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This software executive plays, works hard

Mindex Technologies Inc. president and co-founder Marc Fiore guides with flexibility and focus

By MARY STONE

Since the information technology boom and its eventual bust in the 1990s, adaptability is perhaps the trait most essential to a tech company's endurance.

Over 10 years of business, Mindex Technologies Inc. has endured the ebb and flow of its industry by regularly remolding itself.

It is what Mindex president and co-founder Marc Fiore, 37, says has helped the company succeed. This same flexibility also is what helps Fiore succeed as manager of the 110-person company.

To judge from its track record, Fiore and his management team are not afraid to shed the divisions the company does not excel at to focus better on the ones it does. Today, beyond software development, the company's primary divisions are software quality assurance and IT placement.

But Fiore always has been faithful to the Mindex specialty—software development—which launched the business in 1994.

In 2001, Mindex left the Internet access business by selling its dialup and high-speed digital subscriber division. Despite a 27 percent overall sales growth in the two years preceding the sale, company management decided to sell Mindex's Internet business to Envizion Internet Solutions Group Ltd.

That same year, the now beleaguered independent Internet service provider, previously known as E-Znet Inc., was bought by Colorado-based company e.Nvuzion Communications Group Ltd. Due to various financial woes, that company is involved in a legal imbroglio that includes multiple lawsuits filed against e.Nvuzion and its subsidiaries.

For Mindex, the sale was sought to avoid hiring additional support staff and modifying the company's billing structure—changes that would have been necessary to grow the division successfully.

The deal allowed Mindex to eliminate additional costs and refocus on its forte: software development.

Two years ago, Mindex began developing SchoolTool, a central database designed two years ago to help New York schools adhere to state regulations and track at-



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

MINDING THE STORE—Mindex Technologies Inc. president Marc Fiore co-founded the company in the early 1990s. The technology firm has 110 employees and focuses on software development.

tendance, grading and class scheduling.

Recognized as an avenue for significant growth, SchoolTool became the focus at Mindex when the company sold its custom Web development and hosting businesses to Aztek Computer Solutions Inc. earlier this year.

These sales are one example of how Mindex responds to changes in its industry and new market opportunities.

Mindex has ranked on the Rochester Top 100 list of the area's fastest-growing private firms in 2000, 2002 and 2004. Fiore would not disclose revenues. Over the last five years, the company has achieved 60 percent revenue growth and 62 percent employee growth.

Providing focus

Fiore explains the company stays relevant in its industry by focusing on what it does best.

It is what he does as president and what he hopes to help his staff do too.

Fiore holds regular process-improve-

ment meetings for which he says employees leave their titles at the door. He encourages constructive criticism, and while Fiore says he tries to lead by example, he thinks the most important thing is a leader who can listen and learn from his staff.

"I am constantly looking for ways to improve myself, and I look to my employees to assist me in doing that," he explains.

This year, as part of a leadership course he enrolled in, Fiore asked Mindex employees to fill out a 100-question questionnaire about his management style.

Fiore called it a humbling experience, but one that taught him a lot.

"It ended up being an unbelievable exercise for me because you never really know how other people are looking at you. To have that is such a learning experience," he says. "You start to realize a lot of the ways in which you interact with people."

About the questionnaire, James Miller, one of Mindex's placement executives, says, "Not only is he interested in that feedback, but he's actually going out and soliciting it. To me it says a lot."

The atmosphere at work is personal and family-like, which is unusual for a 100-plus-person company, Miller says.

"It is not unusual to be throwing around a football during the day. I told Marc I like it here so much I want to retire here," Miller says with a laugh.

In addition to the weekly meetings with employees and quarterly meetings with division heads, Fiore frequently conducts one-on-one sessions.

"I do my best to present (employees) with specific roles and responsibilities to know what they're accountable for, to know what I expect from them and give them a very good understanding of the strategic direction of this company," Fiore says. "I think that's the biggest thing, as a leader, you need to do, is to show people your vision. A lot of the time we get so caught up in the day-to-day things we do that we can lose track of that vision."

He learned his work ethic from his father who worked at Sears, Roebuck and Co. for 35 years, Fiore says.

Fiore's friend of 24 years, Shye Gilad, an airline captain at Independence Air Inc. in Dulles, Va., says Fiore respects people,

especially those who work hard.

"I guess when you grow up watching your father work his butt off for your family, and then you run your own business with the energy Marc does, you appreciate hard work," Gilad says. "Marc never takes things for granted—especially people—and I believe they sense that, which is why they work hard for him."

Fiore says watching his father work for a boss is part of what inspired him to work for himself. He wonders if it was not the same reason his brothers chose to start their own businesses too.

"It's funny. I have two brothers. One is an architect in Boston. He owns his own firm. My other brother is in Raleigh, N.C., and he owns his own firm; he's a contractor," Fiore says. "I don't know if it just happened that way, but we're all running our own companies."

Determined leader

Fiore describes himself as determined, a trait illustrated during his first day of work in Rochester.

He moved here from his hometown near Utica in 1991 to begin work as a consultant at Eastman Kodak Co. But his first day landed on the day of the unforgettable ice storm that kept most of Rochester housebound, except Fiore.

He found himself in his car crawling down I-490 that morning. He was halfway to work before he realized his was the only car on the expressway in what should have been rush hour traffic.

But determination was not something Fiore always felt. As a high school student, he says he was uninterested in school. It was not until he was assigned a job shadowing a computer specialist at General Electric Co. that he discovered his passion for learning and for computers.

Fiore offers job shadowing at Mindex.

"I think it's important to show students how what they're learning relates to the real world," he says.

It is also why Fiore joined the Monroe County School Business Partnership, an initiative to help introduce kids to careers.

Once he discovered computers, Fiore chose computer science as his major at SUNY College at Morrisville, southeast of Syracuse in rural Madison County. He went on to the SUNY School of Technology in Utica where he earned his bachelor's degree in computer science.

It was during his first job at Kodak that he met fellow consultants Damon Knopf and Beulah Patterson, with whom he soon after founded Mindex. Patterson served as the company's president until last year when Fiore, formerly the company's executive vice president, took over the helm at Mindex.

Initially, the three consultants focused solely on software development.



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

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Kodak was Mindex's first client. The group developed 11 projects for the company's ColorWatch System, including some designed to transfer data from laboratories to Kodak.

"We actually won, in our first year of existence, the preferred-supplier award for Kodak that first year," he says. "We had about eight employees at the time, and then in 1995 and '96 we went into two other areas of expertise: IT placement and Internet solutions."

Both areas would later become principal divisions of Mindex. The company became skilled in matching skill sets to project requirements and began placing IT people in temporary and long-term jobs at other companies.

The company has three IT placement executives. They work to seek out local IT talent: 60 percent of whom work at the companies where they are placed; 40 percent work on-site at Mindex.

The company provides placement at companies such as Xerox Corp., Paychex Inc., Rochester Institute of Technology, Wegmans Food Markets Inc. and Bausch & Lomb Inc.

Going to school

In 1999, the company began to consider developing its own product. Through his work promoting career shadowing for students, Fiore heard school personnel talk about the need for a product that could handle student data.

Mindex began research into designing

a student management system.

"We began working with East Rochester that was looking for a product it didn't see out there," Fiore says.

SchoolTool soon emerged: a Web-based application, accessible by both parents and faculty, that manages class schedules, discipline, medical and attendance records, report cards, grades and contact information.

During the product's development, Mindex determined there was a need for the same product beyond East Rochester. In exchange for a discount at East Rochester, the company retained the licensing rights to SchoolTool to begin selling it to other schools.

Fiore says that while other school software programs exist, they are made by large companies for a national market and not tailored to fit individual state requirements.

"The state requires certain schools present data to them in a certain format, and it's very cumbersome for a school to have to do that, so we decided to automatically put that data in a format that the state needs, so the school doesn't have to do that work," Fiore says.

The company went on to divest its Internet access business, Web site design and Web-hosting businesses to focus on a SchoolTool, which Fiore says is mature enough now to comprise the company's most significant growth potential.

"I think over the next two to three years, (SchoolTool) can become almost 40 to 50 percent of our company. It has that potential," he says.

The program is used in the Brighton, Holley, Oswego and East Rochester school districts.

Off the job

People close to Fiore agree he works hard and he plays hard.

His wife should know. Andrea Fiore, Fiore's high school sweetheart, has worked as comptroller at Mindex since the company's inception. She and Fiore share a lot of interests beyond work and home, she says.

The Fiores like to ride their motorcycle—a Kawasaki Vulcan Nomad 1500—on regular trips with friends to places such as Massachusetts and Vermont.

They share other interests too: the Dal-

las Cowboys. The couple and their two sons Matthew, 7, and Marc, 8, spent Thanksgiving in Dallas to see their favorite team.

Fiore likes to play drums and is also an avid skier, his wife adds.

Longtime friend Gilad says Fiore is also a great friend.

Gilad recalls once in high school, while Fiore was working at McDonald's, Gilad called him, stranded, halfway across the country, during a road trip.

When Fiore found out, he wired his friend money.

"I found out later he had to sell stuff to be able to wire me \$60 to help me out," Gilad says.

He adds Fiore does not take things for

granted, especially when it comes to people.

"And I believe (his employees) sense that, which is why they work hard for him. He lets them know they are part of his team," Gilad says.

Fiore says it is the team mentality at Mindex that is part of what drives the company's success.

The other part is flexibility.

"We saw that we had a way to develop software and to be flexible enough to deal with our customers. We didn't see a lot of flexibility in the vendors that were out there," Fiore says. "We can mold; we can adjust our processes. We're small enough to do that."

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