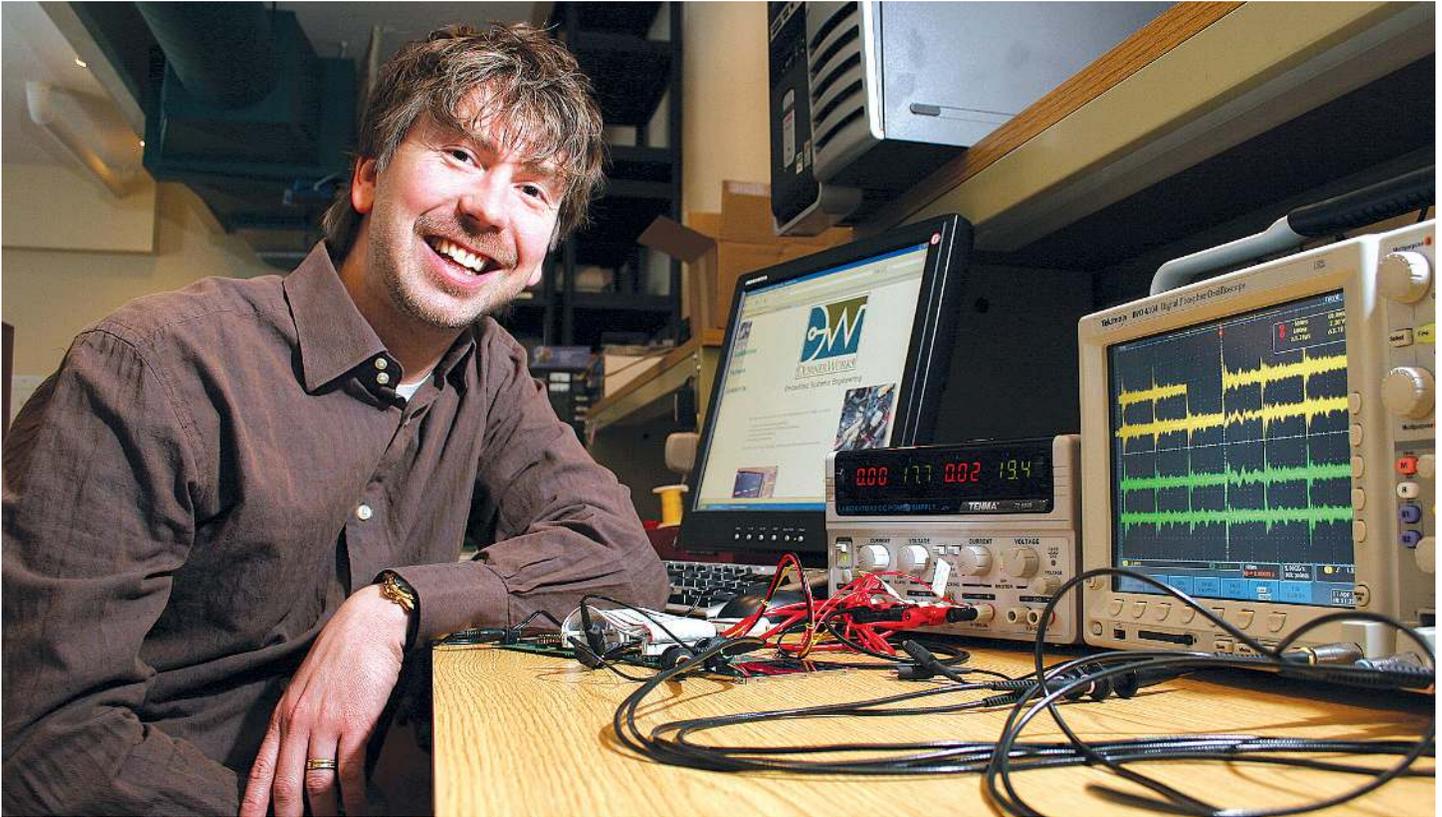


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BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/JOHNNY QUIRIN

David Dorner has seen his electronics engineering firm evolve from a secondary job to a \$3 million company in just seven years.

DornerWorks Eyes Growth

*Embedded
Electronics Market
Wide Open*

Daniel Schoonmaker
GRBJ REPORTER

GRAND RAPIDS — Despite doubling its staff in each of the past four years, local electronics engineering firm DornerWorks Ltd. is still in the enviable position of having more work than it can take on.

“It’s quite amazing that there are enough companies out there doing high-tech electronics that we still have to turn down work,” said David Dorner, president and founder of the seven-year-old consulting firm. “When I started this company, I didn’t ever dream that there were this many companies in West Michigan doing sophisticated electronics.”

The 28-employee firm designs embedded electronics components and systems, with a particular specialty in safety-critical systems. While it works in a variety of fields, its largest market is currently aerospace systems,

a highly regulated expertise the company hopes to expand nationally.

The Federal Aviation Administration and other regulators dictate an explicit process for developing and testing all safety-critical aerospace engineering. Few consulting companies can boast familiarity with the federal DO-254 (hardware) and DO-178B (software) standards on their résumé. That expertise allows DornerWorks to participate in virtually any embedded electronics program, including medical devices, another rapid-growth area for the company.

“As one client told us, ‘If a plane

goes down, you may lose 200 people. If a medical device goes down, you lose one,” said Tim Walker, the firm’s director of business development. “That’s what makes Dorner special. We’re able to work in these safety-critical markets.”

With the Federal Drug Administration still tweaking its software standards, there are great opportunities for embedded electronics firms to enter the medical market.

DornerWorks recently added Kalama-zoo medical device firm Stryker to a list of clients that already includes Smiths Aerospace, Eaton Aerospace, Gentex Corp. and X-Rite Inc., among others.

When Dorner first launched the company in early 2000, he had no intention of growing it into a design house. At the time an electronics engineer at Smiths Aerospace in Grand Rapids, the 1993 Calvin College graduate had lost interest in the corporate world. He pursued an opening for a tenure-track position at his alma mater, and set up the consulting practice as a backup.

“I thought it would be something I can do on top of the teaching,” Dorner said. “It was something to do during the summer and keep a foothold in industry.”

Dorner didn’t get the tenured position, and was instead offered an adjunct role with the college. While teaching part time, he provided con-

sulting services for then-Grandville-based color management firm X-Rite Inc. and his former employer, Smiths Aerospace, which was rapidly outgrowing its staff’s capacity.

In 2002, another engineer asked Dorner if he could use a partner.

“I had never thought of that before,” Dorner said. “I was swamped, and my wife and I were starting to have children. Then it finally hit me on the head enough times that if I have all this work — I was constantly turning down offers — it might be a good idea to add some employees.”

Two years later, the company had a base of six full-time engineers. When Dorner’s brother Jeff moved back to Grand Rapids from Manhattan a year later to manage the business aspects of the company and help recruit talent, it quickly grew to 12 consultants, then 26 a year later. Eleven of those employees work out of the firm’s headquarters at 751 Burton St. SE in Grand Rapids; nine are at a facility dedicated to aerospace clients at 2828 Kraft St. SE in Cascade Township. Eight more are assigned to customer sites.

At the original Grand Rapids facility, design work has largely shifted away from aerospace to some of the region’s most exciting entrepreneurial efforts. In one office, a prototype for a video-surveillance system to be used in schools and other campus environments is being built. That client has no

engineering capabilities of its own, so all of the software and hardware is being designed by DornerWorks, today a \$3 million company.

Down the hall, a pet containment system is being tested for bugs, an off-the-shelf circuit card is being customized for use in an auto show prototype, and in the back corner, an engineer is reverse-engineering a new invention in search for patent infringements at the behest of local law firm Warner Norcross & Judd.

“Some of the larger companies, like Smiths, have the capabilities of doing everything themselves, but they’re too busy,” Dorner said. “Other companies don’t have any of these capabilities, so for their product to become a reality, they need someone to do everything for them.”

As sophisticated electronics become an increasingly important part of industry — embedded in everything from vacuum cleaners to car keys — Dorner expects services like his will be an important part of the West Michigan economy.

“We’re trying to get in contact with people who don’t know us,” said Walker, a recent addition to the company tasked with managing its expansion efforts. “We want to help anyone out that we can.”

In addition to its local and national expansion efforts, DornerWorks is also in the initial development stages of its own proprietary products. **BJ**