UW energy- and water-sensing technology acquired by Belkin

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Zensi, a research startup from the UW and Georgia Tech that uses simple technology to monitor electricity and water use in the home, has been acquired by international electronics company Belkin.

Zensi, a research startup that uses simple technology to monitor home electricity and water use, has been acquired by electronics company Belkin International Inc. The startup was based on technology developed by Shwetak Patel, a University of Washington assistant professor in the departments of computer science and engineering and electrical engineering.

Patel co-founded Zensi in 2008 while pursuing his doctorate at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The startup was initially based on his thesis research and Zensi had licensed technology from Patel's research group at the UW.

"We've had an increased focus on supporting faculty and starting companies around their technology," said Linden Rhoads, vice provost with the UW Center for Commercialization. "It's exciting to see that one of the companies that's spun out of the University of Washington and Georgia Tech was acquired by a major player in this emerging field of clean tech."

Co-founders of Zensi are Gregory Abowd, a computing professor at Georgia Tech who was Patel's thesis adviser; Erich Stuntebeck, a

doctoral student in Abowd's group; and Matthew Reynolds, an assistant professor at Duke University who co-founded the company while a faculty member at Georgia Tech.

"Information technology can be a driver in green tech. Shwetak and his colleagues have demonstrated this by developing very simple but powerful devices to optimize energy use in homes or offices," said Matt O'Donnell, dean of the UW's College of Engineering.

Zensi was based in Atlanta and then Boston before being acquired for an undisclosed amount by Belkin, which has its headquarters in Playa Vista, Calif.

"I am very excited about our vision to help people make better, more informed decisions about their energy use," said Mark Reynoso, president and CEO of Belkin.

Belkin said it expects to have a product featuring this technology within two years.

Patel's thesis research used a concept called "electrical signal disaggregation" to monitor the electrical activity at a single point, then tease out the signal to pinpoint whether power is flowing to a refrigerator, a television or a light bulb. Even two light bulbs can be distinguished.

At the UW, Patel's group has furthered the research and collaborated with James Fogarty, a UW assistant professor of computer science and engineering, to extend the original concept to sensing water. Patel's doctoral students working on the project include Eric Larson, Jon Froehlich and Sidhant Gupta.

"The acquisition is pretty exciting for us and for all the students that

were involved," Patel said. "It hopefully shows how academic research can reach the end consumer."

Kevin Ashton, the former CEO of Zensi, will become general manager of Belkin's new Conserve business unit. Patel will work as a consultant for Belkin while maintaining his faculty position at the UW, where he will continue his research on sensing technologies while pursuing new directions.

"I'm very excited on what we have done in the energy space, and now I'm going to explore health-care applications," Patel said.

Provided by University of Washington