

Matthew Buchert

Skipping to a Different Beat

18-year-old Matthew Buchert had always thought of himself as a team sport kind of guy. On the way to baseball and basketball practices, he would sometimes stop to tussle on the mats with his friends on the wrestling team, but he never took the sport seriously. That is, until the day the wrestling coach, Dale Egger, suggested he might want to try out. Matt protested, but Dale insisted, so he showed up for practice one day.

Surprisingly, one of the most memorable moments of Matt's life occurred soon afterward—not when he hit the wrestling mat, but when he picked up the old leather jump rope Dale gave to him. "You're always skipping to a different beat," the coach said. "Practice with this to learn how to get your footwork in rhythm."

In wrestling, as in business, you have to learn the fundamentals. Over the years, Matt has taken the time to master the basics in both challenges. But in wrestling, as in business, it's also important to keep the unique moves and signature edge that sets you apart as a competitor, ultimately making or breaking a match. Now the co-founder and CEO of MBL Technologies, an IT consulting firm serving federal and private sector clients in the areas of cyber security and information assurance, Matt has built a successful career and business out of the tenets he learned in wrestling all those years ago. "I realized that, in many ways, wrestling is the most team-oriented sport you could ever be a part of, and a perfect metaphor for business," he says. "You practice together, strategize together, and sacrifice together, preparing for those few minutes alone on the mat where your skills are put to the test and the rest of the team is counting on you. In those moments, when the heat is on, relying on your training while skipping to your own beat is the only recipe for success."

In high school, skipping to his own beat

often met leveraging his height to take down opponents—a move that often proved successful and only once gave him a broken nose. Today, MBL relies on its price point to win. It was launched as a virtual company, and now that it employs a team of over fifty, it remains far ahead of the curve in terms of savings and simplicity. "Of course, it's hard to get that water cooler talk and share thoughts sometimes," Matt remarks. "But we have people all along the Eastern Seaboard and into the Midwest, and we're all connected through technologies we've grown from the beginning."



MBL specializes in security project management, continuous monitoring, privacy, cyber security, cloud computing, operational resilience, and emergency management, offering comprehensive services that address the entire life-cycle of risk management. With projects at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and a number of commercial companies, and its work poised to almost double in the coming months, the firm was recognized in 2013 as Inc. 500's 76th fastest growing IT services firm, the 27th fastest growing Maryland company, and the 49th fastest growing company in the DC metropolitan area.

A Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business, MBL is a corporate sponsor of the Center for Secure Information Systems at George Mason University. The company's President, Bryan Laird, specializes in the delivery side of the business, while Matt focuses on facilitation, financial matters and administrative concerns. Together, they've worked to build a quality-of-life culture that promotes a balance between business, family, and personal development. "We want each and every employee to feel that they leave MBL a better, happier, more skillful person than they were when they started," says Matt. "We have a lot of self-

starters, and we invest in allowing people to take risks and try things. Failure's okay, as long as you learn something from it. With this mentality, I hope our employees always have the sense that they're part of something bigger."

Though MBL operates in an urban region, Matt brings a small-town feel to his work, emphasizing relationship-building and trust. He spent the early years of his life in Chicago, but his character underwent its most formative experiences in the nearby suburbs, where his family moved when he was six. The open farmland was a playground for the four Buchert children during the day, and they were always home by eight o'clock when dinner was served. "It was a simpler time back then," he remarks. "But you have to remember that everything's evolving all the time. You can't get set in your ways; you have to keep moving."

Matt's father, a disciplinarian, was a finance manager at a steel company while also working two other jobs on nights and weekends to support the family. It was an era when people were accustomed to smoking cigarettes at their desks, and Matt hated the smell so much as a child that he resolved he could never work in an office. His mother was a housewife until she got her first job in 1978, a stint at McDonald's that meant free cheeseburgers for Matt and his brothers. She advanced in that line of work for a while and then decided to enroll in college to become a legal secretary. From there, she landed a job in a law firm, working her way up to paralegal status. "She was always looking for that next step and never stopped pushing herself to be better," Matt recalls. "It was a really inspiring thing to watch as a kid."

Sports were a big part of his life growing up, though his mother always made sure the children did their homework at the kitchen table before going out to play. A mischievous boy, Matt would explore amidst the construction that always seemed to be going on in his neighborhood, and was often found in tractors or stuck at the top of scaffolding. He made his first buck in fifth grade as a caddy at a nearby country club, earning \$7 for each golf bag he carried. Later, he got jobs at fast food chains, movie theaters, and clothing stores. In high school, he began working construction during the day and busing tables in the evenings, saving up enough money to eventually buy his first car. The rest of his earnings were saved for his college years.

Matt's relatively strict upbringing and studious high school years were shelved once he tasted the freedom and independence of college life. Neither of his parents had gone to college, so higher education was a challenge he would have to undertake alone. With a full class load, an intense rush period for his fraternity, and the pressure of having to work to pay his way through school, Matt quickly found himself going 24/7. His academics suffered to the point that he soon found himself on the verge of failing out. He had to leave the University of Illinois to move back in with his parents and attend junior college, yet when he hit rock bottom, he decided to launch himself skyward again rather than settle into defeat. "I just resolved firmly that I needed to get it together and pull myself out of that situation," he recalls. "I set my sights on graduating, and everything I did from that moment on was designed to achieve that mission. I put that mission into achievable steps and wrote out a timeline. It was a defining experience for me because it changed the very chemistry and mechanics of my mind, to the point that I became goal-oriented in all I did."

Once Matt was back on his feet again, and this time with a discipline and ability he had never known before, he enrolled at the University of Illinois at Chicago to finish his degree in Economics. Graduating into a recession, however, he decided to enlist in the Navy to jumpstart his career. As a combat operations specialist, he learned ship driving, radar monitoring, and navigation. "I absolutely loved my time serving our country," he says. "It helped me realize that everyone should do something to give back somehow, whether it's time in the military or time spent volunteering." Today, Matt continues that tradition of giving back by supporting Habitat for Humanity and wounded veterans through his company, and contributing to Saint Jude's and Little Sisters of the Poor for his personal interests.

While he was stationed in Yokosuka, Japan, he met the woman he would marry several years later. She was an officer, and once the couple started dating, they decided to transition into civilian life. She had family in Maryland, so they decided to settle down in the Washington, DC area. Matt began consulting for a small company called Business Information Systems (BIS), where he felt an immediate affinity for the small business lifestyle. "I was a small town guy who had run amok in the big city for awhile but was ready to

come back," he reflects. "I realized it was important to me to be in a place where everybody knows your name and everyone's friendly. I also loved the idea of wearing multiple hats and having more responsibility, which really allowed me to develop my skill set. The company encouraged us to grow and develop, so I took as many certification classes as I could through that time."

When BIS was acquired in 2001 by a larger company called Cyber Systems, Matt began to realize that the dynamic small business edge and intimate environment he had loved so much was fading away in the assimilation. He hoped that, one day down the road, he'd be able to replicate the BIS atmosphere in other work environments he found himself in, and maybe even start his own small business one day. That opportunity came when Matt and his wife decided to launch a government contracting firm. Matt took a job with Landmark Systems and then worked as a database programmer consultant for USDA to help fund the venture. "When you're trying to launch a business and work on the side, it can be hard, especially when you don't get paid for a few months," he remembers. "We had a child at the time too, which raised the stakes even higher. But the business turned a corner the following May, and it's turned into something truly great."

Inspired in part by the success he had helped cultivate through his wife's firm, Matt first conceived of the idea for MBL in 2005. He and Bryan Laird played around with the idea for several years, finally deciding to take the leap and launch the company in January of 2007. The business wasn't profitable right away, but Matt had been through this before, so he knew what to expect this time and was able to streamline the whole process. They won their first contract within three months, and eight months later, they had money in the bank and revenue coming in. "I only wish we had started the company when we first thought of it in 2005, rather than procrastinating for two years," says Matt.

Despite their positive experience together, Matt and his wife decided to part ways in 2009, around the same time MBL won a large contract. In the dark ages of the wake of the 2008 economic downturn, banks weren't giving out loans, and it wasn't a good time to be a startup. The company expanded from 10 to 34 employees, but Matt quickly found that many of his resources were locked up through the legal process of divorce.

"My assets were frozen, so I couldn't finance it," he remembers. "It was one of my biggest challenges. I was draining my 401k, and at one point I had the bankruptcy papers ready to go. I definitely lost a lot of sleep through that time period. But I was all-in and hell bent on making it work."

By skipping to his own beat through those hard times, Matt was able to see the company through to the other side, and MBL was profitable in its first year. In October of 2010, he got his first paycheck from the fledgling company. Around that time, the federal government and government contracting realms began to shudder amidst sequestration cuts, debt limit crises, and shutdowns, bringing MBL to the brink of layoffs. The company was closed for three weeks without revenue, taking a quarter-million dollar hit. "Thanks to that experience, I always make sure we're prepared for a rainy day," Matt says. "We're ready for the next government shutdown or the next big contract that requires massive financing. We're ready for the next 2009."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Matt aims to sooth the misunderstanding and tension that so often arises between older and younger generations. "Millennials are the future protectors of our networks," he points out. "Let them grow and see what things are like in the industry, and soon enough they'll come back down. They're a different breed that operates at an entirely different wavelength, so it's important to engage. To millennials, I would say it's important to take chances, find a cause, and be part of something. I had two kids when I started to take big chances in life—don't wait as long as I did! Have the confidence to embrace the unknown of life, rather than the certainties."

Through it all, Matt's motivation and purpose has remained an evolving concept. Now, it's the strong relationships he shares with his employees and clients, founded on the bedrock of interpersonal communication and trust that's built up over time. "I love seeing these guys develop, hearing their stories, and watching them grow," he says. "What gets me out of bed in the morning is the opportunity to help people, giving them an opportunity and letting them run with it. It's easy to pick someone up if they fail, so I don't worry too much about trying to control outcomes. At MBL, it's everyone skipping to their own beat, and

the alignment of those beats is the sound of success.”

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*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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