do.'"

As Conor began his life's work of building a network of trustworthy, ethical recruiters, it was as if all the experiences he had up to that point prepared him for that moment in ways he couldn't have realized at the time.

As the company grew, he shortened its name to NSS, and when he decided to firm up its brand, he added the "RPO" for Recruitment Process Outsourcing. Jessica Nicholson, his wife, has handled the nuts-and-bolts details from day one as the role of CFO and COO, managing the administration and financials to free up Conor's time for strategy and business development. "I'm a big picture, head-in-the-sky kind of person," he says. "Jessica's support allows me to focus exclusively on the relationships and the network, which is incredibly important."

Today, NSS RPO places recruiters that hire on behalf of their customers, which include prominent companies like Capital One, IBM, Amazon, CACI, and Northrop Grumman. Growing through referrals and word of mouth alone, the company has now hired in 27 states and clocked \$6.5 million in revenue in 2016. "The

recruiting community is small, and reputation is everything,” Conor says. “Our people have hired for some very important positions in very important companies, and that speaks for itself. We’re known as a network of good people, and that makes all the difference because, as Jim Collins says, the success of any company depends on getting the right people in the right seats on the bus.”

Growing up, Conor never viewed himself as a leader and never imagined he’d start his own company one day. His father, a New Yorker, met his mother, born in Belfast, after the two met in London in the 1970s. They were living in New York, but his mother wanted their son to be a dual citizen, so she flew to Chesterfield, England, for Conor’s birth in 1977. He spent the first two years of his life living in Brooklyn, and from the age of 2 to the age of 6, the family lived in a house by the sea in a close-knit community in Southern Ireland, where his father worked as an architect. Aside from the bomb threats that marked the violence between Catholics and Protestants in the country at that time, his memories from Ireland are quaint and positive. “It was beautiful, and I remember learning in a one-room school house with my little twin sisters sitting two rows behind me,” he says.

In 1984, however, his father lost his job when the economy took a downturn, forcing the family to move to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. “Suddenly we went from this idyllic environment, to a two-bedroom apartment in a foreign country, and I have this distinct memory of sleeping on the floor the first night we moved in,” Conor remembers. “There was a lot of culture shock. It ingrained in me a desire for stability and control over my destiny. We were never destitute, but I still remember vividly that memory of having everything taken away.”

Fortunately, Conor’s father worked hard, and within two years, they moved to Montgomery County, Maryland, known for its nationally-recognized school system. Two years after that, they were able to buy a house in Silver Spring, where Conor’s parents live to this day. His mother, an eccentric but selfless and caring Irish artist, got a job doing cartography for the US Department of Agriculture, and life stabilized. “In all, I went to five different elementary schools, and had to constantly make new friends,” he says. “The lack of stability through those early years left me feeling constantly like an outsider, and as a result,

I was very shy. But when we settled in Maryland, I gained a close-knit group of friends and became much happier.”

Sports weren’t really his thing growing up, and he preferred to hang out with friends playing Nintendo or shooting hoops. Conor excelled academically and was in an English and History magnet program from fourth grade through high school. He was bused into the impoverished neighborhood of Takoma Park, Maryland, and the majority of the school was on food stamps—an environment that profoundly shaped his worldview. “I gained an appreciation for what I had, but also for diversity,” he says. “I had a very multicultural experience with Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian friends of all races.”

While he was decidedly unmotivated when it came to academics and sports, Conor had a strong work ethic when it came to making money. He quit the swim team when he was thirteen, and at age fourteen got his first job as a general laborer at a townhouse site through his father’s architecture firm. “It was a lot of hard work,” he recalls. “I think my dad wanted me to get a sense of how much manual labor sucks, and I definitely knew I didn’t want a future doing stuff like that.”

From tenth grade onward, primarily working as a cashier at a gas station 5 minutes from his house, Conor made enough to buy all of his own clothes, pay for prom, buy a car, and put money toward his first year of college. But he had no idea what he wanted to do when he grew up. “My parents never pushed us to think about the future, and they gave us a lot of freedom,” he says. “It was a European style of parenting, and the three of us kids did very well with it. We were all good kids and are very successful today. But it did take me a while to find my fire.”

Everyone in Conor’s program went to college, and he rode that wave, enrolling at the University of Maryland in College Park. He started by majoring in history but changed his mind after visiting the career center and feeling limited by the discipline’s career prospects. He instead gained admittance to the university’s business school, which was in the top 25 business schools in the country at that time. He joined a fraternity during his sophomore year, and though he continued his track record of not trying, he was still learning and growing. “The social skills I learned through that period were important,” he says. “Thanks to that

fraternity, I came out of my shell and became what I really am—an extrovert who doesn't really care what people think."

Up to that point, he had tried his hand at countless jobs—painting, delivering pizzas, waiting tables, political polling, and taking race track bets, to name a few. He had interacted with people from all walks of life, and had grown adept at talking to anyone. "It's so important in business to be able to relate to people, connect with them, and have empathy for them," he says. "I've seen the gamut of humanity, which was interesting and invaluable to my career later on."

Upon graduating with a degree in Economics in December of 1999, Conor looked for marketing jobs and took a position at a temp agency placing administrative positions. It was a stressful job that didn't pay much, so with the help of a friend in IT staffing, he joined a staffing firm in Tysons Corner, Virginia. Over the next few years, he continued to coast, with no drive and no goals. Then he met Jessica, a go-getter from a high caliber military family who knew how to get stuff done. "She's very structured and regimented," he recalls. "Lots of people talk about doing stuff, but she actually follows through. Though we had similar backgrounds, her approach to life was the opposite of mine, and she started to rub off on me. I realized I hadn't given it my all, so I said, let's see what I can do with this."

Jessica saw things in Conor that he couldn't see in himself at the time—a relentless drive, a desire to provide, and the skills and abilities to build and lead. Her vision inspired him, and in 2004, he took a job at a recruiter placement firm called ESC, a pivotal step that gave him an understanding of the placement business model his company utilizes today. "At that time, I was placed as a contract recruiter myself at Northrop Grumman, so I was able to see how it all works," he recounts.

Conor and Jessica married in 2006 and went to Hawaii for their honeymoon. When the sun was setting in the North Shore of Kauai, Conor felt like he had a calling from above and told Jessica he wanted to live there. "She didn't really take me seriously but I told her I could set up a virtual office and work remotely," he remembers. "The following week, I came back from playing golf on Maui to the news that Jessica had been laid off from her job in pharma sales. Rarely are people excited to be laid off, but we were thrilled!"

With that, the newlyweds found renters for their townhouse in Northern Virginia and drove across the country in their old Civic so they could ship it to their new home. They spent eight months living in paradise, returning home once they were ready. "I realized I'm an East Coaster at heart," Conor says. "But Hawaii is our spiritual home for sure, and it really opened my eyes to what's possible. Every day, I wear an oyster shell pendant from Kauai, where we lived. It's fashioned into a hook to symbolize that it's important to reach for what you want out of life. It reminds me of my wife and kids, and of the possibilities that come when you're a free spirit. It reminds me that life is not decided for you—you decide what happens in your own life through the choices you make and the goals you set."

In 2009, Conor transitioned to Perot Systems. Lee Carrick, the CEO of the government services division and an important mentor, taught him that much of success is about simply doing the right thing. "He said that being honest in your dealings and being a man of your word automatically puts you above 80 percent of the competition," Conor recalls. "That's why one of our pillars of NSS RPO today is ethical practices and acting with integrity."

Conor's first child was born in May of 2010, and in June, he was told that budget cuts at the company meant they had to reduce his hourly rate by \$17. The adjustment amounted to an annual salary cut of \$35,000—a kick to the gut that was amplified by the fact that he was now the sole provider for his wife and newborn daughter.

Conor had just started placing recruiters on the side, and when he got the news, the path forward became clear. "I remember walking outside—it was a beautiful day," he says. "I wasn't distraught or heartbroken. Instead I had a moment of clarity. I called Jessica and told her that we had to go after this contract recruiting thing a hundred percent, and fortunately, she's as big a risk-taker as I am. Looking back, that massive pay cut could have been seen as an incredibly negative thing, but really, it was a blessing and a defining moment in my life. Without it, I might not have gone out and tried to build this thing from scratch."

Two months later, Conor gave his notice and dedicated himself completely to building his own company. His first month on his own was September of 2010, and he and Jessica were bringing in less than half of what he had been

making in his consulting job. Money was tight. That first month, they made no placements. “I remember getting up one day and feeling the weight of the world come down on me,” Conor recounts. “I fell face first into the couch and just laid there for a while, immobile from the pressure and the uncertainty of it all. Looking back, it was a full-on panic attack. But I let that stress and fear drive me to success. Failure simply wasn’t an option and I was going to give everything I had to make it work.”

With time, grit and perseverance, the fledgling company made it out of the woods, and Conor saw his goals materializing. By the time sequestration began systemically reducing government spending, he had a staff of 35, but because much of their work supported the vital activity of the intelligence community, the impact on NSS RPO was limited. Since that time, the company has almost doubled to a staff of 65, with abundant opportunity on the horizon. “Of all my jobs, this one has been the only one I’ve loved every day,” he says. “I’ve loved the struggle and the process of learning on the go. It’s been difficult but fun, challenging but rewarding, and always interesting.”

Conor’s leadership style is rooted in a fierce loyalty to those who are loyal to him—an essential quality in the business of people. “If someone has a good heart and a good spirit, I’ll always have their back, and they’ll always have mine,” he says. “I care deeply for my people and am willing to go to the ends of the earth to help them.” When a friend passed away suddenly from a pulmonary embolism at the age of 43, Conor offered a company match to his employees and helped raise over \$13,000 for the grieving family. He set up a similar program after the Sandy Hook shooting. “In business and beyond, I’ve learned that we’re all interconnected,” he says. “It’s important to help others when we can.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Conor warns against focusing on money early in your career. “Instead, be a sponge and try to learn as much as you can

those early years,” he says. “What you learn now will be invaluable to what you become later in life, so pick something that feels worthwhile and focus on learning and honing your craft.” Beyond that, Conor’s story is a testament to the power of goal setting. “It’s so important to have goals and to move on them,” he affirms. “Lots of people wander through life aimlessly, but that’s not how you’re going to get ahead and enjoy life to its fullest.”

Thanks to this philosophy, NSS RPO has been on the Inc. 5000 list for two years running, and Conor now sees himself as the capable entrepreneur and leader he’s always been. He no longer idolizes important, accomplished individuals, understanding now that people are equal in their abilities to achieve. “We started this thing in the spare bedroom of a townhouse, and it has now placed hundreds of people all over the country for some of the biggest companies,” he says. “It’s something I never dreamed of. By doing the right thing and working hard and being good to others, we’ve come so far, and I truly believe that we haven’t even scratched the surface of what we’re really capable of. Our story hasn’t been written yet and our best years are still to come.”

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