

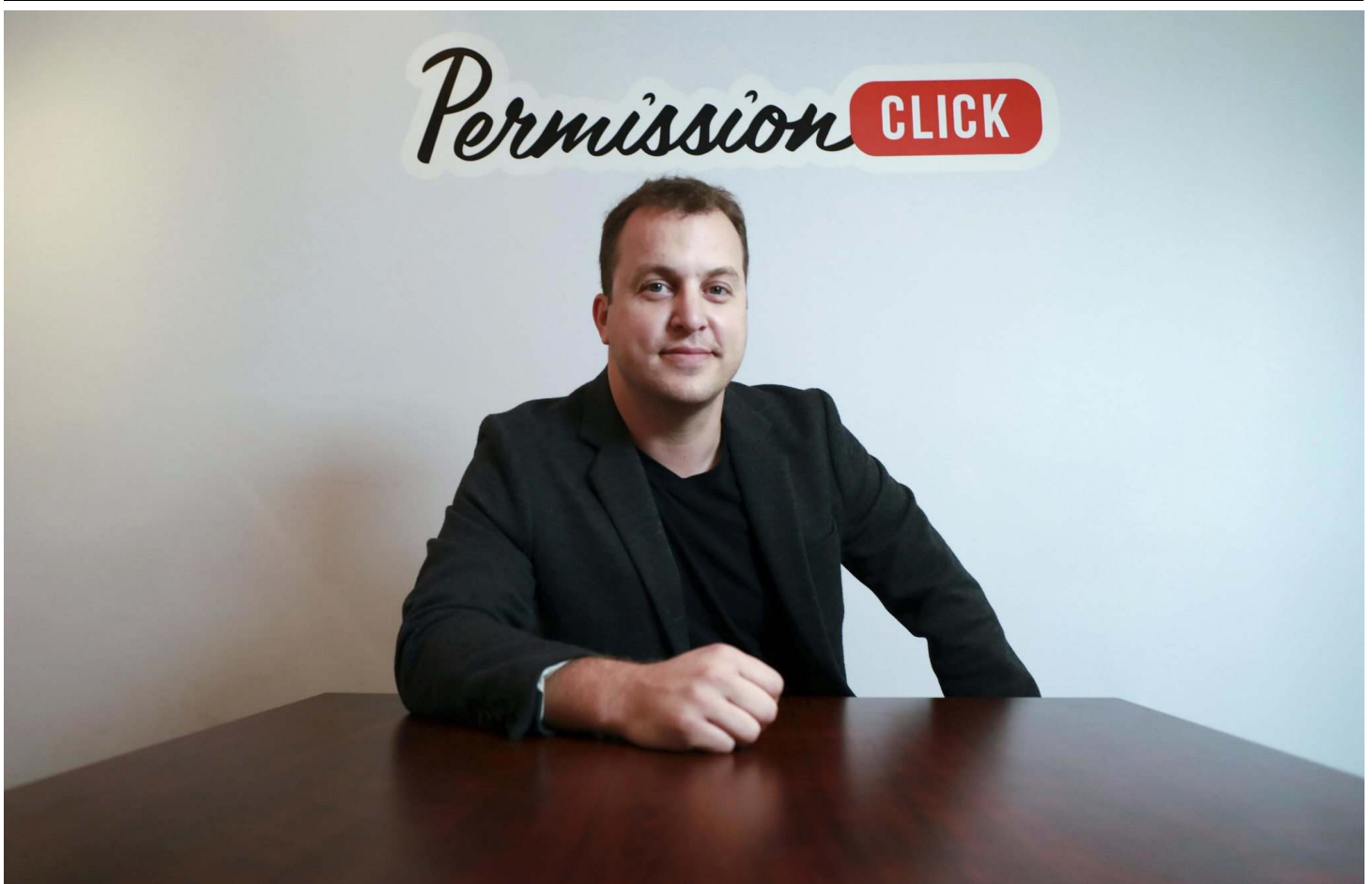
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Security a Permission Click away

WINNIPEG COMPANY PREPARES TO ROLL OUT SCHOOL-DISTRICT VERSION OF FORM MANAGEMENT SERVICE

By: Martin Cash

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RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Chris Johnson, founder and CEO of PermissionClick a 5 year old Winnipeg company that has built a big on-line risk management system for school boards allowing them to systematize permission forms.

When the Winnipeg company Permission Click started five years ago, the idea was to find a way to design an online, digital format to make life easier for teachers and parents

by digitally replacing all those consent forms that kids previously stuffed in their knapsacks.

Now the company is about to officially roll out a massive school-district version of the platform that many believe is at the forefront of a digital transformation that could streamline the way school districts around the world communicate with their schools.



Wayne Glowacki / Winnipeg Free Press files

Curwin Friesen is chairman of Friesens Corporation, an investor in Permission Click, which he says created a solution for an unidentified need.

Organizations including the 587-school Toronto District School Board, Microsoft Canada and the Australian Scholarships Group are already firm believers in Permission Click.

The 15-person company operating out of Kelly House, the little red house on Innovation Alley, is in the process of doubling its workforce, attracting software developers from as far away as Brazil and establishing a sales force across Canada and the U.S.

Chris Johnson, 35, the founder and CEO of the company, said the road to get to where they're at now has been

fraught with challenges, like the time they finished a round of funding to scale up sales and then discovered it wasn't the schools, but the school divisions, that they really needed to be targeting.

Curwin Friesen, board chair of Friesens Corporation, an investor in Permission Click, said, "We realized this is bigger than was originally sketched out. School boards have a need that was previously unidentified and we had a solution... Now we were writing code with specific needs in mind as opposed to building something and then hoping someone had had a need."

After a few years in the market with a free product used by thousands of schools and community groups, the company had to go back to the drawing board.

But with the availability of technology such as robust cloud computing storage, Permission Click now has a platform that will do all the workflow mapping a school district needs. It will ensure that the right templates are used and the right approvals are obtained. And everything can be digitally stored for audit.

The districts can be confident that their schools are consistently using the right policy.

"We're not a digital permission form company anymore," Johnson said. "We're a risk-transference, liability-management tool, helping districts manage important liabilities."

Iain Riffel, assistant superintendent of program at Pembina Trails School Division, has been a Permission Click fan for close to five years. He said Pembina Trails was eager for a tool that would support and streamline policies to make sure that the schools were compliant, that everything was covered off related to safety and that the right people were seeing the right things at the right time.

"I don't see every field from every school, but if there is high-risk activity we are able now to vet them, for instance, through the phys-ed consultant in a paperless way," he said. "And if there IS a reason to see the details of a field trip, now we can."

There is some competition for Permission Click, including all sorts of free digital forms that can be found online, but Johnson and others believe the Winnipeg company has a solid lead in the market from a technology point of view.

Matthew Decker, who runs the office of youth, young adult and campus ministries at the Catholic Diocese of Dallas in Texas, uses Permission Click for a growing number of functions. He said digital documents are a dime a dozen, but they are not safe or secure.

He said, "I cringe when I hear people say they use something like Google Docs for permission or some sort of legal signature. Because the person who creates the form can change the language whenever they want. Permission Click can be used as a legal document that cannot be altered. It captures the legal signature better than people realize and can't be alterable afterward."

It's the kind of solution the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG), a \$2.5-billion member-owned mutual organization, was looking for. The ASG invested in the company's last round of financing earlier this year and is now in the process of setting up its own sale force to start selling the service in Australia after a complex partnership deal was hammered out.

Also in the last year, in addition to signing on the Toronto District School Board ("the motherlode," Friesen said), Permission Click signed a key partnership with Microsoft

Canada, allowing the small Winnipeg company to leverage the credibility of Microsoft, which is opening all sorts of doors. It is one of only 20 companies out of thousands of such partnerships that Microsoft is giving a priority push to.

Microsoft doesn't do that just because it wants to help a little company grow. It does it because it will help Microsoft grow. Permission Click uses the Microsoft Azure cloud platform; the more school divisions that use Permission Click's service, the more data storage business there is for Microsoft Azure.

Nancy Teodoro, education partner lead with Microsoft Canada, said, "We're very excited about the partnership. They have a very bright future ahead of them. The road map looks very promising. I'm super impressed with the people I have met. They have rock stars in terms of talent."

Johnson, who made a name for himself as one of the founders of AssentWorks and as an original board member of North Forge Technology Exchange, convinced fellow North Forge board member, Jerin Valel, the former director of digital at Bell MTS, to become Permission Click's product vice-president

Valel said that after running a large team of developers at Bell MTS, he knew the pitfalls and challenges and how to help a young company negotiate major partnerships like the ones with Microsoft and ASG.

"When I came on (less than a year ago) the company was launching into some real strategic discussions," he said. "The ASG deal means true global expansion. The company is growing at a crazy rate and I'm happy to help build something where people are going to be able to have very long careers."

Valel says he wants to be able to help Johnson and his team have the kind of success where "they can all drive Teslas."

The company has closed millions of dollars of contracts — still, Johnson has slept in airports "countless times" to avoid paying for hotels — but he's mostly looking forward to things like being able to hire a quality assurance professional so he won't have to keep taking everyone on his team away from their work whenever there is a new release.

"It's all hands on deck, and the entire staff gets in a room to go through 200 test cases for hours at a time. It's insane," he said. "We need to take it to the next level. The product is too big now."

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Martin Cash has been writing a column and business news at the Free Press since 1989. Over those years he's written through a number of business cycles and the rise and fall (and rise) in fortunes of many local businesses.

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