

Techie Grabs Wheels of Change

Wall Street Journal - June 9, 2009 - For 16 years, Darrin Duhamel logged a million frequent-flier miles as a subcontractor building computer networks for big companies like TRW and Northrop. But the constant travel was grueling. Shortly after Sept. 11, he decided he'd had enough. He turned to a more personal passion: cycling.

Today Mr. Duhamel, 44, runs a bike shop and coffee bar in Dana Point, California. Owning a small business hasn't been easy, but Mr. Duhamel says it's worth it to wake up in the same bed every morning and cycle to work.

Networking by the Book

As a computer-science student at California State University at Fullerton, Mr. Duhamel got a job creating system backups for a chip maker. But the job was dull, so between tasks, Mr. Duhamel read technical manuals and taught himself about computer networking.

A few months later, he put this new knowledge to work at Digital Equipment Corp., which subcontracted him to set up networks for other companies. The job required a lot of travel, but the pay was excellent, and Mr. Duhamel dropped out of college to work full time in 1985.

In 1990, Mr. Duhamel took a job as a network engineer at SynOptics, a networking company that was later bought by Nortel Networks Corp. After three years, he was offered a director position overseeing a telecommunications group on the East Coast.

Mr. Duhamel preferred not to move, so he left to take a job in business development at Cerritos, Calif.,-based PairGain, now owned by ADC Telecommunications Inc. That's when he says he really started racking up frequent flier miles.

A Stranger at Home

The job required a lot of travel to visit out of state clients. Shortly after September 11, 2001, while standing in a long security line at Los Angeles International Airport, Mr. Duhamel began to think about how much the travel had hurt his personal life. He had a nice house and money, but he was a stranger in his neighborhood, single and seldom saw his family.

Mr. Duhamel searched for any interesting opportunities that involved his two favorite hobbies: scuba diving and bicycling. He had always enjoyed diving and biking, but never had much time to pursue them. Now, he wanted that to change. He came across a chain of two local bicycle stores for sale in 2001 near his Dana Point home and decided to buy it.

(continued)

Techie Grabs Wheels of Change

He got off to a rocky start. He had never run a small business before and admits he should have done more research. One of the stores began losing money after a big bike retailer opened nearby and landed exclusive area distribution rights to a key brand, forcing Mr. Duhamel to carry lesser-known lines.

After nine months of burning through much of his savings, Mr. Duhamel sold his house and became a renter to keep the business afloat. In 2002, he had to close one of the shops.

A Turning Point

He threw himself into making the remaining store successful. He spent thousands of dollars introducing a sophisticated inventory management system and replaced most of the staff who had been employees of the old owners. The changes paid off. By 2006, the store was making a million dollars a year in revenue, he says, and was turning a profit.

The next year, he moved into a much larger space across the street. He added an espresso bar to make the shop, called Revo, more of a destination. Now on weekends, cycling clubs stop by to order the house specialty, Muscle Milk protein lattes.

Mr. Duhamel says he makes less than he did during his peak years in technology and he still rents, but feels he has reclaimed his personal life and sanity. He is now active in the community and he can actually take vacations.

"I had a friend call me up six months ago and offer me a job with a startup back in the corporate world," he says. "I laughed since that's the furthest thing from my mind."

(End)