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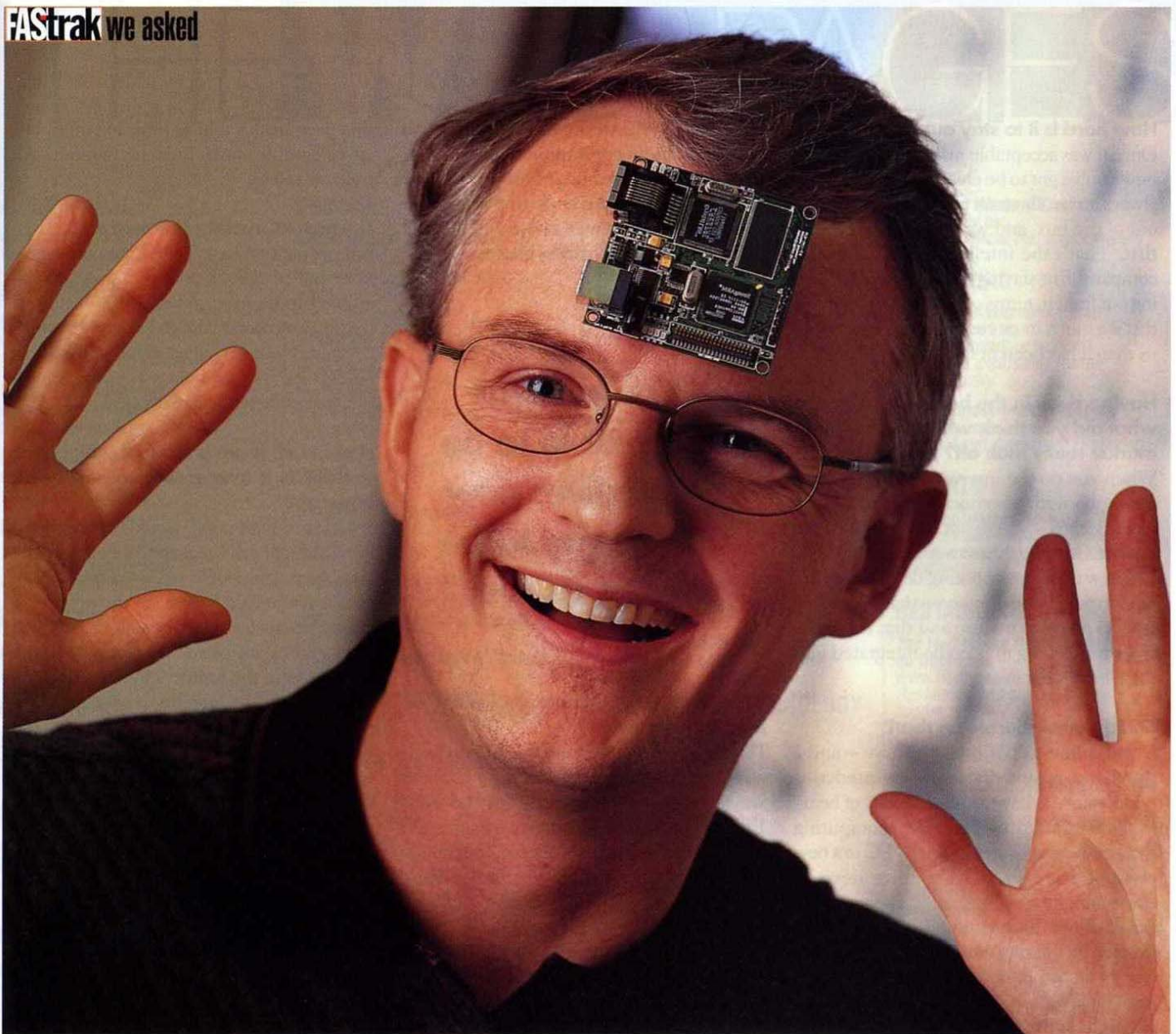
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# Digital Brilliance

Its software is normally embedded beyond view, but **Derek Spratt's** hard-charging company is surfacing fast

*By Greg Potter*

AS THE WORLD GLIDES SWIFTLY INTO THE POST-PC AGE, VANCOUVER-based Intrinsic has established itself as a leader in the nascent information-appliance and Internet-device market. Recently recognized as one of the 50 fastest-growing tech companies in Canada, Intrinsic creates embedded software solutions – ‘the brains’ behind non-computing devices such as home-security systems, vending machines and factory-floor controllers. These Internet-enabled technologies are sold to Fortune 500 companies like Ford Motors and Siemens AG, which use Intrinsic’s technology to create devices linking existing business applications to larger automation networks. Under 38-year-old chairman and CEO Derek Spratt, a quietly driven 15-year high-tech veteran, the company has accrued a market cap of \$200 million (as of November). Meanwhile, Spratt anticipates his employee base to grow from 60 to 100 by year’s end.

**There are about 250 companies working in the area of embedded systems right now. What makes you guys so special?**

Intrinsic is a different animal because we’re the bridge between two universes [Linux and Windows operating systems]. We don’t anticipate being cannon fodder. We are all about growing and building past the billion-dollar market cap in the next 18 months. At that point, we’ll really start to own this thing.

### How hard is it to stay out front?

Once it was acceptable just to be innovative; now you've got to be creative as well. We've always had really smart people who can think out of the box, and we're still very good at that. That's the intellectual capital of the company. But staying out front means staying out front in terms of revenues as well and that is a much more customer-facing focus for us than it has been in the past.

### Having been in the business 15 years, what did you think when the high-tech market really took off?

When you do the innovation thing – and I define innovation as anticipating a customer's future needs – you're out in advance of the market. Creating the networking software for this new class of computing devices was the next logical thing. We knew that the industry was going to mature and that these devices were going to become integrated into the fabric of our lives.

### Could you elaborate on that?

I would like to position Intrinsic – and I think our customers have accepted this positioning – as having the capability of being a standard in the pervasive computing market. We're going beyond the PC to a new class of specialized computing devices: everything from your microwave oven to a factory-floor automation controller to a hospital monitoring device. The standard has been a bit of a dream for us but it is becoming a reality.

Right now, it's an early-stage market. We're out front, we're running hard and we're going for that critical mass. Our cus-

tomers all say that we are crucial to them. We have created a very important technology that is making a strong difference to their business models. We're getting out of the gee-whiz-isn't-this-cool phase and moving into a let's-own-the-market phase.

**"Once it was acceptable to be innovative; now you've got to be creative as well"**

### What inspired you to get involved in the high-tech sector?

I like science, but there is a side of me that is arts-driven. When you look at technology the way society now defines it – as the New Economy – it's more of a creative expression than it is science and numbers. You're really mixing the two together. What we're doing here is making computers more friendly.

### Ever worry about hitting your peak before your 40th birthday?

Burnout is probably a better way to phrase it. You hit burnout when nothing is enjoyable anymore. But right now we're having the time of our lives. I believe we can keep

this pace up for a long time to come, but we're careful not to burn people out. We pace ourselves.

### The post-PC world – is it here yet?

For people that have Palm Pilots and Internet-enabled cellular phones, I think it's beginning to be here. When a non-technical person – someone who didn't grow up with computers – is no longer afraid of the technology and the technology becomes invisible, that's when it will really be here.

### How much room is left in the high-tech sector? Is it ever going to peak and taper off?

I wonder what people would have thought 25 years ago? It's been speculated that 100 years from now people will look back and say, "Man, that would have been the time to be young because that's when all the innovations were taking place." A lot of people who have been in the industry for 20 years look back to, say, the invention of the microprocessor in the early 1970s and say, "That was the heyday of this industry." But the truth is, it's happening now and it'll happen over the next 20 years. It's just starting. Hype always precedes reality.

### What's next for Intrinsic?

We're right at the very beginning. We're just being discovered. Our valuation is modest compared to the potential of the company. We've seen a lot of investment and I know we're in the right market at the right time. We're going to dominate the world! ■

*Greg Potter is a Vancouver freelance writer and author.*

## tech info



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