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Entrepreneurial bent

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Kurtz's latest start-up helps businesses operate more efficiently

Andrew Kurtz's first job after graduating from Furman in 1987 was as an accountant with PriceWaterhouse. Working at the firm's Greenville branch, he conducted audits and chartered business expenditures.

By interviewing company executives, examining spreadsheets and scrutinizing costs, Kurtz became familiar with the complexities of running a small business. At first he found the work fascinating, but after a few months the novelty wore off.

"I became bored. When you audit you always go back in time," says Kurtz. "I didn't like working in the past and wanted to be able to make decisions that would have a direct impact on the future of a business."

Since resigning from PriceWaterhouse in the fall of 1988, Kurtz has been making those impact decisions for himself. During the last 16 years, he has served as a key officer in one start-up company, founded two others and established a reputation as an entrepreneurial leader in the fast-changing field of information technology.

To be sure, riding the entrepreneurial roller coaster has, at times, been an emotional strain. But Kurtz and his wife, Heidi Schmidt Kurtz '87, have enjoyed the ride.

Today the couple, who met during their freshman year at a Pi Kappa Phi fraternity function, are pouring most of their energies into Vigilix, a software venture they launched last October in Greenville. Andrew is president and chief executive of Vigilix and its sister company, ProActive, and Heidi serves as vice president of sales.

The software, which has been purchased by such companies as BMW, Furman, Biltmore Estates and several electrical cooperatives, can best be described as a "real-time event and notification system."

Like an omniscient computer eye, Vigilix monitors a company's systems and notifies information technology personnel when it spots a potential problem. The software can be tailor-fitted for any company. At BMW, for example, Vigilix is programmed to send text messages by cell phone if it senses an assembly line malfunction.

In today's computer-dependent work environment, even a minor system glitch can have a tremendous impact on worker productivity and customer satisfaction.

The Furman connection at Vigilix, from left: Randy Lee '95, product development management; Andrew Kurtz '87, president/CEO; Heidi Schmidt Kurtz '87, vice president of sales; Susan Kutzner '93, quality assurance manager.

Through monitoring and early detection, Vigilix identifies small problems before they become big ones. Innovative, flexible and user-friendly, it helps businesses operate more efficiently.

Which is what Kurtz has been striving to do since he left PriceWaterhouse. First he joined Symco Inc., a Greenville company that custom-developed control systems for manufacturing companies. The systems — mostly computer panels designed to extract, share and record data from an existing manufacturing process — helped floor managers coordinate production activity, manage inventory and reduce assembly line downtime.

As demand for these services increased in the fast-growing manufacturing sector of the Upstate, Kurtz left Symco in 1989 and co-founded a competing firm, Turn-key Integration Inc. But then a recession hit, and the fledgling company struggled until industrial activity rebounded in 1994.

Around that time, Kurtz noticed the increasing presence of personal computers on the manufacturing room floor and assembled a group of engineers and programmers to custom-develop Windows-based tools for manufacturing clients. This innovative approach further improved efficiency for his customers.

Kurtz sold his interest in Turn-key in 1999 and founded ProActive Technology. ProActive's client list reads like a Who's Who of manufacturing companies in Upstate South Carolina and includes BMW, Datastream and Fluor Daniel.

While working with BMW on a project in 2001, ProActive employees hatched the idea of developing a flexible, "event management" software. The pilot software, successfully implemented at BMW, is now being marketed as Vigilix.

Speaking from his second-floor office on Main Street in Greenville, Kurtz says that more than half of his 15 employees at ProActive, four of whom are Furman graduates, spend most of their time on the Vigilix product.

Kurtz and Vigilix have caused a stir in both information technology and entrepreneurial circles in South Carolina. Last fall Innovision, an Upstate consortium of information and technology-focused businesses, selected Vigilix as a finalist for its "small enterprise" award. Kurtz was also one of nine executives invited to make a presentation at a conference in Greenville that attracted some of the region's top venture capitalists.

For Kurtz, the past year has been a heady one. Instead of tending to mostly Greenville-based clients, he is now a one-man mass marketing machine, spending much of his time flying around the country — and sometimes overseas — to pitch Vigilix.

"It's been a major transition for me," he says. "But it's exciting."

— **John Roberts**