

ICT sector must pioneer entrepreneurial spirit

Nic Stirk, chief executive of SLA Mobile in Belfast, argues that if Northern Ireland's indigenous ICT sector is to make bigger footprints on international markets, its ability to invigorate and build on an entrepreneurial spirit already prevalent in the technology community will be vital.

At last, after more than three decades of political division, the economy has its rightful place as Northern Ireland's top priority and the development of a world-leading information and communications technology (ICT) industry appears to be a primary goal.

So where do we start? And how much time do we have?

Over the past decade, our ICT sector has seen significant growth, spurred on by an influx of foreign direct investors (FDI) such as Nortel, Seagate and Allstate. More importantly, we have also watched as a growing cluster of successful, home-grown companies sought to develop expertise in a variety of segments: software, hardware, electronics, telecoms, and content provision.

Fortunately for us, the development of Northern Ireland as a hub of ICT sector activity was supported by strong economic growth in the world's leading economies and by a drive among expansionist multi-nationals to invest in more cost-effective operations overseas. But these two crucial planks of support are now being heavily tested by an economic downturn few predicted.

Though investing overseas is still a vital option in the business plans of every global ICT giant, few governments could comfortably put the goal to attract it at the centre of a policy to drive ICT growth. Take Nortel as a classic example. Canadian-based Nortel, which once employed 2,000 staff in Northern Ireland, recently called in the administrators, leaving 500 jobs in doubt. Seagate, too, is adapting to more difficult times.

For Northern Ireland to set itself apart in the ICT stakes, we must look closer to home, reinforce our existing strengths and build for the future. Crucially, we also need to rediscover, develop and foster the type of entrepreneurial spirit and 'can do' attitude that helped to propel almost a decade of vibrant expansion the Republic of Ireland's indigenous technology sector.

Like many of Northern Ireland's focussed ICT companies, SLA Mobile is actively playing its part.

From only a handful of staff, we have in less than a decade built a business based around innovation and quality customer service, recognised the strong growth opportunities that exist outside the island of Ireland, built the confidence to compete with larger global competitors such as IBM and win lucrative contracts with giants such as Vodafone and Fox Mobile.

Last year, we opened an office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in a major effort to expand our foothold in the fast growing mobile Value Added Service (VAS) and Mobile Internet markets in the Asia Pacific region.

Capitalising on a blended proposition of high calibre, Belfast-based experts and a focused regional stronghold, we successfully compete against global opposition in the aggressive, competitive areas of application development and quality assurance.

SLA Mobile has also joined the rankings of the fastest growing technology companies in the UK, featuring for the second consecutive time in 2008 in the Sunday Times Tech Track 100 list. In addition, we have twice been recognised as Northern Ireland's 'Rising Star' by Deloitte, which annually compiles Ireland's 50 fastest-growing technology firms.

But our company, now employing around 90 staff in Northern Ireland, Europe and Asia, is not complacent, and like Northern Ireland plc, continues to face challenges in growing our business.

Like Northern Ireland plc, if we fail to respond to the evolving market conditions, our position could be undermined. The rapid evolution of the industry and increasing competition from other countries make it essential that we look to the future to ensure appropriate policy and structures are put in place to secure our continued success.

Given the global and local economic slow down that we are facing into, it is likely that we are going to be more dependant on internally-generated business activity.

Our ICT entrepreneurs must be encouraged to play a greater role.

For more information on SLA Mobile please contact 02890 736780