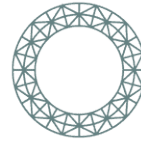




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i M M E M B E R S T O R I E S



When iMasons Needed a CEO, Portman Partners Delivered



The iMasons Legacy Podcast

Listen to the Episode:

When iMasons Needed a CEO, Portman Partners Delivered

Left to right: Dean Nelson, Founder & Chairman, Infrastructure Masons; Santiago Suinaga, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure Masons.

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Scaling Leadership

As 2024 got underway, the digital infrastructure industry was booming. Each new gigawatt data center campus packed with the latest generation of silicon chips to train artificial intelligence (AI) systems was expected to consume as much electric power as 750,000 homes.

Industry insiders, analysts and researchers forecast the size of the industry could triple by 2030, according to [Infrastructure Masons](#) (iMasons), a global nonprofit professional association for the builders of the digital age.

This frenzied growth coincided with an inflection point for iMasons.

[Jeff Omelchuck](#), the Executive Director, announced his retirement. [Dean Nelson](#), Founder and Chairman, who launched the association in 2016, wanted to step back from day-to-day operations to focus on his day job deploying and operating digital infrastructure.

“We had great momentum but finite time and resources. That constraint could limit the potential of iMasons,” Nelson recalled thinking.

To enable iMasons to grow, the association needed new leadership to take the ball and run, to scale the association in lockstep with the digital infrastructure industry.

Nelson and the board realized the time was right for iMasons to hire its first chief executive officer.

“iMasons needed ownership,” said [Mike Meyer](#), CEO and Managing Director of [Portman Partners](#), a data center executive search and talent advisory. “The only way you own an organization is from a CEO perspective. You drive strategy. You drive culture. You drive human resources. You drive sales.”

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— Mike Meyer,
CEO and Managing Director,
Portman Partners





Search for a CEO

Finding a CEO is more nuanced than posting a job description on the internet. It requires diplomacy, tact and a network to identify and vet potential candidates with discretion.

iMasons' search for a partner to recruit the association's first CEO led to a bar on the sidelines of an industry conference in Hawaii. There, a mutual acquaintance introduced Omelchuck to [Peter Hannaford](#), Senior Partner with Portman Partners.

Omelchuck disclosed his pending retirement and the plan for a new CEO role. He asked Hannaford if his firm would lead the search.

The meeting set the foundation for a relationship and partnership that enabled Portman Partners, which focuses exclusively on data center executive recruitment, to delve into iMasons' vision, mission and strategy and imagine the type of leader that could helm the association's next chapter.

Further conversations with Nelson and iMasons board members helped Portman Partners flesh out a sense of iMasons' culture, the value of iMasons to its members and what more the association could deliver.

"Sometimes we feel like psychologists," said Meyer, a longtime partner at Portman Partners who bought the firm from Hannaford in the weeks before iMasons came knocking. "We hear the good, the bad and the ugly. And that factors into our search."

The search firm leaned on its industry network to build a candidate list and winnow it down, collaborating with iMasons staff and board through the process, testing their convictions and assumptions, and refining their understanding of the type of candidate best fit for the role.

What stood out was the need for a leader who could evolve iMasons to meet the moment. As the scope and reach of the digital infrastructure industry expanded, its cloak of anonymity was shed. iMasons was becoming a public face of the industry.

"iMasons needed somebody who could come in and think independently, keep Dean and the rest of the board at arm's length, which is what a CEO needs to do, and represent iMasons as a global organization," Meyer said.

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The Game Changer



**Santiago Suinaga, Chief Executive Officer,
Infrastructure Masons**

Most executive search firms, including Portman Partners, operate under a retainer agreement. The client and firm negotiate upfront compensation, and the search firm gains the exclusive right to fill the role. This arrangement streamlines the search firm's ability to operate efficiently with confidentiality and discretion.

Confidentiality and discretion are key since often the most desirable candidates are employed, successful and not actively looking for a new job.

[Santiago Suinaga](#) was the CEO of [Kio Data Centers](#), a colocation data center operator in Latin America with deployments in Mexico, Panama, Guatemala, Colombia and the Dominican Republic, as well in Spain and Southern California in the United States, when his name was floated as a potential candidate for the iMasons role.

"The job description was very interesting and appealing," Suinaga said. "Being on the other side of the table as an iMasons member for quite some time and on the [Advisory Council](#), I had the sense that iMasons needed a refresh, needed to adapt to the new pace of growth in the industry."

As Portman Partners got to know Suinaga, they recognized his passion for the digital infrastructure industry and desire to effect change from the seat of an industry body that's agnostic to the business interests of any one company, noted Meyer.



The Game Changer

Suinaga also had an opinion on what iMasons did well and how to improve the value proposition for its members.

“He’s not a pushover,” noted Meyer. “He’s very considered, he processes and he’s always looking for the best outcome for everybody.”

Portman Partners uses an assessment tool called the [Game Changing Index](#) to understand the natural proclivities and areas of impact for shortlisted candidates. The index provides additional insight into how the candidates would mesh with the board and other members of the senior leadership team.

Meyer took Suinaga through the process along with several members of the iMasons board, creating a heatmap for each across five categories of how people are naturally inclined to contribute to an organization: game changers, strategists, playmakers, implementers and polishers.

Nelson, the iMasons Founder and Chairman, scored a ten for game changer, meaning he’s a visionary with big ideas. He scored a six for strategist, meaning he’s adept at mapping the future.

“Dean comes up with brilliant ideas, figures out how to do them, but he’s a one on implementation,” Meyer said.

The result resonated with Nelson and underscored his need for a partner to execute on strategy and keep him in check and on track. Suinaga’s proclivities proved appropriately complementary. He scored a seven on game changer, indicating an affinity for transformative thinking like Nelson, and a six as an implementer.

Suinaga’s strongest proclivity was playmaker. Playmakers are focused on bringing people together to achieve a common goal.

“He’s all about collaboration, cohesion, orchestrating the future,” said Meyer, adding that “his stance on the industry and his attitude together with his GC Index and how that aligns with the rest of the board, made the board sit up and go, ‘Okay.’”



Left to right: Peter Hannaford, Chief Executive Officer, EdgeNebula, and Senior Partner, Portman Partners; Santiago Suinaga, Chief Executive Officer, Infrastructure Masons; Mike Meyer, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, Portman Partners.



Recruiting for the Future

The Game Changing Index is a differentiator for Portman Partners, Nelson said. It brings additional context and perspective to the final selection and helped iMasons make a choice among a strong pool of qualified candidates.

But the final decision to offer the job to Suinaga came down to why he wanted it.

“Santiago was at the top of his game at Kio. So, when he reached out and said that he was interested in the CEO role, we were taken aback,” Nelson recalled. “He said, ‘I’ve been involved in iMasons for years, but I want it to have more impact.’”

That statement told Nelson and the board that Suinaga is purpose driven and would put his heart and soul into iMasons and its mission to unite the builders of the digital age to develop a greater digital future.

Nelson said the future of the digital infrastructure industry is bright – barring constraints on electric power and a shortage of skilled people to build, operate and maintain the digital infrastructure that enables the modern, digital economy.

The people shortage is “a looming crisis,” noted Nelson. Retirement is on the near horizon for around 40% of the current workforce and the pipeline of talent coming into the industry is insufficient to keep up with the growing demand for digital infrastructure.

iMasons runs several initiatives under its [People](#) pillar to develop the talent pipeline, including [scholarships for students](#), a recruitment platform for [military veterans](#) and a group focused on support for [women in the industry](#).

As Suinaga champions these workforce development initiatives, he knows success will require strong leadership across the industry.

“You need the right strategy and the right culture where people feel driven to deliver, to create impact,” he said. “Leadership is the only way to do that. All the initiatives to bring more people into the industry don’t matter if you don’t have companies like Portman Partners that are focusing on filling the leadership roles to define and drive the strategy.”

“Build leaders,” Suinaga added, “and leaders will build great teams.”

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— Santiago Suinaga,
Chief Executive Officer,
Infrastructure Masons





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