

DON MORRISON: A RADICAL INNOVATOR

By Karen Christensen

Don Morrison (MBA '83) knows all too well that 'the potential seeds of your destruction are sewn in your success.' As chief operating officer of Research in Motion (RIM), one of Canada's biggest technology success stories, his main focus these days is on scaling the business to keep up with its astronomical growth. "We went from revenue of US\$85 million to US\$221 million in just one year, and we're looking to double that again this year," he says. And there's no end in sight. "This is just the beginning of a new industry segment that heretofore hasn't existed. We created it, and now we have to make sure we can accommodate our growth."

Formed in 1984, RIM is a leading designer, manufacturer and marketer of wireless solutions for the mobile communications market, providing solutions for access to time-sensitive information including e-mail, messaging, Internet, and intranet-based applications. Its portfolio of award-winning products includes the family of RIM Wireless Handhelds™, the BlackBerry™ wireless e-mail solution, embedded radio-modems, and a suite of software development tools. RIM technology also enables a broad array of third-party developers and manufacturers around the world (including IBM/Lotus, Compaq and AOL) to enhance their own products and services with wireless connectivity. "In our relationships with these companies, we see ourselves more as an enabling technology than a displacer — we're not trying to compete with them."

How does the company manage to keep its collective finger on the pulse of innovation? Don says it all comes down to the people. "A few of the people on our team have a total obsession with trying to intuit *exactly* what the industry wants and *exactly* what individual users want: The technology is really just a product of this obsession."

In its hiring practices, RIM attempts to capture the best minds in Canada. "That's been key to our success. We also continue to invest very heavily in the R&D side."

Prior to joining RIM last year, Don spent 12 years with AT&T, working in places like Moscow, Warsaw, Prague, and the Middle East. He found that in general, Canadians are well-received around the world, whether as individuals or representatives of a company. "Being Canadian was an advantage whenever I was an intermediary in a discussion. Canadians tend to be seen as 'safe'," he says. "We are easier to trust — maybe because we don't pose as much of a threat."

Despite enjoying an 18-month technology lead on its competition, RIM isn't attempting to hold onto a 'virtual monopoly' in the wireless

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Internet space. "In any attractive market, competition is inevitable. What we want to be the best at is making sure that we're obsessive about what our customers want." The best way to sustain a

lead is through technology leadership, says Don. "The worst thing that can begin to creep into an organization is a degree of complacency that comes as a result of success."

Looking back on his career, a few major highlights jump out at him. "It was my AT&T team that helped reconnect Kuwait after the Gulf crisis. We were on the ground with the bullets still flying at the north end of the city." Closer to home, Don is proud to have been involved in helping Bell Canada build its rural telecommunications networks in Ontario and Quebec. "We fully digitized the networks, providing enhanced 911 service and access to the Internet — or 'Internet to the barn', as we called it."

In his off-hours, Don spends as much time as possible with his family. "My wife Debbie is my best friend — we've known each other since we were 17. I've also got two kids who I'm devoted to, and they happen to have the same interests I had as a kid — my daughter is very into the outdoors, and my son is a drummer — two passions I still share." Don is also a runner, and a lay member of a Benedictine Order in North America.

Last October, Don was elected chairman of the Rotman Alumni Association Board of Directors. He says he was drawn back to the School by Dean **Roger Martin's** vision. "He wants to produce more complete human beings, not just better managers. I think he's well on his way to achieving this, and I'm just proud to be a small part of it through the Alumni Association." **RM**

