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Farmington's Polarity raises millions connecting augmented reality to the workplace, cybersecurity



A snapshot of the digital interface of Polarity's augmented reality technology. IMAGE CONTRIBUTED

BY NATALIE MISSAKIAN
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The human brain is great at spotting patterns, but at recall, not so much.

Enter Polarity, an augmented reality startup that has developed a memory-enhancing technology for desktop computers in the workplace.

The company uses AR technology to enrich information that appears on an employee's computer screen, with a goal of helping teams of workers collaborate more efficiently.

"It enables what we call a collective memory across the team," said CEO and co-founder Paul Battista, a Connecticut native and former U.S. intelligence officer who leads the mostly virtual company from his Farmington home.

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With 20 employees, the five-year-old startup has raised $11.6 million in venture capital so far and is growing, with plans to double the size of its team in the next 18 months.

"The biggest challenge right now is scaling and hiring folks," said Battista. "We have lots of potential use cases but limited resources."

Strictly defined, augmented reality overlays virtual images on top of real-world vision. It may bring to mind headsets or smart glasses (such as Google Glass) or mobile gaming apps like Pokemon GO.

Battista markets Polarity as AR minus the goggles. It uses computer-vision algorithms and overlays to add data to text that appears on a user's screen.

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It works in two ways: First, users can highlight text on their screen, such as a person's name, and add a notation, like a brief biography.

Polarity's algorithms will then recognize those characters and display the note anytime that text appears on their screen, regardless of the application. The notes will also become part of the team's "collective memory," making it easier for co-workers to collaborate, Battista said.

"You don't have to interrupt workflows or send emails asking about updates on things. You're seeing everybody's notes in line with the tools you're already using," Battista said. In the cybersecurity world — a target market — it can alert analysts to suspicious IP addresses flagged by other team members.

Another feature allows users to pull data from outside sources, bypassing the need for a Google search. For instance, Google Maps could be displayed whenever a street address is recognized, or Standard & Poor's data could be linked to company names.

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Polarity employees including co-founder and CEO Paul Battista (third from right). PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

From zombies to cybersecurity

Battista, 36, grew up in Plainville and studied economic crime investigation at Utica College in upstate New York. He spent time working as an "ethical hacker" on Wall Street and held cybersecurity positions with the New York Attorney General's office, Aetna and the state police before taking a job with the federal government.

His first foray into AR was developing a zombie-shooter game app for smartphones, which sold for $1. It didn't make millions, but was modestly successful for a side project, with sales in the thousands, he said.

"The timing was pretty good," he said, noting its release at the height of Hollywood's zombie craze.

He started Polarity (formerly Breach Intelligence) in 2014 with fellow intelligence officer Joseph Rivela of Easton to create a better way for security analysts to share information. They began



beta-testing the product with a large private equity firm and top consumer bank, and released it publicly two years later.

Today, Polarity boasts "millions in sales" and customers that include Fortune 10 companies and the federal government, according to Battista.

Daniel Ingevaldson, whose Atlanta venture capital firm TechOperators led Polarity's latest $8.1 million Series AA funding round, views the company as "a bet on the human knowledge worker."

Although the startup has found a niche with cybersecurity workers, Ingevaldson says its technology can be useful in any business setting where employees must synthesize large volumes of information, such as a call center or healthcare system.

Even with the rise of artificial intelligence, he said, there are still tens of thousands of human analysts doing jobs that AI can't do, and won't be able to do for many years.

"I look at Polarity as human augmentation technology. It makes the people doing these front-line jobs dealing with massive amounts of information more effective," he said.

Eric Abbruzzese, an analyst for market advisory firm ABI Research, said interest in AR technology has been rising in the business world, where it's being used mostly to enhance employee training.

While Polarity is a little different, he also sees its potential, particularly if the company decides to extend its technology to smart glasses and mobile phones.

"They could be building a foundation that transitions very nicely into the market we cover," he said.

Battista said Polarity is focused on desktop computers because that's where most of its enterprise customers are working. But he said it could branch out into goggles and smartphones in the future, especially if the company decides to make a go at the consumer market.

"We think the headsets are bulky and kind of challenging right now, but as they come along in the future, we're trying to build the platform in a way that will support that," he said.

For the short term, Battista is concentrating on building his team and growing his customer base, which currently leans heavily toward Fortune 500 companies.

One priority is to make the software more accessible for smaller firms without a dedicated IT department. The company is developing a hosted version of its software that can be used without an on-site server, Battista said.

And while the startup currently has office space through an investor in Washington, D.C., Battista hasn't ruled out expanding in Connecticut if he finds the right talent here.



"Our mentality is typically to hire the best people, wherever they might be," he said.

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