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Technology Invasion - 1/4/2008

Technology Invasion

COMPANIES by Dave Szymanski | Tampa Bay Editor

Advanced C4 Solutions built a reputation serving the U.S. military. Now it wants to invade private industry.

It may not be unexpected that three veterans — Hugh Campbell, Norm Abdallah and Dwight Stephens — run a Tampa company that provides telecommunication and information technology services, including a help desk, to the U.S. Department of Defense.

It also may not be surprising that Advanced C4 Solutions Inc. is trying to serve the U.S. intelligence community.

But longer term, the five-year-old IT firm wants to move more into private industry, even to large retailers like Starbucks, says Campbell, president of Advanced C4 and an Army veteran.

After moving around, the company's growth has taken it into a new 22,000-square-foot office building in central Tampa, on West Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Campbell and two other principals formed the company in 2002 to put IT professionals back to work after the dot-com crash. The following global war on terrorism and their own military backgrounds convinced them to become a vendor for the Pentagon.

"We learned a lot in telecommunications, so we decided to bring the best practices to the DOD environment," Campbell says.

In 2001, the three men met in the lobby of the Wyndam Westshore Hotel in Tampa to begin brainstorming and drawing up a business plan. Then they went to Campbell's kitchen table. Then another principal's garage. They added people and moved into various office buildings about every 18 months before settling into their current space.

While C4 wants to do work with more private businesses, it wants to keep its base business with the Pentagon and build on that.

"No one is going to strip down the DOD budget," Campbell says. "Volumes are significant. That's in the billions of dollars. You only need a small percentage."

The company's IT services include systems administration — running the local area network on site in some cases, such as a tent in Afghanistan or in the Philippines.

It recently added employees in Texas and North Carolina and has customers in New York, San Diego, Washington, Atlanta, Charleston, S.C., Bethesda, Md. and Tampa.

Training schedule

Besides fixing and maintaining technology for the government, C4 provides technical training to customers on operating computers, servers, telecommunications equipment and other technology.

At MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, C4 teaches classes on Microsoft software, Internet security and how to work with tactical satellites. It has sent trainers to places such as Australia, England, Bahrain, Korea and Japan.

"It's sometimes a challenge for us to manage an effort that's geographically dispersed, to get them to feel like a team," Campbell says. Privately held C4 has been doubling in size in employees and revenues the past two years.

One of its next initiatives is doing IT support for the intelligence

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community. There are some 16 different intelligence organizations, such as the CIA, in need of some level of support. All the networks are classified.

"It's a major initiative for us," Campbell says. "We're emulating what we're doing on the DOD side."

It also wants to provide IT consulting for DOD contractors such as Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics. Even though such behemoths have IT staffs, because of the amount of work, they can't do it all themselves, Campbell says.

Long-range

Five years from now, C4's goal is to be several hundred employees strong with offices across the world and a diversified customer base, a balance of commercial and federal business.

To do that, it has assembled a team of employees with federal and private business experience. The head of its government security operation used to work with security clearances for the federal government and run a similar program. C4 employees know what it is like to go through government inspections because some of them have been through them before.

Besides experiences, some of the team members are able to help C4 anticipate trends or decisions by government agencies so it can ready lines of credit and other plans.

"We've been successful to date in staying ahead of the curve in what's coming," Stephens says. "That's a unique piece there, when you sit back and think, because these are usually two-year programs. We're able to achieve certification early."

In this business, to maintain government business, C4 has to have a corporate compliance program to make sure all employees act ethically, with integrity.

"Not a day goes by that we don't see a contractor cheating the government," Campbell says. "Integrity is everything. We pound that into our employees."

Campbell estimates there are about 800 to 1,000 similar companies trying to do what C4 does.

It tries to differentiate itself by execution, its people and its specialization in quality joint communication with two or more branches of the military.

"People understand the need for all the branches to work together," Campbell says. "It came about through Desert Storm, more recently through the coalition.

To meet that goal, C4 has assembled several technical help desks for different customers. One is in the Washington metro area, one is in Tampa and it has staff in Afghanistan, Qatar and the Philippines.

The journey in assembling the team at C4 has taught Campbell to plan ahead, stay ahead of challenges, choose the best people you can and give them latitude to grow.

"If people understand your vision, and you treat them right, they'll walk with to the end," he says.

REVIEW SUMMARY

Company: Advanced C4 Solutions Inc.

Industry: Information technology services

Key: Expand service to the federal government while diversifying into commercial work.

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