

DIGGIN' YOUR SCENE

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SCOTT BARANCIK

Neon lights, disco balls, aquariums and cappuccino machines partnered with a low cost of living are what Internet companies in the Tampa Bay area are offering to employees to counter the siren songs from the high-tech hubs of New York and the West Coast.

In a prefab building next door to a Bic pen factory off Ulmertown Road in mid-Pinellas County, an experiment in corporate funkiness is taking place.

Florescent lights have been ripped out, replaced by desk lamps, blue neon and a sparkling disco ball. The top half of a Volkswagen bus has been sawed off and transformed into a sound studio. The ubiquitous water cooler has been bested by a cappuccino machine, just steps from a billiards table. Down the hall, a full-time concierge schedules car washes, dry cleaning and other conveniences for co-workers.

Meanwhile, the chief executive of Hydrogen Media has seized a Nerf gun from employees and is playfully chasing an accounting assistant around the office.

To pampered Internet experts in California's Silicon Valley where one company spent \$500,000 to have singer Bob Dylan and son Jakob entertain its employees and another built an indoor roller rink around its cubicles, attempts by Tampa Bay area Internet companies to recreate that hip ambience might seem anemic at best.

But several start-ups that design corporate Web sites or serve as Internet consultants are determined to try. One of the most ambitious, Hydrogen Media of St. Petersburg, had revenues of \$4.5- million in 1999, claims it has a staff turnover rate of only 5 percent and plans to go public or be acquired in the not-too-distant future. Others, such as Clearwater companies K.Tek Systems and Mediacentric Group, also are growing aggressively.

A key challenge for these companies is to recruit and retain the young artists and programmers who make Web sites hum. For some of the young job candidates, a competitive salary and the promise of stock options, combined with Tampa Bay's agreeable climate and low cost of living, are enough.

Not so for others. To satisfy them, local companies are emulating the West Coast corporate culture notable for its casual dress, laid-back atmosphere, democratic values and indoor recreation. Will that prove enough to drown out the siren songs of San Francisco, New York, Seattle and other Internet playgrounds?

The hunt

At 26, Hydrogen multimedia specialist James Silvera already is a decorated veteran of the Internet job wars.

Since graduating from the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, the Clearwater native has worked at three "new media" firms, one of which moved to Orlando, and all three of which changed names at least once while he worked there.

"I'm trying to explain to the lady at this credit union that I wasn't losing my job every six months," said Silvera, who was trying to obtain a mortgage loan with his wife. "I start to look very shady."

SPOTLIGHT ON K.TEK

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Though baby boomers and bankers might consider his career path mercenary, Silvera's friends see him as unduly loyal. "He's the type to go down with a sinking ship," former co-worker Robert Kittrell said.

With their high rate of churn, area Internet companies, many of which are doubling or tripling their staffs each year, are desperate for skilled workers.

They need a constant influx of graphic artists such as Silvera, the right-brainers who dream up the look and feel of Web sites and CD-ROMs; programmers, the left-brainers who use Cold Fusion, HTML, Java and other Web languages to turn the designers' brainstorm into reality; project managers, who keep the assembly lines humming; consultants, who provide clients with strategic advice on topics ranging from e-commerce to intranet-aided supply chains; and sales people, who bring clients in the door.

Given today's low unemployment rate, none of these positions is easy to fill.

Consultants, for example, often must be lured away from major firms such as Arthur Andersen or PricewaterhouseCoopers, at significant cost. Programmers are in great demand, too, as Hydrogen Media's flashy recruitment billboard on Gandy Boulevard in St. Petersburg attests. "The Internet experts need Internet programmers," it reads.

But it's the creative types such as Silvera who are the toughest to find. Though artists can be taught to use a computer, Web executives like to say, you can't teach a computer programmer to be an artist. And not all artists find the business world a comfortable fit, said Kim During, the 32-year-old chief executive of K.Tek.

To find these computer-era da Vincis, companies aggressively are recruiting at area art and computer schools.

Bruce Bennett, the 39-year-old chief executive of Mediacentric, said his staff mentors students at Sarasota's Ringling School of Art and Design and attends its "portfolio nights," where seniors display their final projects. The payoff: Eight Ringling alums have ended up at the company.

Hydrogen Media's close ties to St. Petersburg Junior College have yielded about six employees. Its connection to Tampa's International Academy of Design - production director Sean Carey used to teach there - has led to about 10 hires.

Failed competitors have provided another source of recruits as have old-fashioned employee referrals and job-related Web sites such as Brainbuzz.com.

But as the pool of applicants has tightened, area Internet companies are resorting to that "old economy" stalwart, the headhunter.

"There are bloodthirsty headhunters and recruiters out there," Mediacentric's Bennett said.

Not that he's above stealing another company's prized staff. In fact, Bennett said he looks for people who are happy and successful at their current jobs, not for "career-jumpers" looking to leapfrog from one high-tech lily pad to another.

Likewise, necessity has taught Hydrogen's Jennifer Risey never to let a minor flaw disqualify an applicant.

A resume recently arrived listing this career objective: "To rock and roll on the Internet!" Risey rolled her eyes but kept reading. "This," she said later, "is one of the better ones we've received."

Perks and quirks

To lure Web designers and programmers, most of them young, Internet companies dangle perks that might appeal to twentysomethings with a taste for risk, an eye for flash and a penchant for fun.

Game rooms are a staple at high-tech companies. K.Tek's new office has a break room equipped with air hockey, pingpong, a dart board and several futons. Mediacentric's "chill-

out" room has a cappuccino machine and a big-screen TV wired with video games. At Hydrogen Media, the office pool table is located in "The Pit," the 100-person Web design and production area.

"We're there to make their lives easier," During said, "whether it's work environment, training, cappuccino machines or camaraderie."

Conveniences also are emphasized. Hydrogen has a full-time concierge, though the services arranged for employees are not subsidized. Mediacentric offers free massages every other week.

Hardly the class of amenities that led the New York Times to dub Silicon Valley's Internet experts "nerds in gilded cubicles," but fun nonetheless.

Employee participation in decisionmaking is part of the office routine. Consider the contest that Hydrogen Media, formerly Weblink Communications, used last year to come up with its new name.

Employees submitted hundreds of names, including eyeball.com and Eyepixel, and defended them zealously for months.

Not only did 33-year-old chief executive Scott Gostyla get a catchy, trademarkable name, but he flattered and energized his staff in the process, much as his company does by hanging staff artwork in its corridors.

"You can't treat artists like press operators," said Silvera, who had lobbied in vain to name the company Anthill Interactive. "You have a whole company of right-brained people who are going to be very rebellious every time a choke hold gets tightened."

Mediacentric hosts innovation labs where employees can toy with new technologies and tools. K.Tek's During said she goes out of her way to lavish praise on creative staff.

"I think showing that you appreciate their work goes further than a \$100 bill," she said. "Now sales staff, they want green in their pockets."

Architecture and interior design also are carefully plotted.

Mediacentric used ergonomic consultants to develop a soothing environment for its employees. Earth tones - greens, browns, grays, oak finishes - bring to mind the decor, if not the aroma, of Einstein's Bagels. Cubicles are warmly lit by desk lamps.

Customary window privileges are turned on their head at Mediacentric. Executives are relegated to the interior of the office. The creative and production staff in blue jeans get to gaze at Tampa Bay.

At Hydrogen, "The Pit" resembles the Bat Cave, Batman's underground garage and laboratory. Neon lights and backlit bubble tanks cast a post-apocalyptic haze over the dim, windowless space. Blue, chrome and black are the colors of choice.

In "The Pit," Hydrogen's customer service employees are walled off by a chain-link fence. "They said, 'We want to be known as the Department of Corrections. We want to be caged,' " spokesman Craig Patrick said.

Not that these creative touches extend throughout the offices. At Hydrogen, visitors who venture up the chrome elevator from "The Pit" to the second floor, home to the company's sales reps and executives, may be surprised by how conventional it is.

Risey, the client services director, summed up the difference.

"Upstairs, the soda machine sells root beer," she said. "Downstairs, it sells Surge."

Bringing home the cappuccino

Beyond the gimmicks, the packages offered by Tampa Bay area Internet companies are a mixed bag.

Hydrogen Media, for example, once let employees bring pets to work. But the company won't watch your child or assist you with the cost of off-site care, benefits increasingly offered by low-tech companies competing for workers.

"If child care was a need or a requirement at the company, I'd be quite happy to open up a child care facility in the building," CEO Gostyla said. "Somehow, for the group of people that we have on board, having free Coke machines is more exciting to them, or cappuccino machines, or free food on Friday or, my quest right now, which is to find an ice cream machine."

Maybe so. But three of the five Hydrogen employees who recently met with a reporter over lunch were parents of young children. Gostyla's wife is due to give birth any day.

Stock options are a common perk at local companies. At privately-held Hydrogen, about 45 percent of stock is owned by employees or has been set aside for future distributions, company officials said. Gostyla said he has spoken with investment bankers about the possibility of going public or being acquired but is in no rush.

K.Tek employees have no stock yet, but CEO During said she expects the company to be majority employee-owned by the end of 2001. Mediacentric's Bennett said he and his employees own 100 percent of the firm's stock, and he plans to take the company public in 2001.

But salaries are below market, at least when compared with the going rates in high-tech magnet cities such as San Francisco and New York. That partly explains why Hydrogen continues to do its design work and programming in St. Petersburg even though it has sales offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

In want ads posted online, for example, Hydrogen is offering to pay designers \$25,000 to \$41,000 a year, and programmers \$35,000 to \$52,000 a year.

As in other businesses, the Web companies count on the pitch that the area's relatively low cost of living means a dollar goes further here.

"I brought a guy in from Seattle, where he lived over a bakery," Bennett said. "Here he pays \$200 less a month and lives in a gorgeous, brand new, high-end apartment complex. The quality of life is an enormous factor."

But local Web companies hire mostly Florida natives and graduates of area colleges. Stories of West Coasters moving to St. Petersburg are about as rare as profitable dot-coms.

People from the West Coast, K.Tek's During said, "think we're a bunch of dumb hicks."

Catching flies with an Internet

To attract job candidates, local Internet companies are handing out perks and hype in equal measure. But is working at these places really such a hoot?

Some of the CEOs admit the fun may be waning. As the Internet ages and as the herd of start-ups thins, the survivors are becoming more corporate.

"Nobody goes in our break room anymore," During said. "It's like, who has the time?"

In the early 1990s, Mediacentric's Bennett said, one area company where he worked, Image Technology, had a "chief culture officer" to keep things lively.

"The pingpong, the foosball, I think its time has come and gone," he said.

Even gimmick-heavy Hydrogen Media is undergoing change. The pool table is off-limits during work hours in order to limit noise. A rigid new schedule requires employees to arrive by 9 a.m., eat lunch at 12:30 p.m., and leave no sooner than 6 p.m. in order to remain accessible to clients.

And not everybody thinks Hydrogen's office hijinks are so funny. Leroy Titus, a former custodian at the company, said he filed a sexual discrimination complaint April 6 against Hydrogen with the St. Petersburg Department of Community Affairs. He claims he was groped,

pinched and taunted.

Clarence Scott, head of the city's community affairs department, said he is prohibited by law from even confirming the existence of such a complaint. As for Hydrogen, the company called Titus' charges "groundless."

But even if the goofiness at area Web companies may sometimes lead to problems, employees still appreciate the freedom they're given to be creative.

"When you get a project, you're free as an artist to develop it," said John Flynn Jr., a 32-year-old designer at Hydrogen. "It's your child."

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