



Creating clarity

JEFF SMITH FINDS INSPIRATION AT THE DYNAMIC INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN.

Jeff Smith ('92) confesses that youthful hubris led him into the entrepreneurial life.

In the early 1990s, while working as a lab assistant for a small Ohio-based medical research firm, the recent biomedical engineering graduate of Northwestern Engineering toiled on "cool projects," yet found himself disenchanted with the pace and depth of the work.

"I wanted to roll up my sleeves and get deep into it," Smith says. "Plus, I was a 23-year-old who thought I knew it all."

Just two years after graduation, Smith ditched the security of the 9-to-5 life to launch Clarity, a consulting firm dedicated to the emerging fields of microcomputers and software. "I had a lot of energy and not a lot to lose," Smith says.

His agricultural family taught him pragmatism and drive; his undergraduate years at the McCormick School of Engineering inspired his enterprising spirit. "Northwestern exposed me to crazy-smart people driven to change things, and I wanted to be one of those people," he notes.

With Smith as the CEO and cofounder, the Chicago-based startup embraced a straightforward formula: gain expertise in new technological developments and then introduce those innovations to business clients as performance-driving solutions. "Clarity became known as the company that could help others implement technology in practical ways," Smith says.

The company crafted proprietary point-of-sale systems, custom software, and other tech-fueled solutions for retailers, restaurants, and other enterprises. "I loved getting my hands into operations, marketing, human resources, sales, and everything else necessary to have a successful business."

By the early 2000s, as the iPhone moved computers from desktops to hands, Smith quickly grasped the importance of user experience. "Humans were using these devices, so someone needed to be thinking about how we could best interact with them," he says. "And that 'someone' became my team at Clarity."

Confident that software and art were stronger together than apart, Smith established Truth Labs, a unit of Clarity that focused on integrating design and technology. In one notable tag team project for McDonald's, Clarity constructed the technical aspects of a self-service ordering kiosk, while Truth Labs provided an inclusive, accessible design.

"It was a solid, successful marriage," Smith says.

By developing a series of winning solutions for heavyweight clients like Microsoft, Twitter, and Uber, Smith grew Clarity into a 175-employee firm with \$27 million in annual revenue by 2017. That summer, St. Louis-based digital consulting firm Perficient acquired Clarity for \$41.7 million.

"The deal with Perficient allowed us to fast-track our growth with a stroke of a pen," Smith says. "That sale was best for the company and the people who worked there."

Late last year, Smith left Perficient to plot his next startup. He's still intrigued by the dynamic intersection of technology and design, but STEM education and entrepreneurial studies now captivate him, as proven by his involvement with EPIC, Northwestern's undergraduate entrepreneurship club that takes its name from "entrepreneurship in action."

"My career is an open canvas before me," Smith beams. "And the kid in me enjoys creating."

DANIEL P. SMITH

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