

The competitive advantage of using AI in business

JANELLE BOMBALIER

For the Economic Alliance of Lewis County

We are witnessing an exciting moment in history — the dawn of a new era in business and technology, comparable to the rise of the digital age and the Industrial Revolution. As we look into the future, it is clear that embracing and understanding artificial intelligence (AI) is essential for businesses aiming to prosper in this transformative era.

Whether you are part of a large corporation or a small business owner, you can use AI to increase your competitive advantage.

AI: A new beginning, not an end

Similar to how the internet era transformed our daily life and allowed us to connect with people globally, the rise of AI is offering new opportunities for enhanced data analytics and innovation across all industries.

AI's integration into business is often met with hesitation, which can hinder its adoption and popularity. A critical concern is the fear of AI leading to widespread job loss. History, however, shows us that like any major technological advancement, AI transforms jobs rather than eliminating them.

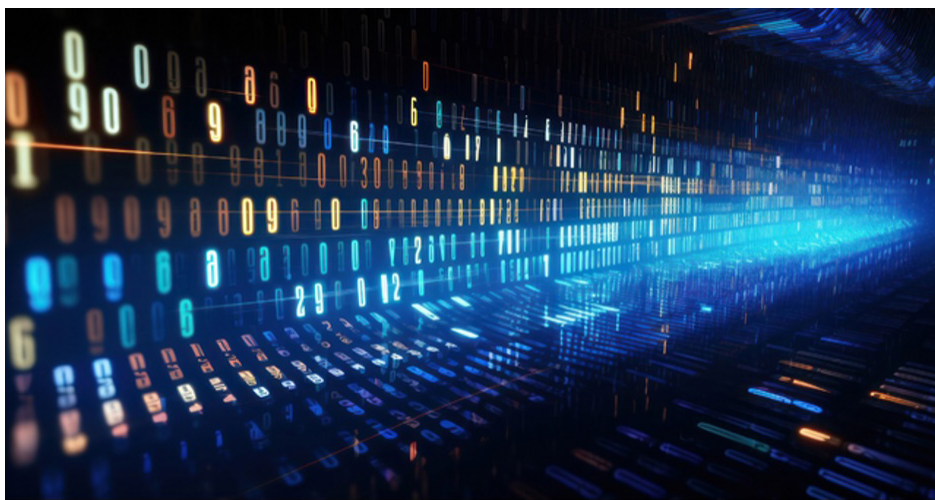
For example, graphic designers who embraced digital tools have flourished. AI offers opportunities for professionals to enhance their skills and efficiency. The key lies in learning to use AI to improve job performance and innovate.

HOW CAN AI HELP SUPPORT YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS?

Market research

AI is highly proficient at obtaining and analyzing large volumes of data, and pulling actionable insights that are beyond human capacity. This capability allows businesses to make more informed and strategic decisions.

AI can predict market trends and consumer behavior, helping businesses anticipate future needs and adjust their



strategies accordingly. This foresight is crucial in staying ahead of competitors and meeting market demands. For example, retailers could use predictive models to optimize inventory levels, reduce stockouts, minimize overstock situations, and enhance supply chain efficiency, ultimately improving the accuracy and responsiveness of inventory management processes.

AI algorithms can identify potential risks by analyzing patterns and irregularities in data in real-time. This approach to risk management could help businesses identify cyber-attacks as they happen, reducing the time between threat detection and response.

Operational efficiency

AI can automate repetitive and time-consuming tasks, freeing up employee time for more complex and creative work. This includes tasks like data entry, scheduling, and even responding to basic customer inquiries. We all know how frustrating a “canned” response from a chatbot on a website can be. Generative AI could replace that negative customer experience with chats that provide precise information tailored to your needs 24/7.

AI can streamline various business processes, ensuring they are more effi-

cient and cost-effective. For example, AI could automate repetitive tasks in the hiring process, such as resume screening and initial candidate assessments; enabling HR professionals to focus on more strategic aspects of talent acquisition. For hiring managers swamped with hundreds of applications to review, this is a real game changer.

AI systems, with their ability to learn and adapt, significantly reduce the likelihood of human error. This precision is highly valuable in areas like financial accounting or data management.

AI enables businesses to offer personalized experiences to customers and employees by analyzing their preferences and behaviors. This personalization can be put in place in things like customized marketing, product recommendations, and tailored customer service. You may have noticed when shopping online that you are often given the option to browse through a “You may also like” section. This is a prime example of targeted marketing for products based on consumer behavior. Amazon has reported that the business of cross selling and upselling make up as much as 35% of its revenue.

Through sentiment analysis and customer feedback evaluation, AI helps

■ SEE AI, PAGE B3

Key to economic success in Lewis County is building partnerships

TODD CHAPUT

Executive Director
Economic Alliance of Lewis County

At the Economic Alliance of Lewis County we are building a collaborative economic strategy for the county centered on how we can all do better working toward a common cause of economic development together.

Our core philosophy is success through building partnerships. Economic development is not a solo effort, but achieved through engaged, strategic planning that benefits the entire community.

A unified vision includes strengthening the Lewis County economy by focusing on helping businesses recruit new employees, retaining and assisting existing businesses and attracting new operations.

The aim, the goal, is to ultimately improve the quality of life for our residents.

In essence the Alliance along with our partners can successfully be the economic engine for the county.

The Alliance operates as a public-private partnership, coordinating closely with these key entities to solve infrastructure, regulatory, and land-use challenges:

- The city of Centralia: Supporting urban revitalization and local business stability.
- The city of Chehalis: Partnering on industrial growth and infrastructure projects.
- Lewis County: Aligning with the county's long-range strategic plan for economic opportunity.
- Port of Centralia: Driving master-planned industrial and mixed-use developments like Centralia Station.
- Port of Chehalis: Developing industrial and commercial properties to create high-wage jobs.
- The Industrial Commission: A long-standing partner focused on bringing quality industry and jobs to the region.

As such, the Alliance staff is deeply embedded in the community, serving on various boards to ensure economic development is integrated into all aspects of civic life:

- My board memberships as executive director:
 - Centralia Downtown Association: A vital component of the retail economic strategy
 - Twin Cities Rotary
 - United Learning Center
 - WACA-Washington Association of Culture and Arts
 - Several key state boards focused on economic and workforce development.
- Eric Sonnenberg (External Relations Manager):
 - Experience Chehalis: Promoting local tourism and downtown vitality
 - United Way of Lewis County
 - Kiddin' Around
- Dolly Tardiff (Business Development Center Program Manager):
 - Centralia Community Foundation
 - Industrial Commission
- Lenee Langdon (Tourism Project Manager):
 - Arbor Health Foundation Board
- They will assist in our key economic strategies for 2026:
 - Retail and downtown revitalization: Leveraging positions on the Centralia Downtown Association and Experience Chehalis to boost small businesses.
 - Workforce development: Collaborating with state boards and local partners to ensure workers have the skills for emerging 21st Century jobs.
 - Industrial expansion: Utilizing the expertise of the Ports and the Industrial Commission to secure shovel-ready sites for new manufacturers.
 - Regional connectivity: Using a comprehensive economic development strategy to help partners secure federal and state grants.



A Q&A with Jeff Baird, owner of Cascade Computers

BY THE ECONOMIC ALLIANCE OF LEWIS COUNTY

The Economic Alliance of Lewis County met with Jeff Baird, owner of Cascade Computers and a sponsor of this past Wednesday's AI Conference hosted by the Alliance.

The conference focused on how artificial intelligence is shaping the future of business, workforce development, and our regional economy. Whether you're curious about AI or already using it in your work, this conference offered valuable insights and real-world applications to take back to your organization.

About Cascade Computers

Cascade Computers has defined its mission: to improve human satisfaction through people-building IT solutions. The company stands apart from many tech service providers by pushing a deep focus on the end user's needs and experience, emphasizing the human element in technology services. This mission evolved from years of observing client needs and considering meaningful ways to deliver IT services including device and network management, cloud services, security services, user support, and business technology planning.

4 big reasons to choose Cascade Computers to support your computer network

1 — Technicians answer when you call

No gatekeeper; hardly ever wait for a call back. They know you're busy and have made a sincere commitment to making sure your computer problems get fixed fast. And since most repairs can be done remotely using their secure management tools, you don't have to wait around for a technician to show up.

2 — Work with you at your level

Their technicians and account managers will not talk down to you and your staff or make you feel stupid because you don't understand how all this “technology” works.

3 — Dedicated to your improvement

They help teach you and your staff about the technology and risks around you. They just want you to be successful and to feel confident using the IT systems in your environment. They take this a step further by continuously internally improving their systems, understanding,



and capabilities to provide top-notch service.

4 — Personal service

When you need them, you're going to be met with someone who knows you. Your company. Your infrastructure. Your needs. This means you don't have to waste your time explaining yourself to tech after tech after tech.

What Cascade Computers offers

Managed IT Services

Their Managed IT Services provide comprehensive, proactive support designed to keep your business's technology infrastructure running smoothly and efficiently. By entrusting your IT operations to them, you gain a partner who actively monitors, manages, and maintains all aspects of your IT environment.

IT Compliance Services

Navigate the complex landscape of regulatory compliance with their specialized Compliance Services. Their team of experts is dedicated to helping your business meet industry standards and regulatory requirements, minimizing risks and safeguarding your reputation. From data protection and privacy laws to industry-specific regulations, they provide comprehensive support, ensuring your operations are fully compliant and up to date.

Cybersecurity Services

Fortify your digital defenses with their cutting-edge Cybersecurity Services. In an era where cyber threats evolve daily, their team of experts provides robust protection for your business, ensuring the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of your critical data. From proactive threat detection and response to comprehensive risk assessments and employee training, they offer a holistic approach to cybersecurity.

Application Development Services

Transform your vision into reality



Jeff Baird, Owner
Cascade Computers

with their Application Development Services. They specialize in crafting custom, high-performance applications tailored to your specific business needs, and maintaining them as your business environment evolves.

A Q&A with Cascade Computers owner Jeff Baird

Alliance: What is Cascade Computers service area?

Jeff Baird: Lacey to Longview, Yelm to the coast.

Alliance: When was the business opened?

Baird: Officially we are Information Development, Inc. dba Cascade Computers, which my dad started in 1992 as a software development consultant for the state of Washington. I started working as a contractor for Cascade Computers LLC in 2007, and in 2013 Information Development, Inc. bought the rights to the name/ domain name as well as almost all of the customers located in Washington state.

Alliance: How many employees work at Cascade Computers?

Baird: Eight, but only two are full time. I consider us to be at three full-time equivalent employees.

Alliance: What is your business background?

Baird: I first pursued learning software development on my own after my dad got me a book when I was 13 on a popular programming language. I earned a computer science degree from Centralia College, and volunteered at an intensive one-week information security conference in San Jose after I graduated.

Alliance: How has your industry changed over the years?

Baird: The line between programming and IT have continued to blur. I am glad to have a background in both. Because this is the case, thinking in systems and looking for effective ways to safely connect those systems continues to become increasingly important.

Alliance: What do you anticipate will change for IT in the future?

Baird: We will need to provide better tracking of data location and governance using more automated means. Facilitating the maintenance of

■ SEE CASCADE, PAGE B3

■ SEE DIRECTOR, PAGE B3

Discover Lewis County features upcoming events

BY THE ECONOMIC ALLIANCE OF LEWIS COUNTY

DiscoverLewisCounty.com SCHEDULE OF APRIL EVENTS

In Lewis County, there's always a good reason to go exploring. Natural beauty abounds, outdoor adventure is nearly limitless, and the slower pace of our rural lifestyle offers calm and relaxation. Plan your trip now and find things to do, places to stay, and outdoor opportunities galore. DiscoverLewisCounty.com is your guide to all things Lewis County.

Easter Eggspress on the Chehalis Centralia Railroad

April 4

Hop aboard the Easter Eggspress, a family-friendly train ride bursting with springtime cheer. As the train chugs for a 75-minute roundtrip journey, passengers enjoy the scenic countryside of the Chehalis River Valley. Upon returning to the depot, kids up to 12 years old will dash to the nearby grassy area searching for bright colored eggs filled with sweet treats and surprises.

The Easter Eggspress excursions are set for 10 a.m., noon, 2 p.m., and 4 p.m. Reservations (general seating) must be made online prior to the event, as space is limited. Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis. This ride on the Chehalis-Centralia Railroad is a family-friendly 30-minute journey. The excursion through the Chehalis River Valley features coaches from the 1920s and provides both indoor and outdoor seating. The trains are unheated, so dress appropriately. The train ride departs from the depot located in Chehalis at 1101 SW Sylvanus Street, across from the Veteran's Memorial Museum. Please arrive 30 minutes prior to boarding. The train is ADA-accessible, and free parking is available.

Reserve tickets now online. Come rain or shine.

Spring Shop Hop in downtown Chehalis

April 18

The Spring Shop Hop in Chehalis is a fun, lively day in downtown Chehalis, perfect for gathering with friends and enjoying a day out. Participating businesses throughout downtown offer special promotions, discounts, and experiences just



Discover Lewis County Photo

for the occasion. From restaurants and bars to boutiques and salons, you'll find great deals on food and drinks, shopping, beauty services, and more.

Free entrance at Washington State Parks

April 22

Free entrance days at Washington State Parks provide a fantastic opportunity for outdoor enthusiasts and nature lovers to explore the natural beauty of the state without any admission fees. These designated days, organized by Washington State Parks, allow visitors to access a wide range of scenic parks, from breathtaking coastlines to lush forests and serene lakes. Whether you enjoy hiking, picnicking, camping, or simply immersing yourself in the tranquility of nature, the free entrance days offer an ideal chance to discover the diverse landscapes and recreational activities available throughout Washington. Spend the day exploring one of the state parks located in Lewis County including Ike Kinswa State Park, Lewis & Clark State Park, and Rainbow Falls State Park. Mark your calendar and take advantage of these special days

to experience the beauty and serenity of these special parks in Lewis County.

The 2026 Discover Pass free day is also April 22 — Earth Day.

You will not need a Discover Pass when visiting a state park, Washington Department of Natural Resources or Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife lands on Discover Pass Free Days. Please note, free days apply only to day use (not overnight stays or rented facilities).

More information can be found on the Washington State Parks website.

Mineral Lake Fishing Derby

April 25-26

Anglers from across the region gather each spring for the Annual Mineral Lake Fishing Derby, a long-standing Washington Opening Day fishing tradition hosted by the Mineral Lake Lions Club and the Mineral community. Boats launch at first light, lines hit the water, and the race for the biggest trout begins.

Whether you're a seasoned angler or brand new to fishing, Mineral Lake offers a welcoming, family-friendly atmosphere with strong trout fishing and incredible

views of Mount Rainier.

Make it a weekend getaway with nearby cabins, campgrounds, and vacation rentals. Enjoy fresh mountain air, towering evergreens, and a classic Pacific Northwest fishing experience.

Learn more, register, and plan your trip: minerallakefishingderby.com

Downtown Centralia

Girls' Night Out

April 25 • 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Centralia Girls' Night Out is a fun-filled evening of shopping, socializing, and celebration in historic downtown Centralia. Local businesses open their doors with exclusive deals, giveaways, refreshments, and special treats, creating a lively atmosphere perfect for a night out with friends. Stroll through downtown, discover unique shops, enjoy great food and drinks, and experience the welcoming charm of Centralia during this popular community tradition. Whether you're hunting for great finds or simply enjoying the festive energy, Girls' Night Out is the perfect way to shop, sip, and make lasting memories together.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Photo Provided

Alicia Richardson and her three children.

Alicia Richardson, A&C Services: All about family

BY THE ECONOMIC ALLIANCE OF LEWIS COUNTY

Alicia Richardson is well known in Napavine and is building a strong reputation across Lewis County as owner of A&C Services, an accounting firm, located in downtown Centralia.

"Our target audience is small businesses that are family oriented and our goal is to help new business owners to make it," she said.

She's well known for her time as a Napavine High School sports star from 2003-07, captaining the basketball, soccer and softball teams before earning full-ride scholarships first to South Puget Sound Community College and then the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota. It didn't hurt that she posted a 3.95 GPA in high school and that she stands at five-feet, 11-inches tall.

A&C Services is an established firm ready to take care of all your business needs, including accounting, payroll, and state and federal taxes. As a small firm they are consistent, available, accurate and excited to bring some family focused fun to the accounting world.

"We understand as business owners that family time is sacred, and that you cannot get it all done during the 8-10 hours of work time during the day," Richardson said. "If you need a night or weekend, we can get you scheduled."

"After working as the general manager of a small bookkeeping company and spending several years working under multiple CPAs, I decided it was time to go out on my own and implement the practices and policies I have seen over the years. That's where A&C Services started. By taking the best from all of my experiences I am able to offer a well-rounded firm with multitudes of services. I am focused on providing the best customer service to my clients anywhere in the country with focus in the Pacific Northwest.

"I am professional, personable and concurrently family focused. I strive to be expanding my knowledge continually. I am currently qualified to test for my CPA exams. I am a certified QuickBooks Pro Advisor and complete 20-plus hours of CPE credits every year to ensure I am keeping up with the most current laws."



Photos Provided

Alicia Richardson, center, with her mom and dad, the team at A&C Services

At the University of Mary, she completed her BA and then her MBA.

She is currently right in the midst of tax time, which will end in April.

"I can see the light at the end of the tunnel," she said, adding she is still taking on clients.

Her firm services about 200 clients each year for their taxes, in addition to 30 regular accounts.

She joined the Economic Alliance of Lewis County a few months ago after attending last year's Women In Business forum hosted by the Alliance. Today she is now the Alliance's accountant.

"I enjoy working with the people at the Alliance and I believe in the work they do in our community," she said.

Richardson is all about family. She

has two seven-year-old twins — a boy and a girl — along with a one year old. She coaches the twins in soccer and basketball.

"I love seeing kids get out there and exercise and learning how to be responsible with accountability and discipline," she said.

Her business is also all about family. Her two employees are her mom and stepdad.

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320 N. Tower Ave., Suite 108,
Centralia
360-669-5154

Alicia.ancservices@gmail.com
www.anc-accounting.com
Open 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
and via appointment

**PROPERTY SPOTLIGHT • \$4.4 MILLION
2001 RUSH ROAD - CHEHALIS**



ERIC SONNENBERG
Economic Alliance of Lewis
County External Relations
Manager

Features:
36 Acres
Electricity: Lewis County PUD
Water: City of Chehalis
Sewer: City of Chehalis
Natural Gas: Puget Sound Energy

For information on this property and others available throughout Lewis County (or to list your industrial/commercial property for sale or lease), contact Economic Alliance of Lewis County External Relations Manager Eric Sonnenberg at 208.206.5407 or eric@lewiscountyalliance.org.

AI:

Continued From Page B1

businesses understand their customers' needs and preferences, leading to better product development and customer service strategies. For example, a brand manager may utilize social media listening tools to gather millions of digital messages across the internet and identify the feelings of people towards a brand. Implementing AI in business requires a strategic approach for both small and large businesses. Whether your business has a large or smaller budget, there are free and low-cost AI tools that can be helpful to businesses for the growth and efficiency of operations.

Small business AI tools:

- Customer service functions can be facilitated using chatbots like Tidio, which offers a free plan in assistance of customer service and engagement.
- Marketing processes can be simplified with Hubspot, which offers customers a free CRM system including functions of analytic assessments and email scheduling.

Additional AI tools

Identify the Needs: Determine which areas of your business can benefit the most from AI.

For example, an e-commerce company can conduct a thorough analysis and discover that implementing AI could effectively enhance their operations. They can introduce AI chatbots to streamline customer service, use predictive analyt-

ics and dirty" by just providing guest wi-fi across the whole building, but given that these were families moving in, there may be needs like low-cost smart TVs or wi-fi printers that they might want to connect to. Properly configured guest wi-fi blocks access to other devices on the network shutting down any of these use cases from the beginning, so instead I configured a separate protected network for all 24 units in the complex. Extra time? Yes, but I felt good knowing that those tenants were going to have wi-fi connectivity flexible enough to keep up with their growing needs.

Alliance: What is the oldest computer/software IT need you have worked on?

Baird: In the early 2010s, we had a client running a few computers with Intel 286 processors. Those processors were first released in 1982. I had no idea how they were still running.

Alliance: Are you on any boards or a member of a pertinent agency or group?

Baird: We are members of both the Centralia/Chehalis Chamber of Commerce and the Economic Alliance of Lewis County.

Alliance: What do you enjoy about your profession?

Baird: I love how we get to work with everyone at an organization — the janitor all the way to the CEO or executive director. We have the potential to understand more about what is going on

DIRECTOR:

Continued From Page B1

Artificial Intelligence

We just finished up this past Wednesday with The AI Experience, sponsored by Centralia College and Cascade Computers. Titled "Discover the Future of Artificial Intelligence," the gathering was at Centralia College's Corbet Theatre.

I was impressed with our three speakers, Dennis Skarr, Josh Booy and Bo Anderson. Skarr is the founder of SkarrNet Training Systems, Booy founded 10 Fold Consulting and worked in cybersecurity for Lewis County government, and Anderson has a PhD in Artificial Intelligence from Carnegie Mellon University and shared his expertise with neural networks and machine learning.

This was a fascinating look into the future of Artificial Intelligence's rapid expansion into businesses of all kinds.

Upcoming events

To that end, we have a few upcoming events to help us stretch to our goals of economic development.

On Monday, March 30 we are hosting, along with the Centralia Downtown Association, a

Revitalization Roundtable with the theme "Building Stronger Business Together." That's where we continue the conversation of partnerships. Join us at 6 p.m. at The Annex at the Centralia Square Business Ballroom.

We'll begin with a short tour and presentation of Centralia Square, followed by an open, solution-focused discussion as we turn dialogue into action; identifying what's working, what isn't, and where we go next together.

This is an honest, forward-thinking space for business owners, stakeholders, and community leaders who care deeply about Centralia's future. RSVP is now open. We encourage everyone who wants to be part of the conversation to sign up today at <https://forms.gle/2rcA1r5isG3Kb5J59>.

You can also look forward to our annual Women In Business Seminar May 13 at The Loft in Chehalis, that helps the Alliance partner up with area leaders.

Add it all up, and the Alliance with our partners are building what's next — together.

Management: AI is only as good as the data it uses. Ensure you have a robust data management strategy.

Choose the Right Tools: There is a wide array of AI tools available. Select those that align with your business objectives.

For example, a retail company may have a goal of enhancing online customer experience and boosting sales and can select specific AI tools: "Algolia" or "Adobe Sensei" for personalized product recommendations, "Blue Yonder" or "Infor Nexus" to help with inventory management, and an AI chatbot for responsive customer service.

Develop Skills: Ensure your team has the necessary skills to leverage AI effectively. Continuous learning and training are crucial.

An example of this would be if a financial services firm were to integrate AI into its operational systems and roll out a skill development program, including AI literacy workshops for all staff, specialized training for key departments, and continuous learning opportunities through online courses and certifications. Data

Management: AI is only as good as the data it uses. Ensure you have a robust data management strategy.

AI is not just a technological advancement; it's a strategic tool for businesses seeking to thrive in today's world. By understanding and leveraging AI's potential, businesses can unlock new levels of success and efficiency.

In an article published by the Blog of Bill Gates, it states, "We should keep in mind that we're only at the beginning of what AI can accomplish. Whatever limitations it has today will be gone before we know it." This is an important idea to keep in mind at the emergence of the AI era and ask yourself, whether you want to be a pioneer of this transformative time or not.

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About the author

As a content strategist, Janelle Bombalier thrives on the art of storytelling and crafting compelling narratives. Her journey in the world of content has been driven by a relentless curiosity and a commitment to delivering stories that captivate, inform, and inspire.

CASCADE:

Continued From Page B1

AI systems and their security permissions will be important. Finally, confirming that all of this is compliant with varying laws and security standards will be critical — not just to keep from getting in trouble, but also to actually implement basic security guidelines.

Alliance: How have customer needs changed over the years?

Baird: We have shifted from 50/50 commercial/residential customers to 99% commercial. Security has remained an important service, while the systems and tools we are managing have increasingly moved to the cloud. We are even now implementing software to become aware of unauthorized online software usage. Someone can sign up for a brand new program, upload organization data to it, and no one internally might ever know about it. If our clients' team members have found a great tool, we want to know about it so that management can consider if they want to implement it across more of the org, but in a way that reduces risk to that organization.

Alliance: What is the most interesting, unusual or comical customer service situation?

Baird: I was asked to handle networking for a low-income housing facility. I considered doing it "quick

in an organization than any other outside service. Accounting, legal, major, we have the potential for more connection than any of those, and when we listen and pay attention, that translates into insights and better service.

Alliance: How important is customer service?

Baird: Begin sarcasm and parody — Not really very important ... they're just people, and we have 8 billion of them on this planet. Crushing their self-image with my superior intellect is actually helping this world by keeping to a minimum the number of people competing to achieve their hopes and dreams. — End sarcasm and parody.

Real answer: IT scares people — sometimes the technology, sometimes the people. The problem with that is that scared people are not productive, they don't learn new things, they stick with what they know for fear of doing something wrong or looking stupid. It is very important to us that our clients' team members feel very comfortable reaching out for support. Kindness, clear communication, and honest feedback are all part of service from Cascade Computers. I will tell you when I think your idea is taking on too much risk.

Alliance: What is your top selling customer service/product?

Baird: Our "starter" managed services — it is very rudimentary, and a lot of our

clients move on to higher levels of service

Alliance: Does Cascade Computers have a specialty and/or something that nobody else offers?

Baird: In the IT services industry, documentation and time-clocking are the bane of our existence — well that and printers. Of those three, documentation affects our speed and effectiveness. I understood that early on as I took over the company in 2013, so we have worked hard to instill a culture of consistent continuous documentation. Even when we have lost customers — a rare event — we get complimented by the new service company on how good our documentation is. This means fewer mistakes, consistently excellent service, and more than just one person that can help you with your issue.

Alliance: Anything else?

Baird: People do not understand how much they need to be able to trust IT. How are we handling access to your systems? How much is written down vs just in someone's head? How are backups handled? Who are we hiring? Do we run background checks on them?

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To contact Cascade Computers
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