

Talking Technology

Building a high performance software team

By Steve Burns, Capital News contributor

On Wednesday, Steve Burns column did not appear correctly. The following is the correct version of his column.



I was recently out to dinner with a software CEO and we were discussing how difficult it is to start up a software company.

Ironically, the person at the next table was involved in a software start up so we had a good conversation about what it really takes.

The conversation reminded me that the Okanagan is simply an amazing place to live and work. Where else can you start up a software company, find qualified resources, service the world, enjoy the B.C. outdoors and attempt to have a family life? While these things are true, starting any venture, whether a software company or not, can be exhausting.

There are days that you wonder if you have made the right decision. Whether or not steady employment in a more stable environment would help you keep your sanity. Well when you start a software technology company you do sacrifice your sanity in the hopes of building your dream. Building the dream is what this week's article is all about.

As I walked into the heritage home last Friday afternoon, I was struck with the team environment from the very beginning.

Normally, when I do these interviews, I am only privileged to meet the CEO. In the case of Assured Software Limited (www.assuredsoftware.com) or ASL, I was privileged to meet the entire team. The key to the differentiation of this Company was clear—they are a team of skilled professionals servicing a niche market.

How did the Company start? Assured Software Limited was founded in 1997 by Chad Smith and Mike Turner. At the time Mike Turner wrote a basic application to help him process insurance claims. At the time the insurance industry was lacking the proper tools required to efficiently process claims, with information being manually tracked and often duplicated in an effort to distribute information between insurance companies, adjusters, brokers and vendors.

Chad Smith, a graduate of BCIT, took the basic program to new levels by working with Mike to create ASL's new product, the Claims Processing Program (CPP).

CPP is designed to record, track and report all aspects of an insurance claim by the independent claims adjuster. It handles everything from recording time and expenses, printing loss assignments, and invoicing the insurance company.

"We had a lot of fun developing this product together. Although it was hard work to take a software product from concept to commercialization, our hard work continues to pay off as our product becomes better known in the insurance industry."

"One of the keys to our success had been that we spent over three years of development with our end customer, the independent insurance adjusters. They helped write the specifications and took an active role in the entire development process. Without their insight and input into how they work, the various workflow issues and the technical challenges, we could not have developed such a comprehensive solution."

What are your main products? The team was very enthusiastic when talking about how their products help their customers:

"For the homeowner/policyholder, our contents inventory software helps them keep track of all their belonging and determine if they have adequate insurance coverage. We can also store the contents information on our secure web site, which ensures that nothing is lost. The insurance company will be able to use that list to expedite and settle your claim much faster than a video tape or written list."

"For the restoration contractor, our contents inventory software helps them keep track of the pack-out list. They can use our palm software to do the listing on-site. The insurance adjuster will be able to use that list to start the Schedule of Loss which will save them countless hours and ensure that they call you the next time they have a claim."

"For the insurance broker, they can encourage their homeowners or policyholders to do a pre-loss inventory to ensure they have enough contents coverage which will result in happier clients in the event of a loss. We can also provide a web site to quote potential clients' premiums and coverages."

"For the insurance adjuster we have a Claims Processing Program and the Schedule of Loss program. The first product, the Claims Processing Program, records all aspects of property and casualty claims, prints forms and letters and tracks accounts receivable. The second product, the Schedule of Loss program, will complete the SOL electronically, allow searches for product pricing and even send purchase orders directly to preferred vendors.

Using the homeowners, policyholders and contractors contents listings, this will give them a great start on closing the file as soon as possible. Our consulting team can also set them up with an interactive Web site where they can receive claims twenty-four hours a day that are downloaded directly into their in-house system.

"For the insurance company, they can encourage brokers to have their clients do a pre-loss inventory. This will reduce the number of fraudulent claims they receive and reduce the shelf life of claims."

What makes ASL unique? Mike Turner was quick to point out the uniqueness of the company being not only their high quality product but their high performance team. "We have worked hard to ensure that ASL has a balanced and complimentary set of skill sets working together. We believe in the team concept and live it every day. We are constantly taking ideas and bouncing them off one another. We work very well together and, although often we do have different perspectives on an issue, we come up with a better solution together than we could on our own."

ASL's approach to software sales has also been a clear differentiator. As Chad commented "we charge our customer one monthly fee for everything, including license fees, training, maintenance and support and upgrades. For instance, our customers receive upgrades every 30 days without charge. There are no hidden costs when a company purchases our product. Everything is known upfront, which makes it much easier for the customer to determine the return that an investment in our software will generate for them."

ASL is working on new capabilities, including accurate voice recognition technology. As Chad pointed out "This technology will allow our customers to do a number of innovative things, including walking through a house with a microphone and doing a loss inventory that is recognized and priced very quickly. Right now we are working on increasing the accuracy of our voice recognition application. We are excited about the possibilities that this technology application will bring to our customers."

What Advice Would You Give to Technology Entrepreneurs? The team has three pieces of advice for technology entrepreneurs:

- Build the Team: "You need to build an excellent team for this to work well. With a balance of skill sets, you have a much higher chance of being successful."
- Focus on a Niche Market: "Stay focused on serving a niche market. You simply cannot be everything to everyone. Find your niche, develop solutions that meet their needs and keep servicing them well."
- Ensure You Have Supportive Spouses: "We all realize that starting up a software company involves huge personal sacrifices. We all could have had jobs someone else with more stability and less chaos in our lives. However, we are fortunate to have very supportive spouses who are willing to allow us the flexibility of building this company. Without their continual supportive, ASL would not be the thriving company that it is today."

So, whether you are an insurance company, an adjuster, a broker, a restoration contractor or a homeowner, ASL's products could benefit you. I couldn't help but think that if you are like me this interview has you asking some serious questions. What if we had a fire? Is our home owner's insurance coverage really sufficient to cover our contents?

Do we really know what we have in our house and how much it is worth? Perhaps we all need to contact our insurance companies and obtain a little assurance by using ASL's software tools.

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