

kevin king

The author of ‘the big green book’ turns his ideas into action and has patents pending to prove it.

by David Enders



PHOTOGRAPHY: TODD POWELL

You know the idea man. The one who can instantly come up with 101 ways to do it better. Let’s face it—we’ve all been the idea man or woman. In the information age—and in IT contracting in particular—a great idea is not enough. The question remains: What are you going to do about it?

Contract Professional All Star Kevin King has come up with some great ideas in his 17-year IT career. More importantly, he has followed through and brought those ideas to life. The 37-year-old King has for the last seven years realized his share of ideas as president of Longmont, Colo., consulting company Precision Solutions. A former specialist in the MultiValue database industry, King recently expanded his repertoire to include client/server design, implementation, installation, and support services for a variety of vertical markets. He has shared his ideas with thousands of others, expanded existing knowledge into new dimensions, and (this is the hard part) learned to balance ideas and action to provide real-world solutions to his clients and peers.

Like those of most contract professionals, King’s clients are varied and offer an unlimited number of problems to be solved. A health science client needs help with its international credit card processing system to allow for the unique financial regulations of each country where the system is installed. A student loan association needs to streamline operations by virtue of a system that allows client universities to update and track their own borrower information online. A client in the tourism industry needs a system to track maintenance and operating costs of thousands of items used to keep a cultural center pulling in guests. There has been plenty

of opportunity in King’s career for some pragmatic thinking followed by well-applied action.

“I have found the greatest success by not applying some artificial limit to the services I can provide,” King says. “Sometimes that means I’m pushed a bit outside the comfort zone, but, in the end, I have learned something new and have a bit more experience that I can use to help solve the problems for the next customer.”

The comfort zone can easily become a virtual jail in the idea business of IT contracting. Before going independent in 1994, King got comfortable with the SystemBuilder environment developing Pick software at Jenkon Data Systems in Vancouver, Wash. SB+ uses a component-based architecture to provide a development and deployment environment for rapid application building. “It’s something that I fell into that was very good for me,” King says.

So good, in fact, that he literally became “the guy who wrote the book” in the SB+ industry. The *SB+ Solutions* book, known in the industry as “the big green book,” is the de facto standard reference manual for the SystemBuilder development environment. The book, King jokes, doubles as a child’s booster seat, and came about simply because he was the first to act on an idea shared by many. Sometimes when opportunity knocks, we don’t exactly knock each other over to answer the door.

Meeting with the developers of SB+ at the product’s first technical trade show in Atlanta, King remembers product developers remarking how much the MultiValue industry needed a book on the SB+ environment. “There were a number of us around a table

who heard that comment and who thought it would be a good opportunity, but of course we did nothing about it.”

It wasn't until years later that King found himself doing SB+ training through his company, Precision Solutions. “I had accumulated about 800 pages of handouts for teaching these classes and I'm thinking, “Wow, this could be a book!”

The big green book and its second edition (the little green CD) have sold about 900 copies, King estimates, saturating the relatively small SB+ developer market. He has since served as moderator of the SB+ Solutions mailing list and has contributed dozens of articles to magazines in the MultiValue and open systems database communities. “I like to write. I like to share, and I like to help people,” he says. “If I have a piece of information that could be useful to someone else, I want to get it out there.”

Being well known in the MultiValue industry had its perks in terms of bringing in contracts, King admits, but he soon realized it was more important to stay out of the comfort zone and in the action zone. He turned his MultiValue contracts over to three subcontractors and turned his attention toward Java, XML, and C++ development.

King is pragmatic when it comes to technical solutions. “There is a time and a place for everything, and it's not always and it's not never.”

He is hoping one idea whose time has come is one of his own. He has patents pending on “Phoenix”—a new information storage system for dynamic multi-dimensional structures of all different data types, including international text and multimedia.

The relational database storage model devised by Dr. E.F. Codd in 1969 has served the industry well, but is no longer appropriate, King reasons, simply because the definition of “information” has changed. Information is no longer simply text and numbers, but also includes video, audio, graphics, and countless other formats.

Phoenix and its commercial application Aspen will, like the old model, continue to define a file as a collection of records and a record as a collection of fields. However, the Aspen field can hold not only text and numbers, but also any combination of video, audio, graphics, Unicode text, and any other type of information imaginable, King says. “An Aspen field can itself store a collection of fields, which can each store a collection of fields, to a nearly limitless depth. This multi-dimensionality provides significant capability to the database designer, allowing him or her to design a data set inside the computer with the same structure as the original information ‘in the wild’, instead of enforcing column and row organization simply to maintain compliance to 30-year-old rules.”

King found that by combining the best features of the relational database and MultiValue models, and by “breaking a few old-school rules,” a phoenix of data storage technology could indeed rise from the ashes of conventional wisdom. “I've stumbled across something here that is so unbelievable...the speed, the capacity, and the abilities of this thing are just astronomical.”

The function of thought is to guide action, the pragmatist would say. King continues to work toward putting his ideas into practice and enjoys telecommuting to most of his contracts. “My weapon of choice is a Sony VAIO laptop, Pentium III, 850MHz, but I also keep a 300MHz Pentium II NEC and a 450MHz Pentium II Dell warm, one running Win98, the other running Linux,” he says. The arrangement allows him to spend more time with his wife Kimberly and kids Jeremy, 13, Nicholas, 11, and Haleigh, 5.

He finds community volunteering to put good ideas into even greater action his most satisfying avocation. His goal is to become a full-time teacher and speaker, helping others to realize their potential.

A good idea is one that gets done. “I once thought I loved the technical details more than anything: learning, expanding, always changing,” King says. “But, you know what, that stuff gets boring if it's not applied. I am most satisfied when at the end of the day the customer is happy, the job is complete, and I've learned something new.”

David Enders is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas.

Copyright 2001 Skinner-James Publishing. Reprinted from Contract Professional, 125 Walnut Street, Watertown, MA 02742. All rights reserved.

For more information, contact:



1379 Monarch Drive
Longmont, CO 80501
Local Colorado: 303/651-7050

Email: Info@PrecisOnline.com
Web: <http://www.PrecisOnline.com>