

Dream come true

Posted 2 days ago

He was a kid who grew up on Ware St. -- his best friend only a few doors down -- who had a fascination with computers before the Internet existed.

He studied robotics at Sir Sandford Fleming College as all the dot coms were just starting to take off and then worked at various jobs trying to accomplish what is now commonplace: Using the Internet to make money.

Now Peterborough native Mike Skinner, whose business partner is that childhood best friend Jason Stimers, is the CEO of a multi-million dollar technology company that sells its flagship software across the world with big-name customers such as Bell Canada, Rogers, the Nova Scotia government, SunLife Financial and the American Association of Diabetes.

Skinner said he's proud that Operitel, headquartered in Peterborough with a total of 89 employees and more than \$6 million in sales last year, is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

"Ten years ago, I dreamed I'd get here ... but I never believed I'd get here," the 34-year-old said with a smile and a slight shake of his head in his office on the corner of Sophia St. and Armour Rd.

The Operitel headquarters, in the former Fisher Gauge building, has a lively feel -- it's full of young, friendly and sharply dressed employees who, as Skinner puts it, work hard and play harder.

Staff members have lots of options when they want to blow off steam: There's a gym with showers in the lower level, a pool table, a room to play Wii video games and an active social committee that plans staff events such as bowling or soccer games.

Skinner is also organizing a 10-year anniversary gala with cocktails, prizes and speeches for Saturday night at The Venue -- a recently opened convention centre that he also owns on George St.

Skinner was born in Peterborough and grew up in a modest family -- his father Don was a furnace mechanic and his mother Sharon was a historical interpreter.

After graduating from Kenner Collegiate and Fleming College, he worked in technology positions for various companies figuring out things such as how people could shop online.

As the Internet grew by leaps and bounds in the 1990s, he eventually worked with bigger companies such as Nortel and Telus about how to make it easier to buy things online.

"I was basically bridging the gaps between the banking world and the Internet world," Skinner said.

But two things always beckoned: Owning his own business and moving back to Peterborough.

His parents still lived here and this is where he wanted to live long-term.

After initially opening Operitel in Ottawa in 2001, with five employees including himself and first-year revenues at just under \$1 million, Skinner decided to put the headquarters in Peterborough.

Peterborough was not just his hometown but also close to Toronto, close to Pearson Airport and a good middle ground between Ottawa and Toronto, where Operitel had customers.

Skinner said the company primarily sells one product -- software called LearnFlex.

The software gives organizations a framework for managing their employees' professional development.

After each group adds its own information, LearnFlex will track information such as which employees have had certain training and whose certification is coming up for renewal.

If a company's chief financial officer is retiring in a few years, for example, the software would help pinpoint who's best trained to replace that position and it would indicate how much money it would take to train that person to get him or her to that level of expertise.

Operitel enhances the software every three months, Skinner said, such as making it operational on cellphones.

Skinner said 4.1 million people use LearnFlex every year.

The company has had some wild success: Operitel was named one of Canada's fastest-growing emerging companies in 2006 by Profit Magazine.

In 2008, Canadian Business magazine's annual Profit 100 list named Operitel one of the fastest-growing companies in the nation.

That same year, Operitel won the prestigious Peterborough Chamber of Commerce Business Excellence Award as Employer of the Year.

Now celebrating Operitel's 10th anniversary, Skinner said he doesn't know what the next decade will hold.

With satellite offices in Brazil, China and Australia, Skinner said one of his dreams is to expand into Europe.

Sure, he's ambitious, driven and successful. But Skinner's secret to success may be that he loves what he does.

"The day it stops being fun," Skinner said, "I'll look for something else."

NOTES: The Peterborough Regional Health Centre has named the pediatric observation room after Operitel following a \$100,000 donation from the company.... Operitel also donates to the Peterborough and District United Way by supporting the annual hockey tournament organized by MP Dean Del Mastro.

ebower@peterborough examiner.com

- - -

Decade in business

What: Operitel's 10th anniversary party.

When: Saturday. Open to the public after 10 p.m.

Where: The Venue on George St.

Cost: Donation to the Kawartha Sexual Assault Centre.

Copyright © 2011 Peterborough Examiner