

NORTH-WEST

The case for technology firms in the north-west of Ireland is no longer going by default thanks to the ongoing efforts of a cluster of like-minded local companies.

Speaking up for NW technology firms

Based in Londonderry, the IT Quarter is an employer-driven ICT cluster which, in effect, covers the north-west region of the island, representing the business interests of its members and promoting and fostering excellence in the technology sector.

Founded in 2000, the organisation now has around 25 corporate members, representing more than 50 ICT firms in the north-west region: it has members from Strabane to Coleraine in Northern Ireland and a sprinkling from across the border in Donegal. They represent all aspects of the industry, from cabling firms to software development companies and IT support. Funding for the effort has come from a variety of sources, including Derry City Council, Coleraine Borough Council, Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Business Information Centre (NORIBIC).

Spokesman for the Quarter, Jason Scoltock, whose own company, Tec-Net (Europe) Ltd. provides IT support to SMEs in the north-west, including Donegal, says that one of the first challenges that the organisation faced was the difficulty that many of its new members were experiencing in recruiting staff with the appropriate skills.

Reversing the skills drain away from the north-west remains a work in progress for the IT Quarter and Scoltock maintains that the situation now is better than it was, but he concedes that there is still a difficulty:

"In our own firm, we'll get plenty of applications but people won't necessarily have the skills that we're after", Scoltock said recently. "The last time that we recruited was before Christmas and we had difficulty then finding the people that we wanted. I think that there might be a perception that the jobs aren't there for them, so they're going to Belfast, but the jobs are certainly here."

Scoltock knows that firms such as Northbrook Technology and



Singularity have reported skills difficulties in the past, but he says that the IT Quarter has a role to play in resolving those problems. It can broker discussions with bodies such as Invest NI to ensure that the story isn't allowed to reflect negatively on the region and it can lift the profiles of the individual firms through various events and via its website.

"Staffing issues such as these were one of the main reasons that the IT Quarter was founded", he says. "We were keen to raise everyone's profile and to say look, we're doing business up here in the north-west, we want to say something positive about the region."

EVENTS

The IT Quarter is responsible for holding a series of events throughout the year for its members: in the past, it has staged a corporate law seminar in conjunction with Belfast-based solicitors, Tughans, as well as a procurement information event for members interested in tendering for government contracts. Derry City Council's funding of the IT Quarter will come to an end this year and the organisation is already looking at ways in which it could become more self-sustaining:

"It's a challenge," says Scoltock, "but it's also an opportunity. We'll be looking at the tangible benefits that we're able to offer our members. We might, for example, approach a company such as Dell and say, we have 25 companies on board, could we discuss a discount supplier's deal? We'll be looking at our buying power as an organisation."

Jacqueline Doherty, investment officer with Derry City Council, says that one reason for the authority's decision to fund the Quarter was the potential it offered for marketing the area as ideal for ICT-oriented investment:

"Even though we will no longer be funding them directly, we'll still be helping them to market themselves in this way", she confirmed.

Members of the IT Quarter held discussions around Christmas during which they examined the future path of the organisation and the results of that are still being collated:

"We'll be looking to consolidate what we have", says Scoltock. "And we'll be looking across the border. We already have a few members in Donegal and it's an area we'll be looking to build a stronger base in."

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IT Quarter case study - InVision Software: Supporting innovation and expansion

The efficiency of any organisation depends on employee satisfaction: if staff can work in an environment where they feel valued, they are more likely to perform better. The ideas of workforce management and employee satisfaction have long been recognised as important by industry thinkers. This may sound straightforward, but in practice, it's a multifaceted and complex challenge. The most diverse planning parameters must be considered, from current and future demand for employees, short-term peak periods, availability and vacation times, to budget guidelines and qualifications.

Based in Ratingen, near Düsseldorf, Germany, InVision Software provides workforce management applications that reflect each of these different requirements. At its inception in 1995, InVision focused on individual projects on a company-by-company basis. But, as the number of projects grew, it developed a standard modular system, the InVision Enterprise WFM.

InVision has worked closely with leading corporations across all sectors, to ensure it can integrate iWFM into various environments without incurring major cost. This means the solution can be introduced into any size of organisation, from small or medium-sized businesses with a workforce of less than 100, to more complex structures with tens of thousands of employees. Customers include ABN AMRO, Allianz, BMW, Deutsche Telekom, IKEA and Vodafone. As the company won more business, it needed to expand its research and development (R&D) capabilities to create innovative modules for iWFM and remain at the forefront of the industry. After examining a number of overseas locations, in May 2001, InVision decided to establish a development centre in Londonderry to take advantage of the available skilled workforce.

Stephen Williams was appointed the head of software development for InVision Software Ltd and set the task of establishing and managing the development centre in Derry. Stephen, a native of the city and a B.Sc. (Hons) applied computing graduate from the University of Ulster, began his career with Singularity, where his was involved in a number

of projects for the financial services industry and had gained experience in handling outsourced development projects in London and India. As a first step, Stephen chose to locate the new development centre within the University of Ulster's prestigious Science and Research Park on the Magee campus. In June 2004, InVision Software established a direct UK and Ireland sales presence from its base in Derry and appointed John Cann as account manager and he is responsible for sales and distribution. John has more than 10 years experience in project management and business development, particularly relating to human resources software and services.

"The UK is a large potential market for InVision's workforce management system and with the Derry office up and running, we are now able to drive sales and support customers locally, rather than from Germany", says Peter Bollenbeck, CEO

This sales presence was been further enforced by the appointment of Chris Dealy in June 2005. Chris joined InVision Software with over 20 years experience in the workforce management arena. He has held senior sales positions with Callscan (GMT Planet) and QPC (IEX Total View), developing new business sales of workforce management. Dealy has worked on a wide range of successful workforce management projects with organisations of all sizes and covering all major industry sectors.

"I was attracted to join InVision by the company's genuinely innovative approach, the high quality of the software and perhaps most importantly, by the commitment and enthusiasm of the entire team", says Chris.

InVision Software most recently achieved the establishment of a US subsidiary in 2005 as part of InVision's international strategy of targeting any business with a staff-scheduling requirement.

This same strategy has also successfully made inroads into extending market share within existing countries by targeting business sectors such as transport, manufacturing and retail that fall outside of InVision's traditional market focus of financial service and call centre activities.


