

ENTERPRISE: Managers pride themselves on employee development

Continued from page 8C

handwritten transaction documentation for their music store. Cox saw an opportunity to help them be more efficient, said Acton, who joined the company in 1991 shortly after it moved to Dubuque.

"It used to be that music stores would have these ledger cards. Every time a payment would come in, they'd have to go into the filing system and grab a card," said Acton. "It got very tedious ... and the music industry has some very unique characteristics."

Keeping track of rentals, repairs, payments and lessons is labor-intensive for music store managers. The Tri-Tech software was developed to perform those duties and make life easier for music retailers, said Acton.

Over the early years, Dave Cox remembers taking the family van on the road to sell to new customers. When not traveling with him, his wife, Julie Cox, raised their five kids while answering customer support calls from their home phone.

If a customer question required more complex support while Dave Cox was traveling, he would call the customer back from a phone booth along his route.

"Raising five kids (the family business) was our means of income. It felt like a necessary job to keep things going for our family," Dave Cox said. "It was our next week's groceries."

In 1990, Dave Cox moved the business to Dubuque to be closer to family. Dubuque's central location and proximity to the airport in Chicago was an added benefit, as it made traveling for work easier, said Greg Cox.

Throughout the move, Dave Cox's vision for the company expanded. With a desire to grow the business beyond the music industry, he



STEPHEN GASSMAN • Telegraph Herald

The Interior at Tri-Tech (above) and the server room (below).



renamed the company Tri-Tech to apply broadly to other retail industries.

Acton met Dave Cox while studying for his bachelor's degree in computer sciences at Clarke University, and Cox hired Acton to program the POS software and work in both

support and sales duties during the early days.

Over the years, Acton focused on development as the company grew and hired more staff. Currently, the business employs nearly 50 people between its Dubuque corporate headquarters and a small group in

Chandler, Ariz., that includes Acton.

In 1993, Greg Cox graduated high school and joined the company to work in a tech-support role and worked his way up.

Tri-Tech's managers pride themselves on employee development and promoting from within.

"Someone hired in the support department might end up being a great developer," said Acton. "We'll train them in development and give them opportunities to move up within the company."

Tri-Tech's current customers range from gun stores to sewing shops, and Acton said the common thread among their customers is they all use serialized numbers for tracking purposes.

Tri-Tech's customers are based all across the U.S. with a few abroad, but the Dubuque business serves local entities, too. From being utilized in Dubuque Mining Company's kitchen to Dubuque Community School's concession stands, Tri-Tech's POS solutions appear in organizations both big and small.

Over the years, Tri-Tech has adapted to changes and overcome hurdles.

"We've rewritten our software from the ground up three times to take advantage of the newest in development technologies," said Acton.

Economic instability has impacted the tech industry in multiple ways, but Greg Cox said Tri-Tech weathered the worldwide impacts of 9/11, Y2K and the COVID-19 pandemic with consistent 10% average year-over-year customer and revenue growth.

"We had some sleepless nights with COVID," said Acton. "We sell to retailers, and all the retailers were closing down."

During the pandemic, Acton and Greg Cox quickly acquired laptops

and webcams for every employee in 2020.

"We kept all of our employees hired (throughout COVID) by keeping them working from home and having campaigns to either contact prospects or existing customers to use newer portions of our software," said Acton.

Amber Earles, director of project management at Tri-Tech, was one such employee. She's worked for Tri-Tech for 27 years. As project manager, she floats between projects and departments including customer support, sales, development and marketing.

"I get to think and work creatively to develop new ways to work with customers and our different departments and ultimately help the company grow," said Earles. "You can feel that sense of family within the company culture, and it carries over to our customers."

Pam Lewey, general manager of The Bike Shack, a Dubuque-based Tri-Tech customer, sees that culture firsthand.

"If I have an idea, I call them and share it. Then all of a sudden, they do an update (to the software) and it's there," said Lewey. "If you have a problem, chances are someone else does, too. They're really good about actually going and implementing it."

The Bike Shack uses Tri-Tech for everything from inventory and order control to invoicing and reporting. Lewey praises the software for its ease of use and efficiency.

But besides Tri-Tech's customer-empowerment and efficient software, Lewey said she's glad to work with a local company.

"Being a small, local business ourselves, it's just nice to support another business in the community," said Lewey. "That's just how the world works best."

Survey indicates that big concerns exist for many small businesses

The Associated Press

About 40% of small-business owners think 2024 will be a "make or break" year for their business, according to a survey by messaging service Slack.

After several years of dealing with the pandemic, rising inflation and a tight job market, some small businesses — 32% of respondents — aren't sure they will make it through 2024.

Still, others are feeling optimistic about the future. There were 71% of respondents who said they are optimistic about the state of their business this year. But many are still facing tough issues like a volatile economy, a polarizing election on the horizon and declining sales.

In fact, 38% of small-business owners said they're more worried about their business as they enter 2024 than they were as 2023 started. And only 26% are less worried.

Despite those concerns, almost three quarters of business



GREG EANS • Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer via The Associated Press

Ashley Crafton looks at tennis shoes at Shoe Stop in Wesleyan Park Plaza in Owensboro, Ky. About 40% of small-business owners think 2024 will be a "make or break" year for their business, according to a survey by messaging service Slack.

owners said they're taking steps to help improve their business. About half of the respondents said they're expanding marketing efforts to bring in new customers, 45% said they're setting money aside for emergency use,

and 43% said they're exploring new technologies to increase productivity and efficiency.

The survey included 2,000 small-business owners — half of them in the tech or retail industries.

people

Emilie Blum and Candice Keller joined EXIT Realty Unlimited, of Dubuque, as real estate sales professionals.

Centrally Rooted, of Dubuque, announced promoting Danny Zanger to chief operating officer.

The cardiology department at Medical Associates, of Dubuque, has been granted a three-year term of accreditation in nuclear cardiology by the

Intersocietal Accreditation Commission.

The Chartis Center for Rural Health named Memorial Hospital of Lafayette County in Darlington, Wis., to its list of 2024 Top 100 Rural & Community Hospitals.



Danny Zanger

Items for the weekly People in Business feature can be submitted to Helen Waldmeir via email at helen.waldmeir@thmedia.com or at biztimes.biz/biztimes-press-release. Please send submissions by noon Tuesday for Sunday publication.

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TelegraphHerald.com/Savvy

Closes Friday, March 15

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