

VOICES

Gordon Nuttall: turning layoff lemons into start-up lemonade

Armed with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, Gordon Nuttall went from college to work for Hewlett-Packard, where he put his engineering skills to use in areas such as digital imaging and new-business creation. Thirty-one years later, during the economic downturn of 2008, Nuttall was one of the many tech-industry employees to be laid off. Instead of taking an early retirement or seeking a position similar to the one he had just lost, Nuttall did what some might call crazy: He set out to form a start-up. Now, three years later, Nuttall and the team at Couragent Inc aren't just surviving the still-cold economy, they are growing and moving their Flip-Pal mobile scanner toward new markets. The chief executive officer recently spoke with *EDN* about the choices he made in turning a layoff into an opportunity. Excerpts of that conversation follow. Look for the full interview at www.edn.com/111020pulsea.

You had been with HP for more than 30 years. How did you react to being downsized in 2008?

A We call it "WFRed." WFR: workforce reduction. So we called ourselves the WFRers. We formed a group of people who met socially and did things together to replace that interaction you would get in the company. That social interaction tends to get lost when you leave a company.

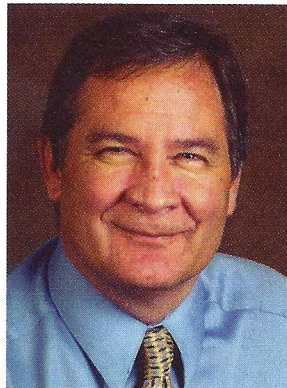
Are these the people who helped you start Couragent?

A Some, yes. But others I had known from before and are just really talented people. That [fact] was one thing that was instrumental about the [large-scale industry] downsizing and economy: It makes for a lot of really fantastic talent out there. If I started a new company, I

would never be able to recruit those people away from their old jobs. But a start-up gives people a chance to think about a new way of doing their work and what their real passion is. That's one of the ways I think the downsized economy can be turned into lemonade rather than lemons. People get a chance to do something that, in a corporate gig, they might not have ever ventured out to try. Sometimes you need to be upstaged out of your comfort zone, and then you find out that you can do so much more than you ever thought you would within the confines of a company.

Where did the name Couragent come from?

A We started the company based on our five foundational values: courage, integrity, collaboration, innova-



tion, and care. When you take the first four letters of courage, our first value—*cour*—means heart in the old Latin derivative. And then "agent." When we talk to our team, they are "couragents," agents of heart. In that talk, we speak not only from our logic but also from our hearts, and the things that matter to us are not just facts and figures but also who we are as a people. The name reflects a lot about our company.

Any words of advice for the many talented engineers out there who have been downsized and may be wondering what to do next?

A It's very common to want to find a job like the one that you had before. Well, that's kind of slim pickings these days. I was a program manager, and big corporations aren't really hiring at that management level. I became really involved in professional-networking groups. I really encourage people to join a networking group or to become more proficient at talking with people and getting to know other areas that you normally would not have come in contact with when you were in a company. Be out there, and do a lot more networking.

I also think that the employment model of the future and

the one we are using with Couragent involves multiple streams of income, where people are independent consultants and they work under a 1099 contract to one or maybe several gigs at the same time. I would suggest that people form LLCs [limited-liability companies] to take advantage of tax benefits. And go to the conventions; join the associations that are the industry-leading professional organizations. It looks good on a résumé, and it keeps you speaking the general lingo of the industry.

You left college, went into this corporate world at HP, were downsized, and are now here in this whole new life. Are you happy?

A I'm pursuing my passion. I sometimes will give presentations to groups, and I will say that I'm unemployed now. For me to go back to a corporate gig—where you have to do all the politics, and decisions take forever, and you have to get three doubles of an approval—I could never go back to that. With this small company, when we need to make a decision, we just put our heads together and go for it. Once you've experienced that passion for action, you might never want to go back. Some days I wonder what the heck I am doing starting a company at 56 years old. Maybe there is a fine line between crazy and totally gassed.

Everybody thinks it's the younger folks who are doing all the entrepreneurial, innovation stuff. But we're doing a great job, enjoying ourselves, and have a very solid business plan ... So this has got a lot of nice aspects to it. —**interview conducted and edited by Suzanne Deffree**