

# THE TRIBUNE

AMES TRIBUNE > BUSINESS

## Business Times: Software on the assembly floor *Ames-based Proplanner is serving manufacturers worldwide*

Print Page

By Bob Zientara  
Staff Writer

Published: Saturday, February 12, 2011 11:53 PM CST

Scale models of several wheeled vehicles adorn the office of Dave Sly, the president and CEO of Ames-based Proplanner, Inc.

They include a model DeLorean (he once drove one), a poster of a vintage Corvette on the wall with the inscription, "Did you ever wonder what your mom saw in your dad," and a model of a combine.

In some way, all three of them fit into what Proplanner does as a software development company, Sly said.

"That's our specialty, designing plans for how to build vehicles," he said. Typically, we work with clients who build lots of things with wheels. We design the tasks, the arrangement of the workstations, and the tools and the parts that are needed at various stages of assembly.

"We tell our clients that we take products, processes, plants and resources and mash them together to produce a solution."

Those clients include manufacturing giants such as Case-New Holland and John Deere.

"And we have operations in Belgium, the United Kingdom, Italy, Brazil and Canada," Sly said. "We also have contracts with manufacturers of military and heavy equipment vehicles."

There are 13 employees at Ames, mostly (software) development personnel. Two more Ames positions recently were created.

Proplanner also has sales operations at Minneapolis, the East Coast and a third now under development in Detroit.

Bob John, who's based away from Ames, recently came on board as vice president of worldwide sales.

"He is managing dealers in Brazil, the Philippines, India and several European Union countries," Sly said.

But the nerve center for Proplanner continues to be right here in Mid-Iowa, in a building at 2221 North Loop Drive in the Iowa State University Research Park.

"The Ames location has been good for us," Sly said. "It's in the Central time zone, the cost of living is competitive, there's a strong work ethic and the state is a good promoter of business."

The presence of ISU "is extremely important to us," he said. "Just about all of our employees are ISU grads. We've hired undergrads to work on projects, and we've cooperated with the university to do research work."

Most Proplanner employees hold ISU master's or doctorate degrees in engineering or computer science, he said.

**Here's something for free**



[Click here for larger image](#)  
[Purchase Photos Here](#)

Contributed Photo

In the Proplanner application, assembly workers see instructions on these large overhead screens when they are putting parts on a product being produced.

In a two-desk carrel on the Proplanner office floor, software developers Neal Kaloupek and Rob Timms are involved in what Sly said are the first steps in Proplanner's next evolution.

"We are developing Internet-based solutions, looking to make free stuff available for potential clients to launch at their businesses," Sly said.

Proplanner would make money when those same clients come back "to buy additional features from us as they add on" to their manufacturing processes, he said.

Kaloupek, of Ames, came on board in August 2010 while Timms, senior developer, celebrated his fourth anniversary with the company in January.

"I've always loved programming, but I was doing a lot of commuting to (jobs in) Marshalltown and Cedar Falls," Kaloupek said. "I was happy to get something here in Ames. When the opportunity came up, I jumped at it."

Timms said he started at Proplanner part-time while still attending ISU.

"It wasn't so much the kind of software work they were doing that attracted me," he said. "It was more the idea of working for a small company and the chance to be exposed to a lot of variety. You're in touch with the product from start to finish, and even to interact with the clients."

Timms said he and Kaloupek are putting the finishing touches on the give-away product that will be launched soon.

"The idea is to make something that manufacturers can use right away," he said. "Then, we tell them, if you like what you see so far, there's a much bigger suite of products for you to buy from us, with a lot more functionality."

### **Turning clients into dealers**

Sly said consulting engineers are being targeted by his company.

"We originally thought of them as customers, but now they are becoming dealers," he said. "That's mainly because they're so persuasive with their own clients.

"That's been a fundamental shift for us. Instead of selling our product to the engineering consultants, we're collaborating with them to help them get more jobs."

The engineers used to look at a client's factory, make necessary changes in assembly procedures and layouts, document the changes and leave the client with a three-ring binder.

"But how does the customer adapt?" Sly said. "It's almost as if the project is out of date as soon as the three-ring binder is delivered."

But with the process now web-enabled, clients pay a monthly subscription fee to get all the necessary updates and changes, he said.

"It transforms the contents of the three-ring binder into a living document that the factory, the engineers, and we can change and improve," Sly said.

"Let's say Case is changing the engine cowling or the cabin design. Each change affects the assembly, and we build those changes into our process."

### **Evolution from EAI**

Sly founded an ancestor of the company, Cimtech, in 1987 at what became known as Building 1 at the Research Park. He joined Engineering Animation Institute when it acquired the company in 1997. He bought interest in Proplanner when it was spun off by Siemens after the European giant purchased EAI early in this decade.

The company has gone through "two or three years of 50 percent to 100 percent growth," he said.

Bob Zientara can be reached at (515) 663-6961, or [rzientara@amestrib.com](mailto:rzientara@amestrib.com).

Copyright © 2011 - Ames Tribune