

# Energized by new career prospects

## Green power offers shot to switch jobs

By Scott Kirsner

This summer, when Jonathan Guerster went to talk to a group of midcareer entrepreneurs cultivating new clean tech or green start-ups, he was surprised to recognize a handful of them.

"These were guys who worked at our portfolio companies at Charles River Ventures in the 1990s," Guerster says, referring to the Waltham venture capital fund where he was once a partner. "And a lot of them I recognized from other software and communications companies."

In the late 1990s, everyone wanted to be part of the Internet revolution. Now, there's a similar level of enthusiasm building around companies tackling the world's energy challenges. And many people from the biotech, software, and hardware fields are seeking out - and finding - opportunities to make a career switch.

Guerster was among the first. A veteran of Open Market Inc., a pioneering e-commerce firm, and the venture capital industry, Guerster cofounded Groom Energy Solutions in 2005. The Swampscott consultancy works with companies such as EMC Corp. and Raytheon Co. to make their facilities more energy efficient, or link them with renewable energy sources. Guerster is now working with a fellow Open Market alum to explore the opportunity to spin out two new companies from Groom Energy.

But others have followed a similar path. Several of the 100-plus employees at Mascoma Corp., a Boston biofuel developer, have come from outside of the energy sector, according to president Colin South. Both he and the company's head of research and development worked most recently in the biotech industry.

The group Guerster spoke to this summer was a collection of entrepreneurs who'd dedicated almost four months to learning about the energy business and exploring opportunities to create new companies, as part of a fellowship program created by the New England Clean Energy Council. They included the former chief executive of Boston Coach, data networking executives, and medical device entrepreneurs.

"Clean energy is a very hot sector," says Nick d'Arbeloff, a longtime tech executive at companies such as Apollo Computer and Wildfire Communications, who now heads the Clean Energy Council. "But it also has a cause attached to it. This is the challenge of our generation."

Last month, Governor Deval L. Patrick signed into law the Green Jobs Act, which provides \$68 million over five years to try to make the state a leader in environmentally oriented innovation. Already, about 14,500 people work in the field in Massachusetts.

D'Arbeloff says the demand for senior executives is intense at clean tech or green companies, many of which are still small ventures in need of leadership. Executive recruiter Charley Polachi says his firm has conducted eight CEO searches for clean tech companies so far in 2008 - a 100 percent increase over last year. "I don't see it abating," says Polachi.

Bill Davis, the chief executive of Ze-gen, a Boston company developing ways to turn construction debris into synthesis gas, says his headcount will double within the next year, to 30 employees. (Synthesis gas can be used as a replacement for natural gas or fuel oil.)

Clean tech is really a blanket description for several different-but-related sectors, explains Jim Matheson, general partner at Flagship Ventures in Cambridge. "You've got a number of different areas, like energy efficiency, software for energy management, lighting, water, biofuels, wind, and on and on," he says.

Making the move is easiest for people who work in general business functions such as human resources, marketing, or finance, Matheson says, and harder in specialist areas such as project managers, scientists, and engineers.

But, he adds, "There are some natural connections, where you could see a biotech person going into biofuels, or a semiconductor person going to do solar cells, because the manufacturing processes are so similar."

A good first step for those hoping to transition is to start learning about the sector - and schmoozing.

"My best advice is to become very familiar with the players in the market you're interested in, and be able to talk intelligently about the issues in those businesses," says Chuck Digate, a software executive who participated in the Clean Energy Council's fellowship program, which wrapped up last week.

One source of information is Greentech Media, a local company that runs a website and organizes conferences like the Future of Ocean Power, taking place next month in Cambridge. As for networking, many in the clean tech sector recommend the MIT Enterprise Forum's energy group and the MIT Energy Club, both of which are open to people outside of the MIT community. The Renewable Energy Business Network East also organizes regular networking events around Boston.

Training and certification programs are starting to crop up at places such as Cape Cod Community College and Mount Wachusett Community College. Unions such as the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers are offering education about solar and wind power systems to new apprentices and existing members.

The Clean Energy Council is considering expanding its fellowship program, currently geared to founders and CEOs, to other professionals.

The clean tech sector is growing so fast, says Steve Kropper, that "you have to assume you can't meet all of your staffing needs by hiring only people who have experience in the sector. It's kind of like the dot-com days. Dot-com companies pulled in a lot of people who didn't know beans about programming, and turned them into Web developers. Energy is going to do the same thing."

Kropper recently launched WindPole Ventures LLC, a Lexington start-up that aims to develop wind farms.

But any mention of the dot-com days inevitably raises the question: is clean tech simply another bubble that'll inflate dramatically until it reaches the popping point?

"I think this is a megashift," says David Olsson, a former networking executive who is another of the Clean Energy Council's fellows.

"The hardware and software and telecom booms were each decade-long booms. This one lasts until we become energy independent and fossil-fuel free."

And unlike the brief renewable energy boomlet of the 1970s, "climate change is now acknowledged as being real," says Peter Rothstein, executive-in-residence at Flagship Ventures. "And the science is much further along than it was in the 1970s in areas like batteries and solar cells and bioengineering of ethanol production."

Both Rothstein and Kropper worked in the energy field back then; Rothstein was an energy-efficiency consultant, and Kropper was at one point the energy manager for Boston City Hospital.

"It's important to remain cynical and suspicious," says Kropper. "But once you go to India or China, and you see hundreds of millions of middle-class people who all want a house and car, you realize that the competition for energy has probably permanently changed energy prices."

"In the 1970s, all the ethical concerns about the environment evaporated when oil prices went down," says Kropper. "This time, I don't think prices are going down."

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