

The Ann Arbor News

Thursday, September 26, 2002

Software in the spirit of Edison

Company emulates inventor's focus on collaborative creativity

By Scott Anderson
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Inside Thomas Edison's famed "invention factory" were designs for the first incandescent electric lamp, the phonograph and an early telephone receiver. Often elbow to elbow in one building, craftsmen, machinists and laborers toiled with wood and wire to bring the inventor's ideas to life.

The cubicle is an invention Edison may have rejected.

Looking back on the past turned out to be the future for Menlo Innovations. The 15-month-old Ann Arbor firm is getting software professionals – and sometimes entire tech departments within companies and government – to look at their profession in a whole new way. Software gurus seem to be listening, and spending hundreds of dollars to attend the seminars of Menlo's "institute", in a bricked building on Fourth Avenue near Kerrytown.

A collective spirit

Although Menlo's founders wouldn't dare compare their work to the earth-shaking devices of Edison's Menlo Park lab in New Jersey, they are out to emulate the collaborative spirit the inventor started at the country's first research lab almost 130 years ago.

"People think of Edison as this lone inventor," said Rich Sheridan, president and co-founder of Menlo Innovations. "But he actually had this open way of doing things, bringing in a lot of different people."

For 16 years, Sheridan tried to practice that open philosophy as the head of software development of Interface Systems. But after the Ann Arbor software firm was sold to Tumbleweed Communications two years ago, the California owners downsized most of the Interface staff, including Sheridan.

Like many software professionals cropped during the technology slump, Sheridan was forced into a career change. He connected with three other software developers also

Menlo Innovations

■ **What they do:** Consulting and coaching to help software developers create products with businesses and the consumer in mind.

■ **Management:** Co-founded by President Rich Sheridan, formerly of Interface Systems. Other co-founders include chief architect James Goebel, chief technology officer Thomas Meloche and chief operating officer Robert Simms, all formerly with Commerce One, which was previously known locally as AppNet Inc.

■ **Employees:** 12

■ **Financials:** Self-financed by the founders, who say the firm is profitable.

interested in trying something different. Just a month after leaving Interface, Sheridan and partners decided to launch Menlo in June 2001. The group began taking on specialized software projects with other companies and hosted their first class in August last year.

Learning from past

Sheridan sees a cause-and-effect connection between the boom and bust in the tech industry and the misguided practices that have plagued the software industry.

“You should be free to blame the designer if software doesn’t work for you,” Sheridan said. “Unfortunately, a lot of (software engineers) do work in a void, and that’s something we’re trying to change.”

Indeed, Menlo’s classes hammer home the idea that software designers need to connect with business managers and envision the real people using their devices. Lack of connection between the technology developers and their audience means 28 percent of all software projects fail, wasting more than \$70 billion a year, Menlo’s chief technical officer Tom Meloche told a class on Tuesday.

“This industry is in a crisis,” Meloche told the group of about 25. “It’s costing us our companies, it’s costing us our jobs, it’s costing us our self-esteem.”

Bill Cavnar, research manager for Careersite, an online job directory in Ann Arbor, said 10 employees of the firm have attended Menlo classes. Though he’s been in the software business for more than 30 years, Cavnar said the Menlo classes are unlike many software workshops.

“The focus is on communication and process, as opposed to technical computerese solutions,” Cavnar said.

After attending the daylong seminars, which cost \$675 per person, Careersite programmers are trying to approach their jobs differently, Cavnar said. Specifically, they’re designing ways to test their products before actually creating software, instead of the other way around.

A profitable venture

Most of Menlo’s business is still generated from the more traditional consulting and specialized projects through its “software factory”. Some have included helping local Pfizer Inc. pharmacologists better automate data for testing compounds and coaching information technology departments at Domino’s Pizza.

Menlo also worked with several members of Washtenaw County’s 42-person information technology staff to transition many county services onto the Web via the www.ewashtenaw.org site. County information technology director Ed Luchi said the courses have helped the department become “more nimble” in choosing projects and figuring out ways to pay for them.

“It’s no longer possible to set out a five-year plan and work toward that. Things move far more rapidly like that with technology today,” Luchi said. “So this process we’re going through now will allow us to better connect our technology projects with our business objectives.”

Completely self-funded, Menlo has been profitable since last fall, and unlike many tech firms, it has no plans to seek outside investors, Sheridan said. Business continues to be steady, even as many information technology departments slash their budgets.

“Probably all software organizations are in a constant search for a process that works. They’re yearning for a way to be successful,” Sheridan said.

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