

Hans Kobler, ICx Technologies

by David Silverberg

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Hans Kobler was at a meeting in New York's midtown on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, when he heard that the twin towers had been struck. His apartment, where he'd left his wife that morning, was 400 yards from the World Trade Center, with an unobstructed view.

For frantic hours he tried to reach his wife, who had watched one of the planes strike the building. He ultimately succeeded in reaching her. But for the next two and a half weeks he and his wife were unable to return to their home because of the dust, the debris and the danger. After two months, they moved away.

Kobler, an aerospace engineer who originally gained his master's degree in his native Munich, Germany, was already deeply involved in high technology. Along with Mark Mills and Peter Huber, he'd helped found the investment firm Digital Power Capital in early 2001. This was a firm committed to investing in technologies that converted raw power into transmittable forms like light, lasers, batteries or computer power supplies using advanced materials and other techniques. It was on the cutting edge of its field.

Now, as he surveyed the hulking ruins of a building that once had towered outside his window and looked over the business cards of friends and acquaintances who had been working on the 89th floor of the World Trade Center, he saw that there were new needs.

"You want to make sure your family is safe, so you don't think about much else at the time," he recalled. "It's not easy for me to get emotional, but when you're looking at the ruins every day when you wake up, it kind of reminds you of the implications of what you're doing.

"Digital Power had just started, and our focus was on the energy track and advanced materials" he continued. "After 9/11, we shifted our focus and our concentration and went more to security technologies. It was a very natural thing to do."

It also led to the founding of ICx Technologies, which Kobler heads today.

A new player

ICx Technologies, now headquartered in Washington, DC, is the product of 18 technology companies that merged in late 2005. The oldest one dated back to 1975.

Today, ICx employs about 800 people, some 400 of whom are researchers and scientists from different disciplines. Last year, it reported revenues of \$136 million, representing organic growth of between 30 percent and 40 percent; doubled the number of products it produced; and poured \$170 million into product development and research.

"We're really at the early stages of development," noted Kobler.

The list of successes and products is already impressive. In October 2007, the Transportation Security Administration contracted for 200 Fido PaxPoint handheld detection systems. The system can screen liquids through bottles and containers.

In December 2007, the Boeing Co., Chicago, Ill., selected ICx ground surveillance radars for the Boeing SBInet (Secure Border Initiative network) Toolbox program.

In February, the US Army signed a \$17 million contract for further development of enzyme and mass-spectrometry-based technologies, the key means for detecting improvised explosive devices.

Furthermore, ICx produces the world's most accurate perimeter security radar integrated with cameras and the world's most precise spectroscopic gamma radiation detector, according to Kobler.

A long-term need

Kobler foresees a steadily expanding homeland security marketplace and steady growth.

"I think the trend in the security industry is going toward better sensors, people trying to help the people on the ground with better tools that are more reliable, more accurate, that are cheaper, so that they can be more widely dispersed. Then the next trend will be to take the data from those various sensors and put it all together in a center so that someone can do something about it."

This is already being done on the border, but Kobler sees security needs growing in all sectors in the years ahead: in the military, which must respond to asymmetrical threats; in homeland security; and in the commercial arena.

"The commercial market is huge," he noted, and could be calculated to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The cost of a false alarm or a catastrophic incident, whether chemical, explosive or biological, is so enormous that companies must safeguard against them. "Asymmetrical warfare, homeland security and commercial security are huge. They're growing strongly; they'll do so independent of who is in the White House and they'll outlast a recession." Furthermore, the market is global and ICx is already active in the Middle East and overseas, he maintained.

Commercial considerations aside, Kobler sees ICx as having a mission as well as a commercial purpose. "It is somewhat ingrained in the DNA of our company," he said. "We have great technology and we're very proud of the products that we build and the technology that we develop. Yes, you have to make money and all, but we believe that we're doing something good for the country and we hope that we're doing our share to make sure that 9/11 doesn't happen again." HST