

Rob Hunden: Leading the Way in Real Estate Development – CEO of Hunden Partners



by [Jed Morley](#) [May 23, 2023](#) in [Interviews](#)



To keep people engaged and motivated, there's a balance between the basics like salary and benefits, and the culture you can provide.

- *Rob Hunden*

Welcome to **ValiantCEO Magazine's** exclusive interview with **Rob Hunden**, the visionary founder and CEO of **Hunden Partners**.

With over 28 years of experience in real estate, tourism, and economic development, Rob Hunden has been at the forefront of transforming communities and shaping the future of placemaking projects.

In this captivating interview, Rob Hunden takes us on a journey into the world of real estate development, sharing his insights, expertise, and the driving force behind his success.

As the head of Hunden Partners, a globally recognized full-service real estate development advisory practice, Rob and his team have played a pivotal role in the creation of some of North America's most iconic projects and destinations.

From market demand analysis to financial feasibility studies and economic impact assessments, **Hunden Partners** combines critical analytics with strategic planning, design, and programming to deliver smart, synergistic developments.

Rob Hunden's unwavering commitment to providing comprehensive data, unbiased advice, and sustainable solutions empowers municipalities, developers, and organizations to make informed decisions that drive local economies forward.

Join us as we delve into Rob Hunden's remarkable journey, his company's distinctive approach, and the future of real estate development in this exclusive interview.

Check out more interviews with entrepreneurs [here](#).

Table of Contents



- We are thrilled to have you join us today, welcome to ValiantCEO Magazine's exclusive
1. 1. interview! Let's start off with a little introduction. Tell our readers a bit about yourself and your company.

In the past year, what is the greatest business
 2. 2. achievement you'd like to celebrate with your team? Please share the details of that success.

Quiet quitting, The Great Resignation, are an ongoing trend causing many businesses to struggle to keep talent engaged and motivated. Most are leaving because of their boss or their
 3. 3. company culture. 82% of people feel unheard, undervalued, and misunderstood in the workplace. In your experience, what keeps employees happy? And how are you adapting to the current shift we see?

Here is a two-fold question: What is the book that influenced you the most and how? Please
 4. 4. share some life lessons you learned. Now what book have you gifted the most and why?

Business is all about overcoming obstacles and
 5. 5. creating opportunities for growth. What do you see as THE real challenge right now?

2020, 2021, and 2022 threw a lot of curve balls into businesses on a global scale. Based on the
 6. 6. experience gleaned in the past years, how can businesses thrive in 2023? What lessons have you learned and what advice would you share?

On a lighter note, if you had the ability to pick
 7. 7. any business superpower, what would it be and how would you put it into practice?

We are thrilled to have you join us today, welcome to ValiantCEO Magazine's exclusive interview! Let's start off with a little introduction. Tell our readers a bit about yourself and your company.

Rob Hunden: I'm Rob Hunden, founder and CEO of [Hunden Partners](#). I've worked in real estate, tourism and economic development for more than 28 years.

I started my career in the public-oriented sector, first in Washington, D.C. then in Indianapolis for the Indianapolis Bond Bank, before moving to Chicago in 1998 and transitioning to consulting in 2000.

In 2006, I launched Hunden Partners because I wanted to be able to provide municipalities, developers and other organizations with the wisdom, analytical tools and experience to assess their project and placemaking ideas, and, if compelling, move them toward financing and development.

I wanted to make sure that cities, counties, tourism bureaus, and other public and private entities had access to comprehensive data and unbiased, non-political advice so that they could make strategic decisions that would benefit the local economy and its citizens.

Hunden Partners is a full-service global real estate development advisory practice, primarily providing market demand, financial feasibility, and economic impact studies for compelling, placemaking projects.

Hunden is distinguished from others in our industry by our ability to combine critical analytics with planning, programming, design and strategy — all toward smart, synergistic developments.

Our studies use a deep knowledge base and analysis of “what works” to direct projects into a form and function that will thrive and elevate the project and surrounding community to the next level. I like to say there is no “right” answer in development, but rather choices and consequences.

This includes telling the truth, always, to help clients avoid mistakes or unsustainable projects, and helping clients pivot if our analysis finds their original idea is not viable.

Our expert team of 15 studies the feasibility of individual projects like convention centers, hotels, sports complexes, entertainment venues, and others, as well as entire districts and downtowns. We also conduct community-wide tourism assessments to determine gaps and opportunities for long-term strategic development.

We have had a hand in the development of some of the most compelling projects and destinations across North America, such as the Chicago Riverwalk and Navy Pier, the T-Mobile District in San Juan, KC Power & Light District in Kansas City, the Fort Worth Stockyards, the multi-billion dollar Dallas Convention Center District, major league sports stadiums and districts including all major professional sports leagues (MLB, NFL, NHL, MLS and NBA), among others.

In the past year, what is the greatest business achievement you'd like to celebrate with your team? Please share the details of that success.

Rob Hunden: 2022 was the most successful, diverse year in our company's portfolio, with 2023 already on pace for 30% more growth. I'd like to celebrate our team's work last year and highlight the exciting developments happening across the board, from small towns to major cities.

Last year, we won 75 studies, brought on 45 new clients, and helped 30 returning clients move their projects forward. This included projects across all four major sports leagues – NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB stadium/arena and districts, as well as USL soccer.

We worked on headline projects with Dallas Convention Center & District, Meadowlands Convention Center, Corpus Christi Convention Center and District, two Great Wolf Lodge projects, multiple arenas and amphitheaters, a dozen youth sports complexes and several major tourism studies in New York, Indiana, Texas, California, Kentucky, and Washington.

We spoke at conferences, meetings, and placemaking events across the world, from Dubai to London, NYC, Prague, Oklahoma City, Tampa and Dallas all in 2022.

None of this would have been possible without the hard work, organization, and dedication of the amazing group of professionals I'm fortunate to have working with.

Our team size remained the same as our business, growth rate, and client base grew – a testament to our team's productivity, efficiency, and overall brilliance! We are bringing on new staff this year to keep pace with growth, and I'm looking forward to seeing our team continue to expand.

Quiet quitting, The Great Resignation, are an ongoing trend causing many businesses to struggle to keep talent engaged and motivated. Most are leaving because of their boss or their company culture. 82% of people feel unheard, undervalued, and misunderstood in the workplace. In your experience, what keeps employees happy? And how are you adapting to the current shift we see?

Rob Hunden: I started out as a “solopreneur,” but I learned early on that all of the great things you want to achieve in your business come from the people you bring on board. You can have the vision and the skills, but as a business grows, the team can make or break your ability to succeed.

To keep people engaged and motivated, there's a balance between the basics like salary and benefits, and the culture you can provide. I've learned that investing a bit more to get top talent and reinvesting to keep talented people always pays off.

On the culture side, I've had good experience investing in technology and innovative processes so our team can be as efficient as possible. We've also added leading-edge monitors, access to data sources, and other amenities – and fun and games – to our office environment to keep our team motivated to work together in the office five days per week since mid-2021.

Your talent will be more motivated and engaged when you're able to remove obstacles from their path and set the stage for them to do their best work. And of course, gratitude and appreciation are crucial.

I try to thank my team, individually and as a group, on a daily basis. Sometimes the little things go further than you expect.

Here is a two-fold question: What is the book that influenced you the most and how? Please share some life lessons you learned. Now what book have you gifted the most and why?

Rob Hunden: I have the same answer to both questions. The book that has influenced me the most and that I recommend to anyone is *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue* by Neale Donald Walsch. It's not a book on religion; it's more of a wakeup call revealing how you can be the best version of yourself.

It helped me understand what "the best version of yourself" means, and how to pursue it. I appreciate the book's messages about forgiving yourself for your past – both the things you can control and your own choices, and uncontrollable, the hand you were dealt.

Another lesson I learned is to view actions as a series of choices and consequences, rather than right vs. wrong. This is an idea I have implemented into my advisory practice – treating roadblocks as opportunities to pivot. Overall, this book really changed my perspective on life and freed me from limiting beliefs.

I used to stew over things, but now I try to move away from negative thinking because "what you resist, persists." Focusing on the negative just creates more of the negative, and I actively attempt focus on what's positive in a situation.

As a CEO, I carry these messages into my mission and my approach to work. Part of my mission at Hunden is to help clients and communities create the best versions of themselves.

Business is all about overcoming obstacles and creating opportunities for growth.
What do you see as THE real challenge right now?

Rob Hunden: There are a number of related challenges that roll-up into a single challenge – keeping up with a rapidly evolving business. Our industry is in many ways a competition of who can out innovate the others.

We also find that technology is our partner but also our competition – for example, the emergence of AI. No two projects are alike, and AI isn't able to replicate the qualitative wisdom of hands-on experience, critical thinking that comes from decades of working with boots on the ground, and creative problem solving that we apply to every situation.

However, we find ourselves in a new position of competing with peers and competing with misperceptions about what qualitative findings technology can produce.

We also understand the power of media (social media and traditional media), both good and bad. As a company in the public eye, we have had this benefit and challenge us on a regular basis.

I've developed a pretty thick skin when the slings and arrows come our way and continue to pivot and learn how to best manage the ups and downs.

Ultimately, we focus on what we do best, the value we have always provided our clients and wake up each day improving upon the version of ourselves from the day before.

2020, 2021, and 2022 threw a lot of curve balls into businesses on a global scale.
Based on the experience gleaned in the past years, how can businesses thrive in 2023?
What lessons have you learned and what advice would you share?

Rob Hunden: The last few years reinforced a lot of critical success factors that businesses need to think about all the time, but they became more pronounced in recent years.

One big lesson is the importance of cash flow. Revenue and even profit aren't enough – the cash flow needs to be steadily coming in the door at all times. Another big lesson that is always a best practice is constantly getting in front of people.

The idea of “Always Be Closing” can help businesses survive and thrive even in tough times. The last few years reinforced that it’s important to get in front of people in various ways too, and not rely on one channel, technique, or format.

Lastly, the pandemic years reinforced how important relationships are. At Hunden, we’re focused on sharing the value that we bring. Our approach is to act as a trusted resource and an advisor not only during the study contract, but for years to come.

So often companies focus on jumping from sale to sale; at Hunden, I’ve learned that providing education, support, and guidance encourages lasting relationships and stronger outcomes. I also prefer teaching versus selling. A teacher is trusted, while a salesperson is often looked at skeptically.

On a lighter note, if you had the ability to pick any business superpower, what would it be and how would you put it into practice?

Rob Hunden: Our industry is a people business and a place business. So, my ideal superpower would be the ability to be in multiple places in person at once.

There is no substitute for face-to-face interaction in destination real estate, and no substitute for experiencing a place firsthand vs. seeing it online.

With that said, the pandemic and meeting by video created some new flexibility for us. It’s possible now for us to be physically in one location while presenting to a client online in another. We can juggle both in-person and virtual meetings more easily than before.

Still, my team and I are, in a sense, professional tourists – we have the good fortune to be able to visit authentic, unique places across the country and the world as part of our research. We’d love to be able to do even more without the constraints of time and logistics.

Jed Morley, VIP Contributor to ValiantCEO and the host of this interview would like to thank Rob Hunden for taking the time to do this interview and share his knowledge and experience with our readers.

If you would like to get in touch with Rob Hunden or his company, you can do it through his
- [Linkedin Page](#)

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