

What happens when you cross a quirky IT expert with a hyperactive, hippie-styled economist? The intellectual offspring is award-winning software company 1000Minds.

Minds OVER Matter

WHOSE HEART SHOULD be operated on next? Which degree course should you take at university? Hunting for the perfect house, car or boyfriend? All devilishly tricky decisions – more so when they involve millions of dollars or people’s lives.

Thank goodness then that an unlikely partnership between a long-haired surfing economist from the University of Otago and a Treasury IT hotshot has produced the extraordinary decision-making software 1000Minds. It has already garnered a swag of national and international awards, including a TUANZ Innovation Award and a Microsoft/IBM Consensus Software Award.

Associate Professor Paul Hansen, 41, and Franz Ombler, 40, first met in 1996 over a Speight’s at the “Fridge Fund” in the bowels of the Treasury building in Wellington when Hansen was a Treasury analyst and Ombler worked in IT. Six years later they



reconnected and began to develop what would eventually become 1000Minds.

In the intervening years Hansen experienced a “Eureka!” moment while on sabbatical at the Stockholm School of Economics. A health economist by training, he’d long pondered the problem of how best to prioritise patients for health treatment. His moment of discovery proved the first step

to a point-and-click software programme that ranks individuals according to the user's preferences, based on a combination of selected criteria and answers to specific questions.

He wrote a proof of his approach and realised he needed someone who understood computers to take it further. A mutual friend got him and Ombler together again, this time over a coffee at Wellington's Fuel Espresso. After reading through the paper on the pavement of The Terrace, Ombler accepted the challenge.

Ombler generated screeds of numbers: "I knew there was a pattern there," he says. Sure enough, there was. While Hansen hunkered down in Dunedin, writing equations on the print-outs, Ombler's own Eureka moment hit him on the wild expanse of Makara Beach on Wellington's east coast. The patterns Hansen described mathematically, he was seeing "algorithmically": now the equations had meaning, they could get a computer to ask doctors the questions that Hansen had proved could prioritise a waiting list.

But there were too many questions by far. Hansen's proof had shown the number of questions could be whittled down, but how was this to be done?

Ombler found a solution based on his first-year philosophy education. "If there was one thing I was awake for at varsity, it was logic classes and *reductio ad absurdum*

was the solution." If the answer was ridiculous, the problem was in the question.

The pair realised they had invented something that was bigger than prioritising surgery waiting lists. It could help decision-makers in just about any area and their solution was simple to use and accurate. They built a system for the web to let people use it from anywhere in the world and started to become businessmen, albeit rather shakily.

The earliest incarnation of their software boasted a hibiscus flower logo modelled on surf board designs but "dirty hippy" comments from business advisers led to new branding. Their first server was housed in Ombler's spare room until success and the demand for a larger, noisier model saw the pair enlist the services of Interger's professional data centre with air-conditioning and battery back-up.

Backed by Dunedin's Upstart Business

Incubator, the company is now taking on the world with its success in the New Zealand health system being exported to Canada, and defence industry applications to the US. Its "Otago Choice" decision-support software for those embarking on a university education, as well as a new tool developed to help students choose UK medical schools, will be launched this year. The company also has software products in the pipeline for the biotech and tourism industries; no surprise then, to see the *National Business Review* call them the rock stars of the ICT wave.

What would they do with their millions if they make it really big? Ombler says, "That's easy. We'd get others to run the business while we keep doing the cool stuff — and drinking the cool stuff. We're both big fans of [Dunedin micro-brewery] Emerson's beer." +

