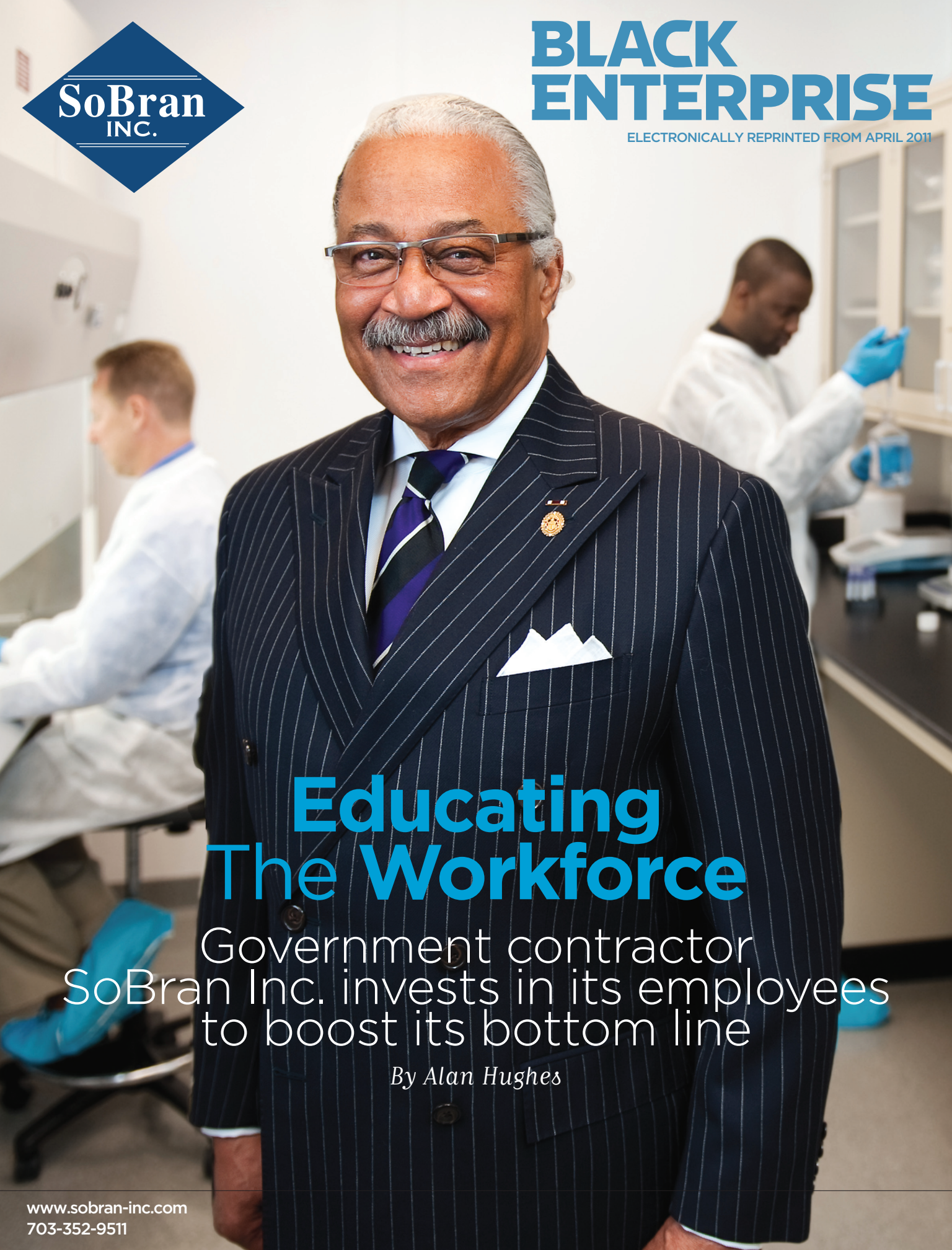




**SoBran**  
INC.

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ENTERPRISE**

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# Educating The Workforce

Government contractor  
SoBran Inc. invests in its employees  
to boost its bottom line

*By Alan Hughes*

**“WORKFORCE READINESS” HAS BECOME A BUZZ PHRASE TO DESCRIBE THE ability—or lack thereof—of America’s current and future employees to succeed in a knowledge-based economy and develop new innovations. Amos L. Otis, CEO of SoBran Inc. (No. 65 on the BE INDUSTRIAL SERVICE list with \$60 million in revenues), views this practice as an important part of his company’s success; and he puts his company’s money where his mouth is.**

In the last five years, revenues have been steadily increasing year over year despite the recession for the provider of chemical, biological, radiation, nuclear, and explosive protective services, in addition to biomedical research support, engineering, and logistics. Otis attributes this outstanding track record to the workforce. With clients that include the Department of Defense, the Environmental Protection Agency, Eastern Virginia Medical School, and the Fleet Readiness Center Southeast aboard Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida, SoBran’s revenues are expected to slightly increase to \$61 million this year.

The former U.S. Air Force officer admits, however, his objectives aren’t entirely altruistic. “If your people are trained and have a high degree of professionalism, that is an added asset when it comes to your company being evaluated either for winning the contract or being allowed to even bid on the contract,” he says. “So, to have a staff that is properly trained and qualified is a significant benefit to the company. It shows up on the bottom line as to how many contracts you get.”

Since founding the company in 1987, Otis, 70, developed an education advancement program that covers up to \$3,000 a year. In 2010, 36 employees took advantage of tuition reimbursement and 37 employees had certification courses paid for—amounting to nearly 10% of SoBran’s employees. He also developed a program so employees can finance the purchase of a home computer interest-free with the cost taken from their paycheck over a 12-month period. He wants his employees to know “that they are backed up with the resources they need and strong management,” he says. “So, we try to keep them as highly motivated, trained, and educated as we can.”

While the debate continues over lack of funding for American public schools and minority underrepresentation in the technical fields that are hailed as economic growth engines of the future, Otis and his team have managed to grow the business throughout the downturn, and also help the company’s workforce obtain the education and training necessary to remain competitive in their industries.

### Seeking High Returns in Growth Industries

SoBran (named after Otis’ two children, Somá and Brandon) is divided into two divisions.

- The engineering and logistics division designs and implements solutions for engineering, logistics, homeland security, anti-terrorism, infrastructure, and environmental protection challenges. This includes warehouse management, supply chain management, workforce management, and logistical assistance.
- The CBRNE (chemical, biological, radiation, nuclear, and explosive) protective services division oversees the assessment, training, design, and operation of mail screening facilities to prevent mail-borne attacks.

Among the services the company offers are managing animal programs for researchers—everything from cleaning cages to veterinary technical support for veterinarians or scientists involved in animal-based research. “I think right now the greatest growth is going to be in our academic and commercial work,” says Gregory Kelly, Ph.D., SoBran’s senior vice president of biomedical services. SoBran currently has contracts with seven academic institutions.

### Profile in Achievement

Matt Sweatt is one employee who has benefited from SoBran’s workforce education programs. Sweatt joined the company in May 2002. The then 22-year-old was part of a team that screened mail for the U.S. Army. Essentially, he used engineering controls to ensure that people opening the mail won’t become contaminated if there was a chemical threat present.

Though happy to gain employment after his tour in Bosnia with the U.S. Army National Guard, he always wanted to finish his education, having joined the military at the age of 17. “It was always a monetary drawback,” he says. “The tuition reimbursement really mitigated that problem and made me go for it.” So in 2005, Sweatt enrolled at the University of Baltimore, where he’d eventually earn his bachelor’s degree in business administration. Sweatt later earned his M.B.A. from Towson State University.

He then proceeded to become certified as a Lean Six Sigma Sensei from the University of Villanova while taking courses on proposal, management, and technical writing. Over the years Sweatt went from mail screener to director of business development for SoBran’s engineering and logistics division. His responsibilities now are to develop a pipeline of new projects, focusing on everything from engineering classically to ►



software engineering, logistics, chemical/biological research and defense. His next plan: possibly earning another degree in Homeland Security from nearby Georgetown University, while continuing at SoBran. "I don't see myself leaving," he asserts. "The way that they have treated me, the way that they have given me stability in my life, the least I can do is give back by trying to get more people on board to be treated the same way I was."

### A Harrowing Experience

The transition from military officer to entrepreneur wasn't difficult for Otis. After all, his 20-plus year career in the U.S. Air Force included a stint as Titan ICBM Missile Combat Crew Commander back in the 1960s. To put this into context, shortly after the U.S. and former USSR were on the brink of nuclear Armageddon via the Cuban Missile Crisis, Otis was part of a four-man team that would regularly be called on to spend 30 hours at a

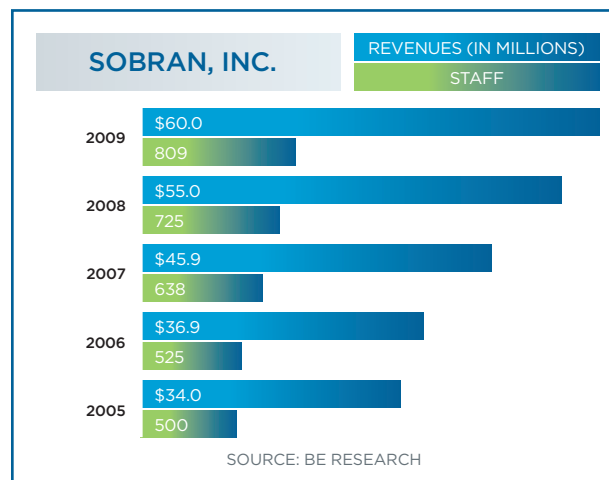
State University, an M.B.A. from The California State University, and a Master of Military Art and Science, from Air University of the U.S. Air Force. "Of course, it took about five years before I got a substantive contract." It was a five-year agreement worth about \$3 million to manage the Publication Distribution Office at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton." Over the past two decades, Otis' contacts, tenacity, ability to spot lucrative deals, and—most important—recruit top talent, propelled SoBran to the ranks of the **BE 100S**.

### Under Pressure

With pressure on the Obama administration to curtail spending on outsourcing government services and projects, SoBran is looking to grow its non-military client base. To that end, SoBran opened a lab across the street from The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine where they maintain lab animals and aid



OTIS (RIGHT) REALIZES A HIGHLY EDUCATED STAFF IS A HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE STAFF.



time in a birdcage-like capsule nine stories underground behind a control panel that could launch a nuclear missile at a specific Soviet target. "You had messages coming over constantly," he reflects. "You couldn't sleep."

There they would pray they'd never receive orders to launch a nearby hydrogen bomb so powerful it could destroy an entire city. "You didn't know from moment to moment, or day to day when you went into that hole whether the next message you got was to launch the missile," says Otis. "It was a stressful job." He recalls an incident where an officer was overcome by the pressure and had to be removed by medics after going catatonic. Otis did this for four years and retired with a rank of major.

After a brief stint with Dayton, Ohio-based Universal Energy Systems, a science and technology services provider, Otis turned to entrepreneurship. "From that point, given my background and people I had met in the government, I started to market my skills and I got little jobs, \$15,000, \$30,000 consulting jobs that got me started," says Otis, who has a bachelor's degree from Tennessee

in the development of medical prescriptions and equipment for corporations and academic institutions.

But with America still at war, the company will likely be able to continue to compete for certain contracts. "They're going to have to bring these planes back and refurbish them. They can't go bring new ones into inventory. It takes too long, it's too costly," Otis says. "We feel probably 80% of our business is secure and 20% is our team working very hard to either bring on things that will either reinforce what we have, substitute for what we have, or go after new business to make up for what we may lose."

There will be challenges ahead, points out Kelly. "Government contractors right now are under the spotlight, so there's going to be increased pressure on those contracts that we go after," he says. "The competition is going to be tighter. That's going to put increased pressures on cost. Making sure that we remain cost competitive is always a major issue." Otis believes that with a dedicated, well-educated workforce, those challenges will be met and overcome.

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