

NATURE VS NURTURE

Are some people born to be successful?

Ed Boutilier ponders that question as we chat over pasta at a small Italian eatery in Woodbridge. He acknowledges that if that were the case, he would not be the head of a major Canadian technology company, or drive a top-of-the-line sports car.

Ed is definitely successful. The Georgian College graduate (Electronic Engineering Technician, 1978) has evolved from very humble beginnings in Barrie to heading up one of the most successful niche technology companies in Canada. As President and CEO of Stealth Computer Corporation, Ed has transformed his ideas into a multimillion-dollar operation with an impressive list of clients around the world.

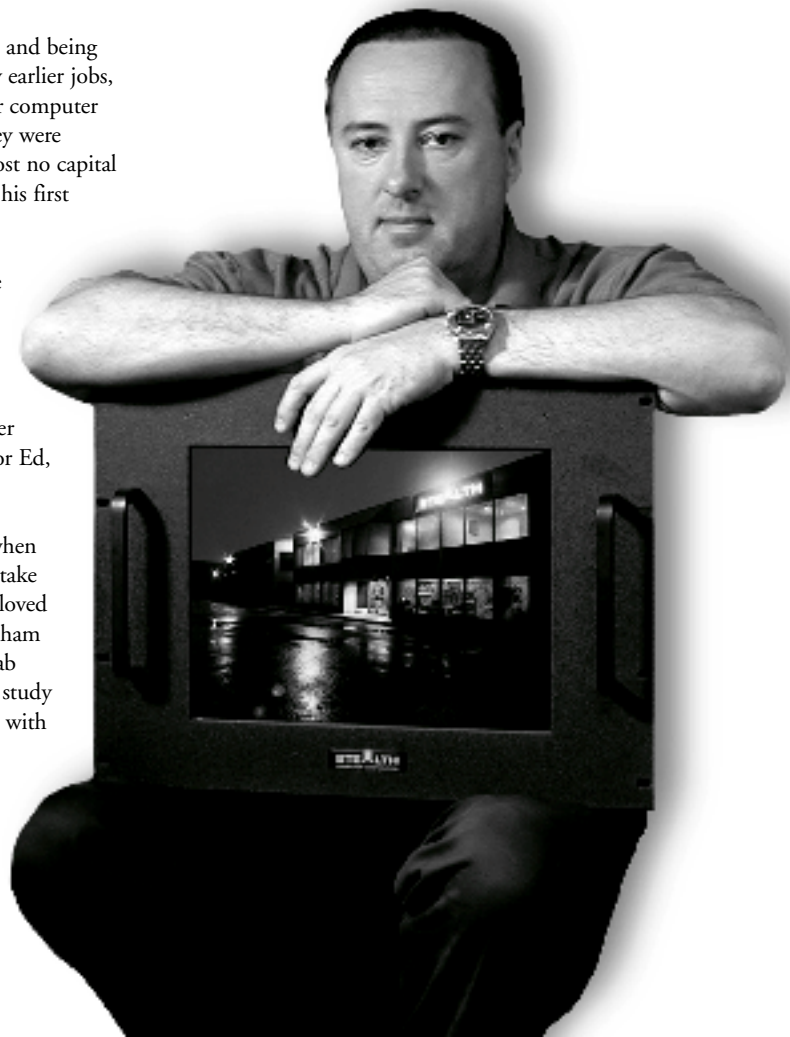
Stealth is a textbook example of understanding a market need, and being the first to develop a solution to fill that need. “In some of my earlier jobs, I witnessed entire manufacturing plants shutting down as their computer systems couldn’t handle the dirty and hostile environments they were exposed to.” Ed knew there was an opportunity and with almost no capital set out to fulfill the need, attracting General Motors as one of his first clients.

In the nature versus nurture debate, Ed definitely falls into the former. His upbringing would not normally be considered a predictor of future success. Ed would talk little about his early family life; however, I gathered that he grew up in a very poor family. For some reason, rather than pushing him to the bottom, his circumstances may have led him to develop a richer imagination and the impetus to aspire to something better. For Ed, school became the place where his imagination flourished.

His first exposure to higher education came at the age of 12, when his public school art teachers sent him to Georgian College to take an adult-level fine arts class, to hone his creative arts skills. Ed loved it but he also seized the chance to dabble in another passion – ham radio. “The college had some of the best gear and electronics lab available,” remembers Ed. “So even though I was sent there to study art, I was constantly sneaking up to the electronics labs to play with the equipment. I knew I was going to go back there one day.”

When Ed started at Georgian College in 1976, its second building had just opened its doors. Georgian was new, its fledgling campus on the perimeter of Barrie in a large field. He recalls the entire faculty as being inspiring. Ed Sowyrda, John Ball and Serge Moiseev are just some of the teachers he remembers as contributing greatly to his knowledge. Daily, Ed left classes, climbed on his bike and rode all the way across Barrie to mop floors, stock shelves, and crush delivery boxes at Woolworths in the Wellington Plaza. Wherever he could pick up work, he did, and revenue from work fuelled his courses at Georgian.

Ed took a job out of college as a bench technician repairing and calibrating process temperature controls for a Toronto company, first in the shop and later in the field -- eventually taking on the role of supervisor of technical services. He spent many years visiting small and large manufacturing facilities servicing process and discrete control systems.



He left to join another firm that was designing and building some of the first microprocessor-based distributed control systems, and personally thrived – though the company struggled and eventually folded in 1990. Left abruptly without paycheques, some of Ed's colleagues saw catastrophe. Ed, meanwhile, saw opportunity.

One of the most influential people Ed encountered in his employment after graduation was Barry Westhead, the President of the failed company, which turned out to be Ed's last employer. "Barry allowed me to be an entrepreneur within the company," Ed says. "He let me experiment with new ideas and help grow the company". Ironically, for the first time in 14 years, Ed, having fulfilled that prophecy, saw Westhead with a group of people in a Kleinberg restaurant. Without revealing himself, he arranged to pay the bill for the entire table and left. When presenting the bill for the table the server merely handed Westhead, Ed's business card.

It wasn't an act of arrogance—far from it. Ed, in his own quiet way, merely wanted to let his former mentor know that his confidence in a young employee had paid off. Stealth's 15,000-square-foot facility is now producing everything from fault tolerant servers installed in military communications facilities to "Little PCs" meant to fit where no regular computer can, but perform as well as its full-sized counterparts. His products are deployed in a wide range of applications, including geological expeditions, MRI machines, control towers, power plants, navigation systems, biotechnology research, television studios and human machine interfaces.

Now 45 and financially secure, Ed is nonetheless continually driving his business forward and striving for excellence. He remains sole owner and has spurned several buyout offers in favour of continuing along his own, set course. He still manages day-to-day operations and takes the lead in product design, engineering and marketing.

He also successfully guided Stealth through the rigorous ISO 9001 certification and audit process, and has seen the firm honoured several times with outstanding product excellence awards. Ed was nominated as one of Georgians choices for the 2003 Premier's Award.

Ed himself is almost shy, yet exudes self-confidence. A minimalist with words as well as design, he is obviously proud of his accomplishments, but refuses to boast about it. He now lives in the country north of Toronto and finds the spare time to explore passions that include fine wine, music and art. It is a lifestyle far removed from his early years, growing up in a Barrie social housing complex and frequently changing schools.

The personal satisfaction of seeing that hard work and the good ideas that followed eventually pay off is evident

in how he handles new business that comes to Stealth. While he has the normal long list of beneficiaries of his financial generosity, Ed's preferred charity lies in his assistance to other entrepreneurs. The Woodbridge facility has become something of a start-up incubator, a place where ideas get a chance to blossom. He provides space in his facility, extends lines of credit, loans equipment, and simply offers a lot of ideas, insight and support. "I enjoy seeing somebody launch a new product or technology. I share the energy and excitement," Ed passionately reflects.

I ask him to list the characteristics he possesses that have led to his success. "You must discover your passions, as they will help motivate you towards your goals in life. Secondly, learn to take risks. The world is filled with negativity that will tell you a hundred reasons not to move ahead, you must take the chance. And finally persistence, you must discipline yourself to focus your energy on goals and constantly move towards them."

Not wishing to talk much more about himself, Ed is happy to switch the topic. Sometimes, just helping to open a door or two makes a huge difference. That's how Ed feels about his Georgian College education. He appreciates that his teachers were industry experts and could share knowledge and experience in practical terms. He remembers fondly past teachers who saw the potential in a young man who had some financial and social disabilities in his life and how they opened the door of opportunity for him.

To learn more about Stealth Computer Corporation, go to: www.stealthcomputer.com



DEVELOP COMPETITIVE EDGE

Ed has some pointers for other entrepreneurs who want to develop a competitive edge:

- Understand the unfulfilled needs of the customer and then figure out what you can do to rise above the competition in fulfilling those needs and desires. After all, it is about them.
- Identify and market the proprietary difference that is inherent in your service or product which is uniquely your own.
- Deliver your promise and exceed your customers' expectations.
- Develop a positive communication exchange with customers and suppliers.
- Gain competitive advantage via:
 - product superiority
 - price superiority
 - service superiority
 - added value, and/or
 - marketing superiority