

Abtran expands in BPO market

BY RUTH WILDGUST

Business process management company Abtran has signalled further plans for expansion after announcing several new developments in the past year, including new clients and investments in resources, technologies and facilities.

"The business process outsourcing (BPO) market is expanding and we're looking to grow our services further in Ireland and also in the UK," said Abtran's chief executive, Michael Fitzgerald.

"One of the key drivers of growth in demand for outsourced services is the increase in demand for digital engagement from customers. Also, the level of deregulation happening within industries is driving a lot of change. We've seen this in the Irish market and also in the energy market in the UK," he said.

Last month, Abtran announced that it had been awarded a new contract by Sky, creating 130 new jobs to support Sky's growing business in Ireland.

JD Buckley, managing director of Sky Ireland, said the company's contact centres played an integral role in meeting customer needs.

"We're really pleased to continue our growth and development through this partnership with Abtran which further adds to our strong commitment to provide the highest standards of service for all of our customers throughout Ireland," Buckley said.

Last November, Abtran announced an investment from Carlyle Cardinal Ireland (CCI). "This investment is very significant for Abtran as it underpins our long-term strategic growth," Fitzgerald said.

"CCI is the largest equity investment fund in the Irish market and brings extensive local and international experience to Abtran which will bring strategic benefits in the future," he said.

"The CCI investment provides access to capital which will underpin a strategic and structured growth programme and will also ensure continuing long-term career development opportunities for our people."

Commenting on the CCI development, Peter Garvey, managing director at Carlyle, said Abtran's success to date had been built on an impressive track record of high-quality



Michael Fitzgerald, chief executive, Abtran
Conor Mccabe

ity service delivery for a diverse base of clients.

"Abtran is a deeply innovative company with an excellent management team who have a clear vision for the future growth of the company," Garvey said.

"Abtran has identified a range of strategic opportunities including international growth in key market sectors where it already has strong expertise and we're looking forward to partnering with the company in realising these plans."

According to John Dolan, managing director of Cardinal Capital Group, this was CCI's fifth investment in fast-growing Irish companies in the last two years, reflecting the significant growth opportunities in the Irish market.

"Michael and the Abtran team have exciting plans for the development of the business in the medium term and using CCI's network and resources, we look forward to working with management to accelerate those growth plans," Dolan said.

In July last year, Abtran also announced 100 new jobs in an expansion of its consulting and technology services division at the IFSC in Dublin. The company now employs more than 2,000 people in Cork and Dublin.

Fitzgerald said the company had seen double-digit growth in turnover over the last three years.

"We are the largest Irish provider of customer and business process manage-

ment services to organisations across the public sector, utilities and financial services," he said.

"We focus on delivering services that cater for our clients' customers across sales, customer service and back-office functions, including insurance claims and driver licence processing, among other functions," Fitzgerald said.

As well as handling processes from its service centres, Abtran also provides services onsite within client locations. The qualification process for the Deloitte Best Managed Companies programme has highlighted key areas where Abtran is consistently getting it right.

"Our brand promise is about putting the client's customer at the centre of everything we do, making it easier for their customer to access services," Fitzgerald said.

"We're single-minded in our focus on service and enhancing customer experience. We're also able to transfer our service capabilities across a range of sectors. We are close to our clients and we strongly support the achievement of their business objectives."

He said that the Deloitte Best Managed Companies Award was a further important milestone in the development of the organisation.

"We're very pleased to be part of a group of high-performance companies with this accreditation. It helps to reinforce our market-leading position in Ireland and internationally."



Michael Slein, founder and managing director, LED group
Picture: Maura Hickey

LED Group leads the way on ambitious new growth

BY RUTH WILDGUST

Building on growth in turnover of over 30 per cent last year, the LED Group is investing in ambitious new growth targets for its operations in Ireland and overseas.

"The Best Managed Companies programme forced us to look in great detail at how we conduct our business across all areas and has helped us to make significant improvements to our 2020 plan," said Michael Slein, founder and managing director of the LED Group.

"We have a detailed 2020 financial plan and the programme made us stress-test that plan more rigorously than we might have done. It made us look at some areas where we could upskill ourselves and we're in the process of implementing those changes," said Slein.

"We expect our spend on research, development and innovation (RD&I) to increase by 150 per cent this year compared with last year," he said.

The company designs and manufactures a wide spec-

trum of lighting products under the Robus brand for the domestic, commercial and industrial markets.

"There's a strong shift towards LED technology globally. Consumers are demanding energy-efficient, eco-friendly products and LED technology ticks those two boxes dramatically," said Slein.

"Last year, we created 20 new jobs in Ireland. We expect to take on three project engineers in the UK this year and have appointed a new managing director in Australia to support the anticipated doubling of business there over the next two years," he said.

"We have put six additional sales people on the ground in France and plan to roll out a similar strategy in Germany over the next 18 months."

To meet growth in demand, the LED Group has invested in upgrading its warehouse in Dublin. "This included creating an extra 800 pallet spaces and moving to voice-recognition picking," said Slein.

The company will be exhibiting its latest products next month in Frankfurt to current and potential new international buyers at the Light

+ Building expo, the world's largest trade fair for lighting and building services technology.

"We will be launching our new 2016 Robus Product Catalogue, our largest one yet, at the lighting fair in Frankfurt," said Slein.

"We recently signed an exclusive deal with Rexel Finland to distribute our Robus products. Rexel is the second largest electrical wholesaler in the world and we've granted them the exclusive rights to the Robus brand for Finland."

The company has also aligned itself with Konka, a strategic LED partner in China. "Listed on the Shenzhen stock exchange, the Konka group is the second biggest LED TV manufacturer and the fifth biggest mobile handset manufacturer in China, employing 38,000 people," said Slein.

"The new Robus-Konka purpose-built manufacturing facility near Shanghai has floor space of 157,000 square metres, enabling us to fulfil all order quantities on time and without any bottlenecks," he said.

Konka brings its expertise in LED manufacturing to the

partnership whilst Robus is responsible for all research, development, innovation and marketing.

"Robus is now producing up to 20 new ranges every year and our key criteria are to improve the efficiency (lumens per watt) and extend the functional lifetime of our fixtures, while at the same time reducing their energy consumption," said Slein.

Founded in 1984, the LED Group is headquartered in Dublin and sells lighting products to electrical wholesalers worldwide. It now has branch offices in Britain, Holland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Guangzhou in China.

"Our key markets are Britain, Australia, Ireland, Continental Europe, New Zealand and South Africa. We employ over 200 people worldwide," said Slein.

"We have experienced double-digit growth every year since 2009 and have doubled the size of the business in the last three years."

"We credit this to having top class people working in the business and a very ambitious, aggressive strategy in

new export markets."

He said an ethos of unwavering commitment and follow through was part of the company's DNA.

"We place a huge emphasis on people development, people motivation and getting the best people on the bus, getting weak people off the bus and getting them off the bus quickly. We have very little tolerance of poor performance and a strong culture of always do what you say you will do, whether it's a promise to a colleague, customer or supplier," said Slein.

Enterprise Ireland provides support to the LED Group in several ways. "They are very supportive of our research, development and innovation team and work closely with us and, if we're looking to break into new markets, they are always very helpful in assisting us to set up appointments with contacts in overseas locations," said Slein.

"Our RD&I team is working on a hugely exciting product pipeline which will generate over €10 million in sales in the coming 12 months. This work will also be strongly supported by Enterprise Ireland."

Portwest achieves a perfect fit with new overseas manufacturing facility

BY RUTH WILDGUST

Specialist clothing company Portwest is continuing to expand its overseas operations this year with the development of a second manufacturing facility located in Bago, Myanmar. The company also has a manufacturing facility in Bangladesh.

"The new facility will employ over 1,500 people, which will bring group employment to 3,500 people," said Portwest's managing director, Harry Hughes, who heads the company alongside his brothers Cathal and Owen. "We decided to locate the new facility in Myanmar as it has a well-established garment industry with a ready availability of the necessary skills."

Charles Hughes, grand-uncle of the current directors, founded Portwest as a small drapery and footwear store in Westport in 1904. Today it specialises in the manufacture and distribution of safety workwear, safety boots and work gloves which are all certified to the latest CE safety standards.

The products are sold in over 100 countries, supported by a sales team of 80 people and a 528-page catalogue printed in 26 languages.

"We have warehouses in Britain, Poland, Dubai and the United States and we now employ over 2,000 people in total," said Hughes.

"The UK warehouse in South Yorkshire received bonded status last year, which allows for duty free exports outside the EU. We anticipate that the US and European markets will be the key areas for growth this year," he said.

"Our export team is also targeting new markets such as Central and South America and Africa."

The company targets annual growth of 20 per cent in turnover and has achieved this growth every year over the last eight years.

"This consistent growth throughout the recession years has been achieved with an increased product range, innovation, great quality and a larger sales team, all backed up by a fast, efficient service," said Hughes.

The company's product range includes more than 1,200 items, from high-visibility garments to fire-retardant clothing, safety footwear and specialist work gloves. "We are the largest manufacturers in Europe of safety fire-retardant workwear for use in many industries such as oil and gas, mining, welding. Many major companies in Europe use our products," said Hughes.

Portwest designs many innovative products and is the only company in Europe to offer a translucent hard hat, which provides a full 360-degree view and is available in eight vibrant colours.

"Portwest is the only company with a fully CE-certified safety wellington boot with metatarsal protection, steel toe-cap and steel foot-plate. In recent years, we also developed the lightest weight fire-retardant garments for use in hot climates," said Hughes.

"We sell our products to safety and industrial distributors and national retailers. Over 20 per cent of turnover comes from own brand labelling through major retailers. So when you are buying from a large multiple in Europe, it is probably a garment manufactured by Portwest."

He said many national tenders for semi-state companies were won by Portwest customers that supplied Port-



Harry, Cathal and Owen Hughes of Portwest

west products. "The market for safety is growing and there are increasing demands in areas such as fall-arrest equipment, chemical protection and electric arc flash protection," said Hughes.

The company employs two specialist teams which focus on new product development.

"The garment team has over 15 design and product managers and a new design office in Manchester. The footwear, glove and personal protection team has ten designers and product managers," he said.

"We have recently employed a safety footwear specialist in the Manchester office and a personal protective equipment specialist based in Italy. Many of the best product developers and designers in the safety industry work for Portwest in our five different centres across Europe."

This is the first year Portwest has participated in the Deloitte Best Managed Companies programme.

"As we are a new entrant, it is too early to fully assess the benefits, but our management and staff are delighted to have been selected into the pro-

accolade also brings marketing benefits."

Hughes said he would describe the current leadership style as "paternalistic" and that he and his two co-owners of Portwest took immense pride in growing the company and mentoring the future management team.

The company also places a high value on fostering a culture of innovative endeavour across the organisation.

"Innovation is an ongoing process from product design to management systems. It is our culture to find better ways of improving everything," he said.

"Participating in the qualification process for the Deloitte Best Managed Companies Awards programme is an acknowledgement of the management improvements and changes at Portwest in recent years and will act as a spur to attain even better outcomes."

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