



UW plans to buy learning software from former student

By Rose Simone, Record staff

March 29, 2011

KITCHENER — About 12 years ago, when John Baker was a third year systems design engineering student at the University of Waterloo, he designed some software for a few professors who wanted to put some course materials online.

That evolved into a thriving software business, Desire2Learn, a company based in the Tannery building in Kitchener that now employs more than 250 people and makes online learning software systems for universities and colleges all over the world.

Now, the University of Waterloo, the place where Desire2Learn was born, has decided to adopt the company's software tools for managing its online learning systems.

"It's fantastic," said Baker about the university's recently-announced decision to make the switch to Desire2Learn software. The staff is excited as well, because many of them are University of Waterloo graduates, he added.

When Baker started the business in 1999, the internet was young. There was very little in the way of delivering course materials online. What did exist at the University of Waterloo was in the form of a hodge-podge of tools. "There really wasn't a standard online course system," he said.

But soon after designing some software for three professors at the University of Waterloo, the e-learning business took off. Desire2Learn got its first big client, the University of Guelph. Today, it also counts Wilfrid Laurier University as a client, many Ontario colleges, and the business has grown across North America and around the world. It will soon open an office in Australia.

The University of Waterloo, meanwhile, developed its own "home grown" system that eventually migrated to a learning management software system made by Angel Learning of Indiana, said Andrea Chappell, director of instructional technologies and multimedia services at the University of Waterloo.

In 2009, Angel was bought by Blackboard, another competitor to Desire2Learn. That would have meant some changes, but also, the system was now more than seven years old, so an upgrade was in order, she said.

The university put out a request for proposals and investigated different options. It recently announced that the Desire2Learn software was the best fit.



John Baker: Desire 2 Learn CEO John Baker is thrilled that his alma mater has chosen to use his online learning software. Peter Lee/Record staff Source: Record staff

Chappell said the group examining the different systems liked the Desire2Learn software functionality, user interface, flexibility and accessibility. It also had a good system for use with mobile devices like smartphones and pads, she added.

Not only is Baker "thrilled" that his old alma mater wants to become a client, but also, he said there are possibilities for students there to create applications that can plug into the framework. "With the University of Waterloo, we have this unique opportunity to build more of a partnership."

Chappell said since Laurier and Guelph are using the Desire2Learn system, there is an added benefit for students taking courses on the different campuses.

The fact that it is a local company is a bonus, she added. "We have had some meetings already, and instead of someone having to fly in one direction or the other, it is just a 15-minute drive."

Baker said even though his clients include big universities all over the world, this deal is especially sweet for him. "This is the university that I graduated from. It was where the ideas were sparked."

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