

For Sierra w/o Wires, it's all about feeling like a family



Sierra w/o Wires CEO Bruce Freshwater stands in the tech operations center at the company's headquarters in Robinson Wednesday morning April 18, 2012.

James Knox | Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

By **Thomas Olson**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Published: Monday, April 23, 2012

To Bruce Freshwater, his company is very much a family affair -- not just because Sierra w/o Wires Inc. is named after his daughter, and his wife is a top exec.

The information technology company in Robinson conducts in-depth assessments of customers' computer systems and provides "cloud computing" and software solutions that are tailor-made for them.

"We try to become part of the customer's family," said Freshwater, casually dressed in Sierra's "open-atmosphere" office meant for workers to "feel like family," too.

As a result, Sierra w/o Wires' business and industry reputation are growing. Most recently, the company was named the state's Technology Company of the Year by TechQuest Pennsylvania, a lobbying group in Harrisburg, on March 30. Earlier that month, Freshwater was named a finalist for CIO (chief information officer) of the Year by the Pittsburgh Technology Council.

"Bruce is a pretty nimble guy. He reacts to the marketplace very quickly," said Jonathan Kersting director of visibility initiatives for the Technology Council, based in South Oakland.

Sierra opened a sales office, its first satellite, in Irvine, Calif., in November. Plus, the company expects to open another office "somewhere in the Midwest" within a year, Freshwater said.

With 26 workers, including at a second data center Downtown, Sierra will add two workers by the end of April and expects to hire six or seven more by the end of the year, he said. The company has five software engineers now, compared to one, President Mike Broeker, in 2007. That's the year he came aboard, along with Freshwater's wife, Stacy Freshwater, as chief financial officer.

"We specialize in remote IT services, assuring that customers' mission-critical systems are available, reliable and secure," said Freshwater, describing Sierra's cloud computing services, a means of managing customers' data off-site through Sierra software and servers.

In late 2010, Mainstay Life Services, a behavioral health services provider in Scott, faced such a mission-critical situation. The nonprofit's entire \$12 million in revenue flows through government. But reimbursements switched from Allegheny County to Pennsylvania two years ago, and the state's billing system was much more complex and labor-intensive.

"We were going to have to key in all that information for the state, which would have been a really time-consuming headache" taking someone an estimated five days a month, said Mainstay CEO Jim Kirk.

Instead, Sierra created an automated system that it hosts for Mainstay. The billing system requires Mainstay supervisors to spend "just a few minutes a month filling out a form and uploading it," Kirk said.

"We probably spent \$40,000 on this, and it will pay for itself over time, for sure," he said.

"It's a substantial savings for the customer, from hardware maintenance to support to purchasing," said Freshwater, adding his average customer saves about 60 percent by using Sierra cloud-computing solutions.

In barely six years, Sierra has grown its customer base to 395 companies in 32 states and four countries. About 40 percent are located in Western Pennsylvania, and about 40 percent are on the West Coast.

"My happiest day was in June 2010, when our CPA (accountant) called and said we broke even for the month for the first time," the CEO said.

Freshwater funded the start-up "out of my own back pocket." in 2006. Raised in Follansbee, W. Va., he founded Sierra after serving in the Air Force, where he learned electronics repair and calibration.

Today, typical customers range from 25 to 2,500 employees and operate in diverse sectors, from health care to education to manufacturing.

For example, Bacharach Inc., New Kensington manufacturer of gas and liquid detection and measuring equipment, needed to upgrade several aspects of its information technology in 2009 because it "only had an IT department of one," said Chief Financial Officer Brian Robbins. So, the company didn't have the internal talent or time to deal full-time with issues such as email, network storage to security.

"Sierra came in and did an assessment of the most critical issues we needed to deal with," Robbins said. "They became a key tech partner for us. They are providing all of our database support, as well as doing project work."

About Sierra w/o Wires Inc.

Business: Remote information technology and managed services

Founded: 2006

CEO: Bruce Freshwater

Headquarters: Robinson

Employees: 26

Revenue: \$4 million

Top executives/owners: Bruce Freshwater, chief executive; Mike Broeker, president; Stacy Freshwater, chief financial officer