

October 19, 2007

Vero Beach may be new haven for Internet moguls

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Vero Beach is not a mecca for Internet moguls, but two software engineers with roots in a high-tech hotbed, Nashua, N.H., have made the city home for their fast-growing software company.

Doug Fowler, 46, and Ron Chesley, 45, founded SpectorSoft in 1998 to produce Internet monitoring software for use by parents and corporations.

Fowler came up with the concept after realizing that existing Internet filtering software to block children's access to Web sites was not keeping up with the rapid multiplication of sites.

His idea: Instead of blocking sites, teach children what is good and what is bad on the Internet and then back that up with software to record the screen so that it can be played back. The concept grew out of a remote control software product Fowler and Chesley had devised for a former company they ran in New England.

Fowler and Chesley had met at the University of New Hampshire where both majored in computer science in the early 1980s. They worked for a New Hampshire tech company writing software, then headed a spin-off, developing the remote control software allowing one computer to control another. That product enabled computer fixes to be done from another location by help desks.

Their former boss moved to Vero Beach and lured his executives south, Chesley to Vero in 1990 and Fowler to North Carolina, where they all worked on a new venture, Ocean Isle Software. They built the business to 70 employees before selling to a California company.

Chesley says they dabbled in things separately for a few years before again joining forces in 1998 to create SpectorSoft.

Spector, their first product, hit the market in 1999 and was successful immediately with sales mainly on eBay. Fowler, Chesley and office manager Cheryl Warriner, who had worked with them in New Hampshire, were the only employees.

By 2000, sales were approaching the \$1 million mark. Last year, they climbed to \$13 million, and the partners expect \$15.5 million this year.

Fowler says he was simply looking for something to produce a decent income and maybe employ five to 10 people. Today,

SpectorSoft employs 75 at its Indian River Drive headquarters. Fowler and Chesley see that number growing within the next few years, possibly to several hundred workers.

"The company has gone a lot further than I thought when I came up with the idea," Fowler said. "The idea of having something to help parents and employers was something that really hit home. It was the first of its type, allowing (computer) screen record and play back."

Spector remains the basic product for parents, tracking the computer screen and keystrokes. Spector-Pro, a more sophisticated version, tracks Web sites, e-mail, and time spent on the computer. Another product, eBlaster, feeds regular e-mail reports to parents about home computer use.

These products sell for \$100 and can be bought at retail chains like Office Depot and Comp USA in addition to the Internet.

SpectorSoft is working with a national government-funded group looking into Internet drug buys by teenagers. The organization provides lists of over-the-counter medicines that can be purchased over the Internet to SpectorSoft, which develops software to look for transactions involving young people.

Two other products are mainly for employers. Corporate Network Edition monitors employees who are suspected of violating corporate policies on computer use.

Spector 360 offers a higher-level view of employees and aggregates results to point out possible widespread problems.

The corporate products range in price from \$695 up to thousands of dollars depending on how many users are monitored.

Chesley said that 90 percent of the company's sales are still made online. SpectorSoft technicians have become skilled at search engine optimization techniques, which keep the company high on the Google and Yahoo lists most consumers use to find products.

SpectorSoft has twice made Inc. Magazines list of the 500 Fastest Growing Companies, and has captured two Editors Choice awards from PC Magazine.

Chesley said the company's 25-person tech group is constantly improving the product.

"The layman thinks we just develop the software and stop," Chesley laughs. "In truth, operating systems and software are changing constantly, and we have to keep up."

Chesley is also very proud of the company's 25-person customer service team. It takes calls from around the world, around the clock.

"Most of our good ideas come from our customers," Chesley said.

"We get lots of ideas and lots of accolades."

High service levels don't mean high stress levels. The company has flexible work schedules. Some employees punch in at 7 a.m., others at noon. Some employees work from outside the office.

"If you allow people to work at times good for them, they will be happy," Fowler said.

The partners are flex workers themselves. Fowler, who handles sales and marketing, is a night owl who prefers to come in about 2 p.m.

and work far into the night. Chesley, who heads product development, is a family man with a wife and two small children, and opts for a day shift.

Fowler and Chesley say they can recruit and retain workers by offering higher pay, December bonuses and a regular schedule of outings, picnics and parties.

"We like this business," Chesley said. "We like our employees."

The partners like Vero Beach, too, but its a challenge to find developers who want to work in Vero Beach, rather than a high-tech centers such as Silicon Valley, Boston and North Carolina.

"We recruit all over, out of state, looking for established people with families who would like the Vero lifestyle," Chesley said.

SpectorSoft is currently ramping up sales and marketing, with a 20-person in-house staff and schedule of trade shows.

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