

MSP SUCCESS

MAGAZINE



Five Steps To Building An
'EXTRAORDINARILY'
SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS
AND LIFE

18 Laws Of Success
From 'Shark Tank's'
Robert Herjavec

Automates CEO
Tommy Thornton Didn't Just
Work In The IT Industry –
He Helped Change It



Special Edition: Winter 2023

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Tommy Thornton, CEO Of Automates

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Automates CEO Tommy Thornton Didn't Just Work In The IT Industry – *He Helped Change It*

Under the shade of a glossy southern magnolia tree, protected from the blinding southern sun, young Tommy was thinking about something most kids in his rural South Georgia town had no interest in – computers. By the time he was in high school, his teachers automatically passed him through computer courses and even asked him to help teach the classes. There were no computer stores in his town, and the local college didn't offer computer classes, which meant Tommy had a passion but no way to pursue it. Following the example of his mother, a tenacious immigrant from Croatia, he knew that if he wanted to achieve his dreams, he needed to leave his home behind.

With integrity and a strong work ethic as his guiding principles, Tommy not only achieved his dream of becoming a “computer guy,” he also helped change the industry by making reliability and integrity incredibly normal, not the exception.

Hard Work And Integrity Turn Dreams Into Reality

Tommy's mother left Croatia when she was 19 years old. Tommy says she arrived on American shores with a tenacious immigrant mentality, which helped her raise her three children in rural South Georgia on a grocery store manager's salary. “She woke up every single morning and got us ready for school. Then she was out the door,” Tommy remembers. “When we came home, she wasn't there. She had to work until eight or nine Monday through Friday.”

But she never complained, even after surviving a stroke when Tommy was in high school, leaving her numb on the left side of her body. “She still went to work. She was a single mother; she had no choice, which was powerful for me growing up,” he says. “It was the tenacity of an immigrant. She provided for us everything that we wanted, everything and more.”

Tommy's mother passed along a strong work ethic to him and his siblings. They were taught to cook and clean before their mom got home, a go-getter approach he applied to technology when he taught himself how to code on an old Coleco Adam computer. Tommy was also fascinated by bulletin board systems that connected computers and users. He knew his future was to be a “computer guy,” and he begged his mom for a new computer, though they didn't have a lot of money. “She took me to RadioShack and put a \$2,500 IBM P75 on our credit card,” Tommy says.

His mother's gesture was an unforgettable investment that shaped her son's future. He started developing websites as a teenager and eventually saved enough to buy a dial-up modem. “I beat down the door for the first Internet company in South Georgia – they hadn't even opened yet,” Tommy remembers. Finally, he was connected and ready to make his “computer guy” dreams real.

But nothing worthwhile is ever easy. When it came time for high school graduation, Tommy investigated the idea of going to college, but no one in his



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family had ever gone. "My family didn't comprehend tuition or how to enroll. I had to do it on my own, and that's when I felt like I was going to fail college," Tommy says. Inspired by his mother's no-quit attitude, he knew he needed discipline, and he liked seeing the world of computers beyond Georgia. His way out: the Marine Corps. It was a perfect fit.

One of the Marine Corps' core principles is to lead with integrity. "If you're not honest, you just lost your people. They'll never respect you. You lead by integrity and honesty, and you protect your fellow Marines," Tommy says. He took several computer courses while in service. Upon his honorable discharge four years later, Tommy worked as a network systems monitor for the Navy and Marine Corps Intranet in San Diego, managing 183 servers.

Tommy loved San Diego, but after 18 months with NMCI, he felt a nagging urge to return to Tifton, Georgia, and give back to his community. Ideally, he'd return as an entrepreneur, but he needed income and capital. He started as a junior network administrator for an IT company, but something felt off. "Over time, we were being nudged by management to do things that weren't right for the customers," he explains. Padding hours or charging for unnecessary hardware upgrades and excessive labor fees were a few ways that management suggested employees nickel-and-dime customers. "We had customers who would come and say, 'I know what y'all are going to do. You'll charge me more than what I'm bringing it in for.' The business had that reputation," he says. That was not how his mother had raised him. Hard work, resolve and determination – yes. Duplicitous – no way. So, he quit.

Responsiveness And Mutual Trust Aren't Extraordinary – They're Normal At Automates

Tommy figured that if virtue was weak at that company, it was probably poor industry-wide. This was his opportunity to turn the boat around. He wasn't just going to find another job in the industry; he was going to change it. "It bothered me that people felt uncomfortable bringing their computers in for repair, for fear of being taken advantage of. I wanted to give the entire industry a reputation facelift," he says. "From day one, I started building the culture that we would never abuse client relations or speak over clients, and we'd ensure they understood every piece of advice or solution or computer hardware they were purchasing before they committed."

Tommy wrote down his philosophy for the company and called it New Image Computers because that's what he set out to create – a new image for the IT industry, built on a foundation of integrity, honesty and reliability.

After 13 years of success as a start-up entrepreneur, continually supported by his wife and daily lunches with his mother (who never hesitated to grab his cheeks and say how proud she was of her son), Tommy packed up his family and moved to San Diego. In some ways, it was a complete restart, like stepping onto new shores. Tommy couldn't take the name New Image Computer with him, but he didn't need it. He was a well-established leader in the industry, with a clear set of core values guiding him as bright as a glowing beacon.

Even after becoming CEO of Automates, nothing has changed about the purpose-driven IT entrepreneur. "When customers talk to us, I want them to feel welcome," he says. "We talk about more than the business with many

of our clients – we celebrate their birthdays, and we've been to funerals. That goes a long way in getting down to earth with people, hearing their stories and figuring out what they want to get out of business or life."

For Tommy, trusting relationships with clients isn't extraordinary; instead, going the extra mile for his clients is standard. "We have hundreds of clients, so I define that aspect of our relationship – the trust and integrity – as part of normal day-to-day stuff. It doesn't stand out to me; it's kind of normal," he says.

Integrity can't be advertised on a billboard stating, "Buy Integrity Here." No, for Tommy, integrity is a lived experience and one that he maintains every day at Automates. If clients have a service outage or down device, Tommy's team will drop everything to get to them. Again, they don't boast responsiveness as exceptional service – it's expected.

"We understand they are losing money; we don't need something in our agreement that says we will respond in 30 minutes. It's fine to hold us accountable, but we're going to respond as quickly as we can, regardless of the agreement," he explains. "Responsiveness is not necessarily a philosophy; it's what we do when clients are in need. It comes naturally."

Automates Represents A New Image For The IT Industry

Automates brings effective, fast and straightforward services to its small and medium clients spanning the medical, dental, legal and financial industries. These highly regulated businesses must maintain rigorous standards of cyber security and compliance – and that means trusting their IT professional completely. Tommy takes that seriously, which is why he has poured his heart into ensuring that Automates is vastly different from his first job in the industry.

Tommy encourages – even financially supports – his employees to develop their education; he doesn't cut corners to improve their bottom line. Automates employees have more than 30 certifications company-wide (Tommy has 20), so they are proficient in working with a comprehensive range of crucial hardware and software platforms to offer services like data recovery, virus removal and router installation and configuration, among others. It's a difference that customers feel.

When customers approach Automates, it's not with apprehension. It's with irrefutable trust. "I've built such good relationships with the majority of my customers that I don't have to get approval to sell them computers. They say, 'Tommy, we need three computers.' It's like a blank check, but we never abuse that blank check," Tommy says. "That's the important part: You build the relationship – you never abuse it. Never."

For more information on Automates visit www.automates.com. ■

