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Scoring success in the broadcast industry

By Lisa MacColl, Special to The Record

If you have watched *Hockey Night in Canada*, Sportsnet or the Canadian federal election returns, you've seen the work of Bannister Lake Software.

The small Cambridge-based company is building a global reputation for providing software solutions to enhance the TV viewing experience. It specializes in "bugs." A "bug" is an industry term for a digital graphic image that is superimposed in a corner or at the bottom of the television screen during a broadcast.

A bug can be a static image of the network logo, a "score bug" that provides the feed that runs along the bottom of a program or a sophisticated program that syncs an animated logo or a feed and real-time results over an image of a live broadcast, such as a hockey or soccer game, or a sports report. A "score bug" shows the score of a sporting event, or can provide a running feed of game scores along the bottom or side of the television screen.

The company has just launched a new product, called Brando, that enables TV stations to automate scheduling, such as upcoming programming, promotions, logos and other information feeds that are normally manually controlled by a producer in the main studio. Currently in use with 17 channels at Rogers, such as OLN, OMNI and OMNI 1, it can be customized to accommodate the needs of small or large stations.

Broadcasting live sporting events such as *Hockey Night in Canada* presents unique challenges, says company president Georg Hentsch. "Any mistake is instantly broadcast to potentially thousands and sometimes millions of viewers."

During a hockey broadcast, Bannister's technology provides the feed that displays the clock, the team, the score, whether or not there is a power play and the logo of the station that is broadcasting the game. The data is compiled from feeds received from each arena's data controller and problems need to be fixed immediately.

Hentsch recalls an Ottawa Sena-



PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF

Bannister Lake Software's employees work out of their own homes. Here, employees (back row, from left) Danny Ljubisic, Jonathan Schmale and D'Arcy Pickering, and (front row, from left) Georg Hentsch, Francis Chan and Chris Mintz, meet at one of their homes.

tors playoff game broadcast from the Corel Centre in Ottawa. During the first period, the penalty feed was not showing correctly. Hentsch coded a software solution during the first intermission. "We make the changes and we see the results 10 minutes later on the broadcast," he says. "Some of the most interesting and stressful times occur when we are using new software for the first time. We'll get a call and people are screaming in the background when the broadcast is not showing what it is supposed to be showing. It can be madness."

Needless to say, staying calm under pressure and troubleshooting on the fly are skills his employees need to possess.

Bannister is not limited to sports broadcast solutions. The company has become an expert at reporting election results. It has developed software that reports real-time election results either on a poll by poll, riding by riding or party by party basis. Its software was used in the last few federal elections, as well as in provincial elections in Ontario,

British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island, and for some municipal elections.

The company rolled out new election software in time for the Ontario provincial election on Oct. 6.

Bannister has been approached about providing similar software to report U.S. election results, but so far it has stuck with the Canadian market. "We wanted to focus on being really good at Canadian elections," Hentsch explains.

While not currently reporting on U.S. elections, Bannister has provided software that tracks Democratic party voting in the U.S. Senate. It shows what vote is being cast, what is scheduled and the time remaining to vote. It is available to every Democratic senator. Bannister has provided a similar product for the Swiss parliament.

Most of Bannister's competition is in the United States, but Hentsch feels the company's small size gives it an advantage. "What we do better is we are more flexible — we'll write everything custom. We're fast and we

provide great service."

Hentsch does not actively market the company. "Our marketing occurs any time we do work for someone," he says. "Word of mouth is how we get our new customers. Everyone knows all the players in this industry."

Hentsch was an Apple Macintosh software developer before he started Bannister in 1993. One of his first contracts, "when it was just me working alone," was with Inscribe Technology, a Waterloo company (now owned by Florida-based Harris Corp.) that specialized in providing software and hardware for inserting graphics into TV broadcasts. He developed expertise in broadcast software through the contract. All but two of Bannister's seven employees are former employees of Inscribe.

Hentsch's home on Bannister Lake serves as the firm's head office — hence the company's name — but Bannister is, in effect, a virtual business, with the employees working out of their own homes. "We use video conferencing if we need to talk," Hentsch says. If a meeting is required, employees are encouraged to carpool to minimize their carbon footprint.

According to Hentsch, the company has already completed most of its "dream" assignments. The one exception is the Olympics. "Olympics broadcasting is a pretty closed shop," Hentsch says, before adding that "I'd like to work on the Olympics."

Bannister operates as a co-operative, paying employees a base amount and then paying out bonuses as it achieves success. Profits are distributed back into the team. "It's a true free enterprise system," he says. "Everyone participates and shares in the success of the company."

He takes pride in the company's work ethic, noting that employees will do whatever it takes to get the job done. "We're flexible and we will work hard to meet the unique needs of the client. We can customize any of our software to meet the specific requirements of each client. Although we're small, we never let our size stop us from being a successful global company."

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