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BYLINE: Shannon Henry

BODY:

The rise of the Internet has been very good for **Charles T. Pinck**, spy-for-hire.

As president of a Washington private detective firm, the Georgetown Group, Pinck searches for information about individuals--criminal records, mortgage loans, stock holdings--by sifting through Web sites and databases for his clients.

He used to do opposition research for political campaigns. Now, with much of the region focused on high technology instead of politics and government, Pinck's fastest-growing group of clients are venture capitalists.

Pinck says that when VCs are considering an investment, they hire him to check out the people who run the companies. He's looking for prison records, criminal cases and lawsuits, but also for evidence that the entrepreneurs owned a company before that they didn't mention (especially one with a dubious past).

And he also investigates lifestyles: Houses, boats, alimony and child-support payments, and general spending habits. He's looking to see whether they're living beyond their means, which may translate into problems with the way they run their business.

Venture capitalists, really, are sleuths themselves. They check out the technology and the books of a company before an investment. So why wouldn't they do the rest?

"Asking these uncomfortable questions are difficult," says Pinck. And the VCs, he says, are usually focused on the here and now.

"What a PI does is take a look at someone's past," he says.

Pinck says he was hired by one VC to check out a start-up the firm had decided to fund. Through public records, Pinck found that three days after meeting with the VC, the chief executive tried to get a criminal conviction for forgery wiped off the books.

The venture deal didn't happen, of course.

More often than not, though, the subject comes back clean.

Citing customer confidentiality, Pinck wouldn't name his VC clients, who often use his services through their attorneys.

He uses database sources that are available to many people, such as Lexis-Nexis and Dow Jones Interactive (he sometimes finds stories about a person or a previous business in a small-town newspaper).

But he also relies on subscription-based Web sites, many of which are geared toward corporate snoops like him. "Just doing a simple Internet search yields a

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lot," he says. Some of Pinck's favorites are KnowX.com and AutoTrackXP.com. He also likes the federal Bureau of Prisons site (www.bop.gov).

Most people being investigated by Pinck never know they're being checked out. He relies more on documented information than personal interviews or surveillance, what he calls "the black arts."

He does worry that new privacy laws could cripple his business. "If you enforce too many privacy laws," he says, "you're also enforcing the privacy of people who have things to hide."

The invasion of the Silicon Valley legal triumvirate is complete.

The high-tech law firm Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati plans to announce today that it will open a Northern Virginia office--its first on the East Coast--in early 2000.

The office will be the Mid-Atlantic headquarters for the firm. Besides its Palo Alto, Calif., headquarters, Wilson Sonsini has offices in Austin and the Seattle area, following a strategy of opening branches across the country in tech hot spots.

The increased venture capital in the region, the number of young technology companies and the strong, mature companies such as America Online are the reasons for the move, says Larry Sonsini, chairman of the firm.

"The fact that we're coming reflects the success of the region," Sonsini says. "We branch very deliberately. It's important that the area invites us by virtue of business demand."

They're still looking for space, mainly in Reston, according to Trevor Chaplick, who along with Laurie Smilan will lead the Northern Virginia office. They'll move to the Washington area with one other Wilson Sonsini partner and four associates to form the initial Mid-Atlantic team.

That means local law firms such as Greenberg Traurig and Piper & Marbury, busily building their reputations as high-tech experts in the area as they watch the Valley lawyers come in, can, for now, breathe a small sigh of relief.

Unlike fellow Palo Alto firms Cooley Godward and Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison, both of which opened area offices here earlier this year, Wilson Sonsini plans to initially bring in its own people rather than stealing locals. When Cooley moved here it took 12 lawyers--the entire technology practice of Hunton & Williams of McLean. And Brobeck hired four lawyers away from Piper & Marbury.

However, says Sonsini: "We will hire from the region. This office will grow."

Mike Russiello, chief executive of online certification company Brainbench of Sterling (which this week renamed itself from Tekmetrics.com), is the latest local exec to land venture money from an outside-the-area fund.

More Washington companies are attracting money from New York, California, Boston and other cities these days, bucking the trend that venture capitalists like their investments to be in their neighborhood.

Russiello this week snagged \$ 3 million from Lycos Ventures of Pittsburgh, the venture-

capital arm of the search-engine company Lycos Inc.

Lycos discovered Brainbench in September when Russiello presented his business plan at a New York venture fair.

The company sells online testing in a variety of areas, including technical, financial and languages. The target customer is a company--

Electronic Data Systems Corp., Ernst & Young and Computer Sciences Corp. are current clients--that uses the system to test and certify their employees.

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Send tips and tales of the digital capital's local people, deals and events to Shannon Henry at henryswashpost.com.

Charles T. Pinck, president of the Georgetown Group private-eye firm, helps venture capitalists rest easier by running checks on entrepreneurs.

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