

SWITCHED ON CEO: DAVID BODY, GLIDEPATH

Newly appointed Glidepath CEO, David Body, is over-seeing an overhaul of the company's technology systems. CRM, VoIP and video conferencing are just some of the projects on the conveyor belt as it moves to keep up with international growth opportunities.



By Simon Young

It's a great time to be part of Glidepath. The company's founder and chairman, Ken Stevens, is New Zealand's export champion. Not to mention the company he founded in 1972 to manufacture airport baggage handling and sorting systems, has factories in Auckland and Dallas, and at the close of 2006 began its third big operation just outside Shanghai.

Increased international travel security concerns have assisted Glidepath to become a world leader in its field, but Body attributes its strength in the market through being on the ground where the action happens. The company has subsidiary businesses in Canada, Latin America and Australia, plus a network of agents, associates and strategic partners in 38 countries worldwide.

Even with its great reach, Glidepath has remained a small, nimble company. It's a company set up for the long term too; with a great deal of its revenue invested in ongoing product development.

As well as designing and manufacturing the hardware that gets cargo and baggage from A to B safely and quickly, Glidepath also creates control software to work with its own and third party hardware.

It's a crucial time for Glidepath, as David Body and Group IT manager Raymond Pritchard prepare for an overhaul of the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) systems. "In every facet of our business we're bringing IT to bear," says Body. "In some areas we're still uncertain, and in other areas we're a long way into it."

The IT overhaul reflects a changing of the guard. Body took on the CEO role in February 2006; Pritchard joined the company in October 2006. New people on board can mean an opportunity for a clean slate. A significant part of the planned IT overhaul is the rationalisation of systems used in the various worldwide offices to reduce inefficiency and double-handling, offering staff, partners and customers a seamless experience.

"We're putting in a stronger foundation of the network," says Pritchard. "The company's growing, and we need to make sure technology's moving with the company."

Right now the company's in the early stages of a two-to-three-year plan. Body and Pritchard emphasise the importance of keeping a manageable pace. "We aren't able to do everything all at once, otherwise we won't achieve anything," says Body. "We've bitten off a couple of real big bits that we want to bed down and see some benefits come through. Once those are

fully implemented, we'll move to the next steps."

Glidepath faces challenges common to many New Zealand exporters. "The spread of our operation is significant for the size of the business," says Body. "We're probably in as many if not more countries than Fonterra, but they've got a massive organisation behind them." Glidepath's team on the other hand, is small, nimble and extremely mobile. "We have people moving all through the Americas, the Middle East, China, Asia, New Zealand and Australia," he says. "To keep those operations hooked in is a major task."

For Body, the need for an IT overhaul is very present each time he visits Glidepath's operations in Dallas. "There's a different setup in Dallas," says Pritchard. "He needs to be able to go there, put his machine on and work. That's one of the things we're working on."

ICT isn't just an operational must, it's also a vital area of competitive advantage in an industry that - like most others today - is very fast-moving. Glidepath has drawn on its own internal resources to keep up with the demands of the marketplace. "We've developed our own design tools to speed up the process significantly," says Body. "The process is relatively standardised, so we've taken the opportunity to develop a series of design tools which enable us to chop a lot of time out of the sale."

Glidepath needs to be connected not just for product development and collaboration, but also to service clients who depend on Glidepath products to work without fail. "Our customers are a risk-averse bunch," says Body. "If their systems don't work, the airports don't work. It gives them significant comfort that we are always at hand, even when we don't have bodies on the ground."

Customers from all around the world connect to Glidepath's 24/7 helpdesk, based in New Zealand. "The helpdesk dials into all our systems around the world and integrates into our systems using some of our proprietary products," says Body. "If something does go wrong, quite often we can identify and resolve that problem in a very short period of time and at low costs to our customers as well."

Two years ago Glidepath moved from Microsoft Exchange server to Lotus Notes running on two Linux servers. Now the company's about to go back to Exchange, primarily because Microsoft Dynamics CRM - a system that integrates with Exchange Server - plays a significant role in Glidepath's future plans.

"The primary reason for moving to CRM is to collect all the data from the other resources of the company, using CRM as the pivotal front end," says Pritchard. Glidepath is working with its service provider to implement Microsoft CRM, and also to look into options for bringing together the various intranet solutions Glidepath uses into a single platform.

The CRM solution also works with Glidepath's accounting system Greentree, currently used both in New Zealand and Dallas. Pritchard says the accounting system will also be rationalised onto just one server, and it's yet to be determined whether that will be in Auckland or Dallas.



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The switch to Microsoft CRM also affects the Glidepath website, currently running on Lotus Domino. "The changeover will be seamless to the end user," says Pritchard, "it's just the backend that will be different."

The well-travelled Glidepath team spends a great deal on cell phone calls and also on air travel. Body says in the future those funds can be diverted into videoconferencing. "It's always good to see the person you're talking to," he says, "because half of it is what they're saying; the other half is how they're saying it and how they look when they're saying it. It just adds another dimension."

Glidepath currently uses Telecom for videoconferencing and Vodafone for its mobile phones. "Whatever works best for each situation," says Pritchard. In the future, the more robust network being developed will be able to provide services such as VoIP telephony for Glidepath staff to communicate.

Being a high-tech company means being innovative and Body says one of the keys to Glidepath's success is its people. "That's not a sustainable advantage, of course," he says, "We've got to keep them! But we've got some very good thinkers."

The way Glidepath is set up makes it easy to leverage an international perspective. "The American market's a great source of ideas and New Zealand is a great place to turn them into something tangible," says Body.

He also believes a key advantage lies in Glidepath's posi-

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tion as a vertically integrated integrator of products. "Many of our competitors will basically use only their own products, and so they end up with a very standardised product set that has degrees of inflexibility around it," he says. "We're more than happy to use anyone's product, and we'll integrate that into an overall design and more than likely do our own software around that as well."

This Kiwi attitude and flexibility helps Glidepath compete against some big names. "Some of our competitors are very big - the likes of Siemens," says Body. "You've got to be flexible to get out of their way if need be."

"The company is growing quickly, both in terms of its revenue base and in terms of its scale globally," says Body. "There will be things we don't do well, because we are in some areas ahead of what we're doing, and in some areas we're lagging in the operational side."

Typically understated, this kiwi CEO adds, "but in general, we're quite happy." **I**



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