

EDC Helps Digicel Connect with Canadian ICT Firms

BY TOBY HERSCOVITCH

No island is an island, when its people are interconnected by Digicel. Now, the frontrunner in wireless telecommunication providers in the Caribbean is seeking suppliers for nearly every facet of its business and EDC is helping qualified Canadian companies vie for a share of this pie.

Three representatives from Digicel spent two concentrated days in Montreal talking to Canadian companies keen on supplying technology and services to their fast-growing company. Twenty-seven meetings later, they flew back to their Jamaican headquarters having identified several prospective suppliers to help them expand their business in the Caribbean and Central and South America. Digicel also has a sister company in the South Pacific.

The matchmaking event was organized by EDC's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) team. "Our goal was to broaden and deepen Digicel's base of Canadian suppliers. The companies who participated were very enthusiastic about this event and the follow-up has been excellent. As a result, it is a format we plan to replicate with other foreign buyers," says Paul Day, EDC's Vice-President, ICT.

"We're expecting to hit 40 countries, from our current 26, by the end of this year,"

says Mario Assaad, Chief Technology Officer. "We are looking for products and services in three key areas: infrastructure, including cell towers; innovative products, such as software for instant messaging (IM); and middleware, such as point of sale (POS) solutions."

Founded in 2001, Digicel has gone from an upstart company, taking on Jamaica's telecom monopoly, to become the largest wireless telephone operator in the Caribbean. It has also climbed to the top or second place in other Caribbean islands, and in several Central American markets. Today Digicel has more than 6.5 million subscribers and an annual growth rate that has averaged more than 50 per cent since its inception.

According to Assaad and his colleagues Amilkar Torres, Product Delivery Director, and Curt de Gourville, Network Design Director, Digicel prides itself on offering affordable prices, clear marketing, flexibility and speed. "We are building a bigger, better network in the



areas where we operate and we provide 24/7 customer care," says Assaad.

Digicel looks for similar strengths in its vendors – "flexibility, responsiveness, competitive prices, and strong after-sales support," notes de Gourville. "We also look for a diversity of applications because we have to adapt to different cultures in each of our markets."

Over the past five years, EDC has provided project financing as well as syndicated and direct loans to Digicel to encourage purchases from Canadian suppliers such as Research in Motion (RIM) and Mpathix, a provider of voice and data messaging solutions. "As Digicel continues to grow, it offers new opportunities to innovative small and mid-sized companies here in Canada," says John Miller, Strategic Account Executive.

The matchmaking event started with a webinar, where participants from over 60 Canadian companies gained an overview of Digicel's operations, growth plans and supply needs. This was followed by

one-on-one meetings with companies pre-selected by Digicel. Two firms that were invited to submit proposals were OZ Communications and VisionMAX.

Linking to the latest in mobile messaging

OZ is a leading consumer mobile messaging solution provider – giving consumers access to instant messaging, email, and many online communities on the broadest range of mobile devices in North America. The company ranked eighth in the 2008 Deloitte Fast 50, a listing of the fastest growing technology companies in Canada. In November 2008, mobile phone giant Nokia acquired OZ.

“We have more than 60 per cent of the North American mobile device market for IM and consumer email,” says Per-Olof Bjorkhede, Account Director. “I believe we stand out for our technology and user experience, based on the number of features we offer, their look and feel, and our close support to our customers.”

The company was founded in Iceland in 2000 and moved its base to Montreal in 2004, following major client Ericsson of Sweden, which had set up a research centre there. OZ now employs 240 people and has offices in the U.S., UK and a development centre in Mumbai, India. It is also looking at expanding in emerging markets such as Central Europe – and Central America where Digicel is growing.

OZ was able to improve its access to cash with the help of EDC’s Export Guarantee Program, whereby EDC works with Canadian exporters and their banks to increase working capital. OZ has also taken on larger foreign contracts with the help of EDC’s Performance Security Guarantees.

Today, one of its key challenges is adapting to the rapid changes in social networks and mobile devices. “We’re dealing with new providers, new online communities, new types of devices, new features – we have to keep up not only with

this changing landscape, but with the high level of support our customers expect,” says Bjorkhede.

“It’s a big help when we can gain access like this [from EDC’s matchmaking session] to companies like Digicel, who would otherwise be harder for us to approach,” says Bjorkhede.

From order-taking to customer-care systems

VisionMAX of Mississauga, Ontario recently won a contract with Digicel. VisionMAX provides cost-effective IT solutions for business, including point of sale (POS) systems, billing and operational support systems, and software to support digital entertainment systems.



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“Our strengths include our ability to mass-customize our applications, eliminate a lot of the complicated programming and deliver on time and on budget. Our applications are built graphically, based on our VisionEngine platform, making them much easier to use. It also means we can quickly take our application from the abstract level to a working prototype, so our customers don’t have to imagine what it can do – they can see for themselves,” says David McDougall, VisionMAX’s President.

“Our biggest challenge is the fast pace of our growth,” adds McDougall. The company, which started a decade ago during the technology bust, has seen its

sales double over the past two years. Staff increased from 38 to 75, the majority involved in R&D and consulting. While most of the company’s exports are to the U.S., it recently won business in Dubai and Taiwan, the latter with a large American leader in television entertainment products and systems.

In the case of the satellite TV provider, McDougall adds: “We were up against global firms like Oracle, [the world’s largest enterprise software company], Amdocs and Convergys. We spent five months preparing the bid and there were six people on the client side doing the due diligence. In September, we learned that we won the bid – we had quite a celebration!”

Aiming to increase his company’s growth worldwide, McDougall jumped at the chance to meet Digicel. “It is difficult for a relatively small company like ours to attract international business and promote ourselves abroad. EDC’s combination of support for these endeavours, and its financing and insurance products to help us be successful internationally, are tremendously important to us.”

Digicel was also highly satisfied with the meetings. “They were very productive. Most of the Canadian companies we met had a good range of mature and innovative products to offer,” says Torres.

In this business, he adds, you can be flooded by suppliers. As such, Torres and his colleagues often prefer when trusted partners, such as EDC, identify potential vendors.

Canadian companies who are interested in learning more about opportunities with Digicel can contact EDC’s ICT team at ICT@edc.ca or visit Digicel at www.digicelgroup.com. ■

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