

Derek Belsham: Case Study Ingenuity

By Dawn Stevens

Derek Belsham's office is in a cozy basement corner of his cozy house. The room is inhabited by several computers, many books, and an abundance of electronic "toys" on his desk, his shelves, and the floor. "Wow," I think to myself. "He must be a busy guy!"

And so he is. I notice many chimes announcing incoming emails on his laptop computer in the hour or so that we chat. Each time he pauses to look at the computer to see who the email is from, evidently to determine how important the message may be.

He has been experimenting with the placement of the large desk in his office, and today has it arranged so that he faces the doorway. "I used to have my desk placed so that my back faced the door, but I wasn't comfortable with that," he tells me. "And besides, I think that's bad Feng Shui." I must admit I'm surprised that this "forestry/computer" guy knows anything about Feng Shui, but I find out that Derek is a world traveler, interested in other parts of the world and in other cultures.

He is a soft-spoken man with a gentle manner and is pleasant to talk to.

Derek's company, Westcreek Silviculture Ltd., combines two of his passions – forestry and computers. He got his start in computers in 1974 when he began a three-year stint studying computer sciences at the University of Victoria. When he decided that it wasn't the right time for him to pursue a degree, he got into the forestry industry as a tree

planter. From there Derek progressed to silviculture and silviculture management, where he learned the ins and outs of data collection.

Through his work in the silviculture industry, Derek knew that computers could make his work easier, so he decided to finish his schooling, and in 1994 he enrolled in UNBC's computer science program. He graduated in 1998 and hasn't looked back since.

I ask him what it was like going back to university after almost 20 years. "Oh, I enjoyed it," he tells me. Being more mature, I knew what I wanted and was there for a purpose – to learn. And I worked while I attended classes, so I didn't have to take out a student loan."

Smart guy.

The business has two parts to it: the silviculture side which began in 1987, and the software development side which is only a few years old. He developed a paperless data collection system for use out in the field. "Originally, I built solutions for my own business and found others needed it too."

Derek's dream is to take the company into the computer side of things full-time, but for now all is going well. He employs from four to six people throughout the year.

I ask Derek about the highs and lows of being in business. His list of lows is short; mainly the risk of making expensive mistakes and the lack of a safety net such as E.I. should the business fail. I don't think he has anything to worry about, though. He loves to travel to trade shows and to visit

potential clients throughout the interior, generating lots of interest in his product. He thrives on being in charge and doing everything his way.

It is interesting to note how much the computer industry has changed since he first entered it in 1974. Back then punch cards were used for programming, and computer terminals were just starting to appear. At UVic the computer science students were allotted a certain amount of time on the computers, and many had to apply for extra time to complete their assignments, as they were busy playing the exciting new computer game of the 70's – "Star Trek."

Computer programming is all about problem solving. Derek says he thrives in environments where there is lots of uncertainty. Then he can identify problems and rise to the challenge of fixing what's wrong by developing new products and protocols.

He has always been on the cutting edge when it comes to the computer industry. He always snaps up the latest programs and gadgets when they are released. He feels that he is a part of something revolutionary in the forestry industry – going paperless.

Derek predicts that regular "snail mail" will go the way of the dinosaur in the not-very-distant future. He says that the anthrax scares since September 11 have made society much more aware of what could be in their mail, and soon email will be the only way to go.

Derek has a lot of fun doing what he does and is very happy with the way his life has worked out.

It sounds like he's in the right business.

Just the Facts

Name: Derek Belsham
Position: President
Company: Westcreek Silviculture Ltd.
Location: Prince George
Years: Since 1998
Assistance: Innovation Resource Centre
Customers: Canfor, Tolko Forest Products
Revenue: ~\$150,000
Services: Silviculture software/custom database development/PDA applications/Custom handheld computer solutions/silviculture software consulting
Products: Seedling Assessment Program (SAP), software for various organizations
Marketing: Direct sales, Word of mouth, trade shows
R & D: Computer programming, testing software/computer compatibility
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