

Getting Ahead

LIFE AT WORK
AND AT HOME

Take the Lead CHARLOTTE BUSINESS LEADERS MOVING FORWARD



Tom Shircliff and Rob Murchison co-founded Intelligent Buildings, a company that plumbs commercial real estate with wireless and other high-tech gizmos, as well as energy-saving environmental controls to make "smart buildings."

Banking on the 'fourth utility'

BY MIKE DRUMMOND
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Tom Shircliff and Rob Murchison launched Intelligent Buildings in 2004.

Based on the premise that certain telecom, entertainment and climate-control technologies can generate revenue and deliver cost savings in commercial real estate, the pair plumb buildings with what they call the "fourth utility."

Essentially, it's a banquet of high-tech goodies that includes fiber optics, wireless Internet stations, environmental controls that adjust temperatures based on the number of people in a room, and digital signage that can display anything from movie trailers to weather reports.

Clients include name brands, such as Wachovia, Bank of America and US Airways.

The Observer caught up with Shircliff last week for his take on smart buildings.

Q. How do you define information as the "fourth utility" in modern office buildings?

When traditional utilities of gas, water and electricity became essential, reliable and commoditized, that's when developers began to put this infrastructure inside buildings. Information has certainly reached that threshold. In buildings, "information" includes much more than Internet access and e-mail. Most of the building operations and management functions are comprised of multiple, small computers and data-based software. When collectively identified as part of the information utility, they can be designed and implemented in a more orderly manner, save energy and increase the performance of the building. It's inefficient to build many separate infrastructures instead of a planned information utility. That's why we created The Fourth Utility infrastructure.

Q. What are some of the technologies that can bring legacy buildings up to speed with their "smart building" brethren?

We don't advocate adding technology for technology's sake. We identify the real estate issues such as competition, absorption/retention, operating costs,

new revenue streams, etc. Then we can see if technology can create value for the property. Technologies include cell signal repeaters, wireless Internet, lighting controls and sub metering (billing utility use of individual tenants), and simple services like television and ambient music delivered over a network. We also work with unusual technologies like smart bathrooms that e-mail property managers when paper towels and other consumables are low.

Q. How has your business model changed since the company's inception?

In the beginning, we had to provide every service associated with smart buildings because we were addressing such an underserved industry. Now, we are turning fewer screwdrivers and providing more real estate guidance and return on investment modeling. This allows for greater scalability and the opportunity to partner with local vendors or favorites of the developer.

Q. What are some of the more profound business challenges you have or still face?

We face the classic problems of finding the best people and scaling accounting, finance, manage-

ment, etc. We also are challenged to keep a work/life balance since we both have young children. This is a priority to us and would not be possible without the energetic support of our wives.

Q. What would you have done differently, in hindsight?

We would have started earlier development of our return on investment software tool. Our clients tell us that has been the most valuable service for them because they can factor it into their analysis before constructing or modifying a building.

Q. The Ballantyne Village seems to be one of your signature projects. What makes this project a high-water mark?

It has shown how technology can support the brand and vision for a development - many aspects that you can see and experience such as interactive plasma screens and Wi-Fi, but most that you can't, like smarter electrical sub metering and lower cabling costs.

Q. What's the next big thing on your horizon?

We are working on the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, which will demonstrate the efficiency of The Fourth Utility on a greater scale - to the tune of 3 million square feet and 350 acres. We are working on projects of similar size in Atlanta and Chicago and talking with several well known Real Estate Investment Trusts as well as a real estate fund. We are also excited to be drawing international attention from places like Asia and Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Take the Lead offers short conversations with leaders of small and mid-size Charlotte-area businesses. Know someone we should talk to? E-mail sjameson@charlotteobserver.com .

FLEEING CORPORATE LIFE

Couple finds it's a jungle out there

Ex-lumber traders enjoy animal sanctuary, but find similar culture traits

BY JARED SANDBERG
Wall Street Journal

Earl Crews has a monkey on his back at work. But it's just that - an orphaned spider monkey named Winky, who hangs from his gray hair and has a tendency to doze during his presentations.

As the co-founder with wife Carol of an animal sanctuary, the 54-year-old is describing to visitors how grumpy toucans can be. Seemingly affable, they're untrustworthy backstabbers who'd eat your young. "There's nothing nice you can say about them," Crews says, as if everyone hasn't worked with someone like that.

In the rainforest of Costa Rica, the couple realized a universal fantasy: fleeing corporate culture. The Crewses, both once independent lumber traders, now rescue monkeys and macaws at their Osa Wildlife Sanctuary Foundation on the black-sand shores of the Golfo Dulce.

But a day at the beach isn't always a day at the beach. Among the animals they nurse for release back into the wild, there's plenty of office echoes: territorialism, the lightning theft of unguarded lunches and, most reminiscent, a lack of adequate socialization. The steady ravages of business-induced stress, working 80-hour weeks with their own money on the line, left Earl Crews "absolutely burned out." "I could literally lose my house overnight."

In Costa Rica, he did lose it. When the couple was renovating a cabin, a pair of opportunistic scarlet macaws, Ramona and April, seized it. Because the birds have the bite of a German shepherd, the couple moved to another cabin rather than risk it. (The macaws will clip an adversary's wings to keep it from flying. Sound familiar?)

The couple's transition into animal rescue was accidental, happening after they had decided to leave the lumber trade to open a bed-and-breakfast. They sold their house near San Francisco and moved to Cana Blanca, where they had found a 700-acre parcel. Within a year, they opened an inn with three airy cabins. When an employee gave them a red-lored parrot named Chico, they refused to clip its wings, developing reputations "as crazy gringos who let their birds fly around," Earl Crews says. Locals started giving them other birds, and so a new career began.

The Crewses don't draw a salary, instead paying employees with revenue from sanctuary tours. Their own expenses - cellular and Internet services, and the same scrambled eggs and fruit the animals eat - are low enough to be covered by donations.

They rescued and released birds for seven years. Then came the mammals four years ago, when government officials seized Papi, a young spider monkey, from a poacher and gave her to the couple instead of an overcrowded zoo. She stirs up trouble, freeing other animals prematurely. "She'd make a great shop steward," Carol Crews says.

Sweet Pea, another spider monkey, steals other people's food and water bottles. The nocturnal Marta, a kinkajou, just sleeps all day, but she is held dear because of her eager-to-please attitude - not unlike some administrative assistants, Carol Crews says.

Humans don't get to sleep late in Paradise. Earl Crews's day begins at 4:30 a.m. He and the sanctuary's six workers prepare vast quantities of food, lead animal-rehab exercises, conduct tours and maintain cages and cabins. The work day ends at 8 p.m.

Still, in his old job, "the only reward was money," and there was little fun, Earl Crews says. Despite the grind, the reverse is true in Costa Rica. "If I had a bad conscience in my life as a trader - I bought and sold enough (lumber) to cut down several forests - this is my way of giving back."

Career Coach

Listen to the job before you hear what candidate says

The issue: Hiring the right people.



Smith

Coach: Harvey Smith

The scenario: In my small company, I don't have a designated "HR" person. I've always done the hiring myself. Still, I seem to be perpetually disappointed with my employees. I always hired based on resume, references and a whether I thought they would be a good person for us. Any suggestions for someone in my situation?

Is there a magic formula for hiring successfully?

Consider this: We scrutinize potential employees, but how closely do we scrutinize a job before we fill it? If the job could speak to its managers, what clarity would it offer?

I advise people this way: Look at skills, behaviors and motivation.

What skills will it take to successfully do the job? Marketing savvy? Verbal

proficiency? Flawless numbers crunching?

Listen closely to the job. Does it need a whiz at Microsoft Office? Or perhaps someone who is merely proficient on the computer but also capable in packing and shipping orders?

Look at the behaviors the job demands. Decisions makers? Risk takers? Cheerleaders? Define what works before you hire.

I have a client who hired a woman to sell for his company. She was warm and engaging when meeting clients, but her follow-through was terrible. She didn't get back to clients with information. She forgot to return phone calls. She had lists of things to do, but she would forget where she put them. If this job could speak it would ask for someone warm and engaging but focused and efficient as well.

How many of us have walked into a physician's office for the first time and been turned off by a dismissive staff? Office "gatekeepers" might serve a purpose; too often they do a disservice by skipping the niceties. If this job could speak, it would demand a warm and courteous greeter as a primary requirement, with the competencies, such as appointment setting and insurance filing as secondary.

What kind of motivation does the job need? A hospice position might require a person who is inspired by social issues and is compassionate with others. A fundraising position would "speak" for a person with leadership skills who can

inspire others to contribute. Sales positions scream out for people who are motivated and even driven (show me the money).

Assessments are one way to get assistance interpreting what a job "says," then matching the competencies, behaviors and motivations of potential employees. They offer businesses an inexpensive short cut to employee selection. They allow you to see - in black and white - what you are getting, giving you the option of moving forward with someone else.

If hiring isn't your strength, be cognizant of your company's needs. Remember, everyone walks into an interview with his or her "game face." However, if you let the job speak-up in the selection process, your next decision stands a better chance of being the right one.

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