

Don Britton

The Self-Reliant Collaborator

From childhood, Don Britton knew he wanted to work for himself. What's more, he wasn't about to wait for adulthood to do it: by the age of nine, he was already earning money independently through various businesses of his own imagining. His unusual childhood spent moving around Europe with his CIA-agent, single mother was rife with inspiration for his young mind, and each location brought a new market and new ideas.

Don's first venture, in London, involved copying records onto cassette tapes. He had learned how to copy the records for his personal collection, but, upon discovering a demand for his skill in the neighborhood, began charging a few dollars for each copy. Next, he began grocery shopping for busy adults who had trouble finding time to make it to the store. In Germany, he opened a pet care service and helped neighbors install their cable televisions for a small fee.

By the time he turned 18 and headed back to the U.S., Don had a head full of ideas about running his own business, but he soon discovered that banks weren't particularly eager to give loans to a recent high school graduate with no professional background or higher education. Setting aside his financial concerns, and the support of his mother, he got a job at a grocery store and headed to college, paying his way through three years at Northern Virginia Community College, followed by two years at George Mason University. In college, nine years after he'd begun to earn money, he experienced working for someone other than himself for the first time. His entrepreneurial dreams were put on hold as he pursued his B.S. in Accounting and three other Associates degrees, but he never doubted his eventual return to the arena.

Today, Don is President of Network Alliance, the business he built by night over

several years while working full time during the day. And although the company was officially incorporated in 1997, the prototype for the idea wasn't finished until 2000—a problem borne of the sheer technological sophistication of the model. “In 1996, there really wasn't much security on the Internet,” he recalls. “The cost of getting Internet access was astronomical, but I could see that everything was coming together. Part of the problem we had was waiting for different technologies to catch up to what we wanted to do.

Back then, I was told I was crazy, that nobody would ever do this kind of stuff. But now it's the way everything's going, and it's the way things are going to be in the future.”

Network Alliance does something truly revolutionary in that it transforms information technology into a utility. Rather than managing their own infrastructures individually, small business can outsource the entire thing to Network Alliance, which, thanks to economies of scale, is able to provide a much higher quality

infrastructure at a fraction of the price. The business provides a virtual desktop, complete with applications, files, and all the IT needs of a small business, for a flat monthly fee, and with far greater reliability than a small private IT department could offer.

Few people saw a future for the IT-as-a-Utility model 15 years ago, but Don looked to earlier technologies for clear precedents as he pursued his vision. Electricity during the industrial revolution was one such beacon. “Factories used to have to build their own electrical plants to power their factories,” he points out. “But as all factories started doing that, any loss of power meant loss of productivity. Eventually power utilities started saying, ‘Hey, instead of you trying to maintain that generator on your own all the time, constantly having to buy your own parts and pay for servicing, why don't



you just let us do that for you? We'll create all these redundancies to make it more reliable, so every time you turn the power switch on, you know you're getting light.' That's the way IT works with us. We're able to build the redundancies so clients can count on it being there." The outsourcing model also increases access by being available from any internet-enabled device. In the event of a storm and subsequent loss of power at an office, for instance, employees are able to login to their virtual desktop from anywhere that has power and a stable internet connection.

Currently, Network Alliance boasts a large client base consisting of businesses that range in size from sole proprietors to 200 employees. It employs 18 full-time workers and many independent contractors, and the company is enjoying steady growth, but Don is quick to stress that this growth is careful and measured. "We don't outgrow our capabilities," he affirms. "One thing that's very good about our model is that we always know how much revenue's coming in because it's monthly reoccurring, but we also know what it takes to make sure the clients are happy. With this balance in mind, we don't push massive expansions without the support to back it. So it's a controlled kind of growth."

Don's client-friendly attitude is one reason Network Alliance recently received a Stevie's Award for Best Customer Service, and the reason his stringent interview process involves a trifecta of interviews, concluding with an 8 hour session. "People can't really give you BS for that amount of time!" he laughs. "We want to know who our employees really are before we bring them onboard." The competence of the Network Alliance team is on full display on their homepage, where a live feed of customer feedback—both positive and negative—is constantly updating and unfiltered. Indeed, transparency on all counts is paramount to Don's leadership style. His employees know his salary, each other's salaries, and are involved in monthly meetings where financials are reviewed. "I'm an inclusive leader," he says. "What I've learned over the years is that communication is key when it comes to business. If you leave any voids where people can make assumptions about something, those assumptions usually aren't good."

Communication wasn't always Don's strong suit. He was a shy child, but he readily

credits his mother with his emphasis on self-reliance. Raising her son alone and in a myriad of strange cities, her own fearless self-reliance was a common thread through his upbringing. Until he was nine, the family resided in a trailer park in Stafford, Virginia, and Don spent summers on his grandparent's farm in West Virginia, where he baled hay and watched his grandfather embark on his own small entrepreneurial ventures, like selling Christmas trees during the holiday season.

Then, when his parents divorced, his mother made the decision to leave everything behind and move to Europe for her son's well-being—a labor of love that Don has come to appreciate more and more over the years. "Looking back on it, of course I didn't realize how much she gave up, but she literally sacrificed everything to make sure I would be a happy, successful kid," he remarks. "It definitely made me extremely independent, and I believe that's why I ended up being entrepreneurial. I didn't like being told what I could or couldn't do." Don also credits his time in Europe as one of the major defining experiences of his life because it exposed him to other parts of the world and other cultures he might otherwise not have experienced until decades later.

Another defining moment came after his return to the states, during his college career at George Mason. Don had become involved in extreme sports, and one day while he was rock climbing, he was in a terrible accident that tore off his foot. Thankfully, doctors were able to reattach it, but his worldview was profoundly changed from the experience. On the one hand, he came to realize that, sometimes, limits can be necessary. But he also emerged with a more robust understanding of the fragile nature of life itself. "I committed to truly living each day to the fullest," he says. "It spurred me to embark on a two-month cross-country road trip after graduation, and it fueled me with this passion to seek success aggressively throughout my career."

A third defining moment also came during his time at George Mason, when Don went to work for his mentor and friend, Mario Morino, as a summer intern at Morino Ventures. "Up until that point, all the business ideas I'd had were relatively small scale," he describes. "For example, I was constantly thinking about starting a restaurant or a bar. But when I met Mario, it exposed me to the idea that, hey, you can actually create a huge

corporation that can have an enormous impact on things. Collaborating with him opened my eyes to a much bigger world of scale for businesses, which is what expanded my vision and prompted me to realize that I wanted something like that.”

Mario liked him so much that Don was kept on at the end of the summer, continuing to intern through his senior year. After graduation and his travels around the country, Don then put his public accounting degree to use working at Beers & Cutler (now Baker Tilley, LLP), a full-service accounting and advisory firm, and within the next year, he began developing the idea that would become Network Alliance.

Don credits Beers & Cutler with giving him the strong foundation in accounting that helped him build his business so successfully. But after two years with them, Mario asked Don to consider coming back to work with him. Don was upfront with his mentor and friend: he would work full-time, but at night he planned to develop his project. Mario agreed, and Don returned as the Controller and Director of Operations.

Finally, in 2000, Network Alliance was ready to launch and bring on clients of its own, and Don, eager to be a philanthropic force in the community, wanted to cater to nonprofits exclusively. Mario, however, made a vital contribution to the direction of the business when he posed the idea that Don’s impact might actually be greater as a for-profit business. “Mario very wisely advised me to reconsider,” he remembers. “He reminded me that, as a for-profit business, I’d probably be more stable, and could thus help that many more people. Thanks to that advice, we’ve been able to help nonprofits significantly more than we would have been able to if I’d tried to serve that sector alone.” Indeed, Network Alliance now provides services to nonprofits at cost, with 50 percent of its profit handed along to organizations devoted to a myriad of causes, including education, children, veterans, and the environment.

In 2007, Network Alliance was up and doing well, but Don still had another important lesson to learn, and this one would be far from easy. “That was a year of many pitfalls,” he remembers. “My relationship went south. I lost a key member of my team at work. My dog died. My mom got brain cancer. All of that happened within two months—it was by far the most that had ever hit me at once. It got overwhelming, but

it did reinforce the lesson I learned when I nearly lost my foot—that you have to live each day to the fullest because you don’t know what the next one will hold. Growing the business, I had become all work and no play, and I kind of lost sight of that other side of me that wanted to live life to the fullest. That trying two months really put things back into perspective, reprioritizing where I was spending my time.” With that, Don began driving ten hours a week to spend the weekends with his mother. At the time, she was told she had between three and twelve months. Now, six years later, she’s still alive, and she and Don have made it all time well spent.

Today, Don balances the important things in life. His emphasis on giving back extends through his business and into his personal life as he makes time to volunteer his public accounting abilities to low-income individuals, does business planning for local organizations, and holds fundraisers at company events. Directing his energy outward in this fashion is a centerpiece of his leadership philosophy, and to young people entering the working world today, he advises respect, interest, curiosity and kindness.

“One of the best things I did in college was to make friends with everybody,” he explains. “You can learn something from everything. You can start your network in college. You never know when you’re going to come across those people again—not only your professors, but everyone you’ve gone to school with. Your fellow students are going to be leaders in their businesses at some point, and some of them will be in areas of expertise that you’re going to want to know something about. If you maintain good relationships with people, it’ll help take you a long way.” The single son of a single mother, Don grew up self-reliant, but time and experience taught him that no man is an island, and that collaboration is as crucial as vision. Success, for Don, is a product of both.

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