

## Mentoring model propels Amentra

*Local consulting firm thrives by teaching client employees how to use new technologies*

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Matt Ernst (left) is the chief executive of Amentra, Inc., a business and technology consulting company. Mike Hurt (middle) is chief operating officer and Mike Lambert is chief marketing officer.

No explanation is needed to describe the difficulty in starting a technology company just a few weeks before tech stocks bombed in 2000, but Matt Ernst gives one anyway.

"We had to have a very valuable model to even be able to get off the ground," said Ernst, chief executive of Amentra Inc., a business and technology consulting company based in downtown Richmond.

"That was kind of a real gut check because you have to look at yourself in the mirror and say, 'Is this company viable? Is this going to stand up to an economy that's not expanding at this point?'"

Five years and a few million dollars later, both answers are "yes."

Ernst is one of three founders of Amentra, which is building a national reputation by using a model that teaches client employees throughout the consulting process on how to manage and use new technologies.

"Companies want to hire people who will teach them to fish rather than doing the fishing for them," said Michele Cantara, a vice president at research firm Gartner Inc. who follows the information-technology sector.

"They want to be in charge of their own destiny once the consultants part," she said.

Amentra isn't the only company using a mentoring approach, a model that comes at a time when there has been a change in the buying behavior of clients in need of business advice, Cantara said.

But Amentra's style of slowly and carefully integrating client IT staff and new processes has recently placed the firm at No. 216 in Deloitte & Touche LLP's program recognizing the 500 fastest-growing technology companies in North America. The firm's revenue grew 733 percent from 2000 to 2004.

The company is also ranked No. 19 among Virginia's tech firms and is one of three in the Richmond area.

Company executives attribute this growth to the mentoring model.

Typical consulting styles might include firms that work on a project and deliver it to the client once finished. There are also staffing consulting companies that send temporary bodies in to complete a needed task.

Amentra's "model is a hybrid," said Ray Hamilton, senior vice president and chief information officer at Chesapeake-based Dollar Tree Stores Inc., which hired Amentra a couple of years ago.

Dollar Tree wanted to link its roughly 2,000 stores into a single Web-based network based at its headquarters.

Not only did Amentra develop the needed software, Hamilton said, the company provided mentoring to selected employees from the retailer as the new software systems and programs were being created.

"You end up with . . . a team of developers that you've grown from your own company," Hamilton said. "The people who were mentored are still doing great."

Michael Lambert Jr., Amentra's chief marketing officer, said the "students" even get report cards.

"We're doing the appropriate training during appropriate points of the process," he said, "basically building a foundation, helping everyone speak the same language."

Companies in the U.S. and Canada spend about \$98 billion a year to get their software or processes set up by consulting companies, Gartner's Cantara said. Most of that is spent by U.S. firms.

The industry is so divided that the top 10 vendors make up just less than 40 percent of the total market, and the rest of the consulting firms -- "and there are thousands of them," she explains -- each take their portion of the remaining share.

Amentra is fighting for its portion of the market, one in which many companies say they have the ability to provide similar teaching and mentoring services.

But other consultants might pass on the knowledge as an afterthought once the project is complete, said Mike Hurt, Amentra's chief operating officer.

Such multinational consulting firms as BearingPoint Inc. and Capgemini both promote themselves as having mentoring models, and Cantara believes "Amentra is doing a very similar thing."

Sometimes, however, the client may not care to know how their complex software systems work.

The company can get its foot in the door using the teaching approach, but it may end up outsourcing a project without the classroom setting, Lambert said.

And in the case of those that do want the teaching services, "a lot of companies will think that their entire staff is going to be able to make the transition, and that's not the case," said Ernst, Amentra's CEO.

"It's a naive thought that everyone is going to be able to become all-stars when they weren't an all-star before," he said.

Ernst founded the company, formerly Distributed Objex Inc., with consultant Scott Steele and a third person who has since left the company and is an executive at a small business-software development firm in western Henrico County.

Today, most of Amentra's work is done in the eastern part of the U.S. It has worked with such companies as nTelos, Verizon and Richmond-based Circuit City Stores Inc. Lambert says Amentra is actively competing against such large IT consulting firms as Deloitte and Answerthink Inc.

The mentoring model is not only the way that Amentra promotes itself, it has become part of its business culture, the firm's executives say.

Hurt, the company's chief operating officer, said: "It is engrained in our overall process."

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