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### Ashley Chen's ActioNet has made the Fantastic 50

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by Joan Hennessy

Ashley Chen spends Sundays at home in her pajamas — working, as usual. The time spent organizing the week ahead gives her a leg up. It is part of a high-energy work ethic that built the company she founded, ActioNet, into one of the fastest-growing tech firms in Virginia.

"If you are taking care of your customers, and if you are taking care of your people, you are going to grow your business," she says. "It's just as simple as that."

But there's nothing simple about making a tech company stand out in Northern Virginia, home to more than 1,100 technology firms. Chen knows what she must do to grow business, says Jim Allen, a former CFO for Veridian and now a consultant who has watched Chen in action. "She has a good understanding of how her business has to change," he says. "What works at one size doesn't work at the next size."

Only 10 years old, ActioNet has 140 employees and annual sales topping \$17 million. It has made Virginia's Fantastic 50 list — the fastest growing companies in the state — five years in a row. Based in Fairfax County, ActioNet has offices in Baltimore, New Orleans, San Diego, Honolulu and Dayton, Ohio. In addition to the U.S. Department of Transportation, federal customers include the Defense and State departments. In August, ActioNet announced a five-year, \$32 million contract with the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center in San Diego to provide systems engineering, software development and more.

Chen, the company's 37-year-old president and CEO, is slender with long dark hair, intense eyes and a tendency to punctuate sentences with throaty laughter. Part of her acumen is the product of upbringing: Both parents were entrepreneurs. Born in Taiwan, Chen is from a traditional family, the youngest of seven children. Her father owned an import/export company, and her mother started a boutique. In 1988, the family came to the U.S. — a move made for the children's education.

During Chen's first year in college she knew little English and taped every lecture. Her parents wanted her to get a doctorate, but she stopped after completing a master's degree in computer science from Binghamton University in New York. Immediately, she landed a job with a Federal Aviation Administration contractor in Northern Virginia.

One job led to another. She worked for a small tech firm and lived comfortably in a town home, but by the late 1990s, she wanted her own business. "I was reading a book and I was inspired by this Japanese philosopher, who stated, 'Action without vision is a nightmare, and vision without action is only a daydream.'" She knew she had vision, she added. "I thought, 'I need some action.'"

An available domain name she found online struck a chord: ActioNet. She pulled out a credit card and \$35 later reserved a domain for her business. Within the first year, her company won a \$50,000 account evaluating Y-2K issues for the U.S. Department of Transportation. Later, an administrator told her why she got the deal.

"He was spending so much money on a large business and not getting anything in return," she remembers. "He said, 'You know what? If I bring in this company [Chen's ActioNet], I bet you this company is going to work so hard to deliver and give me more than what I asked for.' And guess what? He was right."

She finished the work under budget and on time. By the end of that first year, 1998, she hired Jeffrey D. Abish, now executive vice president. "I knew I could count on him," she says, "I knew him back in school."

Moving to a startup was a risk, Abish concedes. "Knowing her level of determination and the kind of person she was, I said why not," he remembers.

Chen believes part of her success lies in hiring and retaining the right people. One of those is Victoria Scott, who was hired seven years ago as a college intern and now works as a project manager. "It wasn't my first job, but it was my last," says Scott. She describes Chen as "one of the most energetic people I've ever met. That's how she is all the time. She's good at motivating people. It's infectious."