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From sand to silicon

The ten-month old IT team at DSOA has worked hard to get the basics of networking and communication right. And now they are all set to move to the next stage of growth supported by a reliable infrastructure.

At Dubai Silicon Oasis Authority (DSOA), IT is serious business.

One of the more recent Freezones to open in Dubai, UAE the 100% government owned authority understands well that information technology can be a double edged sword – one that allows them to provide services to their tenants and gives them the ability to differentiate themselves from similar freezones.

"We always try to align our IT plans with the overall organisation's objectives. It is part of our strategy to work along with the organisation mission and strategy. We always try to make IT a driver for the business, as an enabler for business, which acts as a catalyst to achieve set business targets," says Mahmoud Ewidah, IT infrastructure manager at DSOA.

At just ten months of age, the IT department has put together a data network, built a datacentre and has gotten the first phase of the development active and live.

"We pride ourselves on providing connectivity to our clients to the desktop. The end point stretches to each of the tenant's

business," says Ewidah. In order to tap into convergence, the firm felt the need for an integrated network through which they could offer both data and voice-based services.

"Last year we decided to go for a new telephony system – we released a tender and we invited four different vendors – Avaya, Alcatel-Lucent, Cisco and Nortel. We wanted a multi-tenant telephony system and we considered other things like system capability, redundancy as well as the security levels. We did a full evaluation internally and at the end based on our requirements and the capabilities provided by the system we decided to go with Avaya," says Ewidah.

EMW was appointed by Avaya as the co-ordinating partner at that time and as the most qualified partner to deliver the solution, according to Ewidah. DSOA evaluated EMW itself as a company, as a system integrator. According to Ewidah, it found them to be very capable, with good engineers backed by the right qualifications. In short, they had all the requirements that were necessary to get the system up and running in the right time.

After doing due research on the providers and taking into consideration their own advice, DSOA did not do a pilot due to time constraints, and went for a direct implementation, which spanned the time period between February and April 2007.

All current users, numbering around 500, are connected with the Avaya system. Ewidah states that DSOA plans to expand this to 4000 users in the next two to three years, as the project itself grows.

Setting up from scratch

Apart from the Avaya implementation, DSOA's IT team, which counts 20 members, has spent a large part of 2007 setting up their basic infrastructure. Nortel was chosen for the core and edge switches, while servers and storage are based on a Sun platform. Security is ensured – both internally and externally – by comprehensive usage of virus detection systems, firewalls and IPS, which brings together technologies across vendors such as Trend Micro, ISS, Nortel and Juniper.

"Our current datacentre can host up to 65 racks in terms of space. We are in the



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process of building a second datacentre – on the same campus but in different buildings – which can support around 40 racks. We are constantly planning on expansion and there is no reason not to have more datacentres in the future," says Ewidah.

DSOA plans on using its second datacentre as a disaster recovery site, with plans to open a remote DR in the near future. The firm is also working on re-modelling its existing primary datacentre.

"Currently we are in the process of re-evaluating everything, remodelling everything at the primary datacentre to have Tier III capability at the location. This is happening in parallel to the entire setting up and building of the second datacentre. The second datacentre also will be built as a Tier III datacentre," asserts Ewidah.

"We have a certain committee within IT which does a sort of forecast for our future needs and the projects to be taken up. We have a five year plan and we implement it from year-to-year," Ewidah continues.

"Our IT director is very helpful and fully backs up the IT team. If there is any new

project that we believe will enhance the company's level of support, our type of services or quality of services he will always be there to support us and to convince the upper management and get in place all the necessary approvals and budgets," states Ewidah.

Planning for the future

Part of the projects for the first and second quarter for 2008 involves expanding connectivity – with all its relevant elements of hardware, licences and handsets – to the other buildings in the freezone. Another part of it involves the re-modelling of the existing datacentre and the construction of the new one.

"We have plans to go for standards certification soon. We value this very much within the organisation. As a company we are already ISO 9001 certified. In fact, we

got it just a month back. We have achieved this within just six months. We are now in the process of going for relevant IT certifications and standards. We released recently a tender ISO 27001 and ISO 20000

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which is the ITIL and BS 7799 standards. We are in the process of implementing international standards here within IT. By next year we will be applying these standards in terms of policies, procedures and the best of IT management," asserts Ewidah.

With the basics in place, DSOA plans on expanding and growing by adding not only the latest in technology but also the best in standards and practices. That would count as a strategy for success.