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MICHAEL DELL'S SECRET WEAPON

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Abstract (Article Summary)

Little noticed outside of Dell, President and Chief Operating Officer Kevin B. Rollins has played a bigger role in the company's current success than anyone other than the founder. After arriving as a consultant from Bain & Co. in 1993, Rollins used his keen eye to craft planning systems and controls the upstart desperately needed. Rollins may be one of a kind - an unusual mix of the analytical, cerebral, creative, and spiritual.

Full Text (516 words)

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Just days before Dell Inc.'s April, 2002, analyst meeting, President and Chief Operating Officer Kevin B. Rollins awoke with a new ambition: Double the company's revenues, to \$60 billion within five years. It was a rare departure from reality for Rollins, whose numbers-driven discipline had elevated him to Michael S. Dell's No. 2. Dell was skeptical, yet Rollins quickly convinced him that it was achievable and would excite investors. Dell unveiled the plan at the analyst meeting, and it has since become the company's primary goal. "Dell has not seen its apex," he says.

Little noticed outside of Dell, Rollins has played a bigger role in the company's current success than anyone other than the founder. After arriving as a consultant from Bain & Co. in 1993, Rollins used his keen eye to craft planning systems and controls the upstart desperately needed. During the years of blistering growth that followed, Rollins ascended to Dell's inner circle of advisers, and when PC sales started to slide in 2000, he drove the company to sharpen its execution, cut costs, and wage an all-out price war that devastated rivals. Now he's the point man for an audacious expansion plan. "The company needs four or five people with the strength of Kevin," says Electronic Data Systems Corp. CEO Michael Jordan, a former Dell board member.

Rollins may be one of a kind -- an unusual mix of the analytical, cerebral, creative, and spiritual. He trained to be a classical violinist before studying business at Brigham Young University and often quotes Thomas Jefferson and

Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He inherited a tireless work ethic from his father, a collegiate wrestler who grew up poor and became an engineering professor and entrepreneur. And as a devout Mormon, the younger Rollins has a powerful ethical core, similar in many ways to Dell's Judaism. "We both have very strong family backgrounds. It's part of who we are," says Rollins.

The two men have grown increasingly close. Late in 2001, Rollins asked Dell what role he would play in future decisions, and Dell offered a full partnership. The pair share a straitlaced style as well as a serene self-confidence. But it's Rollins' fascination with history that's behind an attempt to remake Dell's corporate culture. He believes that if Dell is to last, it must learn to value more than just the machine-like execution for which it's famous. In a pamphlet for employees dubbed *The Soul of Dell*, he has summarized a set of guiding principles, including behaving ethically and maintaining a meritocracy. Says Rollins: "They have to believe [in] more than the stock price."

Rollins clearly believes in the company. He turned down a chance to interview for the top spot at Hewlett-Packard Co. in 1999, even though he says he doesn't expect to ever be CEO of Dell. "I'd rather be on the Super Bowl team than be quarterback for someone else," he says. So far, Dell looks like it has a winning duo.

[Illustration]

Photo: Photograph: FULL PARTNER ROLLINS HAS DRIVEN DELL'S RECENT SURGE OF SUCCESS PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCY NEWBERRY

Credit: Andrew Park, with Peter Burrows

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