

Head of data firm says 'what gets celebrated gets done'

Sunday, June 01, 2003

By Linda Dickerson

"We ingest companies digitally," said Art Crivella, stating in simple terms the nature of his company's business. In 1986, Crivella left his post at Dravo Corp., where he was in charge of process control, to pursue his entrepreneurial dreams. He and his partner quickly proved that corporate executives can make the transition to entrepreneurs.

"We built the department from four to 330 individuals. Dravo brought in new management, and we didn't like the way they were taking it. So we left," Crivella said. He and Wayne West founded ASE Edge Inc., based in Mt. Lebanon, to offer their considerable experience in business process management and design to companies across the United States. Crivella now serves as president of the company.

Using highly specialized technology, ASE Edge digitizes, organizes and stores mass quantities of data and information for retrieval by multiple parties across the globe. "We project the content worldwide so people have access to it," Crivella explained.

Until recently, the company worked primarily in the legal and insurance industries. More than 220 law firms have relied on ASE Edge's unique technologies to manage about 400,000 cases. ASE Legal Services enables lawyers involved in a case to quickly tap into the latest development about it and to obtain a full overview of the case's current status at any time.

"We re-engineered how lawyers did their work," Crivella said, explaining the firm's meteoric rise to success. "By designing systems to submit things to a

common library, we could then have the whole thing be accessed from anywhere." This capability quickly gave ASE Edge the competitive edge.

The company now employs approximately 80. Half of its work force has either a master's or a doctorate. Most other employees are graduates of a technical school.

Although he's an enthusiastic supporter of technical schools, Crivella said, "Nothing substitutes for a well-rounded college degree." He looks particularly for "an ability to write and communicate" in his new hires.

"Is the value that they bring [to the job] the knobs that they turn on the widgets that they make, or is it their contributions to intellectual vitality?" he asked. Clearly, Crivella believes intellect is one of the primary factors by which to judge the capabilities of tomorrow's work force.

To stimulate people's learning, ASE Edge recently began to use its technology to warehouse large amounts of historically relevant data. Through its Knowledge Kiosk, ASE Edge will soon make vast quantities of information on Gettysburg available to visitors at the Civil War battlefield and to interested parties around the world.

Gettysburg is the first of what Crivella hopes will be hundreds of cultural or historic resources that will discover the value of ASE Edge's technology. Despite the potential in the cultural arena, Crivella said, "The areas that are paying the bills are the legal and insurance sides of the business."

"At Gettysburg, our role is to take care of the preservation of the materials and incorporate them into an information system that facilitates multimedia exhibits," said Crivella. Gettysburg estimates the value of ASE Edge's work at \$750,000.

"This is not like a conventional information system," Crivella said. "We are integrating all of the information to create a worldwide Gettysburg information system."

With Gettysburg as a model, Crivella hopes to interest other comparable facilities in his company's work. "Until you sell something, you have a hobby, not a business," he said.

While he said, "There's a tremendous thrill in creating a successful business," Crivella said it was definitely a challenge, especially in Pittsburgh. "It's not an easy place to do business."

Lamenting that "there's not enough momentum or critical mass," Crivella urged this region to better support its fledgling ventures. "If we would value that [entrepreneurship] as much as we value sports, we'd create a great climate for starting a business."

Unfortunately, he believes the region punishes its entrepreneurs who spawn profitable companies. "If you are a phenomenally successful business here, you hide it," he said.

If that's the common wisdom of other entrepreneurs, this is a grand tragedy. Business success should be celebrated, not obscured. Borrowing from an old adage, Crivella said, "What gets celebrated gets done."

Ultimately, he said, "You become what you want to be." This is true for individuals as well as regions. If the region wants to be a hotbed for entrepreneurs, it will become one. In so doing, it should rely heavily on the counsel of individuals like Art Crivella.

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