

The Star

BUSINESS

Monthly

California Dreaming

From Steel City to Silicon Valley



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TECHNO TALK

with Chris Muscroft

Chris Muscroft is Commercial Director at Highlander

In association with



IT seems that IT and communications in general gets more and more complicated with each passing year.

I say this as someone who is intrinsically embedded within the industry, but I have to admit, it still amazes me how even the simplest solutions are becoming more and more complex.

Take mobile phones for instance.

For most organisations, gone are the days where you can look at last year's phone bills, compare them with the tariffs being offered for this year and get the best price you can.

Now there's a multitude of things to consider including how they impact on the operation of the business, particularly for those organisations where staff, management and directors spend a portion of the working day away from the office.

Firstly, you have to think about what the device is going to be used for. This ultimately has an impact on the type of handsets you choose but also how they connect to your internal systems.

Most of the advance digital phone systems in businesses today have a mobility offering where you can integrate a traditional mobile phone into the structure of the network. For example, you can transfer a call to a mobile as if you were transferring to an internal extension. However, many companies are wanting much more from their devices.

Whether your considering Blackberrys, i-phones or Windows mobile devices, these units are now being configured so they have instant access to email (linked directly to your Exchange email server), the internet for web browsing and more recently, direct integration with your internal applications - I can now send out an invoice or process an order with my phone.

The suggestion I would give is make sure you engage with your I.T. provider to get the best advice on which technologies suit best and how best to implement them. Highlander has recently been selected by O2 as a partner to provide this guidance, largely due to our experience on the infrastructure platform, but also because we manage all the communication offerings including services on lines and connections (for reduced costs on telephone bills) and traditional telephone systems. We now have the expertise to add mobile devices and integration to this portfolio.

For further advice on your mobile contract or mobile devices, I'd be happy to take your call on 0114 292 3800.

A tale of two cities

By Fiona Firth

DAVID Richards looks around Sheffield city centre with a sense of wonder. It's not the city he left 20 years ago.

These days, home for the Chief Executive of WANdisco - a global provider of distributed software development solutions - is the affluent and glamorous Silicon Valley in northern California.

But, in the last year, he has built new links with his native city, relocating WANdisco's European centre from London to Sheffield.

"The changes here are unbelievable," says Richards, 38. "I never used to come into the centre of Sheffield because it looked like a bomb had hit it. In the 1970s and '80s when I was growing up, it was a hole. Now it's beautiful.

"Sheffield needed significant investment and finally got it. There's still a way to go - the city has to keep on developing and continue to be business-friendly. Council leader Paul Scriven is extremely business-friendly. There's a quid pro quo relationship between business and the city."

WANdisco's European base initially moved in to Sheffield Technology Park and is now installed at the Electric Works - with the aim of creating up to 50 jobs.

Richards stresses: "We are surrounded by like minded people and businesses - providing an environment in which WANdisco can thrive. This will also enable us to capitalise on partnership opportunities. Sheffield's reputation for creative and digital industries is growing rapidly and we are glad to be maximising on this."

He adds: "The jobs we are creating are not data processing, call centre jobs. We are moving core development to Sheffield and the jobs being created will be some of the best paid in the city."

"I've moved my sales director up from Marlow. He's a single guy, so he loves the abundance of night life here and he lives in a penthouse in the city centre. The quality of his life has improved substantially.

"There's just this assumption



that business can only happen in London. But, when I had a meeting recently at the Financial Times, it took over two hours to get from Heathrow to the FT offices. Yet in that time you can get from St Pancras to Sheffield."

The Sheffield move has given Ows-fan Richards the chance to set up links with his favourite football club and to develop a friendship with internet entrepreneur and Wednesday chairman Lee Trafford.

He met Trafford, co-founder and former chief executive of Sheffield broadband provider PlusNet, during a tour of the city with Creativesheffield's Business Investment team.

"In California, there are many, many internet entrepreneurs but here Lee's an unusual fish," says Richards. "Lee made a series of very important introductions for me. Now he's on our advisory board and I'm on his advisory board. We help each other. We're very much alike in a lot of ways."

WANdisco has also entered into a Platinum Partners agreement with Sheffield Wednesday and Sheffield Children's Hospital, helping to raise hospital funds and awareness of campaigns.

Richards was born and bred in the city - his parents still live in Crosspool and his grandmother in Ranmoor. Business was in his blood. His great-grandfather started a Sheffield steel business and his grandfather and father achieved high ranking roles in steel firms.

But former Tipton School pupil David opted for a degree in Computer Science at Huddersfield

University before heading south to join consultancy company Druid Systems in Surrey.

"I was doing a very senior role, being a management consultant for large companies so I learned a lot about how to run a business," he recalls. "I suppose I got lucky. Mine was not a traditional graduate job. I fell on my feet. Within two or three years I left to start my own business doing consultancy. A couple of years into that, I decided I'd like to work overseas. I'd just met my wife - then my girlfriend - and told her I wanted to take off. I looked at Saudi Arabia, but that wasn't my scene."

The couple opted instead for the USA.

"I arrived with two suitcases at JFK to do a consulting job with a company in New York," says Richards. "We moved from a small apartment in the outskirts of London to a 4000 sq ft place in a gated community, with a private beach in New York! We loved it but got itchy feet after about six months.

"We went to Atlanta but really didn't like it and we were about to give up on the States when we arrived in San Francisco.

"I knew about Silicon Valley and about some of the great companies there but I'd sort of had this vision in my mind that Silicon Valley would be an industrial place - a bit like the Don Valley."

He grins: "But it's the opposite of Don Valley! There's a great coastline, hills, Lake Tahoe, Yosemite National Park. And the Bay area is this beautiful place. We loved it.

"I started a business in the middle of the internet boom. We raised \$20 million from a couple of venture capital firms and the business was reasonably successful.

"We exited it two years later and immediately started another business without the need for venture capital. That was in existence about 12 months before a public company, NetManage, came and bought us. I went to work for NetManage as senior vice president and general manager. It was the first time since I was 22 that I'd worked for someone else."

He laughs: "That lasted about nine months - and I decided to start my own investment fund."

Then he met Dr Yeturu Aahlad.

He recalls: "An Indian bloke came through the door. He looked a bit like Einstein! But I was really impressed with him - he's a genius. He presented me with a business plan which solved a problem that's existed in computer science for a long time - active-active replication. It means creating copies of data and allowing that to be edited at the same time. From 2000 to 2005, he'd just thought about solving this problem. He presented me with 20 pages of mathematical hieroglyphics."

Those 'hieroglyphics' formed the basis of WANdisco - Wide Area Network Distributed Computing.

Richards eventually became President and CEO while Dr Aahlad remains Chief Scientist and inventor.

"I brought in a management team and we've built a business around it, raising no venture capital," says Richards. "The business has been profitable since day one and is one of the fastest-growing private software companies in the world. The growth has been exponential and continued growth is forecast for the foreseeable future. We have products to come out to fuel that growth."

Not even a global recession can halt WANdisco's progress.

"It actually helps," explains Richards. "In recessions, people automate things. Budgets have tightened but, whereas in good times people look for big, colourful projects, in recessive times they look internally. They look to fix problems - such as slow networks. And that's what we do."

Despite establishing a business foothold in Sheffield, Richards and his wife Jane are happy to pursue the American dream in California's high-tech hub with their children Harry and Poppy.

"I always struggled with the UK because, if you go to Eton and Oxford, you are going to get the best jobs," says Richards. "It seems to be ingrained. All I ask for is a level playing field. In the USA that exists. People talk about the American Dream and people in the UK are cynical of it. But, even if you are born the lowest of the low, it is still feasible that you could end up a millionaire."

He adds: "At home in California, we have a swimming pool and a spa, a couple of acres of land where our kids run around. My son plays 'soccer'. There's a lot more family-oriented things going on - there's less of a pub culture. My kids have two accents. They speak in English accents to us and American to everyone else."

Yet he sees a link to home.

"I was showing someone round Ranmoor recently and it struck me that Sheffield was once the equivalent of Silicon Valley," muses Richards. "When you look at the houses where the steel barons used to live, you realise that Silicon Valley is to the IT revolution what Sheffield was to the industrial revolution."

WANdisco boss on life in the USA... and new-look Sheffield

Left: David Richards of WANdisco

Photo: Stuart Hastings

Far left: David admires the Peace Gardens

Photo: Stuart Hastings

Below: David with his wife Jane and children Poppy and Harry at Sheffield Town Hall

