

# Chapter 1 Learning to Be an Entrepreneur

It is a mystery to me why I was drawn to the business world. My father was a longtime engineer and administrator for the city of Montreal and my mother a part-time social worker working at a children's agency. Both my parents were extremely liberal, socially conscious activists. My brother became a university professor and my sister is a health researcher, so I am the black sheep of the family. Although I consider myself a liberal and certainly lean far left on the American political spectrum, I always joke that my family considers me to be the Republican in the family.

I had what I consider to be a normal childhood full of friends and sports. I was smart and did well in school, but was never an overachiever. Once I left high school and started CEGEP (Quebec's equivalent of junior college), my priorities became friends and skiing, in that order, with academics relegated to whatever time was left. I did just enough work and attended just enough classes to get by. A career in

business never occurred to me, as I thought I was more likely to become a professional hockey player or full-time ski instructor than anything else.

At CEGEP I had thoughts of being an engineer, perhaps because my father was one, but I was turned down by McGill's engineering school, the school that all my friends were going to go to. My second choice at McGill was physics, although I have no idea why. I think I might have been sitting in a physics class at CEGEP when I was filling out the form. At McGill, I quickly dropped that major when I failed my first physics class. I had done very well in a COBOL computer science class at CEGEP, programming on punch cards the year before they were completely phased out. I also had fooled around with a RadioShack CoCo computer at home, so comp sci seemed interesting, although at the time McGill only offered it in conjunction with a math degree.

Although I graduated from McGill, I never really felt I got anything out of higher education and for a time wondered why I wasted my time. Later in my career, once while in Montreal in 1988 and once while in Miami in 1991, I regretted not getting an MBA and tried to get one. I was heavily involved, if only as a witness, in the process of starting up a company, and I felt that there was a lot that I still had to learn. Twice, when my workload was low, I enrolled in an MBA program, but both times I lasted less than one semester. Eventually, work got busy again and the allure of solving problems in real life outweighed my desire for the degree.

I remain convinced, though, that an MBA would have been a good idea. Years later, at ZOLL, I got the chance to work with a number of Harvard MBAs who proved to me that there was in fact some basic knowledge that could be a great foundation for personal experience.

## The Quebec Department of Transportation

My path to becoming an entrepreneur started in an unusual way: I got a job working for the government. I was a first-year student of math and computer science at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Each year, like most students in Quebec, I filled out an application to land a provincially funded summer job. Very few students were selected each year, but as luck would have it, in 1984 my name was drawn and I got a job working for the transportation department in the software division. Back in the mid-80s, they were doing relatively cutting-edge work using mapping software to simulate traffic patterns.

The job itself was unremarkable, other than it was where I met Martin Nathanson, my direct supervisor. After working for Martin for some time, he confided in me that he was starting his own company, TransControl Systems. TransControl was creating a computer-aided dispatch software system for the courier industry. Martin offered me a job and I became employee #1.

## TransControl

The computer-aided dispatch system TransControl developed was called CUSTOM 2000. Martin had signed up a Montreal-based courier company called Dicom to be TransControl's beta test site, but the business didn't progress much beyond this first customer. Although we attended some trade shows, tried to install the system at Dicom's Toronto office, and sold and installed a system in Amsterdam, TransControl was never able to develop a business model and get things off the ground.

Although CUSTOM 2000 never gained acceptance, it was far ahead of its time. Many of the features we created,

such as turn-by-turn directions through a road network, are features that are still considered cutting-edge in dispatch systems today.

Martin had come up with the name CUSTOM 2000, which stood for the ridiculous “Commercial Urban Simulator for Transport Optimization and Management.” When Diane Stewart joined TransControl as marketing director, she laughed at the name. Her comment was that it should stand for “a Couple of Useless Systems Technicians Orchestrated This Mess.”

While at TransControl I was a programmer, but I really got to observe the pitfalls involved in being a startup company. We got some things right, but mostly I felt like the experience was a lesson in what not to do. Unfortunately, Martin was a technologist enamored with the technology and not a very good businessman.

In 1987, TransControl hooked up with John Shermeyen, who was starting a company called Digital Wireless (DWC), later to be called Automated Dispatch Services (ADS) and now known as LogistiCare.

John and his partner Jim Smith were trying to start a company that would buy up and consolidate other ambulance companies. This idea was also ahead of its time and would catch on five or so years later, when companies like AMR, Rural/Metro, and MedTrans would very successfully launch a consolidation trend. John was interested in TransControl because he wanted to adapt the computer-aided dispatch system we had created for couriers to ambulances.

Initially, TransControl and DWC had a joint-venture arrangement. Eventually, in November of 1989, John got \$1 million in funding from venture capitalists and bought out

Martin's share for \$70,000. The \$1 million was to fund the creation of a dispatch center in Miami. Around that time, I had become quite disillusioned with TransControl. The work we had done was not yielding customers and although we had grown to a dozen employees, finances were very tight and interest in our product was minimal.

As part of the funding deal, DWC changed its name to Automated Dispatch Services (ADS), which was a better reflection of their business.

In a story typical of TransControl, we had one customer in Montreal and another in Toronto when, somehow, we managed to sell a system in Amsterdam. With only two local customers under our belt, we became convinced that this was a great international product and started attending trade shows in London. We went to an enormous amount of work to have our GIS guy, Tommy Marinos (who was self-taught and straight out of school), digitize the complex London street network by hand, which was an impossible task. This and many other similar experiences at both TransControl and ADS taught me one of the most important lessons in business: the importance of focus.

## **DWC/ADS**

In December 1989, John Shermyen flew me down to Miami, where he had landed a contract with Medicar Ambulance to do all of their dispatching. While it wasn't the consolidation concept that he had originally conceived of, it was still a

pretty novel idea, as Medicare would pay ADS on a pay-per-run basis to staff a call center to answer calls and dispatch ambulances. It is still a mystery to me why an ambulance company would want to outsource one of the most important components of their business, but the deal was a testament to John's incredible sales ability.

At the core of the Miami center was EMTrack, the computer-aided dispatch software that had been adapted from the courier system created by TransControl. Adapting the courier version of EMTrack was challenging, and there were a lot of issues that made the product difficult to use in the ambulance environment. EMTrack never really worked well until it was completely rewritten in a project we called Rev II.

I enjoyed Miami. Each year, thousands of snowbirds from Canada descend on the Florida beaches in an effort to escape the brutally cold Montreal winters. While the idea of the beautiful weather had always appealed to me, I had this image of Florida as a place with neon-lit palm trees and tacky tourist shops littered all over the place. I was wrong about that. Florida is a state with beautiful landscapes, parks, beaches, friendly people, great food, and a deep history. John did a great job of welcoming me, finding an apartment for me on Miami Beach, and taking me out on the town.

In a crazy side story very typical of my time in Miami, my apartment belonged to the father of the owner of Medicare, who used it as a getaway to shack up with young Russian women he helped to immigrate into the US. I never knew for sure, but rumor had it that they spent time as prostitutes in exchange for this help.

I thought I was in Miami to help resolve some software issues. Never in a million years did I think they were going to make me a job offer. Jim Smith was the one who did it. I think he couldn't stand how long John took to get to the point. As soon as he saw me, Jim said, "So, do you want to come down here to work full time?"

I had never even considered leaving Montreal. It was the city in which I was born and raised, and I expected to live my life and die there. Yet, John and Jim's timing couldn't have been better. Most of my friends had left town after college and my longtime girlfriend and I had just split, so staying in Montreal had lost a lot of its appeal. I quickly made up my mind and accepted the job on the spot. I went back to Montreal for three days, packed up, and got back on a plane to Miami to start work. I was 25 years old and completely enamored with the risk-taking John Shermeyen; his enthusiasm was completely contagious to me.

The story of moving to the United States was actually pretty funny, at least in hindsight. After packing all of my belongings into my car, I went to a friend's wedding. During the wedding, my car was stolen along with all of the stuff in it. So I bought a pair of jeans and a few T-shirts and jumped on a plane without a possession in the world. Talk about a fresh start!

A rational person might have worried about how he was going to get a work permit to work in the United States, how ADS would be funded, and whether the product or service model John was proposing would even be feasible, but I didn't worry about any of those things. I just thought, "I love the US because people there are willing to bet the farm every day to chase their dreams." I accepted the job at \$36,000 a year.

The work permit story would of course become much more complicated. At the time I accepted the job, John said, “Don’t worry, I’ve done this many times before,” referring to the fact that Jim had run the Mariel boat lift operation for the US government, when Castro opened his jails and thousands of Cubans poured into South Florida. I still have no idea if this story is true, but Jim’s experience certainly didn’t help me a bit with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. I came down on a renewable one-year work permit, and eventually, after two years of waiting for John, had to retain an immigration attorney myself to get a green card.

## **Gainesville**

While I liked Miami, I didn’t really want to live in Florida. John was putting the finishing touches on a deal that would create a California dispatch center similar to the one in Miami, and my plan was to move to Long Beach as soon as it opened.

It was a typical John Shermeyen sales job: he never actually told me that the deal in California was as good as done, but I wanted it to happen badly enough that I inferred it was. Later, around the time David Cohen came onboard with ADS, we were working on a deal to open an office in Atlanta, and David was made a similar promise, only to see it fall through. As crazy as it sounds, this happened a third time—with a deal we were working in Denver—with Bob, who had always wanted to move to Colorado. David, Bob, and I still firmly believe that California, Atlanta, and Denver were real deals and that we never felt lied to. However, none of these three centers ever got off the ground.

While waiting for the California deal to get done, I temporarily moved to ADS headquarters in Gainesville, in central Florida, to help create Rev II, the next version of EMTrack. I was teaching skiing in Canada on the weekends at the time, and my friends, the ski instructors, could not understand my desire to move to Florida, a state with no snow. California made even less sense to them.

Another great anecdote that should have tipped me off about things to come was that when I got off the plane for my first day with ADS, John greeted me at the airport, but had to borrow money to get his car out of the parking lot. We then went by the bank so he could get a cash advance on his personal credit card to make payroll. Strangely, this didn't worry me.

Gainesville was a strange place for me to live, especially for my first experience of living in the US. In addition to having to get used to the differences between the US and Canada—such as how litigious everyone was and how lawyers advertised on TV—I had to get used to living in what I considered to be a small college town. I adjusted to life in Gainesville by traveling a lot. Of the nine months I lived in Gainesville, six were spent on the road traveling to various places around the US.

Before my arrival, John had hired Andy Winner to support the code that John had purchased from TransControl. Andy, as many programmers would, felt the product would be better if it were rewritten from scratch. By the time I arrived, work had already begun on what Andy and John were calling Rev II, a rewritten version of EMTrack. I supported this idea and saw my role as patching Rev I wherever possible in order to keep it going until Rev II was ready. At the same time, I

filled a role I now know as product management, feeding Andy information about what customers and users wanted so that he could implement it in Rev II.

Rev II was developed using C and stored its data in a Novell-based database called Btrieve. For 1990, the technology Andy had selected was cutting-edge. Btrieve was a client-server architecture and abstracted a lot of the functions into the database itself. In addition, it came with a rudimentary yet flexible report-writing package called Xtrieve.

Eventually, we rolled out Rev II into the Miami center. The product was so buggy that ambulance dispatchers wanting to update the status of one trip had to position the cursor on the trip above it. That they were willing to put up with this goes to show how bad Rev I really was.

Ultimately, John sold EMTrack to a number of ambulance companies, but none found the product to be very functional. I spent most of my time traveling around to these customers, patching up the product to try to get it to work. One of the problems was John's habit of selling vaporware (software features that didn't exist yet). This was an important experience for me and a huge example of what not to do, which David, Bob, and I carried through to our Pinpoint days.

There were ultimately a total of 12 EMTrack sites, with 6 of those handed to us by a company called Ambpac, a developer of billing software for ambulance companies.

Eventually, the California center idea fell through, and I was faced with the prospect of moving to the Miami center or staying in Gainesville. I decided to move to Miami.

In fact, there was no actual "move" to Miami. I was there on a business trip and decided to stay. John, who lived in Gainesville, loaded all my belongings into the back of his pickup truck and drove them down to Miami for me.

## Miami

I relocated to Miami in the fall of 1990 and lived for a couple of months with Tommy Marinos, who had also been hired away from TransControl, before I bought a place of my own in Coconut Grove. I worked very hard and didn't have much of a social life. While I hung out a bit with fellow ADS employees Efrain Cuellar and his sister Maria, I spent most of my time keeping the software at the Miami center running and traveling the country, trying to keep EMTrack customers happy.

Efrain did general technical support of the EMTrack product and Maria was in charge of the Miami center. Both were bright and dedicated to ADS and John Shermeyen, although we used to joke that if Maria didn't get to fire a person a week, she would be in a bad mood. Although Maria and I would eventually be at odds and would have a hard time getting along, initially we were great friends and would go out socially.

## STS

In June of 1991, the Miami center got a contract to dispatch the Special Transportation Service, known as STS. Even before the Americans with Disabilities Act made it law to provide programs for people with disabilities, Dade County had a very progressive program whereby all people with disabilities could get door-to-door transportation to wherever they wanted to go for a \$2 co-pay. The program had been in place for many years and about 1,500 people took advantage of it an average of twice a day. The contract to move these people from A to B (or back to A) each day was with a company called Metro Limo, one of Miami's larger taxi companies.

Metro Limo was run by three shady characters named Ziggy, Eddie, and Marty. Eddie Steinberg was the very overweight,

profane, sweaty guy who ran the day-to-day operations. John somehow convinced the trio to outsource the entire call-taking and dispatch operation to ADS.

I can remember sitting in a meeting with Eddie and a bunch of his cronies in which John and I were basically explaining why something we had done had gone wrong. I made the mistake of saying that I had assumed something and then had to listen to Eddie, with sweat dripping off his chin onto the conference table, explain for many minutes how when you “assume” you make an “ass” out of “u” and “me.”

I learned a great deal when we took over the STS operation. I’m not sure that John had thought through how complex the logistics were of taking over such a large operation. Not only did 50 people or so have to leave Metro Limo and start working for ADS in a different location, but there were phone issues, computer issues, and all kinds of other things to be taken care of.

I used to describe the process of making sure that 3,000 people got from A to B as being like balancing a pyramid upside down. It’s hard to get just right, and if you do get it right, all it takes is a small wind to knock it over. In the same way, the process of setting up the next day started around 4 p.m. and went all night. If you got behind and didn’t get the routes printed out for the drivers, morning riders would be picked up late and the whole schedule would be thrown off, causing phone calls from people wanting to know where their ride was. The delays would then snowball because the extra phone calls took up our time and therefore caused even more people to be late.

I remember that the first two days after we took over STS were so hectic that I only got two hours of sleep each night. Within a week, Maria and I were so exhausted that we went to John and were willing to throw in the towel. We actually looked into it, but it would have taken a couple of weeks for the phone company to switch the lines back, and by then things were a little more under control.

Bit by bit, we learned how to run a transportation company, both from a management and a technical standpoint. One of the things that gave ADS an advantage was our computer capability, which we used to the greatest extent possible. Once the basics of the dispatch system were up and running, I viewed a big part of my job as sitting in the center, learning everyone's job, and figuring out how we could make it easier through automation. Anytime someone used a pen I'd try to figure out how to prevent it from happening again.

EMTrack became a strong dispatch product because of its proximity to a high-volume user. The continuous improvement cycle was so rapid that things became increasingly efficient. This was an important lesson that I would later take to Pinpoint.

### **The Orlando Center**

In September of 1991, with the Miami center barely under control, ADS somehow got a contract to answer calls and dispatch drivers for a Medicaid program in Orlando. For \$2.58 per call, ADS was to provide software, call takers, and dispatchers, basically everything that was needed other than the vehicles and the drivers. It would be a fateful contract, not because of its impact on ADS (it was a small center), but because that is where I would meet David Cohen and Bob Durkin, my future Pinpoint cofounders.

I traveled up to the Orlando center as it was preparing to go live. The ADS contract was with a government entity called the Regional Planning Council. The RPC had assigned one of their IT people, David Cohen, to help with the project.

John and I could both sense that David was more one of us than one of them. I worked late into the night with David, teaching him everything I knew about EMTrack. The RPC employees were all out the door at 5 p.m., but David, John, and I were in do-what-you-have-to-do-to-get-this-thing-working mode.

I vividly remember how impressed I was with David's technical ability. By this time, I had trained a lot of people on EMTrack, but I'd never found anyone who understood issues and remembered details like David did. It was like we were one and the same: I told him once, he absorbed, and we moved on. Very quickly, we were equals.

After about a week in the Orlando center, I left to return to Miami. Meanwhile, things at the Orlando center were a disaster operationally. There weren't enough dispatchers, call takers, or managers, all of which contributed to all of our trips being late. The software was live, yet we didn't have the staff or the office setup to run it.

When desks arrived unassembled, David suggested that his college roommate, Bob Durkin, might be interested in assembling the desks for some extra cash, which ended up being only \$20 a desk. John quickly realized that Bob was bright and hired him to take calls, then promoted him to dispatcher, and later to manager of the entire center.

## **The Syracuse Center**

Shortly after Orlando opened, John started another center, in Syracuse, New York. This one was relatively simple, because it was already an existing EMTrack customer, Eastern Ambulance (now Rural/Metro). We took over the operation,

started paying the same employees who used to work for Eastern, and charged Eastern a fee for each call we ran.

It turned out the reason John got the contract with Eastern was that they were frustrated with EMTrack. In an effort to placate them, John had convinced them that the users weren't using the system properly.

"Let them work for me," John said, "and I'll make sure they get properly trained."

Of course, the problem was with EMTrack, so training didn't help. John made the dispatch manager for Eastern, Ed Moser, our center manager for Syracuse, and then we promptly ignored them.

After a while Eastern realized that this arrangement wasn't working, so they kicked us out and purchased another software package from American TriTech, our big competitor in the early Pinpoint days.

## **The Miami Center**

In late 1991, as the Orlando center ramped up, it required more attention. John brought up the manager of the Miami center, Maria Cuellar, to Orlando to help out.

That vacancy allowed me to take on a management role running the Miami center. While I had spent quite a bit of time there, it was in an IT support role, helping with problems with the EMTrack product or getting a better understanding of user requirements to be implemented into the product.

Suddenly I was in charge of 50 or so call takers and dispatchers. There was a massive difference between these line-level workers and the professionals I had worked with previously. Overall, they were a great bunch of people, but they were from a world unknown to me. There were a lot of 20-year-old single mothers, living with their parents, making \$5 an hour. Their stories were sad and difficult, but hearing

about the events happening around them was a part of my job and they took on a comical nature. Life was bizarre, but it seemed normal to us at the time. There were countless stories of lunches being stolen, employees (female) beating each other over the head with radios, relatives being murdered or arrested, and parole officer visits. It wasn't until this time that I realized that I had grown up in a life of privilege. The experience was a real eye-opener for me.

As part of my new job as center manager I now had to attend customer feedback sessions, called C-SAIL, that were held once a month on Sunday mornings. Invariably it was a bitch session, where we sat on a panel with representatives of the transportation company and the county while countless people wanted to know why their ride was late on a certain day, why a driver was rude to them, or why we had taken them in this direction instead of that one. These sessions were completely unproductive and I dreaded them. With so many transports being done, it was impossible to have on-the-spot answers for even legitimate questions. The whole Sunday morning experience had a feeling of get in and out as quickly as possible.

A better memory from the C-SAIL meetings was getting to know some of the riders, including a blind couple, Otto and Leah, who met through their activism in reforming our service. Because we booked their transportation, we had some insight into their lives, and I remember our call taker Sandra being very excited the first time Otto booked an overnight trip to stay at Leah's apartment. Sandra and I, along with a number of other ADS employees, subsequently were invited to their wedding.

## **David Cohen**

Born in DeLand, Florida, near Orlando, David had been a Florida boy all his life. He went to school at University of

Central Florida in Orlando, where his roommates were Bob Durkin and Devon McClain, another longtime Pinpoint employee and David's future brother-in-law. After college, he had gotten a job with the RPC for \$19,000 a year.

David has always been a famously quick learner. When he found out that the job at the RPC required knowledge of Paradox, he immediately added it to his resume, even though he had no experience with it. He then read up on it in time to know enough to get him through the interview. When he got the job, he made sure he completely understood the program before he started work. Then, as he tells it, it was never required in his duties. I've always told that story as an example of when it might be permissible to bend the truth: it's okay as long as you deliver.

Soon after I became center manager in Miami, David Cohen accepted a position with ADS where, among other things, he wrote a billing system that took data out of EMTrack and interfaced it with the state Medicaid system.

Because the Orlando center was much smaller and we were supporting the dozen or so EMTrack sites from Miami, John asked David to relocate. David accepted, but thought it was temporary until the Atlanta center opened. Somehow, John talked me into having David as a roommate. I remember picking David up at the Miami airport in early 1992 after having only met him for the week that we worked in Orlando together.

David and I got along right away. We both jumped into problems and got them resolved. That's why John liked having us around. John quickly put David in charge of supporting the various EMTracks around the country, including in the Miami center, allowing me to focus on managing the center.

In those early days, David and I would each get paged every single night. It could be for an EMTrack issue or it could be for a staffing issue. Because of the massive number of calls being dispatched in the center, a single sick call taker or dispatcher could disrupt an entire day. Generally, when my pager or David's pager went off we would both get out of bed, waiting to hear what had happened so we could judge if the crisis was minor enough for one of us to go back to bed.

After I became center manager, Tommy Marinos became the development manager. Politically, it just didn't seem right to put David in charge of the programmers, as he had just started. Within a couple of weeks, though, it became apparent that David was much more qualified than Tommy and he took over the management role while Tommy returned to map development. David had three programmers working for him: Andy Winner, Joe Tozzi, and a strange bird named Eran Shay.

## **Eran**

Eran was ultimately the guy who wrote 80 percent of RightCAD and Sanitas at Pinpoint. In 1991 he wrote a letter to John Shermeyen saying that he couldn't get a job because of lack of experience and was willing to work for free. John hired him for \$100 a week. David and I quickly realized that Eran had an unbelievable amount of raw programming talent. He was, and still is, a brute force programmer, developing features that are elegant from the user's point of view but always coded in a highly disorganized way.

A recent immigrant from Israel, Eran had a hard time adapting to the US. He lacked many basic social skills and

would peer around pillars to look at cute girls. He quickly learned that credit card companies would give him credit, which he viewed as being the same as cash, which he immediately spent. Bob and I would take him out to bars where he would guzzle hard liquor and become immediately intoxicated. As hard as we tried, he never did quite fit in with the rest of the world.

From a professional standpoint, however, the product took off with Eran's help. Although the core EMTrack product was written and maintained by Andy Winner, David quickly assigned Eran to multiple useful side projects, such as a reporting program called JATREP (Job, Alpha, and Time sequence REPort), a routing program, a new way to route called the Watch screen, a program to automatically call for taxis called "cabcalls," and an end-of-night process called "the button" that would clean up data, print reports, and do backups. David even created a program that automatically faxed out a lunch order, which was straightforward since we ate the same thing every day. David and Eran also embarked on an important project to stabilize EMTrack and create an easy-to-use installation program for new EMTrack users, all experience that would become useful later on at Pinpoint.

## **Bob Durkin**

For a long time, my exposure to Bob had only been from stories from David, John, Maria, or the odd phone call that we had. He was running Orlando and I was running Miami and sometimes he would call with questions on how we had done things.

In early 1993, the Orlando office looked like it was going to close down. Simultaneously, we were having trouble with

JC, one of the supervisors in the Miami center. John basically gave me a choice of keeping JC or having Bob come down to Miami to be the assistant manager. The choice was obvious and Bob moved down. Initially, Bob stayed on my couch in our Coconut Grove townhouse.

David Cohen, Bob Durkin, and I were now all working and living together.

David and I had developed a tradition of waking up early on Saturday mornings and watching *Saved by the Bell* and *Degrassi Junior High* together. Once Bob moved in, this drove him crazy. Bob worked the late shift at the Miami center and we would invariably wake him up to watch what he considered to be two incredibly stupid shows. To make matters worse, after the shows were done, we could then go back to sleep, but he couldn't.

At the office, Bob always said that he was my hatchet man. In theory I worked from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Bob worked from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., although I actually worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Bob worked from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. When we had to let someone go, which was often, we always did it at the end of the shift, which resulted in Bob getting to do the honors. Bob always joked that nobody liked it when he asked them to come into the office.

## **Managing the Miami Center**

The environment of managing the Miami dispatch center is best described in a series of stories.

The STS program provided affordable transportation for people with disabilities. It also allowed a single companion to travel with the passenger. One of our regulars was problematic, because she was a blind single mother with two children. Under a strict application of the rules, only one child could travel with her, since only one companion was allowed. The county administrators made a special exception in her case.

We always had enormous difficulty in processing the exceptions. There were more than 3,000 daily riders in the STS program and we prerouted all the trips the night before. Because the routers weren't accustomed to allowing room in the vehicle for two companions, her trips were often messed up.

Her complaints made their way up the chain until I eventually got a call from the office of a county commissioner asking me to make sure that her Sunday trip to church with her two children went off without a hitch.

What could I do? I personally made sure that the routers gave her one of our most reliable drivers (a man named Siddiqi) and that nobody else was scheduled to be in the vehicle at the same time. I informed our weekend manager, Elaine Taylor, about the situation and made sure that she personally contacted Siddiqi an hour before the scheduled pickup to make sure everything would proceed smoothly.

At the scheduled time, Siddiqi, a devout Muslim, arrived at the house and knocked on her door. When she answered, she was completely nude. He turned around and left without her.

One day, I was having a conversation with my friend Amy Robillard about the types of management situations I faced in the Miami center. I remember her saying, “You must deal with a lot of strange situations.” So I told her two stories from the previous day: (1) A friend of one of our drivers had called in to say that the driver wouldn’t be making it in to work, as he had been arrested for having drowned his wife in the bathtub. (2) A call taker called in sick, saying she was too distraught over the death of her uncle to come in to work. It turned out that the uncle was crushed in a garbage truck while attempting an escape from prison.

One of the best characters working at the center was a dispatcher named Julio Perez. Julio, who’d always wanted to be called Hector until he later changed his name to Peter Kane, was a convicted drug smuggler, and he told fantastic stories of sinking million-dollar yachts to hide evidence. But after his release from prison, he went to work for us, making \$7 per hour on the graveyard shift. A couple of Drug Enforcement Agency guys sat in the parking lot all night and followed him wherever he went.

It was a regular occurrence for me to receive visits from the parole officers of our employees. Mostly they were just checking to see whether the employees had told us that they were on parole before we hired them.

One of the most important things I learned in the Miami center was the importance of understanding where people were coming from. When Bob moved down from Orlando to become the assistant manager of the Miami center, I spent

the better part of a week filling him in on all the employees, what made them tick, and what they were like. I've always felt that if you understand your employees and their needs, you can provide a much better work environment for them and benefit by way of greater productivity.

A positive aspect of the Miami center was its proximity to the programmers. When I had been in charge of development, I spent most of my day in the center, working with the users. I even worked several shifts as a call taker and an ambulance dispatcher. I always called myself an EMTrack dispatcher, but unlike the professionals, I would never have been able to dispatch had it not been for the computer system.

I developed a great working relationship with David. As the center manager and a reasonably technical person, I knew best what functionality would make our staff's job easier. I fed that information to David, who would implement it. Later, we tried to replicate that environment at Pinpoint by having a product manager who was an expert on what was needed from the customer point of view and a program manager who was in charge of implementing those features. The product manager and the program manager had a peer relationship and had to work together to figure out what was best. We never achieved, however, the rapid identification of issues and the quick definition of features that was possible when the users were just across the hall.

## **Hurricane Andrew**

On August 24, 1992, David and I were up in Orlando visiting Bob and some friends. The Saturday night news said that a Category 5 (the highest level) hurricane was heading straight for Miami.

Since the Miami center dispatched about half the ambulances in Miami, I knew that we would have to stay open as long as we could during the storm, so I hurried home. I was lucky, because just after I got back the government turned the interstate into lanes all going north, as people were trying to get away from the storm.

I went home and did the best I could to protect my house, getting everything off the floor and away from the windows in case of flooding. Following a suggestion I had seen on TV, I filled the bathtub for drinking water and headed to the office. Later on, I was so hot from lack of air conditioning and showers that I rashly took a bath in the water I had saved up for drinking.

I parked my car in the lobby of our building—yes, you read that right, the lobby. I had a Jeep Wrangler that was small enough to fit through the doors. Otherwise, I'm quite certain I would never have seen it again. I sprinted up to our office on the fourth floor and got ready for the storm.

Our building was 10 miles inland, so I thought we should be pretty safe. But it was still frightening. I could see our thick windows bend in the wind. Going down to the lobby to check on my car seemed too risky.

Obviously, we shut down all nonemergency portions of the company, which left only a skeleton crew to dispatch the ambulances. Hector took the helm as the main dispatcher as Miami Beach evacuated. We transported patients back and forth out of the hospitals to safer locations. As the crews did their last runs at about 11 p.m., I remember Hector lining them up in a four-by-four formation to protect them from the incredible winds while crossing the causeway from Miami Beach.

After that, we sort of didn't know what to do. Nobody could go outside and the ambulance crews were all placed in shelters in case of medical problems. Eventually the power went out and I tried to get a couple of hours of sleep in the center of the office, away from the windows.

In an illustration of how overworked our computer servers were, I did maintenance on them while the hurricane was over us. After the ambulances were off the road and until the power went out and the battery backup ran out, I shut down the terminals and did some much-needed archiving. Since the Miami center ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week, this was a rare opportunity to do some intensive work that couldn't be done if users were using the system. I took full advantage, but then the server crashed and the power went out, leaving me to deal with it later somehow.

When John Shermeyen took people on a tour of the center, the battery backup was always a centerpiece of the tour. It was a huge machine, about the size of a refrigerator, and was supposed to power the whole center for 24 hours in the event of a power failure. Hurricane Andrew was the only time we got to put it to the test and it lasted just a couple of hours with only a couple of computers running. I eventually had to run out to a store and use some ambulance credentials to cut in front of an unbelievably long line to buy a generator.

The storm veered south at the last minute and missed Miami Beach, but hit south Miami very hard. Once the winds died down and it was safe to go outside, the ambulances started rolling again. It turned out that the storm badly damaged Kendall Hospital, where we had taken a lot of the Miami Beach patients. These poor folks had to be evacuated again!

Two days after the storm, I ventured outside to go see how my house had fared. I was nervous, as I lived less than a mile

from the ocean. On the way home, I passed the airport and saw a 727 tilted on its nose. Traffic lights and electrical wires were hanging everywhere, volunteers were trying to direct traffic, and I saw a boat on the highway about a mile inland. It looked like a war zone.

Within a couple of days, after power was restored at the airport, David was able to fly back from Orlando to help out. He took the crashed server to Efrain's house, which was in one of the few areas of the city that had electricity, to get it going while I was dealing with operations. David and I were living together, and the power was still out, so we continued to sleep at the office. I remember that we would call home on a regular basis and it was a happy day when the answering machine answered, because that meant that the power was back on.

The thing I remember most about my experience is how bad the weeks after the storm were. I was lucky that I was in a safe building during the storm, but for weeks afterward there was no food to be bought in the stores, no running water, no electricity, no gas for the car, and no services whatsoever, all against the backdrop of dreadful Miami heat. Eventually the army came in and set up tent cities for those who had lost their homes. The navy sent a big ship that docked in Miami Harbor with 10,000 cooks onboard who made meals for those who needed them.

South Miami, which received the direct hit from the hurricane, was a crazy place for a long time. Looting was commonplace. Ice and suntan lotion sold on the black market for exorbitant prices. People spray-painted the sides of their condemned homes with signs such as "You loot, we shoot," or with their insurance information, so that the insurance companies could process their claims.

It was amazing to me how quickly business people started to capitalize on opportunities created by the hurricane. Before I had even absorbed the enormity of what had happened,

John, Eddie Steinberg, and the others were scrambling to get in on some of the FEMA money that was flying around. ADS got a contract to dispatch free rides being given out to those in heavily damaged south Miami, which we imaginatively called South Dade Free Ride (SDFR). The contract was run by Handi-Van, one of ADS's original customers, which was run by a very classy lady named Masi Neff. Handi-Van and ADS made an enormous amount of money on the SDFR program with almost no overhead—we dispatched the whole program with one individual named Baldo.

The worst effects of the hurricane were felt in Miami for well over a year. It took a long time to rebuild houses and get services up and running again. It was estimated that more than one third of houses in south Miami were either damaged or destroyed. When you watch news coverage of a hurricane on TV, you lack the perspective of how much damage is being done and how huge the area is. In addition, TV coverage tends to end after the storm passes, which is when the real problems are only beginning.

For David, Bob, and me, Hurricane Andrew, like STS and Orlando, was a great lesson in crisis management. In an environment that was unfamiliar, chaotic, and constantly changing, our jobs were to bring order to the chaos. It required us to be decisive, creative, and open minded. These were skills that would serve us well.

## **Living in Miami**

In 1993, David, Bob, and I still lived in Miami. Although I always lived in the same condo, David and Bob seemed to move in and out of different homes all the time. For a while they lived in a nice home on Bayshore Drive owned by the president of Mediacar. John also stayed there when he was in Miami, which was often five days a week even though he lived in Gainesville.

We were typical twentysomethings. We stayed up at night watching *Saturday Night Live*, and we had nicknames for our girlfriends (mostly Bob's) and acquaintances, like Rubber Dress Chick, Punk Rock Chick, Roller Blade Chick, Planet Moon, and Hairy Cleavage.

In one of the few unembarrassing stories I can recall, I remember waking up one morning to the sound of the dryer. This was strange to me, as our washing machine was broken.

“What are you doing?” I asked David.

“Don't you know about the formula?” he asked.

“What formula?” I said.

“Warm = Clean,” said David.

While we were generally being goofballs in the off-hours, we were certainly united and driven when it came to work. John was keeping us challenged with new contracts and ideas, and David, Bob, and I had to rush out and figure out how to implement them from both a technical and management perspective. We'd often go out to dinner or sit around someone's home with John and talk about things, only to have to make them a reality in the days to come.

I cannot overemphasize how much all three of us loved to be around John. His enthusiasm was infectious, and it was great to go out to dinner with him to discuss the minutiae of what was going on. He'd even have our bookkeeper Susan's sister, a hairdresser, come into his office to cut everyone's hair while we talked to him.

It was without a doubt the most creative and free-flowing time of my life, and certainly taught the three of us how to get things done.

## Selling EMTrack

ADS was in the business of selling its fee-for-service dispatch services. John liked this model because once a company signed up, they continued to pay a fee every month for life. Occasionally, we would come across an ambulance company that would be interested in buying EMTrack. We never went looking for them—we didn't attend many trade shows and we didn't advertise or have a brochure—but sometimes they would find us.

John was always happy to sell them a copy of EMTrack. He had one all-inclusive price for this—\$50,000—which would buy you an unlimited number of users, all the features, and lifetime support. ADS always seemed to be living on the edge financially, so John was very happy to get the cash.

John Shermeyen was a dreamer and a visionary. He envisioned everything that was not and paid little attention to everything that was. Luckily for ADS, John Shermeyen could sell anything to anyone, even if it didn't exist. Before the word “vaporware” was popular, ADS had mastered it. We explored everything from riverboat captaining to cellular long-distance plans based outside the country. John would convince the prospect and the entire company that his latest idea was not far off from the capabilities that we had and that the EMTrack software could easily be molded into what would be required. Soon, we all found ourselves actually believing it. This was a vicious cycle, because when we had to actually deliver, we would.

Because David, Bob, and I were responsible for the implementation of the vaporware that John sold, avoiding those situations became ingrained in us in the Pinpoint days. Our standard story was that John always talked about how EMTrack interfaced to any phone system. Not only is every phone system different, making such a generic interface

impossible, but EMTrack didn't even interface to the ADS phone system! In the Pinpoint days, we considered it a firing offense to sell something we didn't have.

Another lesson we learned in the ADS days was to avoid selling hardware. EMTrack was sold as a total solution, complete with computers, server, and wiring. After countless installs in which we were pulling cable and supporting broken keyboards, we finally experimented with selling only the software. We found that customers could purchase their hardware from Dell or a local computer vendor, who would provide support and an experience that was just as good. Meanwhile, our experience would be infinitely better.

John had sold a number of copies of EMTrack through Ambpac, a billing software company. Ambpac had presold a number of dispatch systems to their customers but had difficulty implementing the systems, so they bought EMTrack for these customers to fulfill their obligation. Because customers had bought from a different company, there was never a clear understanding as to whether EMTrack met their needs, so the customers, ADS, and Duncan Waldrip, the president of Ambpac, were often at odds. This relationship between Ambpac and ADS would come back to haunt us in the Pinpoint days.

Initially I was only involved in the installation and support aspects of these systems. It wasn't until an ambulance company named TWC purchased EMTrack in 1991 that I was involved in the sales process. TWC was an ambulance company in Long Island, New York, owned by a guy named Al Liguori. Al came to an American Ambulance Association trade show in Nashville in late 1990 specifically looking for a dispatch system. ADS was exhibiting EMTrack and Al became very interested in it.

As part of the decision-making process, Al wanted his dispatch manager to participate in the system selection so that

there would be buy-in from the end users of the system. That dispatch manager, John Stapleton, would ultimately become one of the early Pinpoint employees.

The experience with TWC was the first time that I realized that EMTrack could be sold using a cookie-cutter approach. Al had a no-nonsense approach; he simply wanted to know what the software could do and wanted to run his operation around that. It was the reverse of what I had been used to, with potential customers demanding features and ADS promising vaporware.

After TWC, we encountered other companies, like Midwood, Five Counties, and NationWide, which were selling software-only systems with no vaporware. It was an epiphany for David and me; selling software could be easy.

Over the years ADS sold around a dozen EMTrack systems, primarily in the New York area. David and I did the implementation and support of these systems, so we learned how to fine-tune our approach. By 1994, just before I left ADS, I had sold my first EMTrack system on my own and had therefore overseen the complete process: from sale to deployment to support.

## **SkyWire and Vendview**

A fluke relationship between John Shermeyen and a company called SkyWire would set in motion some ideas that would ultimately lead to David and my creating a Microsoft Windows-based dispatch product and starting Pinpoint.

John had somehow met a silver-spoon-fed fellow, named Brian, who was toying with a new company called SkyWire. SkyWire's concept was to wirelessly enable vending machines. The vending machine would signal low-quantity conditions, break-in attempts, and unscheduled door openings. SkyWire would monitor coin and product levels, sending periodic

updates to a central location. All of this would help the vendor to keep his costs low and give him the ability to monitor his kingdom from afar.

Naturally, John Shermeyen saw a perfect fit for ADS. Part of what we did was dispatch, and vending machines have people dispatched to them. He convinced SkyWire of the virtues of a map-based system that would show alarms and allow you to zoom in on vending machines. The fact that EMTrack did neither of these things very well in relation to the vending machine industry was an overlooked detail. To John, this was interesting, and interesting mattered more than anything.

John and David met with Brian when SkyWire was a two-man company operating out of a private home. Brian had somehow convinced Coca-Cola that this was a viable project and they had agreed to work toward a pilot test for the project. John negotiated a 25-cent per vending machine per month royalty with SkyWire, and a deal was struck.

But repurposing our ambulance software and creating a wireless vending machine monitoring application was not enough of a challenge for John. He had also promised to create the application to run on Microsoft Windows. This was new technology and not yet popular. But SkyWire insisted, so John agreed. Not only would we have to learn a new industry, we would have to rewrite all the EMTrack code that could be used for a new platform that none of us had ever seen before.

At the time, Windows programming was new. No one on staff at ADS had ever done it, so David set out to learn about it. He bought Borland C++ version 1.0 and began to experiment. Tommy Marinos began to try to develop some mapping technology for both EMTrack and the VendView application. He located a third-party outfit called Etak that could supply Windows-compatible code and map data. Tommy was able to integrate the Etak mapping system into

the vending machine tracking application and David wrote much of the database management system. What we ended up with was a fairly rudimentary but interesting prototype that we called VendView.

David traveled to Memphis, taking with him the latest version of VendView so that SkyWire could critique it. While there he took notes and we implemented the desired changes when he returned to Miami. This cycle continued for about six months, until SkyWire felt it was a good enough prototype. A company in New York, Ademco, made the spread-spectrum radios that the Coke machines were to be equipped with. From Miami, we were able to use modems to dial into a Coke machine in New York and another in Memphis. This was our only source of real-time data to test the application with. It was neat to be able to see how much money and soda were in the machines hundreds of miles away.

During this time, Eran, Tommy, and David became familiar with the basics of Windows software. Around the office and at home, David would often discuss his findings with me. I even tried my hand at using C++ after one long discussion about the future of object-oriented programming. After many late nights, we decided that Windows was the future.

