

Maryland's High Tech Firm of the Year

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We thought we'd find out how a phenom like this happens. Betsy Rosso talked with Adnan for Bisnow on Business. Adnan was finishing high school in Pakistan and planning to attend the London School of Economics when his father died. His mother thought it best to move him and his brother to the US, under the sponsorship of an uncle, so they settled in Maryland and Ahmed completed high school and enrolled at the University of Maryland. Determined not to take on any debt, he financed his entire education by working at Circuit City. He graduated from Maryland in 1991 with a degree in finance and accounting, but had trouble finding a job. "I looked for a position doing anything," he says, and applied for a sales position at I-Net. Even though Ahmed knew nothing about IT, he knew sales,

having worked for Circuit City 100% on commission. That's when he made the faux pas about the LAN and WAN. But he quickly told the interviewer he was a fast learner. When he didn't hear back for a few days, "I pursued her like I've never pursued anybody." Ahmed got the job, and did it with a vengeance: he grew sales from \$2 or \$3 million his first year to more than \$8 million the next. After he'd worked there 18 months, I-Net asked him to build a sales force, and in time was managing 15 people and bringing in \$30 million in revenue."It brought out my true competitive nature," Ahmed says. "I didn't like losing. When I grew up playing cricket, winning was everything. Even if you lose you go back and talk to the customer and find out what you did wrong." Meanwhile, Ahmed was playing racquetball with three friends who had also come to the U.S. from India. They talked about creating a company, each of them contributing \$1, 000 but continuing to work at their day jobs. When one of the four quit his job and took on the nascent CNSI in 1995, the company began to emerge. "As owners of the company, we had our day jobs wearing suits and ties and then we'd come together and take off our jackets and ties and configure computers for a client.

"Ahmed says CNSI's first government client was the NSA. "I used to stand outside their lobby because we didn't have a security clearance. The guy would draw something on a piece of paper and we would go design it and go back and forth. We delivered and got a contract." CNSI encountered one of its most memorable challenges when President Clinton won the 1996 election. A CNSI client in the GSA called Ahmed to see if the company wanted to bid on transforming an unused Veterans Administration building into an inaugural committee headquarters. The call came on a Wednesday. "They said, 'we want to network this building for 1, 000 users. They're coming over in the next four days. By Monday I need people connected on seven floors.'" "My jaw dropped. I said unless I have a purchase order in my hand now, there's no way anyone can do this. They called a few people to get bids, including a very

big company. We put a bid together in four hours. They looked at our proposal and two others and said, 'You win! You have until Saturday to perform.'"We had 10 people who slept for not more than 2 hours a night. Come Saturday we were up and running. We were on the phone with suppliers as we put together the bid, saying we needed overnight delivery. We put in fiber optic cable, wired the facility, lined up contractors. We supported them through the entire three months. "Then we got to go to the inaugural ball."