

# Industry Passion, Knowhow in Bemidji

When Bradley Olson was just five or six, he watched his grandfather design Basic programs on a Commodore 64 computer, an advanced machine in its day. For Olson, however, that was only the beginning.

Today, Olson, 32, who has been diagnosed with autism, is responsible for much of what goes into a large retail website for a growing Bemidji company, NLFX Professional. His photographic memory, knowledge of programming, research and photo editing skills have made him a key asset for the growing sound, lighting, video and intercom equipment provider.

“The company wouldn’t have evolved as fast without me,” said Olson, who works in information technologies. NLFX President Ben Stowe agrees. “There’s no question. It’s a team. Everybody’s certainly a part of that, and Bradley’s no exception,” he said. From its beginnings as a small lighting equipment manufacturer, NLFX became a distributor and builder of integrated systems that can exceed \$1 million.

Olson’s career track got its start in the late 1990s, when he would stop in for visits at NLFX’s downtown Bemidji location. Sam Wike in NLFX sales was stuck on an error in his HyperText Markup Language (HTML) coding for the company’s website. Olson jumped in to troubleshoot. “He fixed what I couldn’t because I couldn’t figure out where my error was coming out,” Wike said. Soon after, Wike hired him.

Olson taught himself HTML through online tutorials. By this time, he’d also earned a degree in microcomputers from Northwest Technical College in Bemidji.

In his new post working with Wike, the duo spent a year building the first NLFX website, which was written out long hand. Through many changes and additions, Olson still maintains the site, finding and uploading photos and making sure that products are presented in an attractive and informative way. He also fields questions about NLFX products.

Stowe said traditional salespeople often have an opportunity to explain product presentations in alternate ways to help customers understand. Olson's sales job can be harder, with just one chance to make the sale by communicating information about the products and processes online, Stowe explains. At last count, there were 5,930 products on the site. The company has access to more than 100,000 products from 97 manufacturers.

Olson knows how the products work together, and can refer customers to other resources for difficult to find products. "The harder thing is knowing what to do when it is no longer available," said Stowe. While Olson may struggle to communicate verbally, his e-mail responses are professional, and he can explain many options.

Olson's knowledge and interest are enhanced by industry research done on his own. He also speaks for the company on online industry forums. On his days off, he'll sometimes e-mail Stowe to ask why the company doesn't carry a particular product. "He's very passionate about the industry and working here," Stowe explains. Olson follows competitors to see how they're presenting products and finds ways to improve his own work.

"We're service and support oriented, and fundamentally key to that is having intelligent and knowledgeable people," said Stowe. On top of Olson's skills, Stowe said he appreciates Olson's positive attitude that serves as a day brightener. "He's just a joy to be around. He lifts us all up."

That said, the president still expects Olson to get more done in less time, the same as he does with other NLFX employees. The company is looking to expand Olson's role to include blogging responsibilities, social networking and news releases. "He writes well and has a good vocabulary," said Stowe. Like any other employee, Olson can be asked to step up and expand his capabilities.

He works two days a week at NLFX, but his talents don't go to waste when he's away. Olson maintains customer computers as a volunteer at a downtown Bemidji computer store, scrubbing them for viruses, improving performance and installing protective software. He also volunteers for the local Arc and speaks to groups about autism. "His time is kind of in demand," said Stowe.

His speed at core online tasks sometimes leaves others who feed him information behind. "He tears through this stuff so extremely fast that sometimes, we have a problem finding stuff for him to do," said Wike.

"Autism is what it is. It doesn't need to handcuff you or limit you," said Stowe, who was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as a child. When Stowe was seven, "experts" told his parents he wouldn't be able to function in mainstream society. Olson was told he wouldn't make it past kindergarten.

"We're a group of 'misfits' who have been able to do some pretty cool things," said Stowe. "Don't let them tell you what your limits are. Don't let them shackle you and put you in this box," said Stowe to Olson. "I'm the president of this company and you're an important part of my company, and, together we're going to do some great things."

Olson is one of the first persons in Bemidji diagnosed with autism, in 1980, when about one in 10,000 people were on the autism spectrum. He said that number has grown to one in 200. His maturity in accepting his disability was apparent early on, in a column he wrote for the Bemidji Pioneer, published on November 12, 2000:

*"In most ways those of us with disabilities are no different than anyone else. We want to be liked, we want to do well in school or at a job. We like to serve our communities. We have many skills. Some do well with art projects, some do well with music, etc., and we can all be successfully employed if given the chance. But finding that job can be extremely hard to do ... Everyone wants to be included in group activities and have friendships. We with disabilities don't want to look from the sidelines. We want to be right in the everyday happenings just like everyone else."*

For people with autism, Olson has taken on a mantle of responsibility for educating people in northern Minnesota about his disability. In addition to being outspoken, open and public about his disability, he served as a mentor for the Minnesota Autism Society's Camp Discovery and participated in an autism research project at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Olson has a consuming music hobby that includes almost 2,000 CDs and 500 LPs. Considered a learned scholar of music, he can answer most any music question back to the 1960s, and some to the 1930s. Wike said Olson "stomps" employee teams in music trivia competition, and he competes alone.

His encyclopedia-like music memory led to a project for a local radio station, Real Country 98.3, where he categorized a library of 6,000 songs by decade in just eight hours, said station General Manager Dan Voss. "It was amazing to watch him do it. I was just blown away," said Voss. Olson learned to use the station's database software after a 15 minute training session.

A second task for the station was more complicated. Olson was asked to cut the music library by about two-thirds based on the popularity of each song. He got it done in just five hours. "The knowledge he has in music is phenomenal," said Voss. Olson's work saved about two weeks of staff time, the manager explained. Country music listeners within 60 miles are Bemidji are now hearing the results of Olson's labor.

Back at Olson's regular job, the NLFX president values every person on his staff. "It's like a football team," said Stowe. "The quarterback gets a lot of credit, but you can't throw the ball without an offensive line."

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