



Don Brown stresses the need for education improvements in order for companies in Indiana and the United States to have access to a productive workforce.



# Don Brown: Technology, Education Challenges Remain

By Tom Schuman

**T**he list of Indiana's publicly owned software companies is a short one. It begins and ends with Interactive Intelligence.

Don Brown is chairman, president and CEO of the Indianapolis-based firm and a leader in Indiana's technology development efforts, Interactive Intelligence is the fourth company he has been involved with. While the benefits of past experience are being realized today, Brown questions whether he would take the same approach.

"It's easier for me at this company. I'm more comfortable, more experienced. Earlier in my career, I would fly by the seat of my pants," Brown admits.

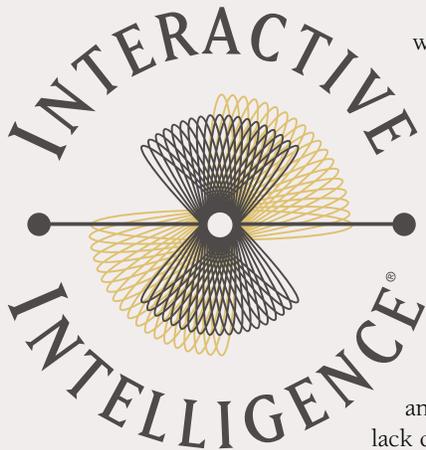
Brown's "flying" earns high marks. His first software company was acquired by Electronic Data Systems in 1987. In the 1990s, Software Artistry was sold to IBM and spawned the next generation of central Indiana technology companies for Brown and his top associates. Interactive Intelligence was formed in 1994 and went public in September 1999.

With the climate changing in recent years for public companies, Brown says, "If I was starting over again, I would think twice or three times about going public. I would probably wait until further into the life of the company. It's much more expensive filing and the regulations are quite onerous."

Interactive Intelligence is a worldwide developer of voice over Internet protocol telephony, contact center automation and unified communications. The headquarters remains in Indianapolis, but Brown believes the state must do more to grow additional technology related companies and support businesses.

"It's still a pretty small community of high-tech companies here. I haven't seen fundamental changes (in Indiana's business climate, and there is still) not a whole lot of understanding about high-tech ventures," Brown contends. "It's still difficult to find collateral expertise."

The lack of company depth delivers mixed results. While it is easier to attract and retain local talent, bringing people in from other areas is a challenge due to the lack of job opportunities for spouses or for the recruit if the initial job does not work out. Brown says that has prevented Interactive Intelligence from making a focused effort to bring





Both the exterior and interior of the new Interactive Intelligence world headquarters send a strong message to associates and clients.

people in from the coasts.

Indianapolis employees, however, typically spend a year or two at other locations, Brown explains. On the other side of the equation, a French engineer – a person Brown calls the lynchpin of the European operations – came to Indianapolis for two years with the company president taking the newcomer around town and helping him sign the lease for his apartment.

With a global operation, Brown sees educational challenges for both Indiana and the United States. Major companies are taking technology jobs to China, India, Russia and other far-flung locations. Why? It costs more to do business in this country.

“If we want to remain at the forefront of technology,” explains Brown, who with his wife started the Interactive Academy, a private K-12 school with a high-tech curriculum, “we have to educate our workers so their productivity compensates for the higher cost. We have to improve so it makes sense to hire people here instead of in India for one-fifth the cost.”

Despite the concerns, Brown looks forward to the challenges. In the electronic communications industry, business is “more cutthroat than ever before.” The economic downturn of recent years has a large number of vendors competing for a smaller share of business.

“For us, that means looking at every opportunity to provide more concrete value for our customers,” he adds. “If you sit still in our industry, you die. In some sense, business is different each and every year. But that’s what makes it fun too.”

Fun, as in Brown being able to look at his computer screen and learn that the French engineer who previously worked in

*Continued on page 63*

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## Don Brown

*Continued from page 43*

Indianapolis is currently on the telephone in Paris. If he was out of the office, Brown could tell where he was located. The company serves as the guinea pig for releases of its new technology.

Fun, as in establishing a “business beyond usual” climate. There is little hierarchy in the 400-person organization. The work demands require bringing in people and allowing them to be creative.

“People don’t want a strict, bureaucratic straightjacket around them. Everybody’s a stockholder and everybody is critical to the success of the company,” Brown asserts. “People speak their mind. The freedom makes it feel a little more like a university graduate department (than a business).”

Fun, as in a new headquarters building that opened earlier this year on the northwest side of Indianapolis. Bicycle parking, a sleep room, massage therapist, fitness center, game room and other amenities are only part of the story. A customer center dazzles prospective clients and uses technology to tell the Interactive Intelligence story to all visitors.

“The building gives us credibility,”

Brown claims. “You walk away feeling we’re a real company, one that has roots. We have a concrete presence here, and we’re going to be around for awhile. That’s invaluable when so many companies are falling by the wayside.”

### INFORMATION LINK

**Resource:** Interactive Intelligence at [www.inin.com](http://www.inin.com)