



# Atomic Object's agile approach delivers

The nine-year-old software development firm is representative of the technology-savvy talent that exists in West Michigan. **ELIZABETH SLOWIK**

**T**his Grand Rapids object flies under the radar.

Atomic Object is a software shop for hire. While you may have used its products, you may never have heard of the local company behind them.

The 28 full-time employees at AO are responsible for, among a slew of other projects, Blue Medora, Bloomfire and Priority Health's new smartphone apps.

"Atomic Object builds software products for other companies, so I guess that makes us a software product development company," said AO founder and President Carl Erickson.

The company, which Erickson founded with Bill Bereza in 2001, uses a software development process called agile development. In this style, results are viewed, changes made and new directions discovered by working with the client on a regular basis, rather than waiting until the final deliverable, Erickson said.

Atomic Object customers range from big firms such as Gentex Corp., Chrysler Group LLC and Whirlpool Corp. to health care nonprofits and one-person start-ups, Erickson said.

"We do mobile, we do Web, we do embedded, we do desktop," he said. "We work with lots of different technology because of that. Especially for our younger developers, it's a cool place to work because you don't get pigeon-holed into one language or one area."

That also lets staff hone "cross-cutting" skills such as relating to customers and end users, he said.

Erickson was a professor at Grand Valley State University when he started looking around for a challenge. He was hired by a former student at a Texas-based start-up to utilize West Michigan talent when the talent in Austin ran out. But that company failed to garner a second round of funding and went out of business. That left Erickson with a team of developers with time on their hands.

"That's when Atomic Object was formed," Erickson said. "We took those people and that process ... and said, 'Let's find people who have problems to solve and help them out.'"

Last year, Josh Little, CEO of the Kalamazoo-based Bloomfire and

eMaestro, was one of the people who landed in Atomic Object's orbit. A former training director for Stryker, Little was finding that customers of his eMaestro website for corporate training seemed to share common problems in establishing training modules. Little had an idea: create a crowd-sourced social media style website where anyone could post or obtain training modules regarding common needs.

Rather than build a development team from scratch, Little said he chose Atomic Object to bring his idea to Web reality via agile development. The site launched in March.

"I think it's pretty revolutionary," Little said. "What it allowed me to do in the process was make decisions based on the information I was learning throughout the process on a daily or weekly basis, on what the product looked like. It didn't force me to decide everything upfront."

"It's the kind of project you'd see coming out of Silicon Valley," Erickson said. "Technology start-up, extremely ambitious, very broad-shouldered, pure Web play, using the power of social media and social connectedness to innovate in a very traditional space: learning."

"People look at that and probably don't think about that kind of thing happening in Grand Rapids. There is not much recognition of the technology community in our city and West Michigan. There is more there than people understand or know about."

West Michigan, however, offers anemic backing for technology start-ups, he added. A start-up in Silicon Valley might receive venture funding starting at half a million, but that is probably tops for West Michigan, Erickson said. So AO is often looking for ways to produce results with small budgets.

One approach has been to put some of its own skin in when a start-up project looks particularly promising, Erickson said. In these selected situations, Atomic Object has discounted its service in exchange for a share of the start-up, he said.

"We're always looking for partners who we could take some risk with who have something we don't have — usually knowledge of a market or access to a market, and the ability to



**BLOOMFIRE AND eMaestro CEO Josh Little (upper right) is joined by Atomic Object staff members Micah Alles, Justin DeWind, Samuel Bowles, Dave Crosby, and Shawn Crowley. Photo by Johnny Quirin**

run a start-up company and the ability to do sales and marketing," Erickson said.

One of the more successful ventures has been Grand Rapids-based Blue Medora, Erickson said, which now has seven employees. AO worked with former IBM worker Nathan Owen on software that extends the capabilities of IBM's Tivoli business applications monitoring software.

Erickson gives a shout-out to his staff and a workplace atmosphere at the company's Wealthy Business District office that fosters creativity and loyalty. When Bereza left Atomic Ob-

ject last year to attend law school, Erickson decided to offer shares to seven long-time employees. Four more are slated for offers this year, he said.

But Atomic Object has no desire to become a Big Atomic Object, Erickson added.

"We are very sensitive to how differently we operate our company and how our company culture is so vitally important to the work we do," he said. "People want to work for us, and we have very high retention rates."

"If that's what keeps us successful, then mindlessly growing is going to jeopardize that culture."