



Bjorn Billhardt

Founder and CEO
Enspire Learning
Austin, Texas

In Bjorn Billhardt's world, the things that make a great simulation are also the things that make a great company to work for: fun, engagement, creativity, innovation, and choices. Billhardt recognizes that it's the people he employs that make his company, Enspire Learning, what it is. His constant goal is to find and hire the best and most creative people he possibly can.

"The most important indicator of learner fun and engagement is the developer's fun and engagement creating the product," he says.

In Billhardt's world, effective e-learning exists at the intersection of three planes: education, entertainment, and technology. Those three things also happen to be his greatest passions. When he graduated from Harvard Business School with an MBA in 2001, Billhardt looked for a job that would harness those passions, but he quickly came to realize that, to get the job he really wanted, he would have to create it himself. Thus, Enspire Learning was born in Billhardt's Austin apartment as a collaboration between him and two business school friends.

The business proposition grew out of work on e-learning and simulations that Billhardt had developed as part of his Harvard thesis. "We had phenomenal feedback from students, and that provided credibility that would have been hard to come by otherwise," admits Billhardt, who landed the World Bank as his second client. In just four short years, Enspire has grown from three employees to more than 50, and counts many Fortune 500 companies among its clients.

Although the company initially was "very much about me," Billhardt has tried not to create a cult of personality. "I hope our corporate culture is taking on a life of its own." Innovative recruiting practices help him staff the company. One such practice is to look outside the obvious realms of instructional designers and multimedia programmers. "We look for people with enormous creativity and abilities, and have been aggressive in hiring from a nontraditional pool," says Billhardt, whose employees include screenwriters and video-game designers.

A second innovative practice is the Enspire Fellows Program. Through the program, promising applicants just out of undergraduate school are hired for one year of employment and training. Although they typically lack work experience or familiarity with e-learning, Billhardt hires for potential, and thus far has converted all past fellows to full-time employment.

The company's location in Austin is a big part of its success, says its founder. "Austin has the most friendly and supportive environment for entrepreneurs, and the best mix of talent in the creative and technical fields that I have seen," says Billhardt, who grew up in Hamburg, Germany, and attended the University of Texas at Austin as an undergraduate. Although he has also lived in San Francisco, Boston, New York, Washington, and Amsterdam, "there was never a question in my mind" of where he would go to start his company.

Billhardt may have inherited his entrepreneurial gene from his father. "I knew from my early days how much freedom and fun you can have in running and shaping a company. It was always a part of my world view," he says.