

Alliant Forges Its Own Path To First Decade Of Success

How A Small Yakima Tech Company Became A Regional And National Leader

By Dujie Tahat

Jim Watters and Scott Mattingly teamed up with Jeff Munson and Ron Johnston in a leased storage space in Union Gap to take control of their own destiny with a start-up tech firm. The company has moved twice, Johnston has moved on, employees finally received titles, but the guiding principles of teamwork and self-determination persist — and today, Alliant Communications stands as one of the largest communications and information technology (IT) firms in Eastern Washington.

With over 1,000 clients spanning from Spokane to Walla Walla to Wenatchee, Alliant has on staff 21 employees who offer ever-evolving services ranging from network infrastructure installation and monitoring, to phone and computer hardware and software, as well as information security and risk management.

At early stages in their career arcs, Perry Technical Institute in Yakima served as turning points for Watters, Mattingly and Munson.

Not only do they look to the institute as a staffing resource, with over a third of their employees coming from PTI, but all three graduated from various PTI programs. Watters and Munson were even invited to return and instruct courses, years later.

Prior to joining forces, Watters and Mattingly spent time finding their footing at various companies, honing their skills as technicians in their respective fields. According to Watters, he focused on communications infrastructure — phones, fiber optic and low-voltage cabling — while Mattingly got one of the first jobs in the IT world "before it was even called IT."

Early in 2003, Watters identified

a convergence in the tech industry that had started gaining traction nationally, but hadn't yet peaked regionally. Watters noticed that big businesses in Eastern Washington were increasingly gravitating to Portland and Seattle in search of communication technologies vendors. From that, he saw the confluence of information systems and communications infrastructure as an opportunity to build something new in the Yakima Valley.

He reached out to his childhood

friend, Mattingly, whose IT skill-set complimented Watters perfectly.

Business took off immediately.

In 2004, Alliant moved into a full-fledged office in downtown Yakima, having doubled its staff. In 2005, Alliant stopped placing ads in the phone book, never looking back. In 2007, Alliant moved again, nearly tripling square footage. Today, with over 1,000 clients, 80 percent are referral-based.

Alliant Means "To Team"

Watters and Mattingly have consciously forged a unique office culture over the years, which they said directly affects the quality of their work. Every employee Alliant hires plays a critical component in

"We all worked at places that weren't the best, so we took the best out of them and brought it here." -Jeff Munson, founding employee and sales engineer



ABOVE: Jim Watters, left, and Scott Mattingly founded Alliant in 2003 to shape their own fortune. Once childhood friends, now they find themselves at the helm of one of the of communications and information technology firms in the region.

BELOW: U.S. Army veteran and Phone Technician Angel Valero, left, works with Operations Manager Robin Johnston. According to Johnston, the Alliant's work culture centers around team, and during Valero's last deployment in Iraq in 2008, the office regularly sent CARE packages.

the overall functionality of the company.

"We don't hire an individual, we hire a company," explained Watters.

In the beginning, Alliant forwent job titles — underscoring the notion that every employee was as important as the next. As the company got bigger, though, the company eventually gave in, as significant growth



dictated that certain job functions be defined. Still, the camaraderie remains palpable.

"We have to work as a team to make anything work," observed Robin Johnson, Alliant operations manager.

Having worked as dispatcher and project manager before turning to operations, Johnson embodies the seamlessness of Alliant's well-crafted team environment.

U.S. Army veteran and phone technician Angel Valero saw his last deployment in 2008. While serving in Iraq, his co-workers remained in contact with him, sending him care packages. Valero values most the stability Alliant provides.

Munson, now a sales engineer, works in tandem with customer advocate Joe Longo to put together client-specific technology packages. According to Munson, 10 years ago he could not have imagined where Alliant is now.

"We really dialed in and got awe-

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some technicians, dynamic people," said Munson. "Everyone gets the Alliant culture."

Building Bigger Business

In the fall of 2006, Alliant purchased Snokist Growers 6,700-square-foot headquarters, snatching up the property before it ever went to market. Though they continued to operate and provide regular services during normal business hours from their downtown Yakima office, Alliant's team immediately began renovations to make the new building their own.

Earlier that year, Alliant had been commissioned by Snokist to

quarters was a kind of roundabout homecoming. He worked at Snokist some years prior, but this time, he assured, "We're not going anywhere."

When they bought the building, Watters and Mattingly envisioned an entirely new space that echoed both Alliant's service approach and technology ambitions. It took six months to secure that vision, but by April 2007, Alliant moved into a custom facility, three times

efficiency bulbs from Puget Sound Energy light the offices, while custom fabricated metal work and technology-themed art pieces — designed by none other than Watters himself — line the halls.

Not everything is entirely new, however, noted Watters. "We kept and repurposed as much as we could."

When it came to executing this vision, Alliant forged its own path. "We were our own contractors," said Watters.

From the tiles to the re-land-

building is the ever-critical "burn-in room." The largest room in the building, it offers plenty of space for programmers and technicians to prepare client-specific software and "burn it into" its respective hardware.

"Each table represents a job we're doing for a client," Watters explained as he walked through the hub of Alliant Communications.

At any given time, the tables are covered with phones, cables and computers. The burn-in room is vital to Alliant operations, and is a nod to the founders' time at PTI. It

*"We've always been working on our business."
-Scott Mattingly, Owner*



Office Manager John Slaughter, middle, shows off the "It's all good!" sign that served as Alliant's mantra during the building renovations from late 2006 through early 2007. Lining the hallways, various pieces of tech art can be found designed by none other than Owner Jim Watters.

remove all the existing communications systems and information technologies. Watters, who was sitting in on the meeting, asked if Alliant could purchase the building. To his surprise, Snokist's CEO and longtime friend said yes.

For Mattingly, their new head-

the square footage of its previous office.

On one side of the receiving lobby, immediately left of the main entrance, the offices' own network servers are shown in a custom cut glass-walled, temperature- and pressure-controlled display. High-

scaped façade, each piece of the new space was chosen carefully, keeping in mind the staff and clients' needs and comfort.

Proving form is only as good function, Watters and his crew matched the design with practical spaces. Prominent in the new

is Alliant's lab, where staffers experiment with new technology and create client-specific networks.

On the far end of the burn-in room, the hub of Alliant's hub, Jaylene Berkheimer monitors each partner-client's system. Function-
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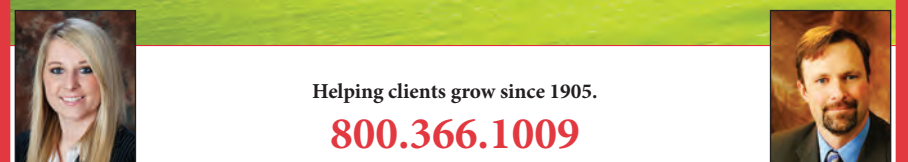
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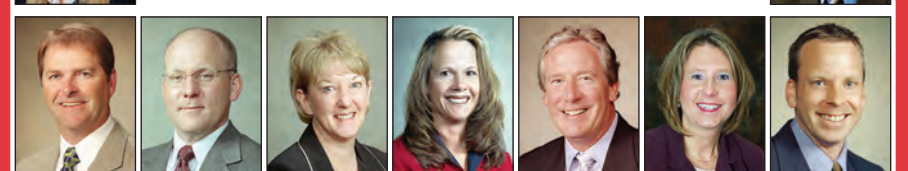
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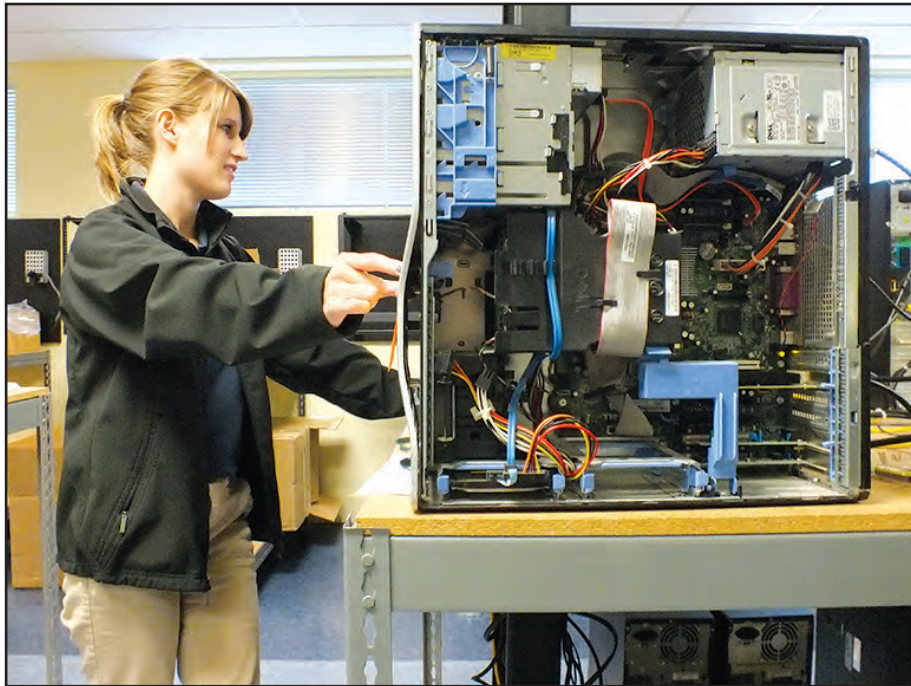
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Better Building

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ally serving as the IT department to its customers, Alliant continually monitors over 30 sites, each equipped with six to 100 computers

of the burn-in room is all part of Alliant's "proactive vs. reactive" approach, Watters pointed out. More time put into the burn-in room, offered Watters, means less time installing and adjusting at the



Alliant Technician Jaylene Berkheimer runs diagnostics on a computer processing unit in the "Burn In Room."

connected to one to 16 servers. The monitoring program is extensive: updating operating systems, keeping watch over anti-virus software, backing up files and much more.

According to Berkheimer, even if a cooling fan stops working, she will know about it. As issues arise, Berkheimer notes the severity and dispatches a field technician accordingly.

The functionality and efficiency

client's offices.

"This is all I've done for 20 years," said Watters. "I've learned the more work we put on the front end, the less we do on the back end."

Though not an entirely unprecedented approach, Watters noted that among communications and IT firms that both sell products and provide services, it often benefits that firm to constantly be fixing

problems, selling products as solutions. Watters rejects this business model.

According to John Slaughter, office manager, many Alliant employees took on additional roles during construction — handling contracting responsibilities in addition to the day-to-day Alliant work.

It was a difficult but immensely rewarding time, recalled Slaughter: "Jim would be in at 6 a.m. letting in the work crews, and I'd be here at 6 p.m. chasing them out."

Mattingly called it a "crazy" time, but one well worth the work. Alliant has not had to remodel since.

Feast For Fear Of Famine: Lean Business

Alliant has always been proactive about growing and establishing its network — as

a start-up it was necessary, explained Watters. As things fell off for the local and global economy in 2008, Alliant's hunger was fed

by companies that turned to streamlining through technology. Oddly, other companies' lack of resources allowed Alliant to continue building on their foundation. As a result, Alliant not only remained solvent. It grew.

Last year, Alliant grew by 80 percent — indicating that even with the economy on the upswing, local

executives and managers still turn to technology, then look to hire staff.

To many experts' surprise, the economic downturn spurred a kind of lean management revolution — not dissimilar to the ethos Alliant had been crafting and honing for years.

As the economy tumbled, "companies began doing more with less people," explained Watters, and as a service-based firm, what Alliant offered suddenly became more valuable to any business with computers and phones.

"There isn't a business that couldn't benefit from what we do," said Mattingly.

Whereas companies once hired bodies to solve problems, a lack of resources driven by the recession

forced business leaders to defer to technology to maximize productivity with what was available.

"With so many people displaced, companies needed

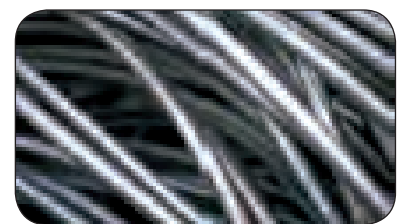
more service calls." Alliant was going the other way. "We were hiring technicians to address those needs," said Watters

Part of Alliant's business model — long before 2008 — included helping manage overhead. Alliant has on staff two full-time customer advocates who continually work on

"We don't wait for the phone to ring. Our fear of famine drives the feast."

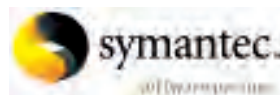
-Jim Watters, Owner

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An original founding employee of Alliant, Jeff Munson, now a customer engineer, works closely with customer advocates to create client specific communications and IT systems.

reducing clients' cost of ownership and increasing their return on investment. In recent years, this type of service became more valuable to local companies.

In years and decades past, business would normally be driven by the sales of new technology. However, said Mattingly, "those days are gone." As companies more closely monitor the costs of their technology, they value more and more efficacy, efficiency and "throughput."

"When we can show you cost of

ownership, return on investment, show you how you can pay for it, and update your tech it's just good business," said Watters.

Keeping Pace

As soon as they opened their doors, Watters and Mattingly recognized the need to keep pace with emerging markets, and began traveling regularly to industry networking events in Canada, Texas, California, Arizona and beyond.

"Early on, we started traveling quite a bit to see what trends were

coming, so we could prepare, educate and teach these applications." However, before passing on the new technology, "we try to be our own guinea pigs," said Mattingly.

As they quickly ascended to big-business entrepreneurs, Watters and Mattingly never lost sight of what brought them there. Throughout their success, they maintain the open-ended curiosity and thoughtfulness of any good technician, continually learning and evaluating their own systems and processes of business.

Alliant regularly hosts "Lunch and Learn" events. Typically in a hotel banquet room, Alliant gathers its clients, presenting one emerging form of technology and how it can be applied to their business.

As with most technology, "It's not if, but when. Lunch and learns are our way of exposing the Valley to new technology," said Watters.

Most recently, Alliant introduced local business leaders to "SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) Trunking," or an "Internet dial tone."

The most recent business technology to have caught fire is "cloud computing." While it does not yet have the capacity to host a cloud, Alliant does provide e-mail and

back-up cloud services to its clients.

In line with the nature of emerging technology, Mattingly explained, "two years ago, we'd start talking cloud and eyes would glaze over," but now Watters explained, "businesses come in want to put everything on the cloud."

The advent of cloud computing has allowed Alliant to focus in other areas of technology.

Mattingly: "We don't have to be experts in the back end of an exchange server. We're trading off the hardware for a more recurring revenue stream."

The implementation of these emerging technologies has in large part been made possible due to Yakima's recent increase in fiber optic cabling. While some areas still face dead spots, telecommunications companies like CenturyLink, Integra and Charter have ramped up efforts to provide more bandwidth options to the Valley.

Additionally, Alliant has benefited from the recent hike in commercial construction driven in large part by agricultural firms like Columbia Reach and John I. Haas.

Agricultural businesses have always

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Keeping Pace

Continued from page 25

embraced technology in their packing lines, noted Mattingly, but they are just now unleashing the full potential of communications and information systems. "As they build new lines, productivity is everywhere. It's a whole new level of automation with state of the art real-time inventory, handheld scanning, bar-coding — all beaming up to one access point," explained Mattingly. "This includes a lot of fiber optic cabling throughout the building."

Doing The Basics: Security And Risk Management

From recent revelations of Bradley Manning and Eric Snowden to the hackers taking over the servers of the New York Times and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), information security has become a hot topic as of late. Even Washington state had a run in with hackers this

past year, as anywhere from 94,000 to 160,000 Social Security numbers were taken from the state Administrative Office of the Courts.

Fortunately for local small-business owners, they are rarely targets of attacks. If anything, explained Mattingly, they fall victim to "back-door Trojan horse viruses" — which can still do some damage.

Alliant focuses most of its energies toward risk assessment and manage-

ment. Nearly all of its clients have some sort of sensitive information, from financials to medical records to proprietary and legal information. While the company stays updated on federal and state regulations pertaining to clients' information security, the most critical steps Alliant can take, said Mattingly, are "ensuring you're doing the basics — from PCI (payment card industry) compliance to keeping antivirus and security patches up to date."

Alliant applies RMM (Remote Monitoring Management) software to determine the health of a network. In one sweeping diagnostic scan, the RMM reports the status of every bit of hardware and software, flagging mismatches and antiquated equipment.

The Industry Standard

In an industry marked by extreme competition, Alliant ascended to Ingram Micro's most recent SMB 500 list — a

"All clients have sensitive information. For us it's a matter of identifying and securing it."
-Scott Mattingly, Owner



significant barometer of a company's growth and development in the electronic services sector.

SMB cited last year's 80 percent growth in its rise to the 392nd spot.

Alliant partners with Ingram for most of its software and hardware.

With worldwide sales at \$10.3 billion and a net revenue of \$596 million in the second quarter of 2013 alone, Ingram is the largest wholesale distributor of networking equipment, computer hardware and software in the world.

During a time when many businesses were trading water, Alliant's

In the last ten years, Alliant has won numerous awards and been recognized by a variety of organizations. Most notably the company was named to most recent SMB 500, the list of top 500 retailers of Ingram products.



strength of business indicates overall healthy growth in the information technology sector, with SMB trading on the New York Stock Exchange (IM) near a 14-year high.

The list was cooperatively compiled by Ingram Micro's Business Intelligence Center, the SMB sales team and consulting firm affiliate, The 2112 group.

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