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Richard St-Pierre displays some of his favorite small electronics at his new tech employer, Logic Supply in South Burlington. / EMILY McMANAMY/FREE PRESS

Written by
Dan D'Ambrosio
Free Press Staff Writer

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Richard St-Pierre never leaves home without his gadgets. The former IBM electrical engineer begins pulling them out of his pockets and placing them on the table in a conference room at the headquarters of his new employer — Logic Supply, Inc., in South Burlington.

There's a toothpick computer. A recycled bottle cap converted into a circuit tester using two LED lights and some wire. And a...something else.

On his personal business ⧉ card, St-Pierre, 52, identifies himself as "Lab MacGyver" after the popular television improviser.

"This is an LED puck," St-Pierre says, holding up the used bottle cap. "It's an easy way to test a circuit, made out of recycled materials. When I do technical education outreach, I show people what it takes to build a circuit. I give these away."

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Richard St-Pierre, a former IBM engineer who was laid off earlier this year, has landed on his feet and is now happily working for Vermont tech company Logic Supply. / EMILY McMANAMY/FREE PRESS

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A knowing smile crosses the face of Mark Heyman, Logic Supply's director of human resources ⧉. Heyman hired St-Pierre in September, about two months after the latest "resource action" at IBM in Essex Junction in July terminated the jobs of 419 employees, including St-Pierre.

Heyman says 75 to 100 former IBMers applied for jobs at Logic Supply after the mass separation in July, but he only had room for one on the company's growing staff. As it turned out, St-Pierre was Heyman's kind of geek, which became apparent after a short conversation on the phone.

St-Pierre didn't balk at Heyman's probing questions about the differences between a Fortune 50 company and a company with about 50 employees.

"The chances we're going to hit what you're making now is not going to happen," Heyman said. "If it's never going to make sense, let's get that out front right away."

St-Pierre wasn't concerned about the drop in pay at Logic Supply. He declined to say how much he's making, but describes his new salary as "pretty much on par" with similar jobs in the industry. St-Pierre also declined to say what he was paid at IBM, but says engineers' salaries there ranged from $70,000 to $150,000, depending on experience — and he was in a senior position.

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Recruiting then and now

St-Pierre, a Canadian native and a permanent resident of the United States, began his career with IBM in Toronto at 19 years old, after graduating first in his class from a technical college. He worked for IBM for 32 years before being let go in July.

"There were some very good years," St-Pierre said. "I joined them because they were recruiting the best. They were looking for the best. That is no longer the main driving force."

After establishing the pay issue wasn't a dealbreaker for St-Pierre, Heyman brought him in to meet Logic Supply's other engineers, including CEO Roland Groeneveld. Groeneveld founded the company in 2002 with his wife Lisa.

"And then he came in with his bag of tricks," Heyman said. "You either have a passion for technology or you don't. Richard has a soldering iron on his night stand in his bedroom."

"I was hoping you wouldn't bring that up," St-Pierre says.

St-Pierre's interview at Logic Supply sounds like a meeting of the Geek Squad. Once again, St-Pierre began pulling "wires and gizmos and stuff" out of his pockets, Heyman said.

St-Pierre was quickly engrossed in a conversation with Groeneveld and Product Engineer Rodney Hill.

"I was having a technical discussion with the CEO, arguing about electrons going back and forth in motors," St-Pierre said. "I talked with Rodney. We were already solving problems. Even in the interview process I was already engaged in the company. I felt there was such a good fit."

That experience was in stark contrast to the climate St-Pierre left behind at IBM, particularly toward the end of his career there, he says. The environment — both philosophical and physical — was open at Logic Supply. At IBM, St-Pierre had an office with a door, as did other engineers.

"Many people had their doors closed," St-Pierre said.

An interview given to the Burlington Free Press by former IBMer Andy Grab following his forced separation from the tech giant in June accurately described the feeling inside the walls of the fab in Essex Junction, St-Pierre said.

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"My wife and I read it," he said. "I also sent it to other people to have them understand the reality."

The reality, as Grab described it last summer, was grim. Grab said most of the employees at the IBM plant were unhappy, and had been unhappy for years.

"It's been 10 years since I've been excited about work," Grab said.

At the time, Grab was looking forward to a new chapter in his career. He did not return calls from the Free Press for an update.

Hold the red tape

St-Pierre began his career at IBM working on main frame computers, then moved to a division that repaired PCs and laptops. He worked next in optical communication, using infrared transceivers, then finished his career in Essex Junction testing the microchip wafers that are the mainstay of the facility.

"My role was to design test solutions for those wafers to make sure the products worked before they got packaged in their final application," St-Pierre said. "Mostly in cell phone applications, but a lot of very specific applications."

There were some very good years at IBM, St-Pierre said, but none of them came lately.

"Innovation is not the focus ⧉ at IBM," he said. "It used to be."

Innovation is the focus at Logic Supply, St-Pierre said, making it exactly what he needed after 13 years with IBM in Essex Junction.

"I need challenges and that's what Logic Supply is bringing," he said. "New challenges for me to channel that passion for engineering."

The company specializes in "embedded" industrial computers that often must operate in unfavorable conditions.

"The niche is rugged, harsh environments," Heyman said. "So think manufacturing floors. I need a computer to go in a mining drill three miles below the surface of the earth. A normal laptop or desktop ain't gonna cut it."

Logic Supply also writes software to go with their computers.

"We need a computer to run our software going into a garbage truck ⧉," Heyman said. "We want to sell our whole system to the waste management industry. It's got to be mobile. It's got to be rugged, and waterproof. There are power supply issues all the time with automotive applications. Tricky stuff."

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All of Logic Supply's computers are made with off-the-shelf components, combined and configured to meet a customer's needs.

Mark Heyman, the human resources director, describes the process this way: "Give me a computer that can fit into my cool thing, but I only have three inches by four inches and it has to be waterproof because I have to spray it down at the end of the day."

St-Pierre was ready for the freewheeling technical brainstorming that Logic Supply required, in meetings that could took place in a room without chairs, where everybody stands.

"The thing that struck me the most is the speed of execution," St-Pierre said. "Decisions that take weeks in other places get made in an hour, or two hours if it's a big decision. Everything happens quickly."

That's by design, CEO Roland Groeneveld said.

"When Lisa and I started the company, now over 10 years ago, we basically said, 'What kind of company do we want this to be?' The answer was simple. We wanted it to be a company where we would like to work," Groeneveld said.

And what did that look like? An open environment, with no individual offices. Open books, very transparent, with very quick decisions. A fast-moving environment without a lot of red tape.

"If we think somebody has a good plan, we try it," Groeneveld said.

Many of the ideas for how to structure Logic Supply's culture came from Groeneveld's experiences working for Dutch companies, where employees feel they have a right to be part of the decision-making process, and are not satisfied being just a cog in the wheel.

"In the Netherlands people have opinions about everything, and they're never afraid to voice those opinions," Groeneveld said.

The biggest surprise

Another important factor in St-Pierre's decision to join Logic Supply was the fact that it's not a struggling start-up. The company finished 2012 with $13.5 million in revenue in the United States and hopes to reach $16 million to $17 million in revenue this year and next year worldwide.

Plans are underway to at least double the size of the facility in South Burlington from its current 15,000 square feet to 30,000 to 35,000 square feet. A European division, based in the Netherlands, Groeneveld's native country, handles sales and production for 27 European Union countries.

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In the last year, Logic Supply has targeted Latin America and South America, handling sales and supply from South Burlington, and the company has a sourcing and supply office in Taipei, where most of the components come from, Heyman said.

St-Pierre said the only thing he misses about IBM are his friends who are still there. He said about half of the co-workers who were let go at the same time he was have found work, although most of them had to leave the state.

"Vermont is a small market for engineers," St-Pierre said. "I'm fortunate that the timing was right with Logic Supply."

At home, St-Pierre's wife has noticed a new and improved attitude, which he attributes to Logic Supply's upbeat atmosphere. There was one unexpected twist resulting from St-Pierre's transition out of IBM.

"If you ask me what was the biggest surprise coming here, on the serious side it was the openness and how well that works in practice," St-Pierre said. "On the fun side, I was assigned kitchen duty. That totally broadsided me."

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