TECH NIMBLE

How one successful business uses low-cost technology to deliver speedy customer service—perfect for firms looking for a leg up in the downturn BY LUIGI BENETTON

Kyle Powell of SureHire: Fast growth fuelled by lean tech

Kyle Powell's prior business experience made him determined to squeeze cost savings, accelerated workflows and competitive advantages out of technology. Using Web-based alternatives to traditional tools, he's doing just that.

"In a former business, we owned a bunch of physio clinics," Powell says. "We bought our own servers, we hired IT guys, we set up VPNs from location to location. All that is expensive and tough to keep in place."

Powell has taken a different tack as CEO of SureHire Inc., which tests job candidates at industrial companies for substance abuse. Since launching in 2004, the Leduc, Alta.-based firm has grown from four to 25 staff, and from $150,000 in sales to a projected $1.8 million this year. "SureHire's rapid growth can be directly attributed to using technologies in non-traditional ways," says Powell.

His firm's lean approach to technology saves money. But that wasn't Powell's main goal; rather, it was to make SureHire as light on its feet as possible so it could deliver superior customer service. The company distributes test results speedily and in the client's choice of format. And SureHire's tech-savvy staff use an astute mix of Web-based custom and third-party software to make the company easy to do business with—a key competitive edge in a shrinking economy.

The linchpin in SureHire's operations is its own Web-based software, developed by programmers in India. It provides clients with secure access to test results, takes appointment bookings and sends reminders, auto-converts test results into PDFs and e-mails them, and otherwise quickens the candidate-testing process.

SureHire uses affordable third-party software from the Web for internal operations. This makes for an unusual office setup. Take staff computers, for example: "If a new employee started today," says Powell, "that person would receive a Dell computer with Windows and a basic version of Office pre-installed—that's it."

This computer serves mainly as a conduit to the Internet, where many of SureHire's own applications reside, as well as others from third-party providers. Often called cloud computing, this increasingly popular computing doctrine sidesteps the idea of software as a product purchased and installed on a desktop PC.

In its place is software as a service (SaaS), in which software and data dwell on the software publisher's servers and are accessed for a monthly fee or, in some cases, are free of charge—Google Docs being a famous example. Because providers spread costs over thousands of subscribers, they tend to offer substantial price savings over traditional "inside the firewall" technologies.

Low cost is just one reward, says John Willis, CEO of Zabovo.com, an Atlanta-based SaaS consultancy. Ease of entry and use also entice businesses. "The cloud offers phenomenal promise," he says.

The rewards of SaaS are obvious; the risks are less so. Willis points out that SaaS providers hold client data on their servers, so "clients put a lot of trust in this business relationship." To Powell, though, SaaS means better business continuity. "I go to bed at night knowing that if a bomb blows up my building, I'm back in business the next day," he says.

Powell has spread SaaS liberally across SureHire. Consider phone calls to head office from any of SureHire's eight branch offices. Employees use Google Talk, a free chat service, to answer questions that arise during testing. These questions appear on the screen, says Powell, so "you cut out time-consuming pleasantries. The whole question is taken care of in 10 seconds."

External calls go through Skype, for $3 per employee per month for unlimited local and long-distance service. And whereas setting up e-mail for new staff was once a slog, "with [Google's] Gmail, you take 30 seconds to set up a new address," Powell says.

Faxes go through MetroFax, an online faxing service from Metro High Speed that charges $17 per month for 1,000 pages. Powell pegs savings at $300 for the unneeded machine, plus $20 each per month for paper and a dedicated fax line.

Although Powell is no techie—he's a trained physiotherapist—he has surrounded himself with staff who are at home in a digitally driven firm. SureHire recruits them through Kijiji.com, a free classifieds site. "It can cost hundreds of dollars to post a job on a site like JobShop," Powell says. "We hire young medical professionals and admin staff, and Kijiji's where they seem to look for jobs."

These new hires quickly adapt. "They use chat, text, e-mail," says Powell. "They answer questions quickly. They type like the wind." Their comfort with SureHire's array of lean technology tools has given Powell's company an agility that seems particularly well suited to today's challenging markets. **P**