



TECH STAR



## Tom Karren: Integrating Technology with Leadership

[By Akbar Ali]

Tom Karren, founder of WingateWeb, a company that makes enterprise event management software, has had extensive experience in many aspects of the technology industry, including entrepreneurship, software engineering, and grunt programming, as well as maintaining his own company, which has had continuously increasing revenues since 1998. Under Tom's leadership and innovative vision, WingateWeb has grown to become the event management technology industry leader, offering a comprehensive array of client services, including technical consulting, integration, custom branding implementation, account and project management, call center support, and financial management, in addition to marketing, sales, training, and on-site support.

Tom traces his interest in technology back to the formative years of his early childhood. His father, a university professor and civil engineer, encouraged him to get involved with a whole host of technical disciplines: engineering, computing, design, drafting structures, building kit computers, networking, and writing software programs. It wasn't long before Tom started to create his own programs, he says. "I was writing software and drafting using computers before I graduated from high school."

Tom also derived a good deal of inspiration from the business environment in which he grew up: as a native of Provo, Utah, he witnessed the unprecedented success of start-up companies like Novell and Word Perfect, which would both go on to become industry giants. He says, "I believed that there would be a fantastic opportunity as the market matured to create new companies."

The years of practice began to pay off early for Tom: while still in high school, he won a national competition for designing and drafting a home using a personal computer at a time when the vast majority of drafting was still being done by hand. "I learned that computing technology would change the world and give business an edge," he reveals.

Soon thereafter, he was off to Brigham Young University, where in addition to earning a

bachelor's degree in computer science, he was able to relish the college experience of "learning and figuring out adult life."

He spent much of his time at college in a student ward which provided him with a rich social network. "Between that and my

personal recreational pursuits, I had just enough spare time for work and school."

Tom financed his education by spending his summers as a river guide on the Colorado River, providing him with his first experiences in tourism and hospitality. He also developed important interpersonal skills through his interactions with tourists from across the world—skills which have since proven valuable in his career in event planning.

Tom's first official tech job was as a full-time programmer, a position given to him by one of his university professors after he had successfully completed a senior-level course early. Subsequently, he joined Utah-based industry giant Novell as a software developer, working as part of a major product team. At the time, Java programming language and server-based computing was becoming increasingly prevalent in software writing. He reveals, "I could see that there was a huge paradigm shift on the horizon for software applications. The web was going to enable centralized data management with ubiquitous access. I wanted to get involved in that kind of revolutionary software development."

Eventually, Tom would leave Novell to start his own company, a move he considers one of the most pivotal of his career. The company he founded worked on software for the

**Q. What do you do for fun?**

**A.** I enjoy spending time outdoors skiing, mountain biking, hiking, or just relaxing.

**Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?**

**A.** Uh—I guess I'd have to ask my parents that question. They have not gotten themselves an iPod yet.

**Q. What is the last magazine you read?**

**A.** *Outside* magazine.

**Q. What is your favorite TV show?**

**A.** Currently, I like *The Office*.

**Q. Who is your role model?**

**A.** I think my kids are pretty cool. I find their enthusiasm inspiring.

**Q. What makes you laugh?**

**A.** I like dry humor. I find spontaneous real life interactions are often the funniest.



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PC-based online banking industry. The goal, he says, was to work collaboratively with a team to “develop a web-based system for internet banking that took that company to a whole new level.” Tom was, of course, onto something quite revolutionary, realizing that the available methods of personal banking were about to experience a monumental change that would make them both more customer-oriented and convenient to use. It was at this moment, he says, that he decided it was the perfect time to begin his own Software As A Service (SAAS) business.

Along the way, Tom has met with both success and failure, though he credits the best lessons as having derived from the more difficult professional periods. One example early in his career was the

launching of a highly advanced application into the market which was later revealed to suffer from rather severe scalability and usability issues. The solution, he says, was to go back to the drawing (or programming) board: “We worked very hard over a period of days and nights to identify and resolve the issues we found, and turned the project around. That taught us a lot about the level of work that was needed to design and implement good software solutions.”

He also notes that the greatest teachers he has had along the way have been customers and partners who have forced him to perform at ever higher levels of expertise, pushing him far outside his comfort zone, and helping him to make some real technological breakthroughs in the process. “These

individuals played a key role in helping us understand that need to have customer-driven priorities and to work hard to innovate new solutions.”

Whether you’re a techie newbie with a struggling start-up or an established pro looking to branch out into the next big thing, Tom believes that passion and dedication are the two most vital components of success: “You need to find something you love to do because to become successful at it you will need to eat, drink, and sleep it to some extent.”

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