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WORK ENVIRONMENT SPURS PROGRAMMERS ON

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BLACKSBURG - Why are the biggest computer companies in the world looking to a tiny outfit in Southwestern Virginia for document imaging, the fastest-growing segment of the computer industry?

Chris Thompson, one of the founders of Recognition Research Inc., says the key to success is the way he and co-founder Pat Bixler work with employees. The programmers, all engineers, are allowed to set their own hours.

And the level of their academic degrees has little to do with their position in the company. Some of them don't yet have a bachelor's degree, while others have doctorates.

By giving employees the environment, tools and opportunity to do what they do best, he and Bixler trust their employees will succeed.

Saher Lahouar, who has a doctorate in electrical engineering, prefers the freedom of working through the evenings and wee hours of the morning.

When he can't sleep, he'll hop in his car and drive the five minutes to the office. He's known to work 60 to 80 hours a week. It's not because he has to.

"This job is really challenging, but it's really satisfying," Lahouar said.

At 28, he's the director of engineering, involved in research, "new, innovative stuff that's never been done before. I don't have a guide to follow. I know what my goal is, but I don't know really how to get there. I've got to find a way. We're always working with the newest technology, and we're always keeping ahead of things."

One of his projects involves map processing for the Army Topographic Engineering Center at Fort Belvoir.

"Just the relationship with the bosses, that's what I love the most," Lahouar said. "They just give you your job and you go do it, you're free, it's your baby, it's your project.

In addition, he said, "We are involved in most decisions, who we hire and don't, therefore we feel important, we want to work more, be productive as opposed to working in too large, impersonal of an environment."

Allen Briggs, 22, who calls himself a software craftsperson, said he likes the advantages of a small company. When he worked in a large corporation, Briggs said he "had no idea of where I was going, or where the products I worked on ended up."

Troy Gustafson, 37, likes the flexible atmosphere.

"It's important to me, not specifically to what I do, but to how I prefer to work and to the type of environment I prefer," he said.

He is a senior software engineer and analyst-programmer, but he likes not having to "worry about a title."

Brad Grantham, 22, and Mark Potter, 30, have all at one time or another been members of Virginia Tech's team of computer whizzes in the international Scholastic Programming Contest sponsored by AT&T.

Grantham's team ranked third in the world in 1991, and almost every Tech team has finished in the top 10.

"I never get the feeling that there won't be work to do," said Eric Bloodworth, 28. "It has all the benefits of a high-tech, small company without the problems, mainly having to do with business coming in."

Says Tim Buck, 25, "People pitch in, they really do. We keep busy. It is never boring." He has a degree in aerospace engineering and is the systems administrator for the company.

The director of software development, Brandt Braunschweig, 27, explained it this way:

"In a small company titles don't always mean . . . it means you have to get the work done. No one here is locked into doing one small job. You do what needs to be done. From interacting at trade shows to designing new systems to running them . . . it's never the same from one day to the next. It's always a new technical problem, sometimes it's too many new technical problems at one time."