

Horn's Ambitious Vision for Ireland

Ireland should aspire to be in the top five countries in the world in regard to E-infrastructure says Dr Chris Horn, Chairman of Iona Technologies, who sets out his vision for Ireland's communications infrastructure in an interview with Cormac Reid



Dr Christopher J. Horn is a co-founder of IONA technologies (est. 1991) Dublin, Ireland. A graduate of electronics in 1978 he received his PhD in Computer Science in 1983. Dr Horn is a non-executive director of Sepro and CR2, is Chairman of Ireland China Association and Vice Chairman of the Irish Management Institute (IMI) in Dublin. He is also a member of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and e-City working group Chair; a member of IBEC's Information & Communications Technology (ICT) working group. As we sat in the meeting room in the Iona Headquarters in Dublin, Mr Horn gave me some of his thoughts on the run up to the instigation of a new Government.

What is your vision/expectation for Ireland regarding telecommunications?

I believe our country should aspire to be in the top ten or even the top five countries in the world with regards to E-infrastructure as opposed to broadband by 2005, improving the quality of life for its citizens.

Where would you position Ireland in relation to the rest of Europe, USA and Asia?

I would like to start with the USA. They have some good use of E-infrastructure in the major cities like Washington DC yet in some rural areas it is almost non-existent

and they would be in the same situation as we are; it's like cellular coverage, there is some good and some bad. The Bush administration is reviewing the National Infrastructure momentum so I would say in the US we are not too far behind and we are ahead on e-Government. Europe is way down the road especially in countries like Finland and in order to meet them we have a lot of work to do. Yet the leaders have to be Korea and South Korea as they have some terrific infrastructure and expect all business to be achieving 5mbps by 2004. Korea are the world's best - their equivalent of our "Digital Hub" in the Liberties is a whole new city in Korea coined the "Digital Media City" not far from where they hosted the World Cup.

What are your thoughts on a change over from the ODTR to the commission for communications regulation?

The ODTR feels it needs strengthening especially in the areas where they have a carrot and stick approach with the market. They need to improve on the processes regarding dispute to resolutions, so there is a lot more to do.

What do you consider to be the critical success factors that need to be achieved in order to move the country forward?

The first factor is a national broadband optical infrastructure, not DSL, to offices and homes. I believe there should also be a government tender issued requesting the provision to provide optics through all the schools, hospitals and state funded organisations allowing services to be delivered at a high quality flat rate, so this would encourage open competition. Once the framework is in place it would be very easy to roll out. It would be attractive using the combined procurement power of all the government associated business and agencies. This is a working model in Alberta Canada, as the Government there awarded a similar contract in 2000.

What do you look for when choosing a carrier and what are the key strengths necessary?

I suppose all the obvious ones, like financial viability, quality of service, international presence and reach. Cost is important, yet I would not like to be locked in and subjected to expensive tariffs when upgrading. Also why are VPN's so expensive? It is merely configuration of the router boxes.

Do you think ADSL will address the local loop issue?

Over copper it's fine but it is moderate bandwidth at least until 1Mb is readily available. As you know the A stands for Asymmetrical which favours traffic in one direction for downloads, so it is good for browsing. I would not use it for commercial use especially for web servers as it is low output, it is a stepping stone. One must note that the costs are too high



compared to that in the UK, perhaps the reason is they are protecting their existing investment.

Do you think the local authority rings which are going to be developed in the coming year and have received Government funding is a sufficient step to address the digital divide?

Not quite sufficient but good all the same. The key to its success is going to be in the execution of the various Metropolitan Area Networks (MAN's). The local authorities are already responsible for the basic infrastructures like the sewers and the roads, so my concern is that it is perceived to be just another infrastructure and we run into compatibility and interconnect issues with the other networks. It's a great project but not sufficient. Connecting the MAN's via a national backbone is not a big national issue yet it will be terrific when they are connected and there are no interconnect issues.

With many of the main carriers filing for chapter eleven do you think the cull is nearing an end?

I hope so, for the brave there is a terrific

asset base representing an excellent opportunity because there is no doubt that in 10 years it will all be needed.

Is there a product or service that you believe is not being offered in Ireland but should be by the main service providers?

No because we have a chicken and egg scenario: only when we get the broadband right will we be able to avail of all the services like video streaming, directory services; then the medical applications will be able to be transferred to rural areas and teachers will be able to teach remotely.

Do you believe that the Government should appoint an e-Minister?

Yes, this does not have to be a long-term appointment. They could take the Mervin Taylor approach as was done for the Law reform and a specific person for a specific issue. It would need to be cross departmental and the post would reside in the Department of the Taoiseach, as E-infrastructure affects broadcasting, public and private enterprise. I think that this is a huge opportunity for the right politician.