

OSU software spinout company launches first product

by Gregg Kleiner

CORVALLIS, Ore. — A start-up software company based on technology developed over a 10-year period by computer scientists at Oregon State University today launched its first commercial product.

RedRover Software, Inc., was officially founded in 2006 by OSU professors Margaret Burnett, Martin Erwig and Gregg Rothermel, who were searching for ways to build confidence among spreadsheet users and reduce the costs associated with auditing and error detection of spreadsheets. The company was based in OSU's new Kelley Engineering Center for almost a year.

The new technology addresses the need to reduce spreadsheets errors, which cost businesses and individuals millions of dollars annually. A single "cut and paste" error cost Trans Alta Corporation \$24 million in profits, and a \$655 million budget error was made at NASA, an industry group has reported.

Errors are easily introduced when users build spreadsheets and they are difficult to detect, especially for large workbooks. Finding and correcting spreadsheet errors also represents a major cost to businesses in terms of personnel time and auditing expense.

"Programs like Excel make it very easy for people to create spreadsheets, however, this same accessibility and ease-of-use makes it difficult for companies to impose quality controls on spreadsheets," said Erwig. "RedRover's tools help users find errors in their spreadsheets. These tools are based on analysis techniques that have been employed successfully in tools for professional programmers to detect and remove errors from software."

RedRover's leading product, RedRover Audit, is designed for people who build, review, or certify Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. It runs on the desktop as a complement to Excel, visually guiding users, tracking progress cell by cell, and enabling point-and-click navigation to flagged cells.

Starting in 1995, the OSU faculty members became intrigued by the idea that spreadsheets are programs and spreadsheet software, such as Excel, are actually programming systems — yet most spreadsheet users have not been trained as programmers. So the professors decided to bring software quality control concepts into the spreadsheet domain. By studying actual human behavior, they developed tools to enable average users to build and use spreadsheets with greater confidence and accuracy.

After more than 10 years of spreadsheet and user behavior research, the trio co-founded RedRover Software, which operated for almost a year in the Kelley Engineering Center, a 153,000-square-foot building designed to foster new company spinouts based on OSU research.

“This is exactly what we hoped would happen in the Kelley Engineering Center,” said Ron Adams, dean of engineering at OSU. “The entire building is constructed to encourage communication and collaboration, which leads to new ideas, innovation, and ultimately results in new companies, like RedRover. We’re thrilled the company is well on its way, and its first product has the potential to help millions of spreadsheet users.”

RedRover Software outgrew its on-campus incubator space and relocated to an off-campus office building, where it now retains 23 people, seven of whom hold engineering degrees from OSU.

“The drive and ingenuity found in OSU engineering grads is a rare find,” said Matt McLaughlin, RedRover CTO and vice president of engineering, who received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in computer science from OSU. “Oregon State engineers have been key innovators in the success of RedRover technology. We will continue to actively recruit the top talent from OSU.”

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