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SMALL BUSINESS

# Entrepreneur sustained by military training

**Internal Computer Services president says ability to adapt is major strength for company**

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SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

**E**ric Sundin, president of Internal Computer Services, specializes in helping companies survive and prosper during difficult times.

The 1971 West Point graduate led by example when he and his former partner, Chuck Gentry, founded the computer-services company during an economic recession 13 years ago. Sundin refers to the firm as ICS.

"I sat at a card table in my 1,500-square-foot office and made 30 'cold calls' a day to make sales-call appointments," said Sundin, who, after being turned down for bank loans, secured startup capital by liquidating his vacation property in Kiawah Island, S.C.

"My initial company goals were to make payroll and fairly 'guesstimate' contract bids."

Sundin received basic training in "creative problem solving" in the military. As an infantry-company commander in Korea and Germany, his first customers were the men he trained.

"West Point and the Army provided great learning experiences for me, which I benefit from as an entrepreneur," Sundin said. "You're given a mission and work as a team."

## Offered repair services

During the economic downturn in 1991, Sundin and Gentry capitalized on offering on- and off-site computer repair services, skilled on-site technicians and network-system installations to Virginia companies that were reluctant to hire additional staff.

"In the Army, you learn that there's no excuse for failure," said Sundin, a former Green Beret and Airborne Ranger. "Success is something you plan and work hard for regardless of circumstance."

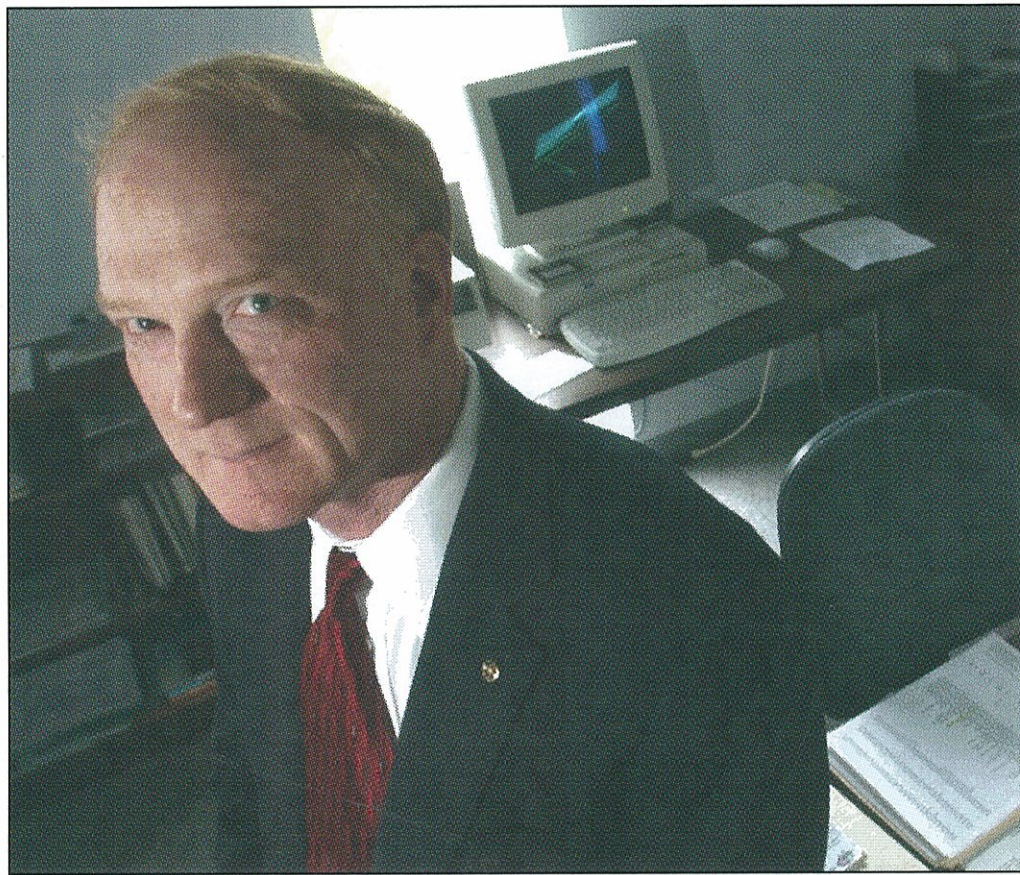
One of ICS' first contracts involved printer repairs for Reynolds Metals Co. (now part of Alcoa Inc.). The firm then moved on to building custom-designed computers for customers such as McGuireWoods, San-J International and Chesterfield County.

Local area network implementation, computer repairs and upgrades, maintenance contracts and Internet connectivity services all contributed to the company's growth and profitability. Within five years of operation, annual revenue at ICS rose from from \$500,000 to \$2.9 million.

## Purchased building in 1997

In 1997, Sundin purchased the 17,000-square-foot building he was renting with a Small Business Administration loan. He custom-renovated 8,000 square feet for ICS and rented the remaining space to two tenants.

His company began installing Dell computers, and his 12 employees continued to brainstorm about new avenues of business opportunity.



CINDY BLANCHARD/TIMES-DISPATCH

Sundin said the company tried its hand selling digital subscriber line, or DSL, service to homeowners. DSL can carry voice and data at the same time. "But we had to restructure when we noticed the degradation of revenue and other DSL vendors going out of business," said Sundin, who now resells Cavalier DSL and T-1 lines. "That's one of the keys to success in business: If you try something and it doesn't work, move on."

ICS has survived and grown through its learning experiences. The company's strength is its ability to adapt to new business environments, Sundin said.

## Honor was mixed blessing

Sundin bought Gentry's interest in the firm in 1997, the same year ICS was named to the Rising 25, an annual list of Richmond's fastest-growing, privately held companies. But the award turned out to be a mixed blessing.

"Once we made the Rising 25, nearly half my employees left ICS to start their own computer companies, taking half my client base with them," said Sundin, who now requires all employees to sign a two-year noncompete contract.

"My company eventually recovered, but the incredibly stressful situation provided a wake-up call to me as a businessman."

Today, Sundin chooses employees from a pool of high-ranking local IT graduates and then assigns a company mentor to supplement their education. Sundin said he hires people he perceives are honest, articulate, emotionally mature, inquisitive and service-oriented.

Customers say they appreciate the firm's emphasis on service.

"I had ICS install a five-station network for my company in December of 2003," said David Auman, president of Capstone Contracting Co. "Eric designed the right software and operating systems to meet my company's needs and installed it within a week. I enjoy doing business with honest, upfront individuals, who treat people fairly."

"The biggest thing about ICS is that they offer great customer service," said another customer, Steve Clary, chief operating officer at Wynne Residential Corporate Housing.

"When a system goes down, you can't afford to wait days to get it back up. Eric and his company are knowledgeable and reliable and continue to do a great job for us."

## Maintained employee base

In 2000, when the IT industry was reeling, Sundin maintained his employee base and made another advance into cyberspace. He bought 50 percent interest in NetworkRichmond.com, a local Internet service provider that specializes in Internet strategies for small businesses. Another computer firm, Techknowledge Inc. partnered with him and purchased the other 50 percent interest.

ICS continues to expand and refine its portfolio of Internet services, while remaining true to its core company mission statement.

"My company objective is to remain a small computer company, expertly servicing small-to-midsize businesses," said Sundin. "I've seen too many other companies get too big and then implode."

• Trade Names is a regular feature on established businesses in the Richmond area.

**"West Point and the Army provided great learning experiences for me, which I benefit from as an entrepreneur," said Eric M. Sundin, president of Internal Computer Services. "You're given a mission and work as a team."**

## THE RÉSUMÉ

### Name:

► Eric M. Sundin

### Born:

► Sept. 18, 1948, at West Point, N.Y.

### Position:

► owner and president, Internal Computer Services, called ICS

### Education:

► U.S. Military Academy, 1971

### Career path:

► U.S. Army, 1971-1981; joined Control Data Corp. in 1982 and Wang Labs in 1986; co-founded ICS in 1991

### Family:

► wife, Nancy; children, Carl, Drew and Elisabeth

### Spare-time pursuits:

► skiing at Wintergreen

### Affiliations:

► Innsbrook Rotary Club