

tech²GO

Private eyes

Portland firm uses the Web to create customized digital security systems

BY SCOTT SUTHERLAND

Bob Flagg has two catch-phrases he uses to describe Webzeye, the digital surveillance system his company has developed: "watching the world work" and "SEE there even when you can't BE there."

The former suggests Flagg's primary market for Webzeye — companies concerned with in-house security and theft issues — while the latter, despite its corniness, conveys his new spin on the old idea of workplace surveillance. Webzeye uses the Internet as its medium, meaning that a factory owner in Camden, Maine can observe her production facility in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in real time on her home computer, and control the multi-camera surveillance system with a few strokes on her keyboard. As Webzeye's promotional literature puts it, "it's the 21st century solution to security problems, quality control and employee monitoring."

Webzeye is one of the many products and services offered by Web Engineering Systems & Services (WESS), the Portland company Flagg founded in January 2001. "We're engineers — we define a problem, and we come up with a solution," Flagg says. The company is involved in an assortment of IT



Candid camera: Bob Flagg, WESS CEO, says his new Webzeye system can be adapted for a variety of uses

and telecommunications work, with Web services like application development, site hosting and streaming media forming the bulk of WESS's revenues.

Web Engineered Systems & Services

CEO: Bob Flagg

Location: Portland, with a satellite office in Farmingdale

Founded: 2001

Employees: 12

Products: Webzeye, a digital surveillance system; various IT and Web-related services

Estimated revenues, 2002: \$600,000

Estimated revenues, 2003: \$1 million

Phone: 761-2972

Solving a particular problem for a client was also the genesis of Webzeye, Flagg says. "After we did the first system we thought, hey, that's pretty cool,

and we put it in our bag of tricks," Flagg says. "But the more we talked about it, the more we decided Webzeye was a separate product. People are realizing we don't live in the same world after 9/11. We started developing the Webzeye trademark and marketing materials."

WESS has installed a half-dozen Webzeye systems in the past six months, Flagg says, including a system at Cianbro's Amethyst oil rig project on Portland's waterfront. "The rigs have received a lot of press, and we'd be remiss if we didn't have some kind of surveillance on the site," says Andrew Whitten, who handles sales for Cianbro Data Services, a Cianbro subsidiary. "It's not an anti-terrorism measure — it's not like we have 20 cameras pointed at the water, watching for Al Qaeda gunboats. It's there to ensure the safety and security of our workers and the premises."

Whitten won't say how many cameras are employed by Cianbro's waterfront system or what it cost, but says it has been in place since July. "It made sense for us," Whitten says. "It's a very

open, non-proprietary way of doing things. We can use a normal PC and cameras, and we can use the Internet to

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Bob Flagg, WESS CEO

bring all the images together. It's a very common-sense, cost-effective solution for us, and it works."

In the aftermath of BroadcastAmerica

Common-sense and cost-effective are Flagg's favorite descriptions for the work his company does. Flagg himself comes across as direct and no-nonsense; he wears his hair in a center-part shag, is fond of describing himself as a "good ol' boy from Maine," and displays a boyish enthusiasm for solving the myriad problems associated with modern technology.

Over a lunch of pepperoni pizza and blue Gatorade in the windowless WESS offices, located on York Street in Portland, Flagg, 47, sketches his tech history: a degree in electrical engineering from UMaine, eight years handling computer issues for Central Maine Power, the establishment of a computer consulting business he called BonFire Enterprises. It was in 1998, during his stint with BonFire, that he hooked up with an emerging Portland company called BroadcastAmerica. The company

was planning to assemble radio stations from across the country and broadcast them over the Internet using streaming media technology, and asked Flagg to help out on the tech side.

He dove into the project in early 1999 and was hired by BroadcastAmerica six months later. "The next one-and-a-half years were a blur," he says, as the company grew rapidly, eventually signing more than 700 radio stations — and 80 television stations — across three continents. He traveled to Europe, and regularly rubbed elbows with New Economy giants. At the company's peak, Flagg oversaw a tech staff of 24 as senior v.p. of engineering. "We put together a data center that was unrivaled by anyone, anywhere," Flagg says. "We spent a couple million dollars, which isn't much for what we did." The overextended company finally ran out of money and filed for bankruptcy in November 2000 — BonFire is still owed \$40,000, Flagg says — but he insists that the technology is sound and that the idea will one day find a market. "When the right people figure it out, it'll come back," he predicts. "And I'll certainly want to take a look at it, too."

In the meantime, Flagg and his staff are developing new applications for the Webzeye product. Aside from traditional security uses, Flagg says, Webzeye can be used to monitor manufacturing processes and employees, as well as environments like schools and daycare centers. The system can be tied to cash registers in retail settings, he says, and it can be used for license plate recognition. He imagines Webzeye cameras watching lobsters in aquariums and monitoring gamblers in casinos — "the sky's the limit," he says.

It's that adaptability and ease of customization that Flagg says sets Webzeye apart from its competitors. "Most systems out there are just a single camera, a Web-cam concept, but we can build a system to suit the needs of our clients," he says. "We can do multiple cameras — indoors or out, wired or wireless — up to 16 on a single board in a single computer, and they can be controlled individually." Unlike video-based systems, which record constantly whether or not something is happening, the WESS digital system uses motion-sensitive cameras that only record when activated; the captured

images are saved to the host computer's hard drive, and can be accessed by another computer at a different site or by wireless devices. Systems start at about \$4,000, he says, "and increase rapidly from there."

Louise Roback, executive director of the Maine Civil Liberties Union, says she's not opposed to employers monitoring the workplace, but that they need to do so in a conscientious manner. "They need to carefully consider what's reasonable and appropriate for the kind of surveillance they want to do, and

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Andrew Whitten of Cianbro Data Services, on the security system for Cianbro's Amethyst project

they need to consider providing employees with written policies regarding employee privacy," says Roback, noting that employee complaints regarding privacy matters are increasing in Maine and across the country. "Employers need to respect basic privacy in bathrooms, changing areas and break rooms. Workers need places where they're not monitored."

Flagg says he and his staff will continue dreaming up new uses for Webzeye, and that his development of the product isn't necessarily driven by the needs of a suddenly security-conscious nation. "What we do is solve problems, and Webzeye is just one of those solutions," he says. "We're not out to prey on people's fears."

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