

## A wireless world of opportunity

Omniglobe Networks aims to get the underdeveloped regions of the planet online

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Freelance

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When electrical engineer Brad Stimpson, a recent graduate of Ryerson University, flew to Nigeria two weeks ago, he took a lot of baggage with him.

There were 20 or so boxes carefully packed with parts for a satellite dish, a large router called an OmniCell, an assortment of tools, wire and cables - everything and a lot more you might expect a cable guy to carry in his truck for a house call.

Stimpson linked up with a local Internet service provider and together they set up a hot zone for wireless broadband (or high speed) access in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, Africa's largest country with nearly 130 million people, many of whom are desperately poor.

Among the first customers to be hooked up were a couple of embassies, he said.

It was another step by Stimpson's employer, Omniglobe Networks Inc., a small Pointe Claire firm a little more than a year old, to bring affordable high-speed Internet to some of the 5 billion people in the world who are not online.

Many of them live in poor countries in the developing world, and they risk falling even farther behind economically without the communication tool that has become such a crucial element of the global economy.

It's an enormous undertaking for a rapidly growing company - the employee count is up to 10 in just over a year - but Omniglobe, which began operations in a spare bedroom of founder and chief executive Jason Neale's Beaconsfield home, has already brought broadband access to several remote areas, including two Internet cafes (with eight more on the way) set up in tents for U.S. military personnel in northern Iraq.

They are allowed to use the Net for half an hour each day to exchange emails with friends and family back home. They can also receive pictures of family, pets and get-togethers.

While curing homesickness is an accomplishment that lifts the spirits, Nigeria is desperate for low-cost high-speed Internet access so it can diversify an economy heavily dependent on oil revenues and agricultural products.

Nigeria wants to grab a slice of the offshoring business, which is becoming such an important part of the economy in India.

While a satellite terminal costs \$5,000 for a single customer, Omniglobe is able to reduce that to a range of \$50 to \$300 a month because its system allows the local Internet or telecommunications provider to amortize the cost among many customers.



CREDIT: JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE  
 Omniglobe's chairperson Julian Costley (left) and chief executive Jason Neale discuss the design of their broadband router in their Pointe Claire office.

But affordable is a relative term and \$50 a month for broadband Internet access may be reasonable in Canada, but it is beyond the means of many people in Nigeria, where the per capita income is about \$1,100 a year.

However, it is within the reach of governments, health centres, universities, schools and many smaller and medium-size enterprises.

"It is a quantum leap forward for many people," said Guy Begin, who heads research and development at the company. He is on a one-year sabbatical from the Universite du Quebec a Montreal where he was head of the computer science department.

"We have developed enabling technology to allow people to do business with the rest of the world," he said.

Omniglobe's advantage is its OmniCell which acts as a router - similar to ones found in homes and businesses here. It integrates other technologies including a satellite terminal and small wireless modems that form a network of customers.

It eliminates the need for a costly infrastructure of fibre-optic cable, including lengthy installation, and avoids possible theft by people who would dig it up for resale, wrecking the system.

Omniglobe also provides for voice over Internet protocol, which will be a vast improvement on the often unreliable telephone systems in many parts of the world.

The company can quickly set up an installation - the Abuja operation took three days - serving a high-density network of up to 10,000 customers in a metropolitan area or a low-density network of up to 1,500 customers in a remote village. Both networks can serve customers in a radius of up to 60 kilometres.

The company's deployments also include Cyprus and Kuwait, with future installations planned for Zambia, Niger, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghani-stan, Papua New Guinea and Canada.

We may take it for granted, but Neale said 20 per cent of Canadians - many living in northern areas - do not have broadband Internet access. The company is working on a broadband network soon to be deployed in northern Alberta near the oilsands, where affordability will not be an issue.

But large swaths of Asia, Africa and Latin America remain the main objective for Omniglobe, and a map of the world covered with coloured dots testifies to the company's targets.

The company has pinpointed 22 countries in Africa and several states in India among places that could benefit from its network applications.

An added advantage: Competition so far is minimal. Omniglobe is among the first to establish viable networks to serve markets in the developing world, according to Neale, and demand for its product is huge.

"(It's) so great that it has become harder to meet our contracted deployments," Neale said from the company's spartan office space - its second since leaving Neale's spare bedroom - in a building overlooking Highway 40 and the Fairview Pointe Claire shopping centre.

To look after business development, Omniglobe recently hired Nigel Maund, a veteran of global sales at Nortel and Motorola. He is the company's 10th employee.

"Basically, business development is deciding which opportunities to go after and in what order," Maund said. "We want to establish relationships with new partners."

As explained by Neale, the company establishes a partnership with a local company for each of its projects - usually a telecommunications company or an Internet service provider.

In the case of the Internet cafes in Iraq, Omniglobe handled the project for a Kuwaiti telecommunications company, Eastern

Solutions, which was awarded the contract by the U.S. government. The company - along with the Canadian government and the West Island local development centre in Pointe Claire - has also invested in Omniglobe, which expects sales in the order of \$1.5 million to

\$2 million this year.

One of Maund's immediate concerns is to prepare a tender for a large contract to enhance network coverage by modernizing infrastructure of an Iranian broadcaster. It wants to broadcast into neighbouring countries.

"I can't give you any more details than that," he said.

The fact that Neale, 37, who has a PhD in electronics systems engineering from the University of Essex in Britain and an MBA from the London Business School and Columbia University, was able to conceive a system to integrate several telecommunications technologies is the result of a career in wireless, satellite, software, telecommunications, cellular and Internet technologies.

He is a veteran of satellite company EMS Technologies in Ste. Anne de Bellevue where he led development of three major projects, and played a role in a project to improve Internet over satellite performance in conjunction with Spacebel, Belgium's leading space company, and the University of Salzburg.

At the British Broadcasting Corp. he improved the delivery of the audio and visual portions of reports from journalists posted in more than 90 bureaus around the world.

Neale has found that working on a global scale has some peculiar challenges, especially in dealing with problems that arise from an installation malfunction.

Weekends cover four days of the week - Thursday and Friday in the Middle East and Friday and Saturday in Canada - so it's imperative to have a close and personal relationship with local partners because it's difficult to avoid disrupting private time.

"We need to be able to phone each other on weekends," Neale said.

The company plans a second round of funding in the coming year to finance the growing number of projects on its order book, and Neale is looking for more government participation and more private investment.

The government already plays a role with the company's demonstration labs set up at the Communications Research Centre in Ottawa, a branch of the National Research Council. The company also received funding for research and development from the Industrial Research Assistance Program.

Omniglobe has consulting links to several of the world's leading telecommunications firms, including Alcatel and British Telecom. Board chairperson Julian Costley was the founding chief executive of E\*Trade U.K. and has 30 years of experience in telecommunications.

As his company expands, Neale said he was looking for people experienced in satellite and telecommunications, two areas that are not part of everyone's background.

However, it is important to be resourceful, as Stimpson has found in his two missions to Africa. Prior to going to Abuja, he spent nearly two weeks in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

"If you don't have the right screwdriver, you can't just go to the local Reno-Depot for one," said Stimpson, 23, who joined the company a few months ago as an intern.

Hence the items packed in the 20 boxes for Abuja. He even takes a pair of big socks with him.

"There were insects in the room of the small hotel in Freetown, including a grasshopper as big as your fist," he said. "I didn't want them getting on my feet."

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