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Acquiring a taste for change

acQuire Technology Solutions has ambitious plans for diversification and growth. CEO Warren Cook talks to Gay Sutton about product innovation and building a management structure that can be replicated across new marketplaces



When investments are made in the mining sector they tend to be on an eye-watering scale. Mining is a business with a high degree of uncertainty and financial decisions are based on extensive and highly varied geological data, often gathered and documented over a long period of time and then interpreted to create resource models. Inaccuracies creeping into the data, however, can seriously undermine the validity of the resource models upon which these mega deals are based.

One of the big developments over the last 15 years has been acQuire, a geoscientific information management system that is not only used by the mining sector but increasingly applied to other industries as well, including oil & gas and even civil construction, where it's used to store important soil data used for the construction of roads and bridges, for example. This market diversification is just the first step in an ambitious programme of expansion for acQuire.

"Our company originated as a mining consultancy in 1981, called Metech," explains Warren Cook, CEO of acQuire Technology Solutions. "But we began developing the acQuire product in 1996 out of sheer frustration that there was no software capable of reliably capturing, managing, delivering and interrogating geo-scientific data. Today, acQuire is the core of our business."

An impressive customer base of 220 companies currently use acQuire on over 400 sites across 35 countries. Customers are served by a highly personalised multinational acQuire team of





120 staff communicating in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. The company has a strong global footprint with offices in Perth and Brisbane in Australia, Calgary in Canada, Santiago in Chile, Belo Horizonte in Brazil, Manchester in the UK and Johannesburg in South Africa.

Strategically sited across global timezones, the offices are manned by a full complement of implementation and business development staff who function as a single entity. Product support is delivered locally by the implementation staff, and 24-hour support coverage is achieved simply by following the sun. A night enquiry from Australia, for example, may be answered by technical staff in Calgary.

“This ‘one-company’ framework gives us considerable flexibility to provide the services our customers need,” says Cook. If specialised skill sets are required or the workloads are pressing, for example, an implementation in one region could be carried out by team members

from another region. Similarly a new customer enquiry may be taken at the administrative centre in Perth and then passed to the most appropriate regional office for implementation and support services. “We have seen companies in our domain who have introduced inter-office competition, where two different offices bid for the same business. That just doesn’t make sense to us.”

Central to acQuire’s operational ethos is the focus on building a strong personal rapport with the customers. And it has certainly paid off: the majority of new business comes purely through recommendation.

“We have also grown the company organically,” Cook continues. “Everything we’ve done has been completely self-funded so we are debt-free.” A massive 25 per cent of revenue continues to be reinvested back into the business every year both for product development and business innovation.

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Over three years ago, a project known as ‘Mica’ was launched to direct and support product development as the company migrates to the Microsoft.net framework. The first step in the Mica Project was to undertake an ODI (or Outcome Driven Innovation survey) of the customer base and those who could provide input, to identify operational challenges or frustrations and how the product could be developed to solve those issues.

The first new Mica Project innovation, acQuire Neo, was launched last month providing users with an intuitive search and discovery tool for retrieving and interrogating the data without the need to write SQL queries. Other Mica projects in development include a web browser called Neo Web, and a web-based self-directed training

system, Neo Training.

Training, of course, is a major part of customer service. “However,” admits Cook, “with users located in some highly remote locations such as Burkina Faso and Eritrea, face-to-face training can feasibly only reach around 20 per cent of our user base. By introducing a cloud-based virtual training system, customers can make significant savings in travel and administration expenses. While our customers receive a benefit in terms of their workforce productivity, acQuire also benefits as we expect to receive fewer customer support calls.”

Looking to the long term, acQuire aims to achieve long term sustainability and growth through an ambitious vision for market diversification. “One of the secrets of our



successes is that we understand exactly what we're good at—management of raw observations and measurement. We don't do analysis—that's a very mature market," Cook says. "We are also very exposed to the mining sector, and this became very apparent during the global financial crisis when mining companies simply put their cheque books away. Our strategy is to diversify more and more into other markets, reduce our risk to any one, and make the business truly sustainable."

An example of a big opportunity at the moment is in environmental data management. "This is one area where we see our future. We are soon to release a system that will be capable

their department and the business collectively. It will take time, and we have to keep reminding ourselves to be patient."

Many organisational changes have been made to strengthen the business structure. One innovation is an internal system called 'Novedad', which Cook describes as a 'suggestion box on steroids'. This system empowers everyone in the organisation to suggest and contribute to change. The R&D discipline has been strengthened and optimised by separating the functions into their respective research and development departments. "Essentially we believe we've built an organisational structure that can now be replicated very easily for different markets," he

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of managing location and time very effectively." This can, for example, capture data for water, noise and air quality at various locations over any period of time. It can also have useful mining applications such as monitoring open pit walls for stability. If such data is not stored securely, managed professionally or retrieved quickly and accurately, vital small rock movements may be missed and the outcome could be catastrophic.

Importantly, this diversification is being supported by strong business innovation. "We have recently expanded the acQuire board from two to 11 people, with each member being responsible for a department," Cook explains. Initially their roles will be largely operational, building and honing departmental processes as well as refining company strategy. "But in three to five years every one of those directors will be solely a strategist, thinking about how to sustain

continues. "Water management is likely to be an important market for us, and we are looking at acQuire Water. But we have many ideas coming through the Novedad system."

In spite of the continuous change and 300 per cent growth of the past five years, some elements of the company will remain constant. "We are essentially a security driven organisation, not a profit driven one," Cook says. "And what I mean is: because all the shareholders are employees we're not looking for quick profits—we want the future for ourselves. We currently have 19 shareholders, all working full time in the company, and when the next generation of employees come along, we want them to buy into our shareholding and keep the process going. Working for the company should always be fun and we want it to stay that way."

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