

How can we use our information systems to make the world a better place?

“a-ha” moment

By Tracie Grimes

About to receive his master’s degree in social work from UC Berkeley, Jim Damian wanted to find work that he would love, but work that would also make a difference in the world. “Saving children, one child at a time” was his mantra. It seemed like a perfect fit when Damian landed a job in the child welfare department in Oakland. He was sure this was a place where he could really make a difference. But it didn’t take long for Damian to realize that saving the children, or even one child for that matter, wasn’t as easy as it sounded.

“When we would find a young child...there was a certain protocol we’d have to follow to get the child the services he needed. And following protocol meant weeding out information and procedures from volumes and volumes of manuals. Most of the time, critical information would be missing from the manuals. It was beyond frustrating.”

Soon, Damian found a new mantra: “There’s gotta be a better way.” And that’s when Damian had the “a-ha” moment that changed his career path and lead him down a road riddled with risks.

“After working as a social worker for a while, I moved up into the position of information systems manager. This move didn’t change my dreams of making a difference in the world; it just tweaked them a little. I started thinking along the lines of ‘How can we use our information system to make the world a better place?’ I began building information systems and feeling good about being able to help out on this level, and then one morning I woke up and it was just like a light bulb turned on right over my head.”

Damian said his entrepreneurial epiphany could help more than just the children; anyone who has to rely on forms, manuals, photographs, and documents of any kind, could benefit from his idea.

But there were some pretty significant risks involved.

“I would have to leave a great job that paid well, had great benefits, move my young >>



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Jim DAMIAN

Risktakers

family from an area we all really loved, and run the risk of going from this fantastic life and amazing career track to something that may not work out. It's pretty scary; I found that you really put yourself out there when you make a huge change like this because, for me, like most people, the sense of who you are is tied to your career. The marketplace dictates who wins and who loses, and you're taking a big risk personally when you make a dramatic change that has a possibility of failing."

So, in 2005, Damian acted on his entrepreneurial impetus, moved his family to Bakersfield, and founded Stria, which means "channel" or "groove," to fill a unique niche in the business world.

Stria provides high-speed document scanning for any type of business, from government entities and hospitals, to lawyers and doctors, allowing organizations to streamline their miles of paperwork.

"On a day-to-day basis, our clients have a more efficient business model because we can scan the data at a high rate of speed and convert it into a format instantly recognizable by the client's information system. We use a method called 'SecurePaper' to convert any physical document, i.e., anything that is paper or film (maps, charts, blueprints, photographs, etc.), and automatically put it into a format that allows users to access information using a keyword. This process can save hundreds of business hours a week because employees don't have to manually search for the documents they need."

An added bonus to having Stria scan and digitally organize a business's documents is that digital documents are more protected, not only in the event of natural or manmade disasters, but from the standpoint of keeping information secure.

"Once we've processed the data, the files can be returned to the customer, stored in the Stria facility, or destroyed. If the company opts to have the paper destroyed, BARC (Bakersfield Association for Retarded Citizens), one of our partners, comes in to shred the papers."

Establishing company headquarters in Bakersfield not only made sense from a geographical standpoint ("We can have

"We definitely want to grow the company, but we don't necessarily want to be the biggest. We want to be the best." -Jim Damian

staff in northern or southern California within a few hours"), but it also meant that Damian would be coming back home to Kern County.

"I grew up in Tehachapi and know that Kern County grows hard-working, eager, ethical workers that have the drive it takes to get a start-up company on its feet."

A tour of Stria's Bakersfield offices (Stria has offices throughout California and Dallas, Texas) makes it plain to see that organization is the name of Stria's game. Executive desks at Stria are free of those stacks of paper and files one normally sees overflowing onto chairs, credenzas, and even floors. Save for a "Two-for-one" dinner coupon or free drink ticket ("Those aren't going in any scanner! I'm using those ASAP!" he laughs), Damian's desk is neat as a pin. The only evidence of paper is the massive amounts that are feeding through the high-octane scanners on the scanner-operators desks.



Once the data is scanned and processed electronically, companies can opt to store the original files safely at the Stria facility.

"The key to doing massive scanings is document preparation," Damian pointed out, noting this involves setting up barcodes for each page and box of documents, plus staple and paper clip removal, and ensuring a good quality scan.

"It sounds simple, but we can take out paper clips and staples and fix ripped documents incredibly fast. We are experts in that. Not everybody can say they are experts in taking out staples, but our guys can."

Stria employees are not only experts in the staple-removal arena, they are trained to ensure each scan is readable, which is no small task considering the scans are flashing across their computer screens at an incredibly high rate of speed.

Although Stria prides itself on being able to create jobs to help our local economy, the company has some pretty tough standards employees must live up to. Each employee must go through a background check before they can touch any of the documents going through the Stria facility. Staff members are trained and certified to deal with the multiple requirements each industry they work with has. They've been certified to work with and manage the special and sensitive documents each client uses and Stria does not offshore any work, Damian added.

"Security is a key component to our business. We take confidentiality very seriously because whether we're getting a

shoebox of tax returns from a small business or an airplane hangar full of documents from a large company, these records are showing the 'DNA' of that entity. That's not something we take lightly around here. We feel honored that we are able to preserve the 'life force' of every company we work with."

It's this commitment to professionalism that has helped Stria find its "groove" and place number 722 on the Inc. 5000 list in 2010, Damian said proudly.

"You know, when I first started the company, people thought I was crazy. Now, I look at the fact that we're scanning about two million documents per week (as opposed to 20,000 per week when we first started), are on the INC 5000 list, are doing business in about 10 states, and have about six or seven teams ready at any given moment to mobilize and

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go on site practically on a moment's notice. I don't think I was crazy," Damian smiled, "but I know I didn't get here by myself. My two co-owners, Rory Banks and Scott Williams, are big risk takers just like me and another risk taker is joining us to direct business development—Scott Garrison, the former President and co-owner of Lightspeed Systems."

Damian and his co-owners have developed quite an appetite for growth, he said. But it's not growth just for the sake of building up the number of clients.

"We definitely want to grow the company, but we don't necessarily want to be the biggest. We want to be the best."

And Damian, Banks, Williams, and Garrison aren't afraid of the new set of risks facing them in their quest to become the best.

"We've survived the risks of starting up a new company and have come a long way in making a name for ourselves within the industry not only because we offer unparalleled expertise in document conversion, but because we've established strategic alliances with industry leaders such as Autonomy, BCS Systems, CMJ Information Technology, InfiniSys, PSIGEN, RICOH, and SpringCM. These partnerships allow Stria to offer a host of document lifecycle services that extend far beyond conversion and bring us into the realm of information management, records management, and on-demand workflow," Damian explained.

Stria is ready for the risks that face them in the future, which includes being flexible enough to know when its time to switch gears.

"We plan on being around for a very long time and to do that we need to be flexible. For instance, a couple of years ago, we were working mostly with governmental clients. Now, we don't have any; our client base has diversified into the medical, law, and energy fields. Things change because of the economy, because of technology, because of a lot of factors, and a company that's able to withstand the test of time has to recognize that and address the changing clients and the changing needs of the clients." ❖

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