



## FROM THE MOP TO THE TOP

From cleaning floors to leading a franchise brand, Anita Elliott's journey to president of JDI Cleaning Services is driven by grit, growth, and a passion for the industry

BY KIRSTYN BROWN

**W**hen Anita Elliott, president of JDI Cleaning Services, began her career in the commercial cleaning industry at just 18 years old, she never imagined she would one day be leading a cleaning franchise. In fact, it was the furthest thing from her mind. As a young mother providing for her son, Elliott juggled multiple jobs, one of which was at her parents' cleaning business. From handling sales and accounting to getting her hands dirty on the cleaning side, she quickly learned the ins and outs of the business—skills she never expected would one day bring her to the leadership role she holds today.

One might say, however, that the cleaning business was in her blood. Elliott's grandmother was also a cleaner, a skill she passed down to her children, including Elliott's mother, when they immigrated to Ottawa from Germany with the Air Force. But going into the family business was far from Elliott's original plan. In 2008, she enrolled in college, hoping a degree in business and marketing would open doors to a career outside the cleaning world—a plan she laughs about today.

"I went to college thinking I was leaving the cleaning industry forever," Elliott recalls. "I thought, 'I'm not going to be a cleaner, I'm not going to have my son see me be a cleaner,' which I'm so embarrassed to say now because I absolutely love the cleaning industry."

## LEADERSHIP PROFILE



### Elbow grease

Despite her initial desire to leave the cleaning industry behind, Elliott's first job out of college was as a regional sales representative for JDI Cleaning Services, a commercial cleaning franchise, in 2008. In 2010, she purchased the region and moved into the role of regional director for the Ontario communities of London, Woodstock, and St. Thomas. But with only one local franchise owner in the region, Elliott says she had her work cut out for her.

"I really had to pound the pavement on the sale side as I had purchased this franchise with very little revenue in the business itself, let alone a paycheque for myself," she explains. "I couldn't take a paycheque from the business at that time, but I couldn't afford not to have a paycheque coming in as a single mom, so I had no choice but to knock down doors. All of which was through cold calling." By 2022, in just over a decade, Elliott had grown the region to 42 local franchises.

Her hard work played a significant role in the broader success of JDI Cleaning, a company with a history of rapid growth. Founded in 1992 by Joe Imbrogno and John Simpson and headquartered in Burlington, Ontario, JDI (the name originally stood for "Janitorial Design Innovation") now cleans over 2,000 businesses throughout Canada, with 13 regional locations and over 170 local franchisees.

When the founders retired in 2022 and sold the business to TrussPoint Equity Partners, Elliott was named vice president. To the surprise of no one, she was promoted to president the following year.

### Support systems

But her success was not without its obstacles. When she first acquired her region in her early thirties, she "stood out" because at the time it was uncommon for someone her age to be helming a franchise location, at least to her knowledge. She recalls feeling underestimated and at

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times being passed over by potential clients in favour of competitors.

"Everyone expected me to be green," she says. "But I had so many years of experience in the industry, and that's the most valuable knowledge I have in this business: knowing it from the base level, the groundwork, the site work."

Elliott says she drew strength from the industry veterans around her and credits the founders with being instrumental in her leadership development. "I just kept building personally, learning from people around me, and consistently looking to learn from mentors," she says.

Later, when she joined the brand's head office as vice president, Elliott faced a new challenge: imposter syndrome, a feeling she says she hadn't anticipated. "[Becoming vice president] was quite a big step for me, and I don't think I gave myself enough credit," she explains, saying her experience on the operations side and lack of formal university education initially made her doubt herself. But



with the immense support of Jonathan Draycott, Adam Jezewski, and Andrew Mitchell—TrussPoint Equity’s owners and JDI’s board of directors—she gained the confidence she needed.

Elliott also spoke highly of the support she and the JDI team have received from the Canadian Franchise Association (CFA). “Joining the CFA, initially you’re intimidated to walk a room of powerful franchisors, but then it’s like a warm hug,” she says. “It’s a network of other franchisors going through similar journeys, and you support one another.”

That culture of support is not just a personal experience for Elliott but a defining feature of the JDI franchise model, which offers both regional and local ownership and offers comprehensive support at every level. Elliott says she stays in frequent communication with the regional franchisees, meeting monthly for group and personalized sessions, and that every franchisee has her cellphone number.

“JDI’s two different franchise models offer a lot of support for JDI customers and franchise owners,” she says. “Our head office team, regional franchise owners, and local franchise owners are focused on supporting one another and our customers. Our local franchise owners are the heartbeat of the company, the boots on the ground, and the personalized and local support they bring to our customers is what really what makes us stand apart, and it shines through in our reviews, which we tag ‘JDI Code Greens.’”

### The future is clean (and green)

This strong foundation of support and collaboration has positioned JDI well for the future, as the company continues to focus on growth and innovation. Looking ahead, Elliott says she’s particularly excited about the role automation and robotics will continue to play in the cleaning

industry. She predicts that JDI’s local franchise teams will endure less physical labour and use their expertise in other areas, such as managing the technology. “Swinging a mop day in and day out or operating a floor machine isn’t easy on the body,” she says. “I know that there’s fear that those things may take jobs away—and it may take hours away from site work—but it’s not going to take jobs away. Someone still needs to operate those machines.”

In addition to new tech, Elliott says there’s an increasing emphasis on using sustainable and eco-friendly cleaning products. She believes the stigma that green cleaning products are ineffective is ending and that harsh chemicals are no longer the norm. “The tables have flipped,” she says. “Before, there was an attitude that green products don’t work, but now they’re the first choice, and that’s going to become more significant over time, as well as more sustainable practices and tools that will help to continue reducing our carbon footprint.”

As the industry progresses, Elliott encourages future franchisees to embrace change, but also to keep in mind the enduring qualities that contribute to success in any franchise—commitment and a willingness to learn. “When you purchase a franchise, you join a franchise system. Learn their system, follow their system. Don’t try and reinvent the wheel,” she says.

Additionally, Elliott advises others to be ready to work hard. “Put your effort and time in. Just because it’s a franchise system doesn’t mean you don’t have to work as hard as you would starting a business from scratch.” 🍁



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