

## HERE'S THE 10 TO WATCH IN 2002

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The Daily Digital Tampa Bay - BILL HOLLAND

Where should your eyeballs be next year? Which tech executive is going to hit the next home run for Tampa?

Here's our best guess at who's either stepping up to the plate for the first time, or coming back off the bench for another cut at the ball. The ladies and gentlemen who are going to build new technology companies in the next year:

### 1. Jared Rodriguez, founder, Turtle Software, Tampa

Rodriguez headed the development of one of the first e-business engines, TRADEX, built in the late 1990's. TRADEX sold to Ariba for \$3 billion (mostly stock), in the biggest technology sale to ever come out of Tampa. The company moved to Atlanta just prior to selling, so that city got the kudos, but the real geeks who wrote the code stayed here.

Financed by Rodriguez and TRADEX founder Daniel Aegeter, little is known about the details of what Turtle Software is developing up on Anderson Road in Tampa. The bare bones Web site alludes to a peer-to-peer e-business package that will handle all popular data formats (EDI, XML, etc.) while cutting the cost to the purchaser by cutting down on the huge installation and consulting fees that have walked hand-in-hand with muscular e-business platforms.

TRADEX's former chief technical officer hit it out of the park the last time. 2002 may be the year he does it again.

### 2. David Ruberg, ex-Intermedia chief executive officer, Tampa

Ruberg bounced off to Paris for his honeymoon right after Worldcom shuffled the chairs on the executive floor at Intermedia and hasn't really been heard from since.

Since Worldcom announced plans to buy Intermedia last year in a deal valued at \$4 billion including Intermedia's debt, Ruberg has consistently said he doesn't plan to leave Tampa. Close associates of Ruberg's say he's got something up his sleeve, but nobody's breaking their vow of silence.

The most credible rumor has Ruberg going to the University of South Florida either as a teacher or advisor to that school's high-tech marketing efforts. Fueling that is Ruberg's obvious comfort at the role of "professor." According to executives who worked for him at Intermedia, he brought as much of the Socratic as the economic into the executive suite.

For now, Ruberg's the enigma, but he's got a fat wallet from building broadband for business seller Intermedia into a \$1 billion-plus in annual revenue company, and he wants to stay in town. Keep an eye on the professor, class will start soon.

### 3. John Kang, chief executive officer, LiquidMetal, Tampa

The founder of physician software company Medical Manager has never run a factory and already has filed to take LiquidMetal, an improved alloy manufacturer, public to get the cash the company needs to build factories.

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That's guts.

Kang sold Medical Manager to Atlanta's WebMD, receiving millions in stock and cash in return. Before Medical Manager, there was little in the way of software designed for physician's practices, so maybe Kang's got the chops to turn LiquidMetal, an alloy said to be more than ten times stronger than titanium, yet as moldable as plastic, into a gold mine.

#### **4. Greg Schmitzer, founder, Jibe, Tampa**

While Rodriguez' Turtle Software has just jumped into the peer-to-peer software game, Schmitzer had the idea of "Napster for business" more than a year ago. He snagged many of TRADEX's top coders and now has two products through beta-test and out on the street.

This is Jibe's year to go big or go bust, so keep an eye on Schmitzer, who learned his first lessons in marketing from an unlikely source: the World Wide Wrestling Federation. He must know something about coupling marketing to engineering, hard sell Tampa venture capitalist Scott Miller's already ponied up \$2 million in seed funding for Jibe.

#### **5. Kim During, founder, K-Tek Systems, Clearwater**

Profitable integration firm K-Tek isn't the story here, what During plans to do with those profits, is.

Word around town is that During is shopping investment bankers, mergers and acquisitions pros, and the usual lawyers and accountants in preparation for an acquisition spree that could add up to seven more companies to her little empire.

No word on what kind of shops During is looking to pick up on her shopping spree, nor whether they'll be local, state or national.

During doesn't lack the grit to turn profitable K-Tek into a bigger piece of the pie; she finished her C.P.A. while raising two children alone. She's still determined enough to make it home from work in time to cook dinner for her husband and now, three children.

#### **6. Leslie Wright, founder, Solvit Software, Bradenton**

Wright runs a cyber-corporation out of her house that sells purchase accounting software to schools and governments throughout Florida and now, the nation. Solvit's a nifty solution for government agencies that want to issue credit cards and other purchasing tools while tracking the money going out.

While not the sexiest realm of the digital world, government IT services are a \$45 billion market, according to a recent federal study, and that's the kind of change that can't be ignored.

Bureaucrats being bureaucrats, a package already purchased by another agency has it all over the Next New Thing. Wright's software is already installed in school districts across Florida, including Pasco, Dade and Citrus counties.

A troubling cloud on the horizon are cuts in Florida's school spending, but Wright's past that too: she's touring the country pitching Solvit to school districts nationwide.

#### **7. Brian Harris, founder, SolSource, Clearwater**

This year, SolSource did \$5 million in sales. Last year, SolSource had the same amount of revenue. Harris cut the overhead for his company, which builds the guts of the information highway: cabling, generators, back-up power, environmental controls, in half and made SolSource instantly profitable.

Harris's firm is already doing what many other tech firms wish, selling to the big players along the bay. SolSource is putting a generator in a Jabil, building out computer centers for several Old Economy firms, and wiring new real estate developments for the Internet age.

#### **8. Stu Sjouerman, founder, Sunbelt Software, Clearwater**

With \$11 million in revenues from selling software to network admin geeks, Sunbelt has

stayed off the radar for years. Now Sjouwerman's pulling back his robe a bit, enough to get the firm named to Inc. magazines top 500 private companies list on the basis of 711 percent revenue growth in the last five years.

Also enough to start looking for some outside investors. He values his firm at \$25 million and he says he's ready to sell a \$5 million chunk to a fund or bank. Keep an eye on Sunbelt and see if Sjouwerman pulls it off.

#### **9. Corey Tellbuescher, sales vice president, Netwise Technologies, St. Petersburg**

Tellbuescher makes the list for his political savvy. St. Pete mayor Rick Baker's advisor for the digital world, Tellbuescher recently was named co-chair of the St. Pete Chamber of Commerce's high-tech committee, the only executive from a start-up company to get the nod to a group full of the usual Old Economy suspects.

Also adding to his political pull has been the back-door approaches he's made to the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce's Tampa Bay Partnership and Committee of 100. His pitch to these groups packed with much of the economic power along the Bay is that most of their IT work can be done right here, with local technology companies, it's time to stop exporting cash.

Tellbuescher's a hot ticket for new start-ups, at least three have tried to recruit him away from NetWise. They may or may not know the handicap they face, in addition to being a near-founder, NetWise is a family-thing, brother Chris is the chief operating officer.

#### **10. Drew Graham, investment banker, Raymond James Financial, St. Petersburg**

The heat is on Graham this year.

Ray Jay snatched Graham out of Don Burton's South Atlantic Capital to raise and run Ballast Point Ventures, the staid investment bank's first foray into venture capitalism.

If Graham makes it work, he and venture capital will be the golden child of Raymond James, if it tanks, like many technology funds have done, Graham's the goat.

The items to watch in the coming year are how much money the fund raises from other institutions by the first quarter, and then watch where Ballast Point puts its money. We predict it'll echo Lovett-Miller's strategy of small firms that can expand quickly into market leaders.

South Atlantic, which does less risky fundings of mergers and family buyouts, was the training ground for Tampa's most successful venture capitalist, Scott Miller of Lovett-Miller, and Raymond James is betting Graham's learned the same lessons under Coach Burton.

Coming Attractions:

The holidays are setting in. No new events except coffee at TechVillage, on Fridays, from 8 to 10 a.m. Informal dress and no RSVP required, contact TechVillage house manager Netta Selego, at (813) 258-8501, for more information. TechVillage is located two blocks off the main campus of the University of Tampa at 1107 West North A Street.

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