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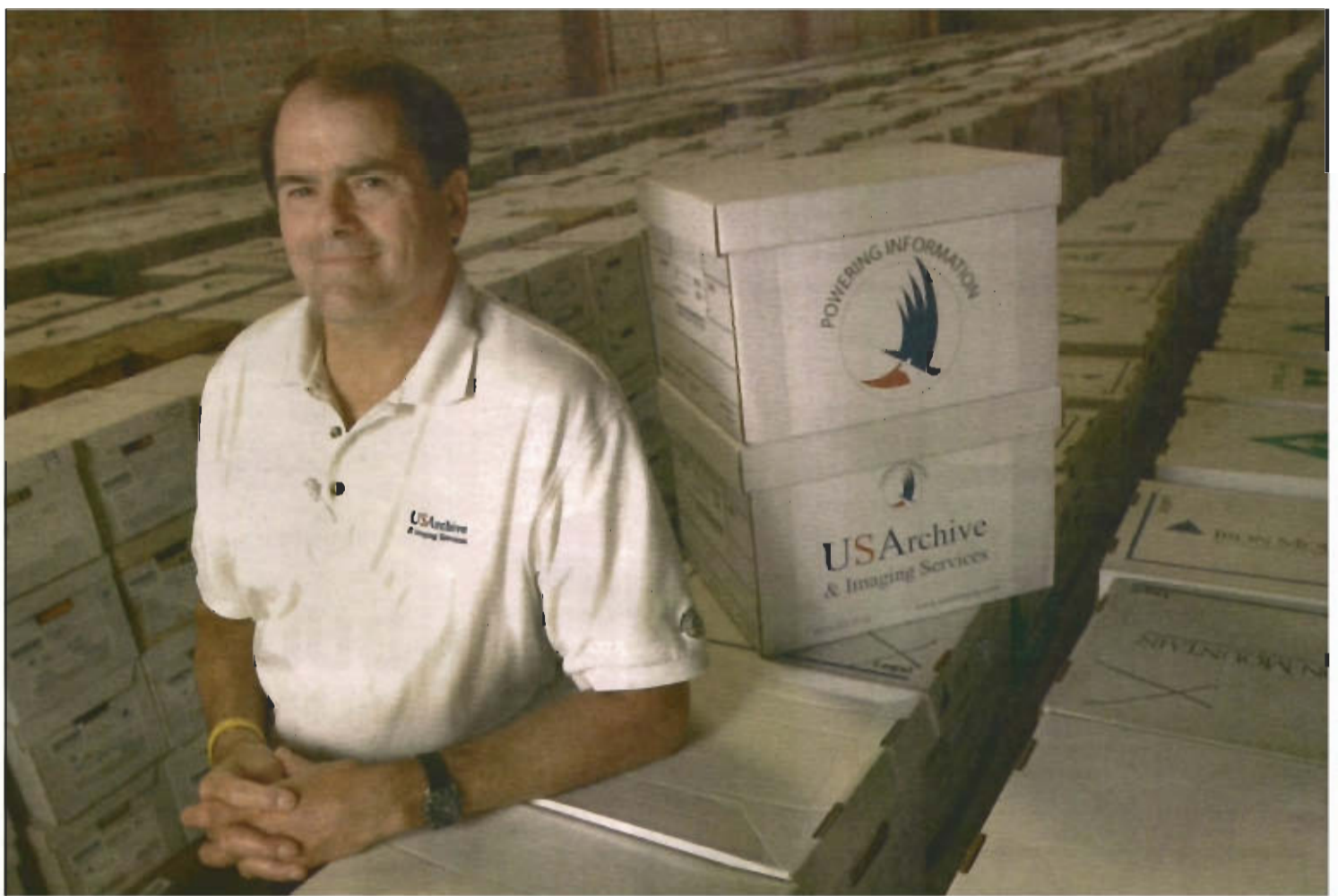
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MAKING RECORDS

Kirkland archival company digs into records, creates copies and keeps backups



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/DAN SCHLATTER

Mick Plath is CEO of US Archive & Imaging Services Inc., which he founded 15 months ago. The company digitizes records for companies and governments and also stores documents at this facility in Tukwila.

By ERIC ENGLEMAN
STAFF WRITER

Not every CEO can say they've been chased by an angry swarm of bees while doing their job. But Mick Plath is not your average CEO.

The retired Pitney Bowes executive launched US Archive & Imaging Services Inc. 15 months ago. The Kirkland-based company excavates old, musty records stored from the basements and back rooms of government offices and businesses and stores them or scans them into digital images.

It can be dirty work. Plath's crew regularly encounter cobwebs, mold, and bugs as well as larger creatures like bats and rats while rooting through old crates and file cabinets. Plath himself jostled a beehive that had taken up residence in a box of papers and had to run to escape the bees' wrath.

But the boyishly enthusiastic Plath is upbeat about the work and his company's prospects for future growth. Despite all the talk about computers creating a "paperless society," use of paper in offices across the country is actually on the rise, as e-mail increases the flow of documents that people can exchange and print.

U.S. consumption of paper reached 98 million tons last year, up from 91.5 million tons a decade earlier, according to the American Forest and Paper Association. Many government agencies and busi-

nesses are groaning under the weight of all the paper they have to store and keep tabs on. That pressure creates an opening for companies like US Archive.

"We have barely touched the market. There is more paper being generated than ever before," Plath said.

Plath's crew regularly encounter cobwebs, mold, and bugs as well as larger creatures like bats and rats while rooting through old crates and file cabinets.

US Archive's offices, which are hidden away in a Kirkland residential neighborhood on the edge of Lake Washington, look like something out of an espionage novel. Inside, workers rifle through crates of government documents and scan the pages into a series of high-powered computers.

The company works with everything

from court documents and county permits to marriage records and birth certificates and can do almost anything with them. It can assign them bar codes and store them at its 30,000-square-foot warehouse in Tukwila. It can scan them into digital images, burn them onto CDs, host and post them on the Web, or download them to a searchable database. It can destroy them by crushing them into a pulpy mass.

During its short existence, the company has lined up a slew of clients, including King County, the Seattle and Bellevue city governments, Xerox Corp., Car Toys, the Washington Association of Mortgage Brokers and medical equipment maker Medtronic, Inc.

King County signed a contract with US Archive in April and has used the company to store 8,400 cubic feet of documents. "We continue to produce more than we can store," said Nathan Valderas, King County records center supervisor. "We were up against the wall and they came through for us."

Valderas said US Archive doesn't charge extra fees for retrieval and delivery, making it less expensive than many of its competitors. "Every other company is going to nickel-and-dime you for every service, but US Archive just charges for storage," he said. He said King County has a long-term need for paper storage,

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RECORDS: US Archive is keeper of government's files

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because the county is required by law to maintain backup copies of records even if they're available in digital form.

Plath said US Archive posted modest revenue of \$75,000 during its first six months of operation in 2003, but quadrupled that amount in the first quarter of this year. He said the company has not turned a profit yet, but predicted that point is "not too far away."

Nationwide, the market for business document management is worth a whopping \$3 billion and \$5 billion, said John Mancini, president of the Association for Information and Image Management, a Washington, D.C.-based trade group. He said companies like US Archive, which offer both storage and digitizing of documents, are particularly well-suited to tap this market.

"This is a hybrid world for the foreseeable future," Mancini said. "People have paper they need to manage, paper they want to convert to digital, and digitized documents," he said. The key is "developing a strategy that picks up on all three

"Old records are falling apart from high use. It's all disintegrating rapidly."

**Mick Plath, CEO,
US Archive & Imaging Services Inc.**

elements. You can't neglect any of these."

Mancini said many government offices and businesses are just waking up to the fact that they need more options to deal with the mountains of paper. "It's a very hot market right now because people have handled this in a sloppy manner," he said.

Plath says his team of 28 full-time employees are helping to move clients into the digital age. "Old records are falling apart from high use. It's all disintegrating rapidly," he said. "Once it's digitized, it can carry over into new mediums."

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