

## An Appetite for Disruption

For Randy Martin, it's the role of IT leaders to evaluate and explain how emerging technology can provide a competitive advantage.

By Evan Cline

The recent rise of drone technology has captured the imagination—and, in some cases, revulsion—of America. Though drones are well suited for filming movies or delivering packages, Randy Martin, director of corporate systems at Atkins North America, one of the largest design and engineering firms in the world, is more excited by the technology advances drones could bring to a construction site.

“Our business provides site surveys, construction inspections, and transportation design of roadways, highways, and bridges,” Martin says. “We may look at an undeveloped area and determine the best route for a new pipeline or roadway.” To an engineering and design consultant, the applications of drone technology are plentiful. Opticopter drones equipped with GoPro

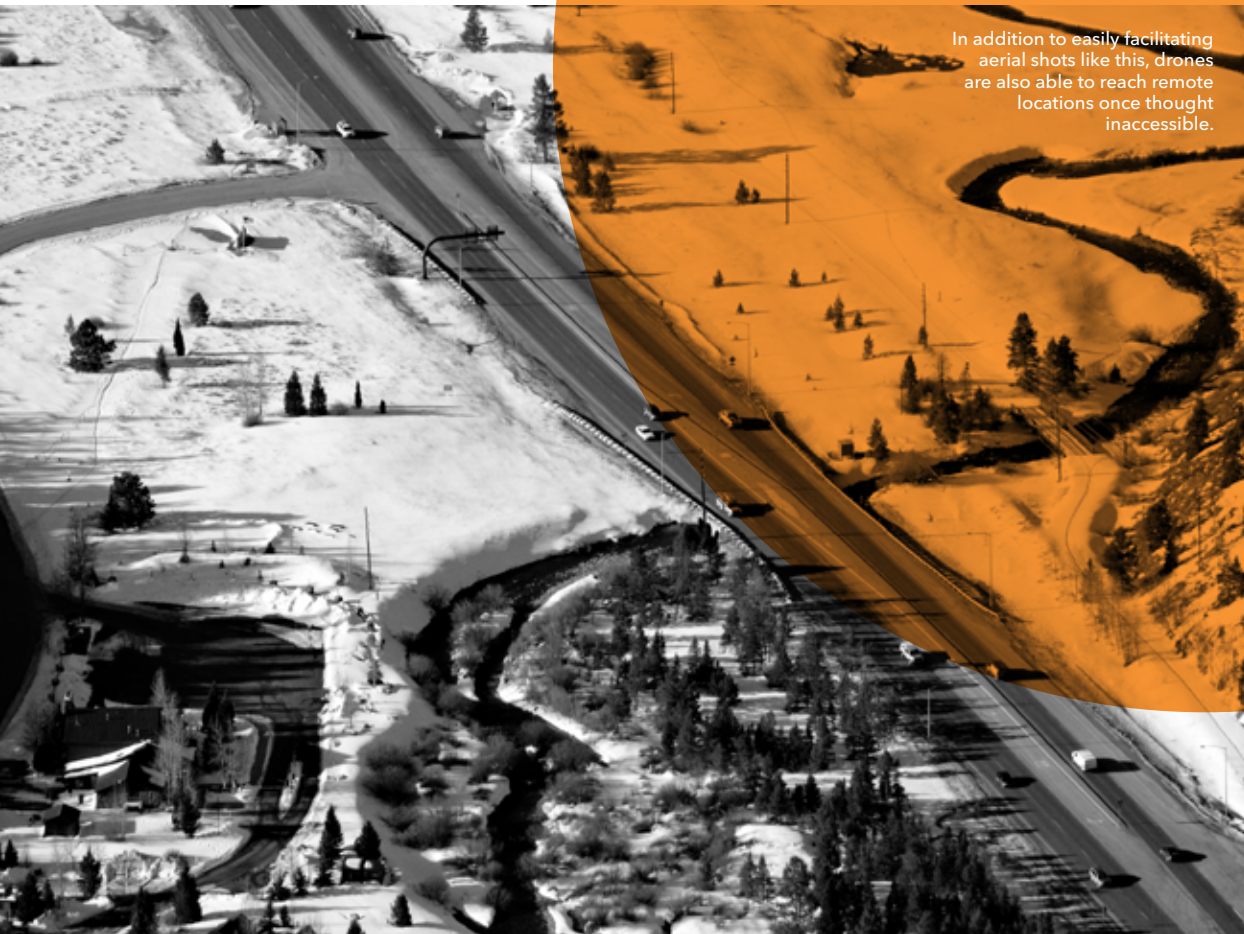
**Randy Martin**  
Atkins North  
America  
Director of  
Corporate  
Systems

cameras can perform detailed inspections in tight or dangerous spaces. They can survey large tracts of land, limiting the use of more expensive helicopters, while providing detailed 3-D maps. “The transformational value is from a cost-savings perspective,” Martin says, “but there is also potential for improved service delivery. And from an accessibility standpoint, we can do things with drones that we just couldn't with a human. In impassable areas, such as the Florida Everglades, drones can add accessibility that we would otherwise lack.”

Although FAA restrictions may limit the scope of drone operations, Martin is not deterred. Researching and implementing forward-facing technologies is an integral function of a modern IT department. “IT needs to become a strategic partner with the business,” Martin says. “My time is not best spent on implementing yet another ERP system with high costs and low value. Instead, I'm exploring and validating a new technology, then returning to the company with a proposal for improved service to our clients. Atkins looks to trusted advisers, companies like Project Partners, LLC, for input into project-centric systems.” With the rise of cloud computing, SaaS, and even infrastructure-as-a-service, the traditional functions of IT are becoming commoditized. Staying current on the latest technology trends is one way IT can remain a relevant business partner.

Of course, IT departments need not specialize in every new technology. Expertise can be solicited. Martin connected with authorities to determine the current capabilities and limitations of drone technology. “After that, the next phase is to get hands on,” Martin says. Atkins is planning to acquire a drone and then prototype its possible uses. “We want to present . . . not just an idea but a practical demonstration highlighting drone capabilities and their integration into our current service offerings.”





In addition to easily facilitating aerial shots like this, drones are also able to reach remote locations once thought inaccessible.

The final stage is deployment. “A lot of these technologies will be brought into IT to incubate,” Martin says. Once mature, the technology will transition to the most relevant department, which will become the de facto repository for in-house expertise.

Martin envisions a more fluid technology workforce as a result. From a recruiting standpoint, that’s an advantage. “Especially to millennials,” he says, “the idea of naturally transitioning into new roles or departments is attractive.”

Martin’s innovative approach to his role extends beyond the use of drone technology. He is hoping to see Atkins utilize crowd-sourced personnel. By profiling human skills and maintaining a database of qualified workers, the company would be able to rapidly scale to meet the demand of large contracts. “Combine that with the technology to work virtually and you really start to give the business flexibility,” Martin says. In this scenario, facility costs are greatly reduced, and employee resources are used only on an as-needed basis. Furthermore, the business is empowered to pursue contracts that would otherwise be untenable.

Atkins is also exploring the business potential of Google Glass. “We want you to walk into a real-world three-dimensional space and actually see what that space will look like with our design implemented,” Martin says.

Although the company specializes in design, Martin’s mind-set is applicable across fields. Aside from drones and Google Glass, technologies such as 3-D printing, holographic projection, and driverless cars will transform how we do business in the coming decade. “In the past, IT has been a service,” Martin says. Today, IT faces a crossroads: evolve into a strategic business partner or rapidly become irrelevant. ●

**15%**

Amount of Martin’s time spent researching emerging technologies

**30%**

Amount of time Martin expects to spend on emerging technologies in the future

#### TAKEAWAY

As traditional IT services become commoditized, technology leaders must reinvent their departments as strategic partners guiding their business towards innovative technological solutions.



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