

VISTAGE

Member *Stories*

Paul Ingebrigsten, CEO
Williams Sound
Eden Prairie, Minn.

At a glance

Role: CEO, Owner

Industry: Wireless communications

Employees: 63

Vistage chair: Jack Sell

Company background

[Williams Sound](#) is a global designer and manufacturer of wireless communication technology, serving personal and professional listening needs worldwide since 1976. Williams Sound offers products and service for such commercial markets as hearing assistance, language interpretation, tour, corporate, education, government and house of worship. These products include Hearing HotSpot™ Live Audio via Wi-Fi, Digi-Loop® Induction Loop Systems, Digi-Wave™ Digital Communication Systems, Personal PA® FM Listening Systems, Portable Hearing Assistance Tour Guide Systems and SoundPlus® Infrared Systems.

When Paul Ingebrigsten took a part-time job with Williams Sound as a university student 36 years ago, he thought he would be there temporarily to earn some spending money while he finished his degree.

But with a bit of serendipity, some twists and turns, and being at the right place at the right



time, Paul is still on the payroll at Williams Sound. He's just not tuning radio receivers and writing technical manuals. Paul is the CEO.

Privately-held Williams Sound is in a unique niche—designing and manufacturing wireless listening systems that help people hear better in noisy places, such as sports arenas, churches and other public places. Also, they produce electronic translation equipment that lets people hear live or recorded content in their native language.

The company's major customer segments include education, government, interpretation, entertainment, healthcare and house of worship.

“Our lower-volume, high-value products are manufactured domestically. Then the higher-volume products are manufactured overseas, says Paul. The company has its manufacturing and headquarters in Eden Prairie, Minn. China and Korea are its international manufacturers.

Williams Sound has 63 employees in numerous disciplines: engineers, designers, IT, finance, technicians, writers, sales and marketing, and

others. “A lot of people in our industry are musicians. They gravitate to the audio-visual world through a connection of music,” he shares.

Within manufacturing, Paul says they have assemblers and technicians who are testing, tuning, and repairing equipment. “Our purchasing/logistics group procures all of the parts and coordinates production,” he shares.

Vistage becomes a cornerstone

Up until 2005, Paul had been involved in sales and marketing for the company, when the board asked him to take on the role of CEO. By then, Paul was already a principal in the firm, having been part of a buyout with the founder, Jerry Williams, when Jerry retired in 1987.

Leading up to his new opportunity as CEO, Paul had been a member of a Vistage key group. He said the company’s culture encouraged everyone to grow through ongoing training, development and self-improvement. Following his promotion to CEO, Paul joined a Vistage CEO group, led by chair [Jack Sell](#).

Paul is quick to give credit to Vistage for helping him on his leadership journey. “I think Vistage has helped me improve the business by making me better, making me smarter, and by giving me the benefit of perspectives of other business leaders,” he shares.

He explains further: “Nobody is as smart as all of us, and to have the opportunity to sit down with other company leaders, and to be able to pick their brains and get their perspectives is a valuable resource.”

How speakers add value

Paul is also bullish on Vistage speakers, a cornerstone of the Vistage experience. “One of the benefits that I’ve seen from Vistage over the years has come from the speakers. No matter what the topic is, there’s almost always at least one or two nuggets that trigger an idea or course of action that will help me be better as a leader, or improve the company.”

He cites a recent speaker who provided his group with a process that will improve your chances of selling your ideas or approach before decision makers. Another speaker came to the group with a revolutionary performance evaluation system that eschewed a report-card based approach for a more coaching-based model. “As a result of that, we revamped our performance review system to more around setting goals, coaching and reviewing,” says Paul.

Paul explains that he also appreciates feedback he continuously gets from other leaders in his group who have been there and done that. “You always think that you’re coming into a situation that’s new to you, and you’re the only one has had that problem before” he shares.

He says that his group members are always ready with helpful advice because most have experienced the same problems. “I haven’t seen a problem yet where someone in the group hasn’t said, ‘Oh yeah. You know, we went through that. Here’s what happened. Here’s what we did,’” Paul shares. “This is a group of people who get it.”

There’s a high level of trust and integrity in Paul’s Vistage group—virtues he considers implacable. Paul credits his chair Jack Sell for creating the group’s culture of trust. You can tell Jack your deepest darkest fears without worrying about

judgment,” he shares. “There’s a calmness about him when he takes in the information and how he calmly asks questions without telling you what to do” The result is a family-like mood to the group and a spirit of cooperation

Paul also credits the company's founder with creating a culture of cooperation at Williams Sound. Because of that there’s very little turnover at Paul's company. “People stick around,” he says. “Our average employee tenure is 11 or 12 years. And we have many people who have been in the business more than 20 years.” **V**