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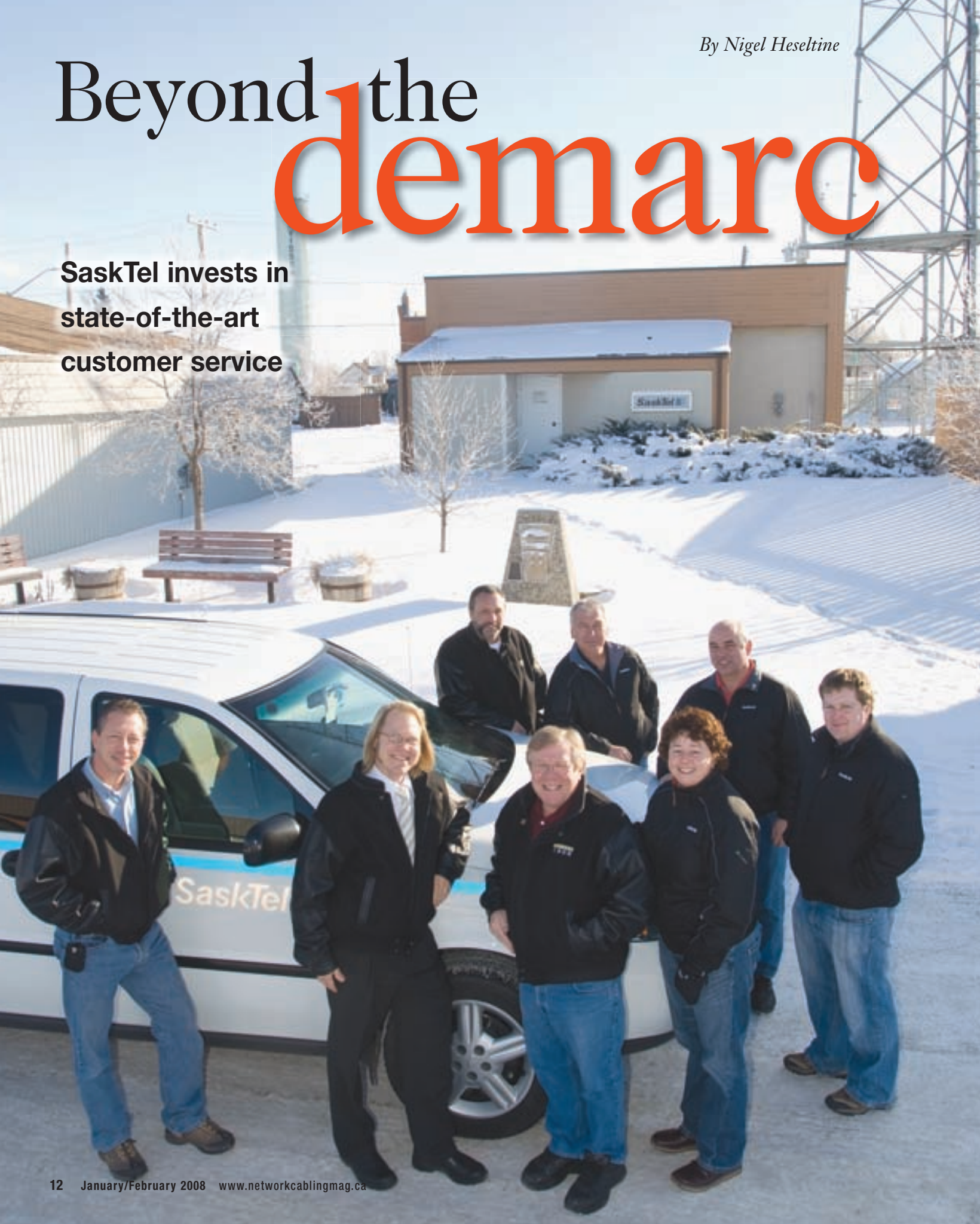
# Beyond the demarc

**SaskTel invests in state-of-the-art  
customer service**

By Nigel Heseltine

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“Some people pass the exam on the first try,” says Doug Hilderman, the client communication engineering manager for SaskTel’s Business Solutions department, “while some take as many as four tries.” The exam he is talking about is the one that makes you a registered communications distribution designer, or RCDD.

RCDDs, he says, design a cable layout, come up with a price, figure out how much labour is needed and prepare a quote for the customer. They don’t sell; they provide expertise in cabling and the related infrastructure. Nonetheless, their broad knowledge of current information transport technologies prepares them to answer technical questions posed by a customer in ways that not only meet their needs, but may lead to repeat or additional business for SaskTel. The work involves “project management, salesmanship, materials management,” Hilderman explains, adding, “It’s quite a nice job when you think about it”.

Hilderman spearheaded a campaign to bring RCDDs into SaskTel. When he began campaigning, there was just one among 4000 employees. Now there are six, himself included, in his 18-person department, with three more seeking that credential this January.

### What is the RCDD designation?

The RCDD credentialing program was developed in 1984 by BICSI, a North American association with 24,000 members (which drew over 5000 people to a recent conference in Las Vegas, Nev.). According to its website, BICSI supports the information transport systems (ITS) industry, and offers “information, education and knowledge assessment for individuals and companies”.

Hilderman, who is an applied science technologist (A.Sc.T.), became an RCDD after passing his credentialing exam about a year ago. He thinks the program made him a better manager because he can better understand what his staff is talking about and appreciate the work involved.

So far, he has not had to look outside of SaskTel to find RCDDs. Those he has have been drawn from his existing staff. They are unionized, so the incentive from a financial perspective is slight; however, it opens doors for them, allowing them to seek some of the increasing volume of work for which RCDD qualification is mandatory.

Gaining the qualification is not easy, says Hilderman. “Normally it takes one or two week-long courses and 100 to 200 hours of

study,” followed by the exam. It’s a process that “balances your practical knowledge with your book learning”.

Keith Bent, a customer systems analyst in SaskTel’s Saskatoon office, says, “finding the time to study was the most difficult part”. He needed two attempts. The first time, he says, he didn’t get away from the business environment to prepare, but the second time he took a week off before the test to focus on the manual and was successful. He noted there are 280 questions in the exam and only three hours in which to answer them, and a passing grade is 80%. You have to know your stuff, he says, because “there’s no time to ponder”, given that you only have about 45 seconds to answer each question.

Dave Achter, a customer systems analyst (design) in the Regina office, observed that experience in the field was key to success in acquiring the credentialing. BICSI requires a minimum of two years of field experience before you can enrol to become an RCDD.

Since gaining their credentials, Hilderman, Bent and Achter have all enjoyed benefits as a result of having more letters after their names. Hilderman believes the accreditation “let us match with what end-users and building owners were requiring”. He explains that RCDDs recognize what a system should look like. They look at all kinds of cable makeups; they know the tests; they understand documentation and labelling; and the program’s emphasis on safety is drilled into them.

Gaining the respect of his customers was an important motivator for Bent. The conferences and the networking have been significant as well. At seminars at the Las Vegas conference he realized that the problems he was having were shared by many other people, and he learned what others were doing to solve some of them.

Achter, who does work for national customers like Bombardier and the Department of National Defence, says it’s a “status thing”, adding, “it’s nice to know how to do things right”. Becoming an RCDD also brought him more money.

Another thing they like about the program is that it prescribes ongoing training. BICSI demands that an RCDD accumulate at least 45 continuing education credits (CECs) over three years to keep the credential. “It forces the company to budget and allow time for it,” Bent explains, “before I had to justify [training] to the nth degree. Now, it’s not even questioned.” And because he knows when he is going on training, he

can plan for it. Hilderman thinks CECs are “a good way of keeping in tune with what the market is doing”.

Some of SaskTel’s RCDDs are upgrading their skills even more by taking some of BICSI’s specialty programs, such as Network Transport Systems (NTS), Outside Plant (OSP) and Wireless Design (WD). Achter already has the OSP specialty, and is working on wireless design, says Hilderman.

From a manager’s perspective, Hilderman says, asking for RCDDs simplifies the hiring process. “When I posted a job in the old days, I had a lot of questions about experience,” he says, and might have had to give each applicant a test. RCDD credentialing “is really a very nice way for me to see if this person has the aptitude and experience to do the job that I need to get done”.

### SaskTel reaps the rewards

There are currently about 475 RCDDs in Canada. John Bakowski, BICSI’s outgoing president, explains that, some years ago, most Canadian RCDDs were with telcos like SaskTel. More recently, though, electrical firms, consulting firms and even some private contractors have started actively pursuing them. At the same time, their numbers on staff at telcos seem to have dwindled (though some, like SaskTel, seem to be ramping up again).

Since completing its training, Hilderman believes his staff is designing jobs better, and his department is able to bid on jobs it could not have pursued in the past. They can also make better presentations to customers because they are aware of all the cabling options and current technologies, and can feel confident in making recommendations. All this is important for his department, because most of its work is done beyond the SaskTel demarcation point—inside buildings or on campuses—where competition is a constant reality.

Bakowski says SaskTel has really recognized the potential of the RCDD program. He gives a lot of the credit to Hilderman, saying, “Doug is a bit of a shining star in the industry these days, in that he recognized the importance of having expertise reside within [SaskTel’s] organization”. Bakowski adds, “He’s very proactive, which says a lot for him and for the organization”.

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