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2010

# SEP'S JOURNEY: Engineering a Workplace Winner

“It’s kind of one of those crazy things that now that I’m older I don’t think I would do.”

**By Rebecca Patrick**

That crazy thing is the “wild ride” Jeff Gilbert embarked on when he and three fellow Rose-Hulman graduates founded Software Engineering Professionals (SEP) in 1988.

**The SEP client philosophy centers on true engagement, flexibility and transparency. Those practices also apply to the internal approach with employees.**

“I was the *most* experienced person with three years of technical experience under my belt,” Gilbert remarks.

While the Carmel-based business is prospering now, the shoestring budget and early days are easy to recall. “Basically, every month, we would figure out what expenses were – I needed \$600 to cover rent – and from that would be the paychecks. That’s how we operated until we finally got some breaks,” he offers.



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## Software Engineering Professionals

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“The main question for us was, ‘Can people form a company that is focused on the quality of the work and not making money?’ Kind of like making money by being good. The answer is yes, but it takes time. To us, the company was like an experiment that got out of the lab.”

### What they do

In broad terms, SEP develops new software systems and products for business, data and safety critical applications.

“We are an outsourcing company that builds products for other companies and then they sell them. We’re mostly medical and health care – about 70% – and work under the FDA (Federal Drug Administration) a lot. We also do aerospace work, energy and logistics,” Gilbert states.

Much of what SEP does “gets imbedded inside a processor. An example might be a medical device. We also do software than runs on desktops; at a nurse’s station is a good example. We also do Internet servers and four types of hand-held development (such as the iPhone),” he explains.

SEP output is based on the needs of its clients, so there isn’t your typical next big thing coming down the pipeline. That said, the mobile applications represent a new and expanding niche for the company, Gilbert says.

Current customers come largely from the Midwest, plus a few from California; most are owned by multi-nationals.

“Last time I checked, over 70% of our work was for Fortune and Global 1000s, which is pretty important – some very large companies. Most of the companies we work for have over 10,000 employees,” he notes.

SEP signs confidentiality agreements with all its clients: “They put their names on the sides of the things we develop, and we sit back in the shadows,” Gilbert surmises.



**“There were 16 people here when I started. It’s been interesting and exciting to watch us grow but also maintain the same (laid back) feel; that’s been important.”**

*Traci Dossett*



**SEP’s new home, scheduled to open at year’s end, is designed with resource utilization and team areas in mind. Company president Jeff Gilbert (left) and Carmel Mayor Jim Brainard participated in the groundbreaking.**

### Growth and visibility

In January 2009, the decision was made to step more into the spotlight. The move was made in part due to frustration felt “when an Indiana company hires someone from out of state because they don’t know that we’re here.

“We’ve run for 20-plus years working for these large companies who know us really well. Yet, no one outside of those companies has even heard of us. You would be shocked at some of the things we’ve worked on ... products that you use every day – well hopefully not every day; hopefully you’ll never use some of them (medical products),” Gilbert begins.

“We wanted to stake our claim to be the preferred partner in our industry and the industry leader. We’ve been going to conferences; we’re writing papers; and we’re blogging all over the place. We’ve been recognized several times for awards within our industry. We’re starting to draw more attention to ourself.”

The company’s first ever marketing manager was hired and more recently an engagement manager was brought on board to oversee products and relationships.

“We’re engineers and sometimes don’t think of the non-technical things to do,” Gilbert admits. “But now, we’re making some really good strides.”

### Empowering employees

This change in company tactics, like other decision-making,



**SEP engineers utilize a method developed by Toyota – a giant board with moveable Post-it notes – to keep track of projects in process.**

involves employee input and buy-in. In the case of balancing the focus of being good versus being known, Gilbert asked the staff over a brown bag lunch.

Employees in general are kept in the communications loop through a variety of efforts. Regular status meetings allow everyone to know what’s going on across the teams. The company newsletter and blog are additional avenues, as are the “what do you want to talk about today” time Gilbert designates for staff.

Traci Dossett, vice president of operations who has been with the company for 17 years, believes this interaction is the best thing about working at SEP. “We’re all connected – there’s good communication, and everyone knows everything.”

Another sign of respect and confidence in staff is shown by letting them call many of their own shots.

“We have self-managed teams. Employees like to make decisions and letting them make decisions is really important,” Gilbert stresses.

“We don’t manage people very tightly. There’s an expectation that you’re going to get your work done.”

Engineer Charles Tippet says SEP’s willingness to let employees explore options has stood out during his eight years with the company.

“Management has not been resistant to change; instead they’ve embraced it. If we say, ‘Hey, let’s go down this path because we think it will work better,’ we’re given that opportunity,” he explains.

“When I first got here, they told me your job is what you make of it. If you want to work on something, you can do that – within reason. If you want to go down this way, you can define your own path.”

Adds Raman Ohri, another 17-year SEP veteran, “It’s an earned privilege, but you do have a lot of ability to influence what your job becomes. For instance, I wouldn’t have to do recruiting, but I’m very interested in that and eventually want to be able to help run the program.

“If I’m more interested in development, I can pour myself into that. As you advance in your career here, you get more and more freedom – as long as you’re doing things in the interest

of the company – to customize your job,” he maintains.

Flexibility also translates to the day-to-day of how one’s job gets done.

Engineers can perform many of their duties from home. Both Dossett and marketing manager Kelly Wilson have enjoyed being able to bring their young children to work with them. Dossett, who had a crib in her office at one time, also mentions leaving to take her son to kindergarten or to attend a parent-teacher conference in the middle of the day.

To HR manager Laura Terry, this practice has become inherently SEP. “We do that so much – being flexible – that it’s now just part of the culture.”

**Recruitment sets tone**

What enables SEP to empower its employees and allow them freedom is its hiring process.

“We say we want three things from our employees. They have to be smart, they have to get things done and they have to fit. And fit is pretty big. It’s nice to tell people what you’re all about upfront and they can either self-select that they want it or they don’t,” Gilbert declares. “We filter people out because we have such a good recruiting process.

While some prospects find it intimidating, Ohri – an engineer who also heads up the recruitment of new engineers – says it’s absolutely necessary. “We are going to find out the answers to the questions we have if somebody is going to get in here.”

Potential hires that pass the first round then take part in a full-day intensive test.

“We literally put the candidates at a board and give them hard problems to solve. They don’t get a computer; they get a marker and a white board. And we pick at them while they try and solve these problems.

“The end result is that the people who make it in here ... they don’t fail because they’re not smart enough, let’s put it that way,” Ohri concludes.

The bottom line is an impressive retention rate of 95.5% over the entire history of the company.

**Staying on top of your game**

Knowledge and continuing to learn go hand-in-hand once you’re in the door at SEP, as the technology the company





**SEP employees and their families enjoy a slate of planned activities year-round, including a summer picnic.**

employs is always evolving. The more emerging the technology, the faster things advance; the hand-held portable market is a prime example.

Gilbert, who has paid attention to trends of the last decade, says “what we know sometimes turns over every three years.

“We set practices in place and we learn things almost together, and we agree that’s a great thing to keep doing.”

The training – which not only keeps employees up to date but allows for professional growth – takes two tracts, informal and formal.

“Twice a week, every month we have engineers who are training groups of engineers over a brown bag lunch on their own time. It’s what they want to do; it’s in them to want to learn,” Wilson shares.

The more structured path begins with a career check-in that employees have with their manager at least once a year.

“We want employees to create a career road map. Employees are encouraged to consider their career goals, let their manager know what those goals are, and then together see what it will take skills-wise for the employee to reach them,” Terry explains.

One avenue readily available is the SEP Academy, which offers 8- to 12-week courses that are primarily taught by staff. Grades are awarded and credit in the form of professional development units (PDUs) is earned. Those accumulating a certain level of PDUs for a calendar year receive \$100 to \$500 (based on amount of professional development) and are recognized at company meetings. Each PDU is between two and six hours worth of effort. Outside coursework or certification translates to PDUs as well. The SEP staff averaged 29.6 PDUs last year.

“Our employees (primarily engineers) develop the academy curriculum based on what other employees are interested in. We have an expectation that knowledge will be shared when someone takes an outside class or attends a conference – that the knowledge will be shared when they come back,” Dossett states.

While most of the classes are serious, technical work-related topics, Terry reports there have been classes more off the beaten track, like self-defense and fish tanks. Last year, a total of 91 topics were covered.

### **Fun happens too**

While SEP certainly knows how to get down to business, recreation is far from ignored. A social team plans events – large and small – throughout the year. And for many of the events, staff is encouraged to invite family.

February’s “Cabin Fever” is one of the more popular outings. “This year we rented a space and had a magician come in. The kids always think it’s beyond cool. It’s a time to play games and hang out, listen to music – we had a DJ – and just have fun. It’s in the middle of winter; you kind of need it,” Terry surmises.

Among the other activities: a summer picnic, a spring fling recognizing the company’s anniversary, a pre-Thanksgiving meal, bowling, laser tag, paintball and visiting the zoo.

The most extravagant gesture? Likely the trip to Cancun for employees and spouses that marked the company’s 20-year anniversary.

A fun tradition that takes place in the office is SEP’s monthly game night – a personal favorite of Tippet’s. “We bring in board games and play them until around 2 a.m. or so. We get a fairly large turnout, regularly between 20 and 35 people. I bring the kids some times. We have fun.”

### **New building; same philosophy**

The many opportunities to get to know the people you work with, to have that access and to foster that sense of teamwork are very important at

SEP. That sentiment is all over the new Carmel City Centre location SEP will move into at the end of the year.

Gilbert points out his staff works extremely hard and he wants them to be able to also have



**“It’s an earned privilege, but you do have a lot of ability to influence what your job becomes.”**

*Raman Ohri*

*(pictured with HR manager Laura Terry)*



**“The flexibility is great. They’re good about letting you have time off if something comes up and you need to leave. They really work with employees.”**

*Ellen Maners*

time to relax and enjoy the camaraderie. With that in mind, the new digs will feature an open-air space: a 19-foot by 35-foot terrace on the third floor that includes a “grill area and is just a place where people can take a break and get fresh air.” A larger break room is also on tap.

Perhaps the most unique thing about the new building is the input management sought from staff. A four-person workspace team was formed to determine what everyone wanted from their workstations and to select the actual furnishings.

Though the company has grown – 83 employees strong now – several made note that the core culture of working together has been maintained.

“When I first got here, it was all about working with your team; there were a lot of discussions and encouragement. If you have a question or problem, there is someone here that will try to solve that problem. And that’s still the case,” Tippett offers.

It all comes back to the mission statement, says Gilbert, that “talks a lot about building a place where we make each other better. That’s important.”

Terry describes herself as “lucky” to be at SEP. “It’s really a pleasure to work here. A lot of credit goes to the staff; they have a lot of initiative to teach and to get better. They care about each other; they care about the clients. It makes work easy.”

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