Stephen Canton

Confidence at the Core

"The one thing I can tell you is that I have no issue with going against the grain," stays Stephen Canton, chairman and CEO of iCore Networks. "It has always been my gut reaction to think that, if everyone's going in one direction, there must be something in the opposite direction." Growing up the seventh of eight children, his ability to employ innovative and outside-the-box methods for achievement was born as much from necessity as it was from his own innate skills. "There's only so many dollars in a family of that size, and by the time they trickle all

the way down, there's very little left," he remarks. "I knew that if I wanted a better life, I had to work for it myself."

The way out for Stephen, then, was sales, and it just so happened that his skill set was perfectly equipped for such a role. Always outgoing and lavishly confident as a child, he sported a fierce competitive streak, always aiming to be the best at what he did and fueled by an inner self-assurance that instilled trust in others even as it

inspired fellow team members. "I thrive on engaging with people," he points out. "Passive is the last thing I am."

The effect of personality on his life's path doesn't stop there. "Only an optimist starts a phone company with their own money," says Stephen, good-naturedly. Ever the optimist, he began vetting and developing the technology for iCore in 2001 and formally launched the enterprise in 2003.

Weighing the pros and cons of various providers, he decided to take a "Southwest Airlines" approach, choosing Cisco as their sole provider and partner. "Our costs are cut in that all our technicians are trained on the same kind of system, and all our parts are designed for the same kind of system. Through developing one solution

and perfecting it, we offer a more streamlined and sound product, and this affords a significant advantage to our customers," he explains.

iCore Networks essentially displaces the need for a traditional phone service by combining voice and data on a single platform, thus eliminating virtually all telecommunication costs. As trends in AT&T and Verizon indicate, wire line services are becoming a thing of the past as FIOS services take their place, and iCore stands poised at the cutting edge of this evolution. Whereas traditional voice networks are exceedingly

support, iCore expensive to utilizes a Cisco platform that reduces the cost of operation by half. "This is the one time in life that there's a free lunch," Stephen laughs. "We're focused on bringing Fortune 500 capabilities to mid to high level enterprise customers. Competing at the commercial level, we handle commercial accounts that average 50 users, although we have some accounts as small as 20 and some as large as 5,000."

Whereas other companies providing similar services tend to offer a uniform solution to residential consumers, iCore specializes in providing tailored solutions for businesses and the unique needs they might have. By eliminating the need for a phone network, the company affords real workforce mobility, increased productivity through ease of connectivity, reduced biometric footprint, and lowered costs that can otherwise be staggering.

In reflecting back over the birth of such technology, iCore itself has played an important role. "This kind of development happens a little bit at a time, and then all at once," Stephen points out. "You could see the national migration tending toward what we now know as cloud computing. I see this as the Renaissance for the telecom industry—a marked stage in the evolution



of communication." Navigating this pivotal period of development in an industry that has essentially transformed the way the world operates, iCore's success is a testament to its dexterity and innovation, with a compounded annual growth rate of about 74 percent and revenues above that.

With such striking success, one would be surprised to discover that Stephen's career actually began in the stock room of an office products company selling the first electronic typewriter to the Federal government. "By observing who succeeded and who didn't in selling such a useful new piece of technology, I learned that sales is not about the better mousetrap. Rather, it's about the person you hire to present that mousetrap," he explains.

Starting in the stockroom delivering equipment and as a janitor, Stephen's diligence and willingness to do any task caught the eye of the upper level management, and he was surprised with his sudden acquisition of a sales territory and, along with it, the chance to draw a better paycheck. The territory, however, was unique to the company in that it was not a component of the Federal government and in that it was a 50-mile commute. "I had no money and was paid entirely on commission, so I realized that if someone didn't buy something from me with cash, I wasn't going to get home that night!" Stephen remembers. "That situation really put an emphasis on productivity in a real way, and that's how I got started in sales."

Though he certainly made his fair share of mistakes along the way, Stephen had an uncanny and innate ability to sell his product and was considered somewhat of a wildcard. He was good around the office and well liked by the management, but after four years, he had outgrown his slot. Having decided that he was ready to take his career to the next level, he struck out in pursuit of new ventures and was called by a recruiter with a lead in the phone business with a company called TDX. "I fluffed up my resume a bit in the interview, but the CEO could tell I had no management experience and no idea about their business," Stephen remembers. "Still, he said they were about to close their New York office, but if I could make something out of it, they'd give me a shot. So I took it."

In his role as manager and with an empowering new sense of freedom at his disposal,

Stephen challenged the traditional industry practice of hiring people with prior industry experience, opting instead to hire untrained individuals straight out of college that he could mold himself. "I would hire those that were manageable and coachable, and they would turn out to be highly dynamic and successful contributors to the team," Stephen reflects now. By hiring in this way and then training each employee to go out and knock on doors, even instructing them to speak with a slight Southern accent to interest potential customers, he reports that he made a killing in New York, soon earning himself a promotion to Vice President of Sales for the company.

Stephen then extended the TDX brand into 20 different cities across the country, hiring independent and strong young adults that could go out into the world believing in their product. Indeed, his process was a grueling one, with each young employee spending about a year out in the field making cold calls day in and day out. "Today, those young professionals are running their own telecommunications companies," Stephen remarks now. "They say working for me, while hard, was the most productive they ever were. That's what it takes if you're going to start a company and establish a brand. Your competitor may have a lot of money and advertising, but if their heart's not in it, you're still ahead."

When TDX became Cable and Wireless in 1988, Stephen departed along with the rest of the upper level management to join a company in Michigan called AllNet. He served in a similar capacity in sales and marketing through 1995, when the company was sold. Stephen then accepted a position with Frontier, which boasted a top-line revenue of \$2 billion. "They were too big for me to work for them," he remembers. "I'm the wrong guy for that kind of company, but the right guy to compete against them." With that, he formed a group with several associates and launched a new company, which he took public in August of 1996 and then sold to his biggest customer from AllNet.

Though Stephen had hoped to retire from that position, the new owner asked him to stay on, which he obliged until the company was sold to Bell Canada. "Then I had to look for something else to do," Stephen says. Thus, iCore was born as his fourth venture but his first solo undertaking, affording him a tremendous learning experience

thus far.

In addition to his remarkable skill set and innate expertise, Stephen credits much of his success to his management team. "Launching and steering a company like this takes tremendous and singular focus," he remarks. "You have to give a lot to get a lot, and it takes a team effort. You've heard of the better half, but my management team represents the better nine tenths."

Stephen recognizes outside influences acting upon his success not only with his management team, but also in a much more expansive sense as well. "We're truly in a country of opportunity," he remarks. "In this environment of a free market system, we have the ability to go do and create. Through the vitality instilled in our country by influences like, say, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and others, we know that if we have the confidence, we can achieve. This climate of confidence, opportunity, and promise just doesn't exist in every country, and in this sense we're tremendously fortunate."

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, Stephen's advice possesses the same element of directness and vitality that has marked his journey so far. "Go to work," he says simply. "Work hard at whatever job you get. I don't care if you empty the trash, but be the best and most reliable person emptying the trash your employer has ever had. You'll get noticed. And when you get noticed, you'll get an opportunity. There's no job that doesn't lead to the next job when you're doing that. The opportunity is there for you, so take it." Establishing a core of confidence in this manner enabled iCore's existence today and will certainly beget many new innovations tomorrow.

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: 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.

