



By **Matt Ottinger**

Data Center Turns Expertise Into Protection

The business: A “high tech landlord” offering data center compliance and colocation services to some of Indiana’s highest profile companies and hospitals.

The location: a discreet presence in Indianapolis’ vacated Eastgate Mall facility on the city’s east side. (The company has several locations, including a new data center in Fort Wayne expected to launch by the end of 2016.)

The reporter: 20 minutes late to the interview due to the location’s previously-stated discreetness.

“We’re hard to find by design,” confirms Lifeline Data Centers’ co-owner Rich Banta, casually accepting my apology for tardiness.

While strolling through the company’s 350,000 square feet of computer equipment and soon-to-be inhabited space, the buzzing of the air conditioning rattles the mind. Controller Dana Carroll explains the abundance of computer activity creates a great deal of heat.

But it’s not just the massive capacity or top-of-the-line technology that set Lifeline apart. There is also highly-credentialed staff.

“That’s the biggest difference between us and our competitors,” she offers. “We’re what’s known as a wholesale data center, and our offerings are head and shoulders above everybody else.”

Lifetime of dependability

Owners Banta and Alex Carroll had experience in previous professions working on large data center and e-commerce projects. As customers, they found the services they received from existing data center providers left them wanting.

“We found we were overcharged and underserved,” Banta says. “We knew we could do better and there was market opportunity there, and it looked like fun. We saw an awful lot of room for innovation in this space. We started with 3,000 square feet of computer room in a basement in downtown Indianapolis.”

Now, the duo and its staff of under 50 take on the monumental task of keeping some of the state’s most prominent employers

online and functioning.

“The cost of downtime has gone up exponentially,” he reports. “Customers here are attached to two uninterruptable power supplies – two generators, two disparate systems, each with their own fuel supplies and batteries. To do that and provide the security in leased office space is not practical (for companies to do themselves). The capital expenditure is astronomical.”

An impressive array of utility-grade solar panels don the rooftop and parking lot to provide Lifeline with another form of energy.

Since its current facility was developed in 2009, Lifeline’s clients have never experienced an interruption in power. That’s an accomplishment for which its staff takes a great deal of pride. Sometimes it’s more than

just slowed productivity at stake.

“(A large trauma center) has its primary data center facility here ...” Banta notes. “Because life safety and patient care hangs in the balance, they fall under life safety portions of National Fire Protection Association codes, meaning we have to exercise our generators weekly, maintain the generators and do documentation surrounding it. We have to disconnect from Indianapolis Power & Light twice a year to prove we can do it. We do this for one specific customer, but since it’s a shared environment, everybody benefits.”

Certified and bona fide

Lifeline is constantly adding niches and building on its current client list of over 150. One such client is an organization with serious focus on protecting its data – the federal government.

“To provide cloud services to the government, you have to have a very high level of certification,” Banta points out, alluding to the goal of earning Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) status. “We’re over two-thirds of the way toward accomplishing that. We will be a pre-certified cloud that government agencies and contractors can go onto directly.”

Banta explains the rigorous certification has only been accomplished by fewer than 70 applicants, despite thousands applying.

“The pass rate is about one in 20; many just give up,” he states. “Very few organizations are capable of doing it. It kind of had to be going before you poured the concrete. We’re there because we headed this direction six or seven years ago.

“We’re the second smallest that will have achieved it,” Banta adds. “The one smaller than us that did it, this is all they do for a living (service the federal market), and they were funded by outside capital and hired a team of 50 consultants to put it together.”

Lifeline also had to upgrade to defense industry standards, parlaying more man hours and high costs. Banta explains the effort was well worth it, largely because all of the data center’s customers have benefited.

Furthermore, Banta is also one of just nine people in the United States to hold the status of Certified Data Center Expert – giving Lifeline an in-house authority. Lifeline eschews the notion of outsourcing in general. Its electricians, diesel techs, fabricators and heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) techs are all employees.

“We build our own HVAC systems and generators by hand,” he reports. “We don’t buy off the shelf because that isn’t right for this.”

Its employees also hold certifications in Six Sigma, welding and other areas that exemplify the company’s self-sufficient attitude.

Furthermore, Banta and Alex Carroll are certified by Naval Air Command as practitioners of Reliability Centered Maintenance (RCM), giving the company the ability to not only troubleshoot, but innovate, prepare and stay ahead of any potential setbacks.

Protecting the masses

Cyber security and preventing breaches are a constant focus.

“The average time to discover a breach, last I checked, was 267 days,” Banta quantifies. “That means a hacker has been on your network, so they’re long gone with whatever they wanted to take. So FedRAMP and the defense industry dictate we work to make it much more difficult, building layer upon layer to get through. Once (hackers) get through one layer, they’re likely to give themselves away getting to the next layer.”

A threat that’s sending shockwaves through the industry and getting media attention of late is electromagnetic pulse (EMP) – an issue Lifeline is taking very seriously.

“Alex and I have gone to working groups in DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C.,” Banta relays. “We’re kind of leading the way in



Co-owners Rich Banta (left) and Alex Carroll emphasize innovation, an ongoing thirst for knowledge and a culture of positivity to make Lifeline Data Centers a leader in data protection. Lifeline looks to expand to fill its existing space in Indianapolis.



this, and upgrading our knowledge and skills. We're also going to different trade shows. That's where we heard about EMP. We were well down the road with our design in Fort Wayne and I came out of a terrifying two-hour lecture. I called Alex and said we have to 'stop the presses.'"

EMP can result from a coronal mass ejection or solar flare.

"We are well within the historical window for another one to happen," Banta offers, noting the last significant flare occurred in the 1800s. "It took out the entire telegraph system in North America."

A hostile, high-altitude nuclear attack could also trigger an EMP disaster and efforts are underway to make the national power grid resistant to such a threat, he adds.

Furthermore, "ransomware" is another intriguing way hackers can essentially hold a business hostage. It's often administered via phishing, in which a cyber assailant sends an email from a seemingly valid email address with a corrupted link.

"Ransomware is the new mafia," Alex Carroll asserts. "It used to be that some guy would come around to the store and say, 'Pay me \$500 a month for protection or I'll throw a brick through your window or burn the place down.' That's how ransomware works if you think about it. It happens electronically and the players are on foreign soil, so it's difficult to catch them.

"By going through the FedRAMP certification and tightening

everything down to military standards, it really decreases the threat of someone being able to hack into your system to use ransomware software to take your money."

Positive enforcement

Not only does Lifeline focus on security, but the company is also very serious about its collective attitude. While many businesses may make attempts to instill and maintain a positive culture, Lifeline makes it imperative.

"Civility is a policy," Banta states. "This came out of my experience as a senior vice president in a large corporate system. It's in our handbook – a strict policy of zero tolerance for incivility. You'll be terminated for uncivil behavior. It also applies to vendors, and customers will be spoken to about it. We've explained to people they may not be the best fit for our environment."

While such a strict adherence to the concept may seem unorthodox, Banta explains the benefits have been (positively) astounding.

"Once we instilled that as part of the culture, it was a game changer," he reveals. "Margins went up, customer satisfaction went way up and we have not had an OSHA reportable accident since then because everybody's head is in the game. Being nice actually contributes to your bottom line."

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