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GUEST OF HONOR

Long-Distance Operator

Micah Singer's VoIP Logic, based in Williamstown, Mass., helps connect the globe

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It's easy to miss VoIP Logic at first. Tucked away inside a modest, two-story house about a half mile from Spring Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts—marked by no sign, and reached only by a narrow driveway that is quite easy to drive right past ... twice—founder and CEO Micah Singer sits alone at a computer.

His humble office, a barely converted living room, seems an unlikely global headquarters for a telecom innovator with half its client base located outside the United States. Upstairs are some sparsely furnished offices and a “nap room” with a futon. The kitchen cabinets are stuffed with what look like old computer parts.

Dressed casually in a striped polo shirt, corduroys, and sneakers, the thirty-seven-year-old Singer leads a visitor over to a map of the world tacked to a wall. Color-coded pushpins are stuck into it—some in New York, others in Los Angeles, Australia, South Korea, London, India, and Mexico.

Pointing to one and then another, Singer rattles off the locations of his thirty-four employees (twenty-six are full-time). “I see the head of development twice a year,” he says with a hint of bemusement. “The guys in Australia get together every month or so for dinner or to go bowling. I only know because I get the bill.”

There's another map of the world tacked to a different wall, and an inflatable globe on the floor. The impression made by the other equipment in the room, such as the Dell computer and the somewhat weathered printer atop a round kitchen table, is belied by the implied global consciousness at work. It may simply have been a convenient decorating choice, but the motif does not seem an idle one.

VoIP Logic was incorporated in 2003, and quickly took a lead role in seizing a very specific niche within a large and diverse global market. Simply put, VoIP Logic provides the voice-over-Internet-Protocol (voIP) infrastructure enabling small telephone carriers to offer services. Voice-over-Internet-Protocol service is phone service traveling over the Internet, rather than the network of copper wires and switches used for the last one hundred years by traditional phone carriers.

Its software engineers and support staff never interact with the end user; they are the men and women behind the curtain, keeping the system running so more than one hundred thirty small phone carriers around the world may provide service to their customers. Given the company's degrees of separation from the consumer on the street, even VoIP Logic's promotional materials are highly technical.

Actually, make that inscrutable. “We like to say that if you understand our website, you probably should be working for us,” Singer quips, with some degree of seriousness. “At family gatherings, there's always someone who says, *Micah, I don't quite understand what you do. I know it has something to do with computers.*”

The confusion begins as soon as you identify VoIP Logic's clients. Most American consumers are familiar with fewer than a handful of phone carriers: Sprint, T-Mobile, AT&T, Verizon. Yet that group of industry leaders barely scratches the surface.

Singer estimates there are some five thousand telephone carriers worldwide. Many are regional in scope, serving niche markets such as small and mid-sized businesses. About one hundred fifty carriers make up the “first tier” worldwide. VoIP Logic specializes in meeting the needs of the second- and third-tier carriers. Its largest client does about \$100 million in annual revenue, Singer says. (By contrast, AT&T reported \$124 billion in revenue in 2008.) These are companies with neither the expensive fiber-optic networks making voIP calls possible, nor the expert support staff needed to service such a network on a 24/7 basis.

VoIP Logic rents space on Internet telephone servers and infrastructure to smaller phone carriers, IT service providers, and the like. Then they basically make sure the lights stay on. Though there are other companies providing the bandwidth for Internet calling, this hidden innovator of Williamstown stands out because it’s created the added ability to package the hardware, software, network space, and physical space in data centers with a 24/7 voIP technical assistance center.

Though Singer is quick to recite, from memory, details like the street addresses of VoIP Logic’s six data hubs carrying Internet telephone service (in Miami, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, New York, and two in London), he’s unable to name another company offering managed services with a software integration system. The evolution of commercial voIP use has left an opening for a company

like VoIP Logic to come along and tie together an ever-growing group of loose technological ends.

Internet phone service was originally used, in the first years of this century, behind the scenes as a means for phone carriers to communicate directly with each other or within their own companies. Some early consumer products rooted in this technology earned a bad reputation, partly because Internet networks were not yet developed enough to provide high-quality service.

Nowadays, Internet phone service is offered by the major carriers, though the nature of the service may be obfuscated. (Time Warner Cable’s “digital phone” service, for instance, is actually voIP in disguise.) It also shows up in desktop applications like Skype, which provides video-conferencing and phone service over the Internet. As this technology finds its way into more commercial uses, it must interact with more systems created by different companies.

What makes VoIP Logic stand out—Singer calls it “the magic that makes it all possible”—is its proprietary software (called Cortex OSS), enabling straightforward management of the various complex systems a small phone carrier must navigate to run a phone service. “Traditionally, in telecom, there were really big vendors selling you all the stuff you need to offer your service. Now, instead of going to a one-stop shop, you end up buying from several different vendors,” Singer explains.

How Micah Singer Does It

Your favorite productivity tools:

Singer loves his iPhone, but for its computing capabilities rather than its telephonic ones. “I love having a computer with me at all times,” he says of the iPhone. He uses it to check the weather every day, to use Facebook in places like waiting rooms, and is an avid listener to podcasts. His favorite podcast is Brainstuff. On long drives, talk radio helps keep him focused.

How do you organize your time?

Singer is able to draw a fairly clear line between work life and home life when not traveling. He’s at the office 8:30 to 6:30, Monday through Friday. He frequently travels to trade shows, an annual management retreat, and for assorted meetings with VoIP Logic colleagues spread around the globe.

How do you unwind?

In winter, trips to MASS MoCA with the family are popular. “There’s something there that a youngster can really pick up on, and show you how to look at something differently.” In warm weather, it’s hikes, walks, and time at the park.



CEO MICAH SINGER, RIGHT, MEETS WITH (L-R) ERIC TIFFANY, RICHARD SCULLIN, MICHAEL WIMPFHEIMER, AND ARDESHIR GHANBARZADEH AT VoIP LOGIC IN WILLIAMSTOWN, MASS.



MICAH SINGER

Because these different products and services do not natively interact, they require a sort of motherboard to function seamlessly as a unit—for a phone call placed on one brand of hard-wired telephone to reach another manufacturer's mobile phone, or for call waiting to function, or a conference call to connect. If everything's working well, the people on either end of the phone call have no idea any of this is an issue.

Larger phone carriers simply develop their own software to handle this, own their own infrastructure, and manage their own systems. Smaller carriers may buy software from one vendor and hardware from another, plus network bandwidth and maintenance from still others. VoIP Logic offers the full package.

"His business is very innovative in the way he built an international company out of a small business. Most people are scared to do that," says Gene Cohen, CTO of VoodooVox, a North Adams, Massachusetts-based company and client of VoIP Logic. "His product innovation is a fantastic approach. He provides some great solutions to companies that can't really afford to build the back-office functions to compete with the larger carriers."

Singer was instilled with an appreciation for world travel from an early age. The son of a professor who works in-

ternationally and a mother who worked for the UN, as a child Singer had stints living in Sudan, Morocco, Yugoslavia, and Jamaica. He also grew up in Alabama long enough to pick up an accent that still lingers faintly.

He eventually made it to Williams College, where he majored in political science and psychology. He also met Alexandra Garbarini, his wife-to-be. (The couple now has a son, Zeke, who is almost three.) The two moved to Los Angeles, where Singer entered the telecom world by chance. He worked, on the operations side, for Justice Technologies and Viatel, two companies specializing in inexpensive international phone calls. He saw that niche deflating by 2001, decided Viatel didn't have much of a future, and quit. He spent a month exploring Africa as he mulled his next move. After descending from a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro, Singer visited an Internet café in the nearby town of Moshi. He discovered an e-mail from his former boss, telling him Viatel had just filed for bankruptcy.

The time seemed right to take what he had learned in the business and set out on his own. First he co-founded OmniAccess, another company concerned with international calling, but with a leaner, meaner corporate structure than his previous employer. But by 2002, Singer was dabbling in the newly



TAKEAWAY

KEEP IT PERSONAL

"It's all about relationships," Singer says, when hiring people to work remotely. Make contacts in your field. Then, hire people you've worked with. When you've exhausted that pool of candidates, find people your colleagues have worked with in the past. Personal work experience is more valuable than any phoned-in reference.

WIDTH RATHER THAN HEIGHT

VoIP Logic's largest client accounts for only about 5 percent of its business. "It's a more intense collections and sales process, absolutely," says Singer. "But the rewards are diversity and stability. There's no one relationship that can go bad and really hurt us. You have a lot of lives when you have diversified revenue sources."

IDENTIFY A NICHE, THEN INNOVATE AGGRESSIVELY

Singer's business targets the needs of a highly specific clientele: phone carriers with annual revenues under \$100 million. It stands out from its competitors by bundling together products and services typically purchased from separate vendors. "That is how we win deals on the ground," he says of the proprietary software that enables this dual function.

emerging Internet phone market. Within a year, it became apparent that this side project was in fact more lucrative than the main gig. VoIP Rental (later renamed VoIP Logic) was born.

Singer and Garbarini moved back to Williamstown (bringing the VoIP Logic corporate headquarters with them) in 2004 when Garbarini secured a tenure-track professorship, teaching modern European history at Williams. Two years later, VoIP Logic attracted the interest of 21Ventures. The New York City-based venture firm made an initial investment of \$400,000, and then another \$1.2 million once VoIP Logic hit \$1.5 million in annual revenues. (21Ventures's total investment currently stands at \$3.2 million.) The company grew from ten employees in 2006 to thirty-four now.

In September 2009, the magazine *Inc.* placed VoIP Logic at 1,925 on its list of the 5,000 fastest growing private companies: it registered 92 percent revenue growth from 2007 to 2008, and growth

of 165 percent from 2005 to 2008. (It placed number sixty-two among telecom companies on *Inc.*'s list.)

"That's not so fast for a start-up," Singer says cautiously. Indeed, VoIP Logic has zeroed in on a lucrative slice of the market, but one not prone to meteoric growth. Its clients are smaller-sized carriers, so VoIP Logic necessarily requires a broad and growing customer base. Its largest customer accounts for only about five percent of VoIP Logic's annual revenue.

This model reduces the chance of a superstar client suddenly jacking up VoIP Logic's revenue, but also makes for greater stability. "I have companies in the portfolio that have potential for much greater returns, but they also have the potential to go down much faster," says David Anthony, founder of 21Ventures. "We feel very comfortable about the growth of the business. It may not be one hundred percent year-over-year revenue growth, but we're confident we can do twenty percent to thirty percent in the long run.... In this economy, having a cash-flow-positive technology company is a rare value."

Singer aims to stock his back-office functions with local hires whenever pos-

sible; he uses Albany accounting firm UHY Advisors, North Adams native Sue Dougherty has been the company's bookkeeper since 2005, and Richard Scullin of Williamstown is a part-time marketing consultant. Given the highly specialized skills he needs for his software engineers and support staff, Singer is only occasionally able to hire locals for those core functions.

With his staff spread around the world, Singer must find the best talent but also reinforce the company's ability to respond to the issues of its global clientele on a 24/7 basis. The time zone in which a prospective employee lives is, in a sense, a piece of the resumé to consider.

For this band of voIP pioneers, the great telecommuting dream of the 1990s seems to have been realized. And for Singer, it happens in a place where his wife's Sprint mobile phone couldn't even

get service for the first few days when they moved back to town. (Ironically, he doesn't enjoy working from home, so he established the Williamstown office—in a former residence.)

Singer keeps a bicycle in his office, and in warm weather, he takes a ride if he has a free hour—not something that was an option back in Los Angeles. He's quick to list the outdoor activities he enjoys with his son, such as visits to Mount Hope Park or a hike up the hill behind The Clark.

"I feel like I have a city job. I'm surrounded by computers and phones and gadgets, and having something like that nearby is really nice," he says of Caretaker Farm, another favorite spot. "It's the difference between a really big city and a really big town. I go to New York, and I'm awed by all the people, but there isn't that same sense of community. Nothing near it." **BBQ**

Jeremy D. Goodwin's writings on culture and the arts have appeared in numerous publications, in print and online. He is associate director of publicity for Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Mass., and the popular music critic for the Berkshire Eagle.

THE RECIPE

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