

ENGINEERING FIRM PLACES IN HIGH-TECH CONTEST

Peter Shinkle | St. Louis Post-Dispatch

A Maryland Heights engineering company is a runner-up in a competition between Midwest technology startups.

The company, EnTech Engineering Inc., submitted a plan to use the Internet to sell data on bridges for use by construction companies, engineers and others.

EnTech will receive \$50,000 in the competition, which drew entries from 600 businesses. Telcom21 Inc. of Naperville, Ill., won the grand prize of \$100,000.

The winners were chosen last week from among 10 finalists judged by a panel of venture capitalists from around the country, said McKinsey & Co., the management consulting company that ran the competition.

The sponsors of the competition,

which was called Prairiefire, said they wanted to jump-start Internet and computer companies in the Midwest. They noted that the region accounts for 20 percent of the gross domestic product but receives only about 4 percent of venture capital.

EnTech was the only company from the St. Louis area among the finalists.

EnTech, which has collected data on bridges for 20 years, has its own patented technology that enables it to collect data on a bridge simply by driving over it. EnTech's plan would expand its business by selling large amounts of data over the Internet, said EnTech President and founder Gary Weil.

"Instead of doing 50 bridges a year, we're going to be doing 15,000 bridges

a year, and selling the information on the Internet to people who can use it to save or make money," he said.

EnTech is looking for additional investors to help launch its new Internet business. The company plans to launch the business from the platform of its existing Web site, www.entech-ndt.com, Weil said.

Rich Ryan, an associate at McKinsey, said EnTech's plan was recognized partly because it would use technology to reduce the inefficiency in the way construction companies and engineers obtain information about bridges and other structures.

The first-place winner in the competition, Telcom21, makes products that help combine voice and data streams into packets as they enter a telecommunications network.

Another runner-up, Optoelectronic Assembly of Mahomet, Ill., makes technology that improves accuracy in the assembly of fiber-optic components.