

High tech hub

City nurtures leading-edge minds and firms

By: Martin Cash

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TWO of the smartest, most leading-edge technology companies in Winnipeg -- Protegra and **Online Business Systems** -- were recently named among the 25 best workplaces in Canada.

Another Winnipeg company, EISI (Emerging Information Systems Inc.), has developed the leading financial planning software tool in North America and recently played the role of the shark, buying up its largest competitor based in Southern California.

The Exchange District is home to the likes of Frantic Films, a visual effects house that services major Hollywood studios as well as the only video game business incubator on the continent, Fortune Cat Studios.

Subway riders around the world from Rio de Janeiro to London, Los Angeles and Boston watch motion-picture advertisements outside subway car windows in otherwise darkened tunnels. The display is made possible by technology created by the Winnipeg company Sidetrack Technologies Inc.

The Canadian Space Agency chose Project Whitecard, a small Winnipeg "serious gaming" firm, to develop an interactive educational virtual reality space environment game.

Winnipeg may not be the Silicon Valley of the north, but there are enough activity and building blocks in place to have created a growing group of innovative companies that are exerting their presence all over the world.

Wadood Ibrahim, CEO of Protegra, refers to his 11-year-old firm as a business performance company that brings information technology to the table when it is required.

Protegra has recently come to rely on the local market for about half the firm's revenues -- with the rest coming from customers as far away as Japan, Europe and the U.S. -- but the current global recession has Ibrahim wishing he was doing more business in Manitoba, which has so far been spared the recession's more severe effects.

In fact, just this week the firm was forced to temporarily lay off nine people as a result of a softening in the international market, especially in regards to some work it does for clients in the financial services business.

Among other things, Protegra designed and implemented an online campsite reservation system for

Manitoba Parks in 2006, producing the work in record time and, according to Ibrahim, allowing the provincial Parks Department to increase its campsite reservations by 50 per cent. Protegra's ability to apply innovation to make its customers more productive as well as including employees in its development dynamics -- close to 30 of them are shareholders -- put the company on the list of the 25 Best Workplaces in Canada for the second year in a row.

Chuck Loewen started **Online Business Systems** in 1986, and it has held a spot on the list of the best workplaces for three years running.

Online also has employee shareholders and expanded outside Manitoba several years ago. It maintains offices in Toronto, Calgary, Minneapolis, Portland, Maine and Southern California.

With about 250 employees throughout its system, **Online** has built a reputation as the leading-edge, high-end information technology consulting house in Winnipeg and is a magnet for some of the city's brightest young talents in the field.

But that is not to say those new recruits do not have other choices for employment.

EISI may even have an unfair advantage in that regard. EISI's NaviPlan is the dominant financial planning software in North America and in the summer of 2006 it paid \$21.5 million to acquire its main competitor, Financial Profiles.

EISI's founder Mark Evans is a former math and computer science professor at the University of Manitoba and many of his former students are now among the company's 280 employees.

Winnipeg also has long-standing and significant presence from global giants IBM and EDS, each of which maintains operations here not necessarily because head office dictates it, but because of enterprising business development the firms have engaged in here.

Last year, Winnipeg was selected as the site of a new \$18-million high-tech service centre for EDS with the prospects of creating hundreds of new jobs to go along with the 300 the Texas firm already has in Winnipeg.

Kathy Knight, executive director of the Information and Communications Technology Association of Manitoba (ICTAM), noted that economists say one of the best strategies to survive and prosper after a global recession is to invest in innovation to become better positioned when the economy turns around.

"Most of the (information and communications technology) firms I talk to are thriving," she said. Chuck Loewen of **Online** saw the technology bubble grow, then burst in the early part of this decade. "After that happened, our order book was pretty thin," he said. "Right now, our order book has never been bigger. It's just taking longer for our customers to finalize things."

But there's still plenty of work going on. For instance, the predominant communications technology firm in the city, Manitoba Telecom Systems, is launching its next-generation highdefinition digital television service, maintaining its position as the leading telecom provider of television services in North America.

martin.cash@freepress.mb.ca

Information and communications sector

Heavy hitters

Protegra

Business -- performance consulting and software development

Founded -- 1998

CEO -- Wadood Ibrahim

Number of employees -- 75

Annual sales -- \$7 million

Offices -- Winnipeg and San Diego

Online Business Systems

Business -- designs and develops business solutions and IT (information technology) plans and provides IT consulting services

Founded -- 1986

CEO -- Chuck Loewen

Number of employees -- 250

Annual sales -- \$20.9 million

Offices -- Winnipeg, Toronto, Calgary, Minneapolis, Portland, Maine and Los Angeles

EISI (Emerging Information Systems Inc.)

Business -- develops financial planning software solutions for financial advisers and enterprises

Founded -- 1990

CEO -- Mark Evans

Number of employees -- 280

Annual sales -- \$44.9 million

Offices -- Winnipeg, Carlsbad, Calif.

Momentum Healthware

Business -- develops information technology software for small to medium-sized hospitals, long-term care facilities and the home care sector

Founded -- 1995

CEO -- Glen Tinkler

Number of employees -- 85

Annual sales -- N/A

Offices -- Winnipeg and Nashville, Tenn.

Frantic Films

Business -- visual effects for film and television and live-action production projects

Founded -- 1997

CEO -- Jamie Brown

Number of employees -- 90

Annual sales -- \$9.2 million

Offices -- Winnipeg, Toronto, Vancouver and Los Angeles

Sidetrack Technologies Inc.

Business -- provides advertising services using full-motion display systems in subway and rail system tunnels

Founded -- 2000

CEO -- Michael Swistun

Number of employees -- 3

Annual sales -- \$1.8 million

Offices -- Winnipeg

Notables

Winnipeg is home to a number of small IT, software and web services companies, including:

Alitra Inc.

Black Pearl Technologies

Great White North Computer Solutions Inc.

Greenridge Business Systems

ID Fusion

Modern Earth Web Design

Olatech Business Hosting Corporation

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