

## Venture Profile

### YOU'RE HACKED—NOW HIRE ME

*Julie Alnwick, Canadian Business*

In March 1999, Curtis Penner, Steve Skoronski, Wil Hutchins, and Corey Auger began to check Calgary-based International Properties Group's computer system—from the outside. Realizing that the system was weak, they contacted company security and mocked the network's "hackability." Unimpressed, International Properties Group Ltd. (IPG) staff challenged them to hack into the network. In less than a week, the hackers produced IPG financials, databases, and scores of personal e-mails. IPG hired them on the spot.

It was the first contract for efinity Inc. The company's founders had just dropped out of the University of Calgary. They pooled their tuition funds to rent an office for a startup whose mission is ethical hacking—breaking into corporate information systems to find weaknesses. After a year and a half of taunting, being challenged, and hacking into other firms, efinity grew into a 10-person firm with clients like CIBC World Markets, Westcorp Inc., and CDL Systems Ltd. "That approach has worked again and again for us because there's not a lot to lose," says Penner, efinity's president. Taunts lead to contracts for security audits (including hacks) for which efinity charges up to \$25 000. Profits last year totalled \$125 000, and Penner anticipates revenue of \$750 000 this year.

To better simulate a real breach of network security, efinity doesn't tell its clients exactly when it will attack. "We want to come across as a skilled attacker rather than someone who's just doing it from their home," says Skoronski. Audits test a company's defences, its reaction to apparent virus infection, and its susceptibility to denial-of-service (DOS)



attacks, in which many infected computers automatically ask for Web pages from a targeted site so fast that the system freezes. An audit includes a first check, risk assessment, and another check after fixes are made.

Skoronski swears efinity has hacked ethically since day one—if not earlier. At university, Skoronski hacked into a server, but didn't ferret out the juicy data; instead, he told the network administrator and helped fix the security hole. Now, that's an ethical hacker.

#### *Exploring*

1. What niche does efinity respond to?
2. How did the founders get their first client? Why did their strategy work?
3. Which characteristics of efinity make it an entrepreneurial venture?
4. Do you think that the venture has a chance for a successful future? Why or why not?
5. What impact has this venture had on the business community?