

## Wired for success

Software developer and IT consultancy altcom has found Cornwall's thriving digital community provides great opportunities for creative projects and partnerships.

### Overview

When altcom moved its headquarters to Penzance in 2004, it was hardly taking a leap in the dark. Development Director John Cowles had grown up in Cornwall and spent some of his early career working in the county. Then in 1995 he helped set up altcom to develop sophisticated taxonomical analysis systems for the news and financial information giant Reuters.

The company rapidly built a strong reputation and started taking on other clients in the global information, environmental and professional sectors, for whom it designs content management systems for internet and intranet projects involving high volumes of dynamic content.

altcom's success is built on its ability to meet the demand for timely and cost-effective software using tools and methods matched to the scope of the project. It's also quick to spot and act on market opportunities – one reason why it is now developing low-cost but feature-rich e-commerce packages that can be easily tailored to the specific demands of SMEs. The exceptionally high quality of altcom's services was recognised when the company achieved the much-coveted ISO 9001:2000 certification for software design and development services.

### Workforce

With a core team of seven highly qualified and experienced design and development staff, altcom also draws on a pool of Cornwall-based creatives on a project basis. Many of these are Digital Peninsula Network members, which brings together IT and media professionals in Cornwall within a trusted network framework. Cowles believes that the Combined Universities in Cornwall will help ensure a continued supply of highly skilled personnel for the county's rapidly growing IT sector.

### Technology

One of the company's strengths is in combining PRINCE2 Practitioner project management with open source web-development technologies such as PHP and MySQL, with XML, AJAX, Java, CSS and Oracle. altcom's base is a beautifully restored Regency townhouse in the centre of Penzance, with dual 8mbit broadband lines and its own dedicated servers running in-house and in London – a great combination of 18th-century style and 21st-century technology.



One of altcom's strengths is its expertise in open-source web-development technologies such as PHP and MySQL, as well more conventional tools such as Java and HTML. This recently led to the company being invited to become part of the core team developing Joomla, the international open-source content management system that looks set to become the best and most adaptable of its sort. altcom is helping to ensure that the whole system is passed through a validation and quality assurance process to identify and fix any problems.

As with many other companies, altcom's move to Cornwall was enabled by the high level of broadband connectivity that the county now offers. Dave Wilcox, the company's Technical Director, explains: "Transatlantic conference calls and video conferencing are becoming the norm in this business. We meet face to face with our US clients maybe twice a year but we meet online every week, with messenger and email filling in the gaps. Where we are physically located is really irrelevant – as long as the technology is there."

### Support

"Accelerator" and "Flex" grants from actnow helped altcom to revamp its web marketing operation and provide flexible working for core staff, and better integrate contractors via secure VPN. It has also received valuable help from Devon & Cornwall Business Link, which part-funded an expert consultant to guide altcom to it achieving ISO 9001 certification for "Software Design and Development". Research grants from the Combined Universities in Cornwall have also helped it grow an international information and software business in the global oil and gas industry. However, the one single factor that led altcom to relocate to Cornwall was the presence and services of the Digital Peninsula Network.

### Clients

altcom's client list includes the DTI, Reuters, factiva, various Universities, Tourist boards and private companies. The company takes pride in the high levels of client satisfaction that it achieves – as shown by the fact that 70% of its turnover comes from repeat business.