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## Computer specialist always ready to roll up his sleeves

By **Tim Rausch**

Business Editor

Sunday, March 21, 2010

In a conversation with Charles Johnson, it doesn't take long for him to get to his catch phrases.

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Rainier Ehrhardt/Staff

President Charles Johnson poses for a portrait at EDTS.

He borrowed "Trust, but verify" from Ronald Reagan.

"Well-done is better than well-said." That's from Ben Franklin.

He uses the phrases to motivate his technicians and information technology engineers and to sell EDTS to clients.

The Broad Street computer network and security firm has been on its own for more than a year. For a decade before, it was a subsidiary of a regional accounting firm.

The 25-employee company occupies the third floor of the Merrill Lynch building at 933 Broad St. Employees' lives revolve around servers, wires and workstations.

"We're not a web development company and we're not a software company," Johnson said. "We're focused, and that's what's allowed us to grow over the years."

EDTS has added three people since the spinoff from Elliott Davis in January 2009, and Johnson is looking for growth in his outlying offices such as Greenville, S.C.

"Charles and I have worked together a long time, so there are certain presentations that he does that I could probably step in and say key words -- just not as effectively as he does it," said

Will McGee, who has worked for Johnson for 10 years and serves as chief operating officer for EDTS.

A few of those key words: "predictable results" and "excuse-free IT."

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"I trust that automation is working, but I verify it," Johnson said. That's where the Reagan quote comes into play. EDTS engineers don't put Microsoft patches on systems unless they've been tested.

"We believe in the solutions that we design and sell," McGee said. "Charles excels in sales. He is a good motivator of people. He is open and honest in his communication."

Johnson said the company hasn't advertised until this year. He wants the company's reputation and results to speak for it, but he's been told by his marketing staff that he needs to be out front more and sing the business's praises.

"I've never been big on telling people how important I am," Johnson said. "I want it to be evident, not from me having to say it. For us to grow, the company needs a face person."

So, well-done is better than well-said.

Being in the business of installing and managing business networks means all of his engineers carry certifications from major corporations, Microsoft, Cisco and Citrix. Engineers have more than on specialty, so a customer isn't waiting on one person to help with a problem. Johnson himself is a security specialist.

EDTS prepays for that training. Johnson said the company spent \$25,000 for training this year.

### **Room to grow**

EDTS was once known as Elliott Davis Technology Solutions.

Elliott Davis is a 450-person CPA firm based in South Carolina and has branch offices in Augusta. The decision to split was amicable, Johnson said.

"We still have a great relationship. They refer clients to us," he said. "They're not a client, but they do my accounting work."

When the spinoff occurred, Johnson said, he kept all the benefits for employees the same. He said his insurance agent called him crazy for maintaining big-company benefits at a small company.

"Our employees are what makes the difference. There are a lot of companies like us out here," Johnson explained.

There are other benefits to working at EDTS, such as the Wii tournaments at lunch time.

McGee said most of the employees are long-term.

"The company is not a ladder. We try to give progressive responsibility to people," McGee said. He is one of those, having started with the company as an IT engineer.

McGee describes Johnson as a hands-on boss, but not a micromanager. Johnson gives the staffers the leeway to do their tasks.

"If need be, he is willing to roll up his sleeves and tackle any problem with the engineers," McGee said.

EDTS serves small to midsize businesses and some local government clients. From a small control room they call the NOC (network operation center), staffers remotely monitor 2,000 computers throughout the Southeast.

Johnson offers a warning to small businesses that think hackers won't be interested in their systems and data.

Hackers want control of computers, and they'll even battle each other to see how many computers they can control.

"They are concerned about what is coming in, which is valid -- you don't want hackers," he said. "But you have to be equally concerned about what's going out of your network."

A virus will send out spam and important files.

"For the life of me, some companies miss that," he said.

### **Augusta boy**

"Although I moved across the river, I'm still an Augusta boy," Johnson said. "I've had plenty of offers to move to California, Virginia. When I was a part of Elliott Davis, they wanted me in Greenville because that was their headquarters. I fought it tooth and nail. This is where my home is."

He was born in old University Hospital in 1970, the only child of Danny and Marsha Johnson.

His father was a heating and air contractor, and Johnson remembers working with him every weekend during his youth -- even during college breaks.

"I had an appreciation for getting an education," Johnson said. "Even now, you'll never catch me without my sleeves rolled up. If I have to crawl up in an attic and run cable for a client, I'll do it."

Johnson grew up in south Augusta and then Columbia County, off South Belair Road. He went to Augusta Christian Schools in Martinez. He played football at the school -- middle linebacker and fullback.

"Tore up my knee and couldn't play college ball, so I went to Georgia Southern," he said.

He had been accepted to the University of Georgia but felt lost on the campus, a stark contrast to the graduating class of 40 at Augusta Christian.

Johnson thinks he could have played football at Georgia Southern, but two knee surgeries in four years of high school helped his decision to sit out the game.

"I did more damage stretching the ligaments than it was worth at that point," he said.

So he went to Statesboro in search of a degree. He majored in finance and management of information systems but graduated with only the finance degree.

"I started out on the general business route like all freshmen and was going to go accounting," Johnson recalled. "I talked to a finance professor. He said, 'You don't want to be an accountant; you want to analyze the numbers that the accountants come up with.' "

Understanding a financial statement without having to crunch the numbers to create it is something that lingers in his work today.

During one of his summers home from college, he was out and about in Augusta with a friend one night and bumped into Joanne.

"It was Red Lion Pub. On Thursday nights that had a deal, you go and shoot pool and hang out. We were sitting at a table and she and her friend walked up," Johnson said. "That split-second decision of which one are you going to talk to ..."

He talked to Joanne. They got married three years later.

When it came time for his first job after college, he went with his interest in computers. He went to work for a home health care company to manage its computer network, turning down an offer to go into banking.

Later, "I got tired of my dad saying you're not using your finance degree," Johnson said, "so I went to work for a small CPA firm in Aiken."

That was in 1995.

He tried his hands at accounting work, doing tax returns. After 50 returns, he realized "this wasn't for me."

"The lady who had to review my work ... she realized it wasn't for me either," Johnson said with a chuckle.

After a year at Wade and Co. CPAs, concentrating on its computer network, not the accounting, he found himself working for Elliott Davis after a merger.

### **Finding his fit**

How does a public accounting firm end up running a subsidiary information technology firm? It landed in the company's lap, and the brass let it be because it was successful.

Before the merger between Elliott Davis and Wade and Co., Johnson was doing consulting and network administration.

"I was billing more per hour than some of the shareholders," Johnson said. "So when Elliott Davis bought us, I was an anomaly. 'What do we do with this guy?'"

His profitability in IT consulting convinced the new owners that he should keep doing it. He was billing 2,000 hours a year.

After three years, in 1999, Elliott Davis formed its own new company, with Johnson as part-owner, and called it Elliott Davis Technology Solutions. Johnson asked for the incorporation partly to attract some help.

"I can't do that in the guise of a CPA firm. It has to do be done as a technology company," he said. It allowed him to hire staffers and specialists.

Johnson was the managing shareholder, and the firm was just an investor. The tech firm was based in Augusta, and the accounting firm was based in Greenville, operating on different computer systems.

In 2008, Elliott Davis decided to let its subsidiary fly on its own. Johnson bought out its portion of the company and changed its name to EDTS.

"We're a professional services company, we're not just a computer company," Johnson said. "The whole mentality of being around accountants for 14 years is that we have a different philosophy. We're about professional relationships. We're about growing the clients' company, not necessarily making the hardware sale, the quick buck."

### **Deer stand**

Joanne Johnson affectionately calls her husband a "high-tech redneck."

"I love hunting and fishing. If I'm not working, that's what I do," Charles Johnson said. "I grew up in the outdoors. If you notice my office, I got Cabella's, hunting and fishing."

What he likes about deer hunting is the ability to work while he's waiting for a deer to stroll by. He gets a signal on his BlackBerry out in the woods.

"So I can be responding to e-mails and taking care of business," he said.

Johnson doesn't even need a gun to enjoy the experience.

"If I didn't have anything but a camera, I enjoy it. I like being in the quiet and watching nature," he said. "I'll have my gun next to me and watch deer all morning, taking videos on my phone."

Johnson is involved in a couple of hunting clubs in Georgia and South Carolina and doesn't stop with deer season. He is even fascinated with hunting crows.

Though he lives next to a golf course, Mount Vintage in Edgefield County, he doesn't play golf often. A few times a year, he'll play with family or in a charity tournament.

He'd rather be fishing. Introduced to hunting and fishing by his father, he grew up fishing in ponds, but he finds himself on the Atlantic Ocean more often these days.

He has a boat at his mother-in-law's house in Edisto Beach, S.C., south of Charleston.

"I love going out with my dad. We'll bottom fish for snapper and black bass," he said.

He's not big on catching and posing for photos.

"I want something I can bring home and put in the freezer. I'm all about staying in your limits -- I'm part of the Coastal Conservation Association -- to keep the population up. But usually we'll come back with enough to feed the family," Johnson said.

Everything he knows about ocean fishing is self-taught. He is on his fourth ocean boat.

"The ocean is big. There was an urge to go farther with something safer," he said.

Finding the best spots?

He uses electronics, of course.

## Charles Johnson

**TITLE:** Owner of EDTS LLC

**BORN:** July, 30, 1970, Augusta

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor of business in finance, Georgia Southern University

**FAMILY:** Wife, Joanne; children, Evan and Emily

**CIVIC:** Member of the Coastal Conservation Association, Central Savannah River Land Trust, Walton Foundation for Independence, Augusta Technical College's computer advisory committee, Medical College of Georgia advisory board for the Department of Health Informatics and Information Systems Security Association

**HOBBIES:** Hunting and saltwater fishing

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