

Local firm finds low-cost way to get small retailers online

Inglenet vice-president uses a hands-on approach

Developing a way to bridge the gap between expensive e-commerce Web sites and local retailers who have the desire to build business online, but have limited resources, required an inventive approach, according to **Inglenet Business Solutions'** vice-president of product development.

Manuel Zahariev oversees development projects, but he also rolls up his sleeves and gets involved hands-on with programming products for the Vancouver-based company's clients. Inglenet (www.inglenet.com) provides advising, technical development and other service to help build businesses' presence on the Internet. The company builds business-to-consumer and business-to-business systems, network-based applications, Web-based systems and helps companies build e-commerce business.

Zahariev, 33, leads a number of projects for Inglenet, including its spin-off company launched in April called **Merchantbridge.com Inc.** (www.merchantbridge.com). The new company, an application service provider, offers e-commerce services to local retailers and helps them sell online without paying the usual high cost of developing a Web site. So far, Merchantbridge has completed three e-commerce sites — www.lululemon.com, www.chairlines.com and www.simply.bc.ca — providing an online extension for these Vancouver bricks and mortar retailers.

Hired on as an Inglenet project leader in 1997, Zahariev has been directly involved in building e-commerce software applications for the Internet, from defining the architecture to taking it through various design phases. He's since moved up the ladder within the company and today heads a six-member development team

while continuing to be actively involved in programming.

"It's very important to be hands-on when you are leading," said Zahariev.

Merchantbridge enables online transactions, payment processing and same-day delivery using a courier service provided by **Dynamex Inc.** (www.dynamex.com) for its clients. Maintaining an e-commerce Web site can be costly, but Merchantbridge provides an alternative by charging clients a monthly fee of \$200 for the site, plus a nominal charge for each online transaction.

Constructing a site involves the direct involvement of both Web designers, who concentrate on the user interface, and programmers who focus largely on the back-end of the system. Getting these two types of specialists to work well together can be a challenge, according to Zahariev.

Creating applications often involves having both designers and programmers working on the same file which can lead to distractions on both sides. Merchantbridge addressed this problem by building a Web application server which allows multiple files to be used by different individuals developing a site.

In some cases, Merchantbridge will work with an outside design team and having multiple files allows the company to do this more efficiently, according to Zahariev.

While Merchantbridge currently only has three clients, it still needed to create an infrastructure that would allow for a high number of e-commerce sites which it expects to develop as the business grows.

Sorting through the wide variety of



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Man with a plan: Inglenet's Manuel Zahariev oversees development projects

available tools and technology also presented obstacles for the company, which needed to be able to produce higher end results with less expensive tools to keep its clients' costs down. While Merchantbridge uses the **SCO UnixWare 7.1** operating system, the **Oracle Database Server** and the **CyberCash** credit card processing system, it ended up building its own application server to increase its flexibility.

"A software development firm should focus on its core competency," said Zahariev. "Because we develop software applications it made sense to make our own application server."