

"If you build a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to your door." After pondering that adage, executives at Open Software Associates (OSA) knew that the future of their Melbourne company was to go global.

OSA started in 1990 when a group of former Hewlett Packard staff pooled their resources to form their own company. Their 'family' culture remains strong despite their early focus on the global market.

While the company's product development takes place in the Melbourne office, there are sales and service offices in Sydney, Germany (Munich and Frankfurt), the United States (New York, Nashua, Dallas, Atlanta, Seattle and San Jose) and soon the UK and Switzerland.

"We can build a better mousetrap and create a world-leading product from Australia," says the company's Asia Pacific general manager, Andrew Hewitt. Although the company's founders considered the idea of moving offshore, in the end they decided to stay in Australia and use it as a base to strengthen their global operations.

The decision to concentrate development efforts in Melbourne has paid off. OSA has plenty of quality skilled software developers and has taken advantage of Australia's competitive labour costs, says Hewitt. As a result, there is no reason to move the company overseas.

The company's management team agreed that it was possible to build world-leading technologies in Australia and to grow a company from an Australian base

"International success doesn't mean jettisoning your Australian heritage," Hewitt says. However, the company needed to strengthen its global sales to fund ongoing research and development.

The executive board appreciated that OSA would need extra capital to fuel fast international growth. In February 2000, OSA raised \$7.2 million from a consortium of Australian investors. In December that year, OSA raised another \$18.4 million from a consortium of international companies.

Siemens Business Services (SBS), an arm of the giant Siemens corporation, was lead investor. Dr Detlef Pohl, SBS's investment manager, believes OSA has a clear vision and a strong business plan. "We see [OSA's] patented technology as a key enabler for our e-business customers. The logic of a strategic alliance was irresistible."

OSA's success is based around the netDeploy Global software program, which built on the company's earlier growth from products such as OpenUI (developed in 1991, it was the first cross-platform thin client development product), and netDeploy (first released in 1995, it was the world's first Internet-enabled software deployment product.)

netDeploy Global provides software management for large organisations with hundreds or thousands of networked terminals. At its heart is OSA's patented SmartPull technology that dramatically reduces download times and bandwidth usage because it only transfers files changed since the last update.

All components are built around the SmartPull technology and have been developed to international standards. netDeploy Global builds on Microsoft Windows 2000 services to permit global software management. The Administrator component of netDeploy Global, for example, is a standard Microsoft Management Console snap-in. netDeploy Global is also integrated with Microsoft's Active Directory technology, and extends and enhances Microsoft Systems Management Server

Peter Houston, group product manager for Active Directory, said Microsoft was pleased that OSA was enabling customers to use Windows 2000 Server and Active Directory. It served as a 'focal point' for managing users, applications and devices across a variety of platforms, networks and operating systems.



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OSA has effectively aligned itself with the world's most powerful software company and will benefit from the association. To maintain the relationship, OSA has a vice president based at Microsoft's US headquarters. OSA also invests heavily in research and development to maintain the technology. More than 50 of the 70 people based in the Melbourne headquarters work in R&D.

Hewitt believes that OSA's staff represents its biggest asset.

"We have a more highly qualified R&D team than any company anywhere in the world." OSA is notable among technology companies because of its almost zero staff turnover. Most recruits arrive as recent graduates and stay because of the stimulating environment, the 'family' culture and the benefits.

OSA aggressively seeks out the best people. "We only hire the top 10 per cent of graduates," Hewitt said. "We're able to attract the best candidates, whereas American companies often struggle to get the best people."

Three in four members of the R&D team have joined OSA through the company's graduate recruitment program.

The bulk of OSA's overseas staff are also hired through the company's graduate recruitment program. OSA is one of the few companies to offer overseas graduates who have studied in Australia sponsorship with working visas. As of mid 2001, OSA was sponsoring nine people. The company also helps overseas students with applications for permanent residency.

OSA offers prizes for students at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Monash University and the University of Melbourne. It regularly sends staff to lecture at universities to give students an industry perspective. When recruiting, OSA looks for graduates who are not just strong academically.

"We value graduates who have undertaken project work and some extra-curricula activity. From a skills base, knowledge of Internet Protocol and Java are particularly sought in new hires," Hewitt said.

The background of OSA's R&D team is diverse. Staff come from countries such as India, Singapore, Chile, Italy, Malaysia and Hong Kong. One of the things OSA looks for when hiring new research staff is an ability to speak a second language. OSA is an attractive place to work because programmers know they are at the leading edge in terms of developing technology. Because of the company's 'family' origins, staff take time out to mingle socially with co-workers.

Postings to the company's international offices are another benefit. As of mid 2001, four former Melbourne staff were based in Germany, with another three in the US. New employees also receive an allocation of shares when they join, and the availability increases as people gain seniority. "It's part of the family focus of the company," Hewitt said.

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