

VISTAGE

Member Stories

Charlie Westling, CEO
Computype
St. Paul, Minn.

Role: CEO

Industry: Printing

Employees: 201–500

Vistage chair: Jack Sell

Company background

Computype produces billions of barcodes and labels that are shipped to blood banks in Miami, tire plants in Manchester, laboratories in Mexico City, and everywhere in between. For almost 40 years the private company of 200 employees has been creating and offering sophisticated product labeling solutions to companies around the world. Its headquarters is in St. Paul, Minn.

During his tenure as CEO of two local companies—Datalink and Computype—Charlie Westling’s constant companions have been fellow members in his Vistage Minnesota group and chair Jack Sell. Charlie’s been a member of Vistage for nine years—joining the CEO peer group while he led Datalink several years ago. He’s derived so much value from Vistage he continued his membership when he joined closely-held Computype nearly four years ago as the company’s first CEO outside of family.

“I came to Computype to help develop a vision, a strategy and a plan for moving the



company to a higher level of performance and a faster rate of growth,” explained Charlie. He’s on a mission to transform the company while also mentoring second-generation family members who are part of the management team. Charlie shared that Computype is making the transition from the first generation owner (father) to the second-generation sons, who own the business.

Charlie joined Vistage in 2005 when a friend and fellow CEO talked to him about the benefits of Vistage. “He was enthusiastic about his experience with the monthly meetings, one-on-one coaching and the many actionable ideas he adopted at his company,” said Charlie.

Today, Charlie’s Vistage group has 15 fellow CEOs. “I feel within our group I have a board of advisers or board members that I can bounce ideas off of,” he said. “What’s nice about it is these are people from different companies with different experiences and different types of organizations. But what we have in common is a passion for leadership. We talk about this all the time,” he shared.

A company with global reach

Recent advice from his Vistage group has helped Charlie decide to hire a new critical position for his company—a global chief financial officer. “We’re a global company—we do a lot of business both inside and outside North America,” said Charlie. “We made the decision six months ago to hire a global financial leader,” he added.

While deciding how to hire the right person he was able to gain the perspectives of his Vistage group members, which encouraged him to look at the process from several different perspectives. “I ended up making a decision to promote an internal candidate into the role—a decision in retrospect that was great for the company,” he shared. When he reflected back on the process and how he was able to leverage the Vistage team going through the decision-making, he felt the group challenged him and helped validate his thinking.

“Working with my Vistage group on the decision gave me a higher level of confidence in the decision that I made,” said Charlie.

Computype has about 200 global employees, with operations in the U.S., Mexico, England, Spain, Germany and France. The company is headquartered in Roseville, Minn. In Charlie’s words, Computype helps companies identify, track and manage information for the products that they produce across a variety of industries, including tire and belt manufacturers, diagnostic labs, biotech/pharma drug developers, blood banking centers and automotive parts suppliers. “We provide most of the labels that go on blood banks when people walk into their American Red Cross or other blood center and donate

blood,” shared Charlie. “Ninety-five percent of those donations have our labels on them,” he added.

Another large sector for the company is the rubber market. Tire, belts and hose manufacturers around the world use Computype labels to identify and track millions of products as they are shipped and inventoried across multiple continents.

He said customers often want the flexibility to print information on a label in real-time at their own facilities. “We help companies use blank labels from us and various printing technologies in their environment to be able to print on demand. We help them automate the actual application of the label on the tire or whatever else might be coming through the production floor or the testing lab,” explained Charlie.

According to Charlie, “We’re in a world of just-in-time inventory and information. The production timelines for products moving through a typical supply chain are getting much shorter.” Customers desire labels that can be printed when and where they are needed. Computype has strived to stay ahead of the competition in this competitive market.

“It’s a very fragmented industry,” observed Charlie. “There are hundreds of local or regional companies that provide labels, so the vast proportion of the companies we compete against are local in scope. There are a handful of national and even fewer international players, but it’s literally a business that’s populated with hundreds of companies both in and outside the U.S.,” he said.

Computype employs sales people throughout North America and Europe that work one-on-

one with customers; collaborating to solve specific manufacturing and labeling problems. “It’s a consultative business,” said Charlie. The company avoids selling labels based on price alone. Its approach is to understand the customer’s business, what’s driving their growth strategies and what kinds of initiatives do they have in place to be more efficient to reduce cost? Armed with this information, Computype helps customers identify how the labeling and tracking of their products can improve their business, provide them with better information and ultimately help them sell more product.

Over time, Charlie says that Vistage has helped him set a course for Computype’s business strategy, especially as the company has expanded operations to serve global customers. For Charlie, the Vistage influence has come from several perspectives: his chair, Jack Sell, his fellow Vistage group members and the speakers, which continually challenge him with cutting-edge business and leadership topics. “There are always at least a few kernels of wisdom or nuggets of gold following a Vistage speaker that you can embrace,” he shared. He especially likes the speakers that rant about the importance of employee engagement, clear communication, focused execution, accountability and driving actions throughout the company.

His group meetings are monthly learning experiences when members share a sometimes-controversial issue they are seeking advice around. “The discussions around leadership, strategy and growth challenges are invaluable,” Charlie shared.

After working with Jack for nine years Charlie appreciates the value Jack brings to the table. “He adds a very perceptive level of

business sense of what leadership is all about.” “Jack is a classic servant leader, always ready to listen,” he concluded. **V**