

## Private Sector Award Winner Thunder Bay

# Irene Kozlowski

by Ian Ross

Getting pink-slipped on Good Friday, April 13, 2001 proved to be a mixed blessing for Irene Kozlowski.

The project manager for iPares American became a casualty of the dot-boom-bust when Minneapolis software and web hoster, elected to close their Thunder Bay development shop.

But she quickly got over the shock and disappointment when, within days, clients began calling her at home pledging their support for her to get back into business.

She contacted her out-of-work iPares colleagues Joe Quaresima, now her 50/50 business partner, and organized a team of software developers and creative designers to form Sencia Canada.

"I guess I thought we'll try it for a few months."

Kozlowski admits facing a steep learning curve during her fledgling year as head of her own start-up.

With no marketing experience or material, it was a tough challenge to pick up a phone to make a cold call to a prospective client or start door-knocking. But she realized her fledgling company had to adapt to the always-fluid IT landscape or face closure again.

"We had to look at the business much different from our iPares days and it was probably one of our best moves."

From the beginning, Kozlowski wanted a very service-oriented shop built around a solid team of technical and project managers

who understood their clients' needs, providing free training and support, and stayed on top of industry trends.

Rather than concentrate exclusively on developing proprietary software that goes out of date, they choose a totally different strategy of creating hosted applications that could be leased to businesses and government institutions and later customized to fulfill their needs. It provided a more affordable solution that eventually became a huge success for their clients.

Along with web design, the award-winning, 14-employee IT firm specializes in e-learning applications and content management systems. Their flagship Informetica, a web-based training platform, can be customized for specific training or reporting needs.

The good thing about hosted applications is sustaining revenues from the renewal of annual licences.

"It's far less rocky and more stable because if you've satisfied your customer by doing a good job you'll continue to work with them," says Kozlowski.

Located in the Northwestern Ontario Technology Centre, Sencia has continued to secure larger contracts with long-serving U.S. clients such as Prosoft Learning of Phoenix, Ariz. and Employee Continuum of Minneapolis, Minn.

Cross Country Canada, the national sport governing body for Canadian cross-country skiing, uses a customized version of

Informetica to help train their ski officials toward qualifying for officiating spots at the Olympics.

Other clients such as Walgreen's, Purdue Pharmaceuticals and AIS Systems of Winnipeg also use customized versions of Informetica for training purposes.

Their stable of present and past clients include Lakehead University, Confederation College, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Cargill, Equipment World and Ontario Hydro.

Though reluctant to disclose revenues, Kozlowski says Sencia will double their 2006-2007 sales from their last fiscal year. Sencia's expertise in web marketing and exporting also earned them an Ontario Global Traders Award in 2005.

John Coupland, emergency planning officer with Thunder Bay Area Emergency Measures Organization, says "Irene's vision and understanding of market conditions have proven to be instrumental in this company's success as they begin marketing in other regions of North America."

Judy Sander, manager of Northwestern Ontario Technology Centre calls Kozlowski a "visionary" and an "exceptional business woman," leading an innovative and high-growth IT company. She's also a committed member and corporate sponsor to local causes such as the Shelter House Corporate Relay, the Port Arthur Rotary Club and frequently lends her expertise to many non-profit and charitable



groups in the region.

"Irene is not just an entrepreneur," says Sander, "she puts her heart and soul in her community."

Coupland says, "Irene's honesty and integrity is above reproach. She cares about people, business and charity, and is committed to bringing excellence to Northern Ontario."

While working for the Thunder Bay Area Emergency Measures Organization, a group of 18 mayors and reeves, "Irene was able to deal with them in a professional and diplomatic manner. She was very well-respected by this group, not an easy task."

The company is anxious to expand its North American reach by installing sales reps in Winnipeg and New Hampshire, with a new marketing and ad manager just hired to prepare web seminars for prospective clients.

With Thunder Bay's growing biotechnology sector, she hopes larger incoming businesses will tap into their expertise.

Kozlowski says although she's lived in other cities including Sudbury and Vancouver, the Thunder Bay native says the quality of life in her hometown, with its seven-minute daily commute, just can't be beat. **IW**