

Leader broadcasts clear signal for growth

Robert Jacobson heads Global Communications Solutions, which logged \$140 million in sales in 2009

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Robert Jacobson could be the poster child for workaholics.

A few years ago, he traveled to an Air Force base in Panama City, Fla., for a two-day meeting and ended up staying for almost a month. He had a 4-month-old son at home and used a Web cam at night to see him from his hotel.

"I kept buying more clothes, extending a couple of more days and working an opportunity to help the explosive ordinance disposal teams that were dismantling the (improvised explosive devices) in Iraq," he says.

The dedication paid off.



Photo by Kimberly Makrize

Robert Jacobson

Position: Executive vice president and general manager of Global Communications Solutions, a division of L-3 Communications Holdings Inc.

Age: 49

Education: B.S. in mechanical engineering, Clarkson University, Potsdam, St. Lawrence County, 1982; completed the Harris Corp. graduate business program at the University of Florida, 1984

Family: Wife, Cathy; stepdaughter, Amber, 17; sons Robert, 6, and Ben, 4

Residence: Fairport

Activities: Riding Harley-Davidson motorcycles, golf

Quote: "Growing and winning are very addictive in the business world. We have created an environment where our people can grow, learn and be rewarded."

His firm, the Global Communications Solutions division of L-3 Communications Holdings Inc., ended up with a \$15 million order, which has since grown to more than \$25 million cumulatively.

Jacobson's drive helped propel him into his current post as vice president and general manager of GCS.

The firm supplies deployable satellite communications products, systems and air-time for government, broadcast media, insurers and other commercial customers. The majority of the firm's business, nearly 90 percent, comes from the U.S. military. GCS equipment also is used by customers such as Fox, ABC and NBC news operations.

Frank York founded the company in 1995 as Global Communications Solutions Inc. after working for 18 years at Harris Corp.'s RF Communications division in Rochester as a design engineer, director of product management and director of U.S. government sales.

In 2007, GCS was acquired by L-3, one of the largest defense companies in the

country. L-3 (NYSE: LLL), which is based in New York City, employs more than 66,000 people worldwide. The company reported 2008 sales of \$14.9 billion.

Jacobson, 49, went to work at GCS in 2005 as its vice president of sales and marketing. In 2008, he moved into the top spot when York retired.

GCS has grown to 146 workers, up from 70 in 2007, and has several openings, including jobs for engineering and program managers as well as manufacturing positions.

The division had \$38 million in sales the year before Jacobson came. For 2009, GCS' annual revenue exceeded \$140 million.

"Growing and winning are very addictive in the business world," Jacobson says. "We have created an environment where our people can grow, learn and be rewarded."

Building business

Engineering was a logical fit for Jacobson, since he loved building things in his youth and enjoyed shop class. He describes his childhood as modest, living with his family

in a 600-square-foot home in Fairport.

His father, the late Robert Jacobson, was a firm believer in education. A refrigerator mechanic who owned his own business despite losing a hand at age 30, the elder Jacobson worked hard to send his children to good colleges.

Jacobson went to Clarkson University in northern New York, where he received his bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering in 1982. Days later, he started working at RF Communications.

At the time, Jacobson was content to be an engineer. But during his second year at RF Communications, he was selected by the company to attend a graduate business program at the University of Florida, which he completed in 1984. The studies redirected Jacobson's passion.

"I found I liked business more than engineering," Jacobson says, adding that he developed an interest in disciplines including sales, marketing, finance and accounting. "I loved the mix of all of the disciplines it requires to properly grow a healthy business."

He used his postgraduate education to hone his sales and marketing skills. During his tenure at RF Communications, Jacobson spent little time in Rochester. He lived on military bases in New Jersey and Florida, selling communications equipment.

In 1997, RF Communications president Chester Massari asked him to return to Rochester. The move made Jacobson nervous.

"Here I was, 38 years old and back in my hometown," he says.

He remembers hearing at the time that if you spent 20 years at a company, there was a good chance you would stay until retirement.

"I didn't know if that's what I wanted in life," he says.

Then a headhunter contacted Jacobson about a sales and marketing job in Florida. He spent the next several years working in that field at companies in Nevada and Wisconsin. He helped boost the companies' sales and then sell the firms to larger buyers. And he found the work exciting and rewarding.

"I believe I was able to succeed by understanding how to strike the proper balance of all of the disciplines," Jacobson says. "All legs of the stool have to grow equally to have balance."

Joining GCS

York, a longtime friend, approached him about GCS. After some consideration, Jacobson took the job.

Today Jacobson spends roughly 30 percent of his time traveling to customer sites in places such as Washington, D.C.; Florida; South Carolina and New Jersey. The balance of his time is spent at GCS head-

quarters in Victor.

A typical day in the office is spent 30 percent on new product development, 20 percent reviewing manufacturing and program revenues, 30 percent on new bids and pursuits, and 20 percent on human resources, finance and other corporate matters.

The key to being a good leader is listening more than speaking, Jacobson says.

"You learn by listening," he says. "I am surrounded by extremely intelligent people, and I want to hear what they have to say."

Jacobson is proud of creating an entrepreneurial environment where people are empowered to make decisions, be creative and have a passion to beat the competition. He also keeps the organization focused on customers and competitors. The competitors include General Dynamics Corp., Rockwell Collins Inc. and Telecommunications Systems Inc.

"I remind people that we are in a daily battle with the competition," Jacobson says.

The GCS staff—including many former RF Communications employees—works as a team and has a good relationship inside and outside of the office, he adds.

Jacobson is proud of the firm's ability to integrate new hires into the organization. He looks for new people who are highly intelligent, will challenge him to do better and have strengths in his weak areas—and a passion to win.

"In the past, I have worked at companies that just totally rejected outsiders," he says. "We love new hires; we embrace their new ideas, their diversity, their perceptions on how we do things, and we really try to get the best out of every employee."

He holds a breakfast meeting monthly, dubbed "Breakfast with Bob," to hear the ideas of 10 different employees representing all departments in the company, answer questions and look for new opportunities.

"It really creates a family environment where everyone's voice is heard," he says.

GCS has a quota club, and winners accompany Jacobson on annual trips to spots including Marco Island in Florida.

His management model appears to be working. GCS doubled its revenue and earnings from 2005 to 2007 and doubled them again from 2007 to 2009.

Sales growth of 10 percent is projected for 2010. A goal is to capture new business from the Defense Department and the U.S. military while expanding international sales. The firm also is broadening its product offering into other frequency bands and base-band equipment, items that are typically bought from other suppliers to connect to GCS equipment.

There has been talk of combining GCS sites—two at Omnitech Place in Victor totaling some 60,000 square feet and a warehouse down the road—into a stand-alone building at the site.

Challenges ahead

Despite the growth, challenges remain.

The administration of President Barack Obama has made business much harder for high-end suppliers, he says.

"We try to provide the highest quality and performance products in the industry," Jacobson says. "That does not always go well with a low-bidder-wins mentality that is being pushed today."

So GCS puts an emphasis on providing what the customer needs and wants, he says.

"We don't add features that are just 'nice to have,'" he says. "We don't want excess cost, size or weight."

Larry Watts, vice president of manufacturing operations, worked with Jacobson at RF Communications but did not know him well until Jacobson came to GCS.

Jacobson has an exceptional memory and is able to recall details years later, Watts says. Jacobson sets the bar high for everyone, including himself.

"He works very hard, not worrying about what day it is or if he is on vacation, and expects the same from his team, yet he rewards people well for following that example," Watts says.

Watts also is impressed with Jacobson's knowledge of business finance.

"He truly believes that failure is not an option and instills that sense in all of us," Watts says. "He has taught us not to give up until every option has been extinguished."

Watts describes Jacobson as the best salesperson he has ever met.

"He knows how to close a deal and not give up against a competitor until the ink is dry on the contract," Watts says.

Role models

Jacobson says his commitment to the customer comes from his father, who is one of his role models.

"Without customer orders, you have nothing," he says. "The greatest ideas would die without a customer to buy them."

Jacobson says his father taught him how to treat a customer, how to respect a customer, how to listen to a customer and that your customers are never an interruption in your day. They are why you go to work and why we all have jobs.

"I am always amazed how many people in business leave customers waiting," he says. "Our customers always come first."

Jacobson cites GCS founder York as another of his business mentors. York taught

him the need to be accurate, specific and articulate in all of his customer presentations, as well as how important it is to take care of employees.

A final mentor is former RF Communications head Massari.

"He taught me more than anyone about how to run a business, how to manage a business, how to make sound business decisions, how to be fair and, most importantly, to be a great listener," Jacobson says.

Jacobson is quick to boast about the benefits of working for L-3's GCS. He admits that the worse part of the job is the time it takes away from his family, although some of his workaholic tendencies can be attributed to his own character. Jacobson says he thinks about work around the clock. His office phone forwards calls to his cell phone, allowing him to take calls 24 hours a day.

"I love my work, and when I get to the office in the morning, I lose all track of time," he says. "I could stay here half the night."

Despite the long hours, his family is among his biggest supporters, he says.

"I really love what I do," he says. "Every job I have had ... has been a great experience, and I have been fully consumed. I know it is tough on my family, and I always try to find ways to get a little more balance," he says.

Jacobson lives in Fairport with his wife, Cathy; stepdaughter, Amber, 17; and sons Robert, 6, and Ben, 4.

His house is a four-minute drive from work. The short commute allows him to leave the office at 6 p.m., have dinner with the family, put the boys to bed and make a list of what to do the next day.

His family also comes to the office for lunch regularly.

When not working, Jacobson enjoys golf and Harley-Davidson motorcycles. He has ridden Harleys through Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Virginia, Wisconsin, New York and California. At one time he owned three bikes and a custom trailer. Then came children, so he is down to one—a 2001 customized Road King.

"My wife will never let me sell it," he says. "We bought it in 2000 and rode it all

while we were dating, including a couple of trips to Daytona for bike week."

John Colaruotolo, president of Anco Builders Inc. and an owner of Casa Larga Vineyards and Winery, says Jacobson is committed to his family.

Anco built Jacobson's house, and the two became friends.

Colaruotolo says Jacobson was firm but fair when working with subcontractors on the house, and it is a style that translates to his management of the business. Jacobson is a motivator and often looks to find a way to get a job done, even if a solution is not easy to find, the builder says.

"He helps people raise their own bars," Colaruotolo says, adding that Jacobson also works alongside others to help them achieve goals.

Jacobson says he plans to keep focusing on hiring talented new workers, working with area high schools and colleges, and on satisfying GCS' customers.

"These are all activities which make you feel great at the end of the day," he says.

adeckert@rbj.net / 585-546-8303