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As we enter the Christmas season, I have one primary wish for the Utah tech community. Not world peace. Not a recall of Arnold Schwarzenegger (he's the least of California's problems). Not even a tour of the Noni Juice factory.

No, what I really want is for entrepreneurship to boom in Utah.

What does entrepreneurship mean to Utah's tech workers? In my experience, it means several things, depending on where one sits in the corporate food chain. Executives see it as either wholly their personal domain (i.e., they, as founders, are the only entrepreneurs in their company) and/or something to be stamped out of employees as something disloyal or unproductive. Employees, for their parts, either equate entrepreneurship with unemployment or something that can only be done after they've left

their existing employers.

None of these perspectives is right. None of them is productive. All of them are rampant in Utah.

Life is different in Silicon Valley. (Attention: Generalizations ahead. Generally true, but not always.) I knew more than one employee who left his/her company to create a startup, and had that startup funded by their former employer. Oracle is a fantastic example of a company that breeds hard-core entrepreneurs: Marc Benioff (CEO, Salesforce.com), Craig Conway (CEO, PeopleSoft), Tom Siebel (CEO, Siebel). As Brad Bertoch of the Wayne Brown Institute reminds us, Silicon Valley has an abundance mentality. There are no non-competes in Silicon Valley, because the Valley understands that competition is good for all, even if momentarily not good for one. (It's called a free market, and it's a good thing.) In the Valley, I also found entrepreneurship to be rife ****[within]**** companies. Employees think beyond their cube, because ambition is RABID in Silicon Valley. True enough, we have this happen in Utah, on occasion. Cymphonix, formerly Broadband Solutions, created a killer bandwidth management tool in the course of building its fixed wireless ISP business, and now the company is built around that tool, and is doing exceptionally well. But that is the exception.

If I may offer a personal example...

Novell has made a big bet on Linux and other open source software. (So has SCO, but it's Christmas-time, and I don't want to depress everyone.) The company acquired Ximian, about as sexy as you can get in the open source world, and has committed to move its entire software portfolio over to run on Linux. Big moves.

We've had a lot of press on this. Within the company, it has felt like everyone is waiting for "Marketing to do its job," and so you'd be hard-pressed to find volunteered articles, speaking engagements, etc. by run-of-the-mill Novell employees.

I may be the lone exception to that rule. When I started at Novell, my job was to attract developers to the NetWare platform. This was not an easy task, by any stretch, and over time I opted instead to try to push the company to a more attractive platform, Linux. I started attending and speaking at Linux conferences. (In fact, I had to take time off to attend my first - Enterprise Linux Forum in Boston - and Novell wouldn't cover my airfare, either.) I also started writing articles and submitting them to industry rags.

As momentum for open source grew within the company (perhaps, in very, very small part, due to my efforts), I decided that Novell needed to get behind an open source business conference in a big way. Unfortunately, no such conference existed. When I first raised the idea of Novell organizing the conference, there was very little interest and anemic encouragement. So, I went off on my own, spending my early mornings and late evenings (with a group of non-Novell friends) gathering speakers and sponsors for the event.

Today, the Open Source Business Conference (osbc2004.com), to be held in March 2004, promises to be one of the industry's premier technology conferences, with an unmatched roster of speakers and a marquee sponsor list. While not a Novell event, Novell will sponsor it and likely be heavily associated with it. Novell's efforts to successfully reinvent itself will be that much closer to completion.

I have not cornered any market on entrepreneurship. Far from it. But my little acts of entrepreneurship have benefited and will continue to benefit my employer. Yours can, too. If, however, your particular idea requires you to leave to start your own company, so be it. Utah will be the better for it and, in the long run, so will your employer. Utah's best entrepreneurs are waiting to happen. Be one of them.

Matt Asay is an active participant in Utah's venture community. Upon moving back to Utah in 2002 after several years in Silicon Valley, Matt founded the SL Venture Breakfast series. He also actively works to connect entrepreneurs with angel investors and venture capitalists, both in Utah and outside the state. Readers can reach him at mjasay@attbi.com.

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