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Envative - a Custom Software Development Firm specializing in Web, App and IoT Development and ready to take on Outside the Box Ideas



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“Everyone always asks what industry we specialize in. The honest answer is, we have clients across almost every vertical from healthcare to manufacturing, real-estate, and hospitality. In addition, we serve all types of businesses: start-ups, fortune 500 companies, not-for-profits, government/municipal. This is also what makes our business so uniquely interesting. People come to us with the coolest, outside of the box ideas for a product or service and we say, “yeah, we can do that...and this is how...” Dave Mastrella

Interview conducted by:
 Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Mr. Mastrella, what is the overall vision behind Envative and what is your focus now?*

Mr. Mastrella: We are a custom software development firm specializing in web development, mobile app development and IoT. We stick with these core areas of expertise. Our reputation for delivering quality and what we promise is of utmost importance to us, which I think is why we have been successful in this business for more than 23 years. The size of our jobs has grown dramatically and most of them now encompass web, mobile and IoT components with many different integrations. Those are cool jobs for us to work on. They are fun, interesting, and challenging.

It is like a domino effect; you bring in a couple of these larger jobs and you have your name established in the industry. The fact that we attract large and complex jobs helps us attract talented developers. In return, we do not have a turnover issue here, which has been great, especially in the competitive environment we are in today.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about the IoT side of things; what are the advancements and challenges today and how do you marry that up with web and mobile?*

Mr. Mastrella: In the IoT world, although it is a term that people throw around a lot, I still feel that some people working in different industries do not understand it and how IoT can help them.

On our part we are just trying to educate our customers by saying hey you have something going on over here (whatever it is), we can build a device to help automate that. A good example would be at a hotel - being able to access your room without a room key so everything becomes touchless. We put a device where the door lock would typically be and, using an app in your phone, we are able to unlock that door to

grant access to that room. That is a great, albeit simple, example of IoT. It is the education of consumers or business owners to say this is how IoT can help you and this is what it can do.

As far as our biggest challenge, staffing is, by far, our #1 issue right now. Again, this is not due to turnover but due to our continued growth. The demand for our services has increased our need for resources by 50%. It is extremely difficult and competitive to find talented developers that possess the expertise and experience we seek. We refuse to hire "just anyone". Again, our reputation for quality drives every decision we make. This includes hiring the best qualified people.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular industries of focus for Envative?*

Mr. Mastrella: We are across all industries, anyone that needs to automate, solve a problem, improve efficiencies, or reduce risks through custom software, we can help. Everyone always asks what industry we specialize in. The honest answer is, we have clients across almost every vertical from healthcare to manufacturing, real-estate, and hospitality. In addition, we serve all types of businesses: start-ups, fortune 500 companies, not-for-profits, government/municipal. This is also what makes our business so uniquely interesting. People come to us with the coolest, outside of the box ideas for a product or service and we say, "yeah, we can do that...and this is how..."

CEOCFO: *Is the solution yours or does it belong to your clients?*

Mr. Mastrella: We do not control ownership of client software. Everything we develop on a client's behalf is 100% theirs to keep and take in-house (if desired). We do have our own internal project frameworks that we have built that allows us to start a new client instance or project "shell" that is reliable and much more cost-effective than starting from nothing each time. So, while we own our framework, the solution that we build to client specs is considered theirs and we will hand over their fully operational code at any time if requested. This is the major difference between custom software vs. "off the shelf" software. While we have software maintenance contracts in place for things like minor custom enhancements, bug fixes, security updates, we do not charge per seat user licensing fees like the standard off-the-shelf model.

CEOCFO: *What is your geographic reach?*

Mr. Mastrella: Geography does not play a role for us. While we are located in Rochester, N.Y., our client base spans the U.S. and beyond. For example, projects we are working on today include clients in New York, Arizona, Texas and, even globally, we've had business in England and Germany. We have always been highly effective at working remotely for clients because we have cloud-based infrastructure, a tried-and-true software development project process and automated deployment. The pandemic has really solidified everyone's comfort level with working remotely so any geographic barriers that may have existed from a client perspective are now gone. Now, more than ever, we have new prospects reaching out to us from anywhere and everywhere.

CEOCFO: *What about when you come up with the device, would the client be doing the installation or do you work with local people when there is the physical component?*

Mr. Mastrella: We can and have done both scenarios dependent on client preference. To use the hotel example again, the client took care of the installation of the devices that were integrated with the IoT communication that we developed along with the mobile app, and all the related web technology. Honestly, our preference is to leave the installation to our clients or their 3rd party vendors because we feel that it is more cost-effective for them to allocate their budget for Envative to software development.

CEOCFO: *What would people like to do regarding IoT, that is not ready yet and what are some of the solutions available now?*

Mr. Mastrella: It is all automation, do things quicker, faster and more reliably and make sure that it is scalable, which can be a big issue. It is also about being more proactive and less reactive. People want to be warned about a potential problem that could occur before it happens. Whenever you have a process or a person doing the same thing every time, we can help automate that. Here is another notable example of IoT that we have implemented with benefits that are quite easy to envision - IoT-enabled gate openers at gated communities. We wrote a component to work with a mobile device that would not only open a gate based on your credentials within the app on their phone, but that controls levels of access based on user type (residents vs staff vs delivery drivers, etc.) The improvements to residential safety and ease of use without increasing security staff is a huge win for that industry.

IoT is now becoming very common in other areas as well such as manufacturing. I think manufacturing in general has embraced IoT and been at the forefront, because the benefits for automation are so obvious. It has been easy for manufacturers to calculate potential savings associated with increased productivity, risk reduction, and enhanced safety in a dependable and reliable way.

Beyond this, we see the use cases for A.I., machine-learning, robotics becoming more prevalent, but the reality is, these applications are still in their infancy as far as where they will be in 10, maybe 5 years. We have barely scratched the surface.

CEOCFO: *Are people receptive to the touchless aspect because of COVID or are people so boxed-in with the challenges of COVID they are not looking for new ways?*

Mr. Mastrella: The touchless is obviously huge because of COVID, which has brought some interesting challenges to industries in general. The hotel client asked us to come up with a solution that would allow patrons to walk into a hotel and get to their room without requiring interaction with a person. So, think, kiosk and/or mobile app to handle lobby entry, check ins, identity validation, payment processing, change requests, housekeeping, room service. This demand was fueled by the emergence of Covid which has changed the way businesses everywhere are thinking about "self-serve".

CEOCFO: *Are you finding challenges in getting the hardware you need?*

Mr. Mastrella: They do not come as quick as they used to, but we have been ok at finding hardware. You have to wait a little longer, plan ahead and be more patient than before COVID but it has not limited our ability at all to be productive (so far). The recurring challenge we have is not at all with sourcing hardware – it's sourcing *talent*.

CEOCFO: *How do you reach out for personnel?*

Mr. Mastrella: In the past, we've had good success with posting openings on LinkedIn to get the word out that we're hiring. We have a very good reputation locally and are well known in the development arena. This combined with the pool of surrounding universities including the Rochester Institute of Technology, there has always been a relatively robust talent base for a city our size. This is not so much the case any longer. Our business has grown dramatically in the past few years and, since the pandemic, the growth of opportunities for remote positions for local developers has eaten into this base and made competition for talent much, much greater. It is not that we aren't receiving a lot of resumes, it is that we are looking for a certain skill type and a certain level of expertise that can be challenging to find. I have quite a few resumes that just are not exactly what we are looking for. As I mentioned earlier, I will not settle for hiring just anybody to fill a seat on a project so that we can bill hours. Our reputation is too important for this type of strategy. We have had to expand our recruitment strategy as a result.

CEOCFO: *What are the intangibles you want in people working for Envative?*

Mr. Mastrella: First, we need people that can translate a technical solution or issue into plain everyday English that a non-technical client can understand. We must make sure that our software developers can come in and speak to our clients in a highly consultative way. While we have seasoned Project Managers that are the primary points of contact for our clients, we don't keep our developers behind the scenes by any means. They also need to be team-oriented, accountable, and possess a positive attitude. When we find this along with the skill set we are looking for, we know we've struck gold. We feel we have a very strong culture here, a very healthy culture so we want to make sure that the person we bring in is a team player, believes in collaboration and they want to work in a group and share ideas. They cannot come in with a big ego.

CEOCFO: *Do you find you can tell quickly when you are talking with a candidate, if they understand that aspect?*

Mr. Mastrella: It is challenging at times. I would go to these career fairs before they were virtual looking for potential interns and there would be a line of 100 students waiting to talk to me. This is very challenging because you have about maybe one or two minutes to have a conversation with each student and it is a judgement call based on that conversation. You always walk away asking yourself if you picked the right candidate, or did I exclude someone that I should have brought in. When filling a developer position, the first interview is less technical and along the lines of "getting to know you". If they seem like they will

fit in with our team and will have the ability to converse with a client, they will move on to the next step for technical evaluation. This is done by 2-3 of our engineers which benefits the candidates as well as they are able to gain insight into the kind of team they would be working with.

CEO CFO: *How do you stay ahead of changes in the industry?*

Mr. Mastrella: That is the one aspect of this business that is very fun and interesting as well as sometimes frustrating because you learn something and become an expert in an area and the next thing everything changes, and you have to keep up with that. We are always doing research. I have a business partner and he is always reading just to see what is going on out there. We rely on our developers quite a bit because developers have a lot of passion for what they do so they are always doing R&D to stay in touch with what's new and exciting out there.

They are always coming to us and recommending different platforms that we should be looking into. This keeps us fresh and on the cutting edge of the latest and greatest offerings we can provide. This is also what makes Envative such a great environment for sharp developers to work in because they always want to be on the forefront of innovation as best we can. It is really what our staff seems to love most about working here. The development teams drive where Envative goes from an innovation standpoint. We listen to their recommendations and move forward with implementing them often. It has been a major component of our success in employee retention and satisfaction.

CEO CFO: *What are you surprised we can do today with technology and what are you surprised we have not conquered yet?*

Mr. Mastrella: Technology has done a lot of good and overall, it is wonderful. I cannot think of something that right now that we have not done that surprises me. I grew up in the generation where you were watching The Jetsons on TV and that is what a lot of people compare it to. I am amazed that there are self-driving cars. I think that is the biggest thing that amazes me right now with technology. It's also a little scary to me, by the way.

CEO CFO: *What is ahead for the company?*

Mr. Mastrella: We have thirty employees right now and our goal is to get to about fifty. We have been at it over two decades now and still come to work every day excited about the future. I am excited about what is going on today. We want to grow, and we are trying to build up our infrastructure to get our next leaders lined up for Envative. We also are genuinely concerned about our community in general so one important initiative we have is to get much more involved in the community. We truly wish to focus more on giving back in a way that makes this world a better place. I would say that is a big thing.

CEO CFO: *With so many companies to consider in tech services, why choose Envative?*

Mr. Mastrella: We are awesome, seriously! We are proud of our transparency and consultative approach. It is really what sets us apart from many of our competitors. We are not just technologists. We are

technologists that have a very well-defined and proven process. What we have learned in business is that many people cannot really understand technology or how it is being done, it is a black box to some. They know the inputs and outputs, but they have no idea how it works and that is okay. We can explain that to them. Something they do understand, however, is *process*. When we start talking process, our clients start listening and when they see it in action, we see them let down their guard and relay their trust in us. That is huge.

Upon kick-off of a new project, we lay out a detailed sprint schedule. This allows us to define what we will accomplish every 2 weeks in the schedule. This is due to our consultative approach and getting to know a client and their needs thoroughly before any coding begins. This dramatically reduces project risk, budget overages, and missed deadlines which are risks that are viewed as common in this industry. Again, this is the result of our custom, honed process.

Lastly, clients truly will benefit from our longevity and experience as a software development provider. It's why we can be as consultative as we are. No matter what someone is looking to have done, there is an extremely high chance that we have done it or something similar before, so they reap the expertise and best practices we possess.

We have worked extremely hard to earn our reputation for promising what we deliver and delivering on what we promise and take immense pride in the testimonials, accolades and referrals that have come our way as a result.