

# Making technology work for the Highlands

Information technology is often the source of many a migraine for any business operating in today's global marketplace. But while companies and organisations may find it difficult living with IT, they certainly can't live without it!

Helping businesses throughout the UK – and beyond – negotiate the IT minefield is the mission of Inverness-based IT consultants, Avendris.

"It can be difficult getting a straight answer from an IT supplier," managing director Mike Robb told *Executive*, "they have their own agendas and pet technologies. And they often speak in language business doesn't understand."

Avendris doesn't sell technology but provides independent IT advice and trouble shooting to a wide range of businesses including high growth SMEs (small or medium enterprises) and third sector organisations.

"We're like IT doctors – we give you a health check, work out what's wrong and what you should do about it. We understand new technology very well but we explain it in a language that senior business people – a finance or operations director – will understand."

"We give companies a road map of how to develop their systems to get where they want to be in the next two or three years."

A typical client is an established business that is rapidly adding new customers products and services or is expanding through acquisition or merger.

"Their business is growing fast but they are finding their existing IT is holding them back," explained Mike.

"They need to know what the real problems are and what to do about them; which IT supplier to go to; whether to keep their IT in-house or hosted; do they need to replace some of their applications and if so with what sort of system?"

"From talking to our customers, we've found three main reasons they come to us: We know what we are talking about when it comes to IT; they trust us because we're independent; and they like the fact that we explain what they need in a language they understand and can act on."

Originally set up in Edinburgh in 2002, Avendris opened an office in Inverness two years ago and now has clients all over the UK, as well as working further afield in Europe and the United States.

It is the company's innovative, low-cost business model, originally adopted from the west coast of America, that has allowed it to flourish both locally and beyond.

"We came across the idea whilst working with some of the companies

involved in film production in Hollywood; they call it the Studio Model."

Rather than having one central office staffed by a large team of employees – with all the fixed costs involved – Avendris operates as a small core team with a network of associates around Scotland and the UK. If any face-to-face meetings are required, office space can be booked at the InBusiness Centre on Longman Drive.

For clients, the benefits are two-fold – not only does it keep consultancy fees down, it also means that support is never too far away wherever you are in the country.

"Just like the film studios, we can bring together an experienced project team with a wide range of skills when we need to. It gives us an in-depth knowledge pool from which to draw and a very focused business model. We're not distracted by the same issues you would have with managing a permanent team in an office."

Among its Highland clients, Avendris can count Eden Court, Albyn Housing and Loch Fyne Oysters but the company also advises businesses in emerging sectors including the electronics and bio technology industries. The renewables sector is also generating a lot of interest.

"These are areas where there is a lot of investment focus just now and they want to get their IT systems lined up to support their growth."

In the Highlands, Mike is keen to support as much as possible the distinct entrepreneurial culture in the region.

"There are lot of fast growing businesses with great products and big ambitions. They have a global outlook and they want to access world class advice."

"I'm determined to bring that sense of world class advice about technology – whether that's exploiting social media for marketing, selling online, or the latest thinking about manufacturing systems – and putting it in a Highland context."

"There are also some technologies that are particularly relevant to business in the Highlands and that can do a lot to help growth. For example, mobile computing and teleworking, where people can work on the move or from home and don't have to be constrained by an office. Because of the distances in the Highlands this could open all kinds of opportunities. It's very cost effective because you don't have to physically be in an office to do your job, or drive to one."

"The new breed of Cloud Computing services are also very relevant to the Highlands, providing small businesses with access to powerful IT systems and applications over the internet without needing to have racks of costly servers and all the rest in your office. You use these services on a 'pay as you go' basis which is much more cost-effective as your business grows."

"And you don't have to worry about how long an engineer will take to reach you to fix that failed disk drive."

However, Mike stressed that investment in broadband services in the area is vital to allow Highland businesses to exploit these latest technologies and fulfil their business potential.

"Investing in high speed broadband infrastructure is absolutely key to economic development in the Highlands. But it will need government action to deliver it; the telcos won't do it by themselves."

Despite the recession, Avendris has grown significantly in the past year.

Mike puts that success down to the company's commitment to its customers whether they are growing or consolidating their IT requirements.

"A lot of our business comes from word of mouth so during the difficult times in 2009, we made sure we looked after our core clients. We also kept our research and market knowledge up to date. Over the last year, that's really paid off. We've gained 10 new clients, including two in the Highlands, as well as a lot of repeat business."

"We must be doing something right!"

## Mike Robb

Mike Robb is the founder Director of Avendris, which he set up in 2002. With more than 25 years of IT system development, delivery and change management experience, he has worked at senior levels - as a technology provider. Mike has particular expertise in IT Strategy and the application of new and emerging technologies



## John Dowell

John is one of the most experienced consultants in the Avendris network, working with Mike Robb since 1993. With an original background in software development, John now works in the difficult areas where technology and business performance converge.



## Dianne Haley

Dianne Haley is an experienced interim director with strong commercial, financial and strategic experience and a proven track record of successful programme delivery. She has particular expertise in change management, mergers and acquisitions, post merger integrations and partnership agreements.



## Mike McGinn

A practical, methods-oriented change programme manager and director with wide and successful experience in the management of complex business and IT change programmes. A hands-on problem solver with a high rate of achievement and an appetite for new challenges.



## Robert Leiser

Robert has over 20 years' experience of designing and managing IT-driven change programmes and programme management regimes. Robert has developed complementary skills such as facilitation, cost-benefit analysis, organisational design, process re-engineering and simulation.



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