

*Business London Magazine*

## **The Marilyn Factor**

***Promoting London as a technology destination isn't an easy job. But somebody's got it. Meet TechAlliance general manager Marilyn Sinclair. New role, new challenge.***

***By Suzanne Boles***

Many Londoners remember her as the owner of a very successful London-based provider of technical end-user software training. But while her name may ring familiar, you might wonder what happened to the thriving company. The woman, Marilyn Sinclair, remains local, active and engaged. ObjectArts, on the other hand, was sold to a Toronto-based firm, where the head office now resides.

In many ways Sinclair has moved on, too. She now promotes London's technology sector from a different vantage point as general manager of TechAlliance, a member-driven organization that's catching the eyes, ears and imagination of London business folk from a wide range of sectors as it works to stimulate the growth of technology-based businesses and promote this city as the place to do just that.

It's a natural fit for Sinclair. After all, she piloted a one-person start-up to a Microsoft partnership, 65 employees, revenues of almost \$10 million and offices in with offices in London, Toronto, Atlanta, and New York City servicing North America, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Malaysia, England and the Netherlands.

Despite this accomplishment (and despite a career that has been punctuated by numerous periodical and book profiles and awards such as a London Woman of Distinction Award for business in 1997 and runner-up Entrepreneurial Woman of the Year in Canada for the same year), Sinclair remains exceedingly modest, preferring to put the spotlight on others. Almost conversely, she is the epitome of an entrepreneur in just about every other sense, decisive and never afraid to take a risk.

Sinclair arrived in London from Alberta 19 years ago with her husband Kirk and their two sons. In order to get a feel for the city and its corporate inhabitants, she signed up with a temp agency and landed a job as an administration manager, assisting with a clinical study at Robarts Research Institute. She also worked as a fitness instructor and took a part-time job with a software training business.

A few months into her software training work with Oncourse Learning Centres, Sinclair approached the firm with a proposal to take on the corporately-run unit as a franchise. Her offer was accepted, and Sinclair quickly found herself scrapping it out in the increasingly competitive training environment.

“The London market became very saturated very quickly in end-user training (in the early 1990s), so I was looking for an edge,” recalls Sinclair, who often found herself bidding on projects against the then-called Microsoft University.

“I knew I couldn’t beat Microsoft so I thought I would try to join them,” she continues. “I called up Microsoft and asked them if I could become a Microsoft University.”

She looks back at the proposition—one many would have thought preposterous—with a chuckle. After all, why would Microsoft be interested in a one-woman operation? But as with many turning points in business, timing was key. Microsoft had begun to replace their educational services with partnership models and Sinclair’s offer was greeted with open arms by the software giant. An alliance was struck, the business name changed to ObjectArts (to reflect the change to more object-oriented or “visually artistic” programming) and her decade-long success story was underway.

Today, in her role as general manager for TechAlliance, it’s Sinclair’s job to promote the technology sector in London. She will tell you that it’s a hotbed, bubbling under the surface like lava in a volcano. And while some people will raise an eyebrow at this analogy, the numbers show there is much more going on here than the average citizen might think.

According to the London Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), the tech sector for London includes about 600 companies with approximately 47,000 employees. Breaking that down, there are about 300 companies engaged in IT in London with over 6,000 employees, 200 companies in advanced manufacturing employing 23,000, and 100 life science companies—including hospitals research institutes and private companies—with 18,000 employees.

“London is poised for an explosion of promising high-tech success stories that will merge over the next decade,” says Sinclair. “This region benefits from a wealth of brain power that is increasingly seeking to migrate great ideas into great companies. We will see a definite growth in tech-based sectors of our economy.”

The trick, she says, is to bring together the necessary ingredients to set the explosion off—a task Sinclair says belongs to TechAlliance and their strategic partners, including the LEDC, the University of Western Ontario, The Stiller Centre for Biotechnology Commercialization and Robarts Research Institute.

“As a result of the increasingly strong collaboration within the business community, and between the academic and business community, we should see significant increase in the number of start-ups and spin-off companies and associated technologies,” says Sinclair.

Dr. Ted Hewitt, vice president of research at UWO, agrees. “We are tremendously encouraged by the degree of collaboration that exists in London in the area of technology transfer and commercialization, and we’re working hard with our partners and TechAlliance and LEDC and

with our affiliates—Robarts Institute, Lawson Health Institute—to try to create an environment in London where we’re able to take advantage of these emerging opportunities.

“Western has benefited tremendously from the increase in federal and provincial research funding and that’s provided a very fertile ground for new technology processes and services, many of which would be appropriate for commercialization,” continues Hewitt. “The university is also building its capacity in this area under the direction of Alex Navarre, our director of technology transfer. So I think that we’re seeing a pretty good increase in terms of research funding or research activity and this is providing a wealth of new technologies, processes and services that can be commercialized.”

At the grassroots level, Joel Adams, chair of InterNETwork London, keeps his finger on the pulse of the tech sector. What began as an informal after-hours gathering of 30 or so people from London’s tech sector five years ago, InterNETwork has grown into regular monthly meetings that can see up to 200 people in attendance. Asked if he thinks London on the verge of significant tech-based expansion, his answer is blunt: “If I didn’t believe that I wouldn’t be in London, Ontario right now.

“I’ve worked a bit overseas. I’ve worked with clients as an entrepreneur in a lot of places. I think there’s more opportunity in London right now than just about anywhere else.”

Adams, who is associate director, economic development at Western, says his belief has been confirmed by people outside of London. “I heard a U.S. patent lawyer recently say that he feels that London is where Silicon Valley was 30 years ago. We’re under the radar. People don’t realize what we have but we’re right on the cusp of something really big. But we need everybody working together in unison for that to happen and I think we do have the right players.”

So what is TechAlliance doing to promote the tech community? Sinclair says the biggest areas of concentration centre around knowledge sharing, capitalization, networking and marketing. She points to lunch-and-learn events, panel sessions and a focus on networking. Another important component of TechAlliance involves venture services, where members can take advantage of the expertise of entrepreneurs, representatives from UWO and its Ivey School of Business and the local financial community and businesses to ensure their business plan is well vetted and their presentation refined before they head out to seek funding from financial institutions, venture capitalists and angel investors.

Paul Taylor, account manager at London-based organizational software developer CoreSolutions Development Inc., says he’s pleased with what TechAlliance has been doing in terms of networking opportunities and raising the profile and awareness of the tech community in London, but tempers his enthusiasm by noting there remains “lots of room to grow.

“We aren’t known as a technology centre even though we have a lot of technology companies (here). I think TechAlliance is helping London become known for its technology community, but

it still has a way to go. People would be surprised at how many technology companies are in London.”

Of course the real challenge in all of this is to ensure that key players remain on board for the long haul. Michael Crowley, vice president, business development at Robarts Research Institute, says that while London once relied on a large corporate and head office presence, it’s simply no longer the case. Change, he believes, is ours to grasp.

“In my mind the entire city has to embrace an entrepreneurial attitude toward rebuilding the economic base of the city and, while it will be diversified, we have a huge economic engine in our academic centres that are training future knowledge workers who will attract the highest gross national product (per) worker, business, etc.”

“There is a culture of change emerging in London, which is the key to overcoming any challenge,” believes Sinclair. “We are continuing to be strong in the area of collaboration and need to continue to leverage world-class institutions such as Western and Fanshawe College.”

Sinclair goes on to stress the need to support initiatives promoting the quality of life in London—a key to attracting and retaining young workers coming out of our academic institutions who will work in the technology sector or launch technology-based companies of their own.

But above all, perhaps, is the requirement for a central figure to bring the numerous ends—academic, institutional, investment, government, entrepreneurs—together to form a cohesive, meaningful and workable front to accomplish what individual groups are unable to achieve alone. It’s into this role that Sinclair steps. Her goals are in unison with those of TechAlliance and its partners, and many believe her energy and real-world experience will help to develop London as a North American technology centre of note.

Says Adams, “She’s had lunch with Bill Gates. She’s had an office in New York City. But she’s firmly committed to London, Ontario.”