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Invisible Technology

More than cloud computing, a solution provider talks education process improvement.

INTERVIEW | by Victor Rivero

"The challenge was actually brought to us," says Bob Burke, President of [FolderWave](#), a privately-held Massachusetts-based company serving the higher education sector with process solutions. "We already had an extensive background in similar technology when a senior administrator at Boston College contacted us," explains Bob. "He had grown frustrated with the vast amount of data and documents being managed for their financial aid operation, although it was really missing 'process'. He recognized the efficiencies and savings revamping the process in an entirely new way, and asked us to take on the challenge. Once we had that in place, BC asked us to manage it all for them, then look at

other processes. Things took off from there." The company was founded back in 2000. In this EdTech Digest interview, Bob traces where they've been since, their unique approach — and where they're heading.

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Victor: It's interesting that cloud computing for higher education is only now hitting its stride, you might say. Anything else to say about FolderWave's development history?

Bob: In a way, we were offering a cloud-computing service well before the term caught on. Because we had the opportunity for a totally new approach, there were few constraints. We partnered with staff to understand their challenges, brainstorm the optimal solution, and made use of state-of-the-art solutions without the prior "baggage" of earlier versions, maintenance, or other types of overhead. We asked the users to lead the way by describing impediments and tried to implement the results as quickly as possible to avoid disruption during peak cycles. This evolved into a flexible framework that is far more agile than most traditional software. The structure allowed us to respond quickly and incorporate creative solutions to challenges. We've tried to continue to approach problems in a similar fashion ever since. Essentially we listen.

Victor: How about your own background – did something in particular really inform your current approach?

Bob: My background in product development and business process re-engineering allowed me to envision solutions outside—or perhaps a better term is opposite—of traditional educational offerings. I was fortunate to have already had a multitude of experiences that informed the structure of the solution we designed. While certain processes remained unique to higher education, I had enough other experience to provide breakthrough results in terms of volume and efficiency. From the start, we saw ourselves offering not so much a product as a service. In addition, we found opportunities to incorporate similar thinking in process design and self-service by listening closely to our customers' needs. We worked closely with them to solve the challenges they faced, and because of the solution design we could deploy them rapidly and efficiently, and adapt them as processes change.

Victor: What's your 60 second pitch to someone on what exactly it is, benefits?

Bob: I tend to describe FolderWave as a series of plusses. You get a system, plus a case management/document imaging service, along with automated feeds that your IT department doesn't have to build or support, reduced turnaround time for credentials, less need for human intervention, web self-service, comparative analytics, and enhanced email tracking and targeting. Then I point out the savings associated with fewer temporary workers, impact on the IT queue, and, finally potential return on investment from freed-up office space, reduced phone calls, and intangibles such as improved perception, increased personalization, etc. In short, you gain a partner, the security of remote-hosting, freedom from distraction, and the ability to redeploy resources while not breaking the bank. We see ourselves as being in the education process improvement business.

Victor: Got any direct or indirect competition?

Bob: Because of the breadth of the capabilities we provide, we basically compete in some form with many silo products, but I find that few, if any other, combine process enhancement, software as a service, and flexibility quite like we do. I like to think our commitment to our customers is broader: we don't disappear once the implementation is complete. In fact, we often see a second academic cycle as the perfect opportunity to nail the remaining twenty percent. When people recognize the breadth of what we offer, there doesn't tend to be a lot of comparison to other products.

Victor: Test marketing highlights? How was it starting out?

Bob: I tend to think we did things a little differently in the start-up phase. We stayed with a single customer for a few cycles in order to flesh out our ideas, understand the nuance of the business, and be sure we were meeting their needs. Then, with our second customer, we listened and learned as well, before taking on other clients. It is frequently the case that opportunities we encounter with a new client are of use across much of our diverse customer base. Very early on we constructed an ROI model to help understand how the solution could cost justify itself. In the beginning, we were never asked for it, but now with cost containment being front and center, it is a really valuable tool.

Victor: What else can you say about the value and benefit of FolderWave?

Bob: I think it's important to think beyond the concept of "a system" when you think of us. You're getting the opportunity for process improvement, state-of-the-art hosting with built-in disaster recovery, the ability to offload redundant manual processes and free up resources for expanded customer service as part of a partnership that continues year after year. Continuous improvement permeates out relationship with our clients, as well as the mantra of our company. We help customers re-engineer themselves.

Victor: Anything else in the works?

Bob: We continue to develop additional functionality for smartphones and tablets. We've also expanded targeted messaging and added a new analytic component to the product suite. We already support web enabled mobile devices but we are working on some native mobile solutions.

Victor: Your thoughts on education in general these days?

Bob: It's a time of rapid change and significant risk, but it's not without some real opportunities. It's one of my firm beliefs that any vendor in the field of education must view their involvement as a sort of sacred trust. We should focus on more than selling software. We have to contribute the opportunities for improvement and return on investment to keep education viable for all.

Victor: Any guidance or advice to educators these days?

Bob: Don't underestimate the "virtual marketplace." No matter how impressive your reputation, decisions to apply are often made based on web pages and service experiences. Free up as many resources as possible through

automation so you can focus on world class service at every touch point, whether that is refined targeting, social media, or just going the distance with courteous and committed personal service. The irony lies in the fact that the more technically savvy students and their families become, the more the personal touch makes a difference.

Victor: Anything more you'd like to add or emphasize?

Bob: There is a significant need to increase value for price while incorporating all possible efficiencies and opportunities to hold costs down. There are thousands of dedicated, creative people who commit their professional lives to the education of our young people. I see folks like them every day. It's often the case that all these people need is an opportunity to get out from under antiquated processes and systems to find the time to do what motivated them in the first place. With the right tools and focus, all things remain possible. In a recent article we indicated that technology should be invisible. It should support, manage, and track, but should not get in the way functionally, technically, or cost wise.

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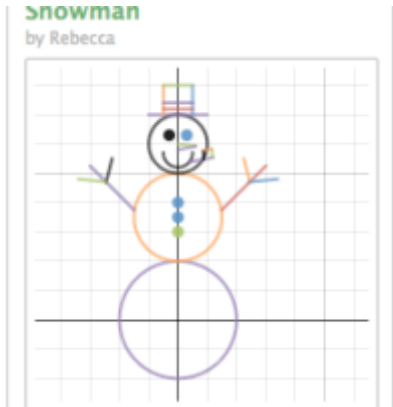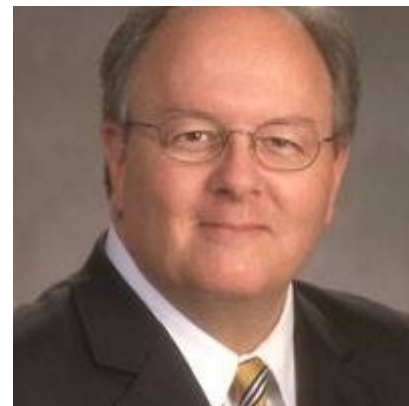
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