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Timonium IT firm takes byte out of recession

Helion expands in Timonium

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Helion's business growing 'like wildfire'

Nearly a decade ago, Erik Nachbahr's information technology company consisted of one employee -- himself -- in the basement of Nachbahr's house in Rodgers Forge.

Last week, the 35-year-old Towson native, who lives in Cockeysville, was hosting County Executive Jim Smith and other officials for a tour of Helion, Nachbahr's new \$3.5 million headquarters on Greenspring Drive in Timonium.

County officials say the company's growth -- to 35 employees in three locations -- is a true local success story.

"They really are the IT equivalent of a garage band," Fronda Cohen, a spokeswoman for the county's Office of Economic development, said of Helion's humble beginnings.

Helion now manages computer networks for 250 car dealership groups and a total of 8,000 computer work stations.

The firm also provides computer services for accounting and law firms, a landscaping company, a nonprofit and small businesses.

From bites to bytes

Nachbahr graduated with a bachelor's degree in history from Loyola College in 1996. During his time in college, he took two years off to get a culinary degree from Baltimore International College.

He said it wasn't long before he realized the "restaurant business is tougher than it looks on TV" and a history degree wasn't going to lead to a job that paid the bills.

So in 1998 Nachbahr started a technology consulting company building computer networks and Web sites for small companies. That led to a contract for building a computer network for a car dealership in Pennsylvania.

That led to managing computer networks for 270 clients. Most of the company's clients are in Maryland, but some are in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Virginia.

"All the big names, all the names you know," such as Bill Kidd and Towson BMW, Nachbahr said.

Despite the recession and continued troubles for U.S.-based car companies, Helion continues to thrive, growing "like wildfire," Nachbahr said.

Nachbahr said that while dealers might be laying off employees, they still need someone to run their computer networks, which often still use "all this freaky '70s software," he said.

Helion charges a flat-rate fee to manage a client's computer system based on the number of computers.

"We almost always save them money," Nachbahr said, adding that one car dealership his company works with will save \$2.6 million over the life of a five-year contract.

Helion's focus on the auto industry was an initial concern for Charles Huebler, general manager of Hunt

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Valley-based TAMRAC Insurance Group, which employees about 25 people. Huebler's firm was looking for someone to take over the management of the computer system about five years ago.

"We're in the insurance business; we don't know about (information technology)," said Huebler, adding that he knew of Helion's focus on auto dealers but wanted to know from the company, "What do you know about the insurance business?"

"Once we got through that initial meeting (with Helion), we were very comfortable with their answers," Huebler said. "They're very down-to-earth."

Helion manages the insurance company's system and even helps with buying equipment and making Internet service provider recommendations, resulting in savings to the company, Huebler said.

Savings to Helion's clients also comes from something as simple as turning off computers. Because Helion has remote access to all of its clients' 8,000 computers, Helion staff can turn off stations left on by a client's employees. That act alone can save clients \$1.2 million a year in energy costs, Nachbahr said.

Expanded four times

Helion has grown so fast that it has had to move into larger spaces four times over the past four years. Most of the 35 employees work in Timonium. The firm also has two-person offices in Philadelphia and Chicago, Nachbahr said.

Nachbahr was looking to expand again last year when he was advised by his bank to buy a building. Helion bought the two-story, 21,600 square-foot building on Greenspring Drive with the help of a \$250,000 business growth loan from the county and a \$1.5 million federal Small Business Administration loan.

Nachbahr said he already is planning to grow again. The second floor of the Timonium building has been renovated to add employees as Helion diversifies.

"We've got every car dealership in Maryland that we wanted as a client," Nachbahr said. "There was no more room for growth."

Helion's accountants suggested marketing its services to professional firms.

Nachbahr saw the opportunities.

"Oh my God, there's all of Baltimore," Nachbahr said.

"We're kind of shotgunning it right now," Nachbahr said of his approach to expanding beyond the company's core car dealership business.

"What we do is so portable to any other business," he said.

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