

High-tech business moves to Springfield

City hopes it helps reshape downtown

By Jason Roberson

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SPRINGFIELD | Renaissance Services Inc., a technology company specializing in the aerospace and defense industries, moved to downtown Springfield, an area city planners hope becomes a major technology hub.

Renaissance exemplifies the type of companies Springfield business leaders say they want to help reshape downtown and its surrounding areas.

"I'm absolutely excited," said Horton Hobbs IV, executive director of Center City Association, a nonprofit charged with revamping downtown Springfield. "It's a turning point. I mean, we already have small business offices and retail, but this is the first real technology company to come into downtown."

Renaissance is also the first high-tech business to invest in the area since LexisNexis announced plans for a new Data Center in Springfield.

Hobbs has a goal of at least 100 technology workers pacing the streets during lunch hours within two years. The biggest challenge, however, is in "swinging the perception of downtown," an obstacle that many Midwestern downtowns face.

Renaissance's founders Dan Sokol, 42, and Robert Morris, 53, said the move to downtown Springfield made logical business sense.

"We travel a lot," Morris said. "And the two most affordable airports in the region are Dayton and Columbus. We're 45 minutes from both. Cincinnati's airport is too expensive."

In addition, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, a major military client, and Ohio State University are close by.

Renaissance currently employs five senior personnel with plans to add up to 15 additional employees by 2005. Right now there's a job opening for a senior program manager with experience in the aerospace industry, paying a six-figure salary.

Sokol and Morris started the company seven months ago, but neither is a stranger to business in the Miami Valley.

Sokol was the founder and chief executive of Cohesia Corp., a software company with offices in Dayton and Cincinnati. Cohesia was formerly known as Renaissance Engineering. It sold the technology in the automotive, aerospace and metals industries.

Sokol was in his late 20s when he started Renaissance Engineering. In 1995, he shifted from consulting to developing IntelliDoc, a program that automatically reads engineering specifications — cumbersome documents that spell out exactly what materials and processes to use. He hired two Russian immigrants as his information technology staff and put them to work in the basement of his Butler Twp. home. Meanwhile, he cobbled together a National Science Foundation grant, a client fee and loans from CityWide Development Corp. and the National Center for Industrial Competitiveness to pay for work on the software.

In all, he raised more than \$20 million in venture capital from companies such as General Electric, and grew the company from a single person start-up to more than 50 employees. The Dayton-based company is still operating and is located at 714 E. Monument Ave., Suite 120.

Morris has more than 25 years experience in the aerospace and defense industries. He was chief of industrial base and technology for the Air Force at Wright-Pat. He has also worked at GE Aircraft Engines as manager of GE's special products operation.

In essence, Renaissance simplifies the workload for companies in the aerospace and defense industries.

For example, Honeywell International Inc., a \$23 billion Morristown, N.J. jet engine manufacturer, called on Renaissance in August to help streamline its communications with the plethora of global companies it works with to build engines.

"They purchase thousands of parts from all over the world," Sokol said. And interacting with those companies "is expensive."

Renaissance was able to combine Honeywell's existing software into an online format that simplified Honeywell's day-to-day business with its global partners.

When planning their new company, Sokol and Morris decided not to seek venture capital.

"It's the eat-what-you-kill method," Morris said.

Sokol and Morris said they will grow without outside help because capital expenditures are mostly supported by money earned from completed projects.

"But when you're not venture capital funded, you're maxing out credit cards," Sokol said