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## Keeping It Professional

*Integrated Communication Systems*

Published: April 2017

By William Atkinson

**B**ased in San Jose, Calif., Integrated Communication Systems (ICS) has been building its success as a low-voltage integrator for 15 years. The 80-employee firm, founded in 2002 by Aaron Colton, president and CEO, serves low-voltage integration needs in San Francisco and the Bay Area.

"I started out doing low-voltage contracting work in 1986 and started ICS in 2002," Colton said.

How does ICS set itself apart from the numerous low-voltage contractors in the area? Professionalism. The company focuses on technical professionalism in terms of what kind of work it does and personal professionalism in terms of how the work is done.

### Technical professionalism

First and foremost, ICS is not just a low-voltage integrator, nor simply a contractor.

"We are a one-stop shop—truly an integrator," Colton said. "In addition to having technicians who climb ladders, pull wires and mount devices, we have the ability to program, configure and integrate all of the bells, whistles and software onto the entire system. For example, some of our competitors may do installation, but then they need a third party to do the programming to create a user interface. We do it all."

Second, the company has developed a reputation for selecting and installing user-friendly components and systems.

"End-users find it very easy to work with our systems," Colton said. "They can walk into a room and easily navigate the technology."

Third, while the company provides virtually all types of low-voltage work, one way it maintains its professional edge is by specializing in three low-voltage niches: audio/video, fire systems and educational systems.

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Fourth, the company focuses its sales and marketing efforts on projects that match its technical expertise.

"We have a direct sales force, which focuses on looking for projects to bid on," Colton said. "We also call on electrical contractors and, in some cases, general contractors and end-users."

Since ICS represents hundreds of product lines, it also obtains leads from its original equipment manufacturers. It works closely with the consulting community that specializes in this type of niche work, so when relevant projects come along, they will encourage the end-users to include ICS on their bid lists.

ICS also focuses on the professional and personal qualities of its employees.

"Our culture is one of our most important assets," Colton said. "We have very little turnover. In fact, our culture is what draws people to come here to work in the first place. We give our people a lot of autonomy and authority to make a lot of their own decisions, especially when they are working in the field."

Valuing this type of resourceful employee has presented a challenge to ICS: finding qualified people.

"We are experiencing a significant boom in our geographic market, so we are vying for new talent," Colton said. "We want to find people who understand what we do and then develop them to where they can contribute."

At this point in time, the company's ability to take on more work and grow is limited by its workforce.

"If we had one-third more people, we could put them to work with no problem," he said.

Justin Gamble, director of the company's audio/video division, elaborated on this challenge.

"Our challenge is not getting enough people to work here," he said. "We are a very appealing place to work. Our challenge is in finding the right people. What we do in the field is very specific and very high-tech, so we look for people who can do that kind of work both in terms of the technical background as well as being able to work independently."

"Once we find the specific aptitudes and interests that our individual technicians, programmers, and systems people have, we arrange for them to get the training that they need in those specific areas, either through in-house training, manufacturers' webinars, or even flying them to manufacturers' sites," he said.

Third-party training is important to ICS. It had the opportunity to not only use this kind of training, but actually participate in the design and construction of a new third-party training facility.

ICS was selected to be the audio/video integrator for the JATC's Northern California Sound and Communication Regional Technology Training Center, which opened in 2015. The facility features smart classrooms, meeting rooms, collaborative study spaces, and multiple labs for hands-on training in electrical theory, fire alarm, security, closed-circuit television, card access, audio/video, structured cabling, telephone, public address, cable TV, master clocks, mass notification, nurse call, relay logic, distributed antenna systems and computer literacy. One area was built to serve as a wire-pulling lab.

"This is a new state-of-the-art center for Northern California," Gamble said. "We designed and built it from the ground up in terms of meeting rooms, training rooms and demo labs to provide training for technicians in our industry. It was not only a successful project for us, but it now provides a place where people can be trained to work in our field."