

OPS Group chooses Dubai

Aberdeen-based manpower agency OPS Group is celebrating the first birthday of its first overseas venture, the opening of an office in the Dubai Airport Free Zone, in the UAE.

It's not a location you often see chosen for your first international operations, but managing director Steve Pryor and his board were looking for an accessible springboard base to service their increasingly global operations.

"In recent years, the overseas element of our recruitment and training operations has grown to around 70% of our total workload, with contracts in the Far East, the Middle East and West Africa," he explains.

"We decided Dubai covered pretty much all our options, and went out on a couple of private fact-finding missions to check out the facilities at first hand."

The OPS Group, founded in 1988, was working to an ambitious five-year plan to quadruple turnover from £5m pa in 2005 to around £20m by the end of the decade, and adding overseas operations were viewed as critical to achieving that goal. "If we didn't make the right move, we felt we seriously risked being left behind," recalls Steve.

But having identified Dubai as a prime location, the hard work was about to begin. DAFZA (the Dubai Airport Free Zone Authority) was marketing its impressive facilities very aggressively, but with hefty up front commitments – two years' rental in advance and a local shareholder having to be nominated.

At which point, OPS Group decided it made sense to look at alternative approaches, and called on the assistance of Scottish Enterprise Grampian international business development executive Claire Rannou.

Working with the OPS board, Scottish Enterprise brokered a number of information-sharing meetings with other Scottish businesses based in Dubai to look at all the procedural implications, and the OPS Group eventually settled for renting fully-serviced, expandable premises from the Regus Group.

"This approach meant we still had an airport location, which in the manpower business is very important, but with no need to source local office personnel support, which can be very time-consuming," explains Steve Pryor.

"I think it would be fair to say that we were already committed to going out to Dubai, but Scottish Enterprise's expertise definitely led us towards finding the most practical – and ultimately fairly painless - means of market entry."

One year on, and the new operation is already "washing its face", with an early contract in Qatar signalling a significant Middle East breakthrough. But other benefits have also accrued to the group as a whole, notes Steve.

"We realised the importance early on of good communications between our two offices, so we made a major investment in state-of-the-art communication terminal services to keep all our executives in regular contact wherever they are working on a global basis," he observes.

“We also wanted to ensure we didn’t duplicate too many administration functions, so we actually up-manned our Aberdeen office to take on board financial and other key ‘head office’ functions.”

The OPS Group comprises four specialist companies, each with its own dedicated role in international manpower resourcing. Coiltec provides technical personnel on daily hire or contract to the major oil service companies, while sister company OPS provides the same range of services directly to international oilfield operators.

TecSupport delivers the group’s training functions, while Maslow Recruitment (named after influential 1960’s psychologist Abraham Maslow) concentrates on effecting permanent recruitment solutions.

This holistic approach, stresses Steve, has taken some years to evolve, and ensures individual companies within the group are ideally placed to match employees or contract personnel with their clients’ precise requirements.

Since opening in Dubai, the OPS Group could hardly be said to have been resting on its laurels. The group now has the distinction of being one of the few manpower agencies to have achieved full quality accreditation to ISO 9001, and an innovative and robust competency assessment and monitoring system has been introduced.

Although the OPS Group is well established and resourced, Steve Pryor is nonetheless quick to acknowledge the importance of the tailored export support it received at a critical point in the group’s development – “overall, I would simply describe Scottish Enterprise’s assistance as ‘invaluable’”, he says simply.

For more details on the OPS Group, visit www.opsgrp.com

Article drafted by John Malcolm of JDM Marketing, re-published with the permission of Business Gateway International - Aberdeen City and Shire