

Building a Unique Lab IT Solution Provider – a Westbourne Story

Q&A with Westbourne Founder and CEO, John O’Sullivan

When and why did you launch Westbourne?

“I founded Westbourne in 1994. At the time, I was working as a customer service engineer for a very successful and brilliant American multinational called Digital Equipment Corporation, affectionately known as DEC. It no longer exists after being bought by Compaq, and Compaq was then bought by Hewlett-Packard. But, at the time, I was DEC's customer representative and field engineer for Munster.

“Part of my role was to attend the management meetings of DEC customers. Those business leaders were telling me they were looking for more by way of a bespoke rather than a corporate style of service.

“Customers were also getting pushed into a service desk solution that they weren't used to and, at that time, didn't want. I was also advocating at the time that it was a bad idea, as it introduced what I called a delay loop. Customers were used to being able to call John O'Sullivan or another engineer they were familiar with, but now they were being forced to talk to a service desk first. The customers felt they were being pushed away.

“Today, of course, service desks are the norm, and they offer a lot of benefits. But the way the concept was being implemented back in the 1990s didn't sit well with customers.

“Therefore, the gap I saw in the market was to provide a more personalised, bespoke service. My intention was to always put the customer first, where you fix the problem as a priority. And you do it in a friendly and efficient way. That was our motto back then, and it still exists today. We are still very much customer-focused.

“This was a period when DEC was going through tough times, so they offered staff redundancy. I accepted and used that payment to set up Westbourne. I approached my customers with what I wanted to offer, and a lot of them said yes, so that was the start of Westbourne.”

When did you hire your first employee?

“That's a good story, as it represents an important part of how we work. We create the conditions and opportunities for our employees to advance their careers and reach their potential, and that started with our very first recruit.

“In the initial years of operation, we worked with contractors to deliver services to clients, but by 1997, it was clear we needed to hire our first employee. The first employee worked with some of our biggest clients and was eventually recruited by one of them, where he continues to work to this day. It's an employee success story that I am very proud of, and one that has been replicated many times over the years.”

Westbourne is known today as a pharmaceutical IT solution provider. When did you start working with pharmaceutical industry clients?

“We've worked with pharmaceutical industry clients of varying sizes from the earliest days of Westbourne, but the solutions we offer have evolved. In the early days, we were very much focused on hardware sales and service – selling PCs, servers, networking, along with break-fix contracts.

“Then, around 2002, we started to transition more into on-site support for pharmaceutical industry customers. We began specialising in providing on-site IT support in laboratories and, in 2010, won our first service desk contract with a pharmaceutical company. This evolved into a 24/7 service desk contract, and we started growing from there, winning new contracts and expanding our team.”

Why did you decide to transition into Lab IT support?

“There were a number of indicators, but one particular meeting with a global pharma company springs to mind. I asked about the challenges they were facing. They explained that their IT department didn't want to cross the door into the laboratory. The tech was different, the requirements were different, so they didn't want to be involved.

“I saw an opportunity to focus on lab IT to fill the gap between standard IT departments and the requirements of pharma labs. This was like my lightbulb moment.

“That was around 2014 when we were already well-established as a provider of service desk solutions to the pharmaceutical industry. I approached our key clients to say we would also love to work with them on the lab IT side. It all started from there, and it has grown ever since.

“Lab IT is now our specialist area, the main focus of our business, and the key point of difference for Westbourne in the market.”

Westbourne is based in Ireland but also has an office in New Zealand. When did you open the New Zealand office, and what was the thinking behind that strategy?

“We opened the New Zealand office in 2012 when we won our first 24/7 service desk contract with a multinational life sciences sector company. We opened the New Zealand office so that we could have a team of skilled people working whenever everyone in Ireland is in bed. We call it follow-the-sun capabilities.

“New Zealand was the ideal place to set up operations as they are more or less 12 hours different from us. They speak English and are very switched-on technology-wise. There is also a great talent pool in New Zealand, so it was the ideal location.”

You also have people working in locations other than Ireland and New Zealand. How far does Westbourne's international footprint spread?

“Yes, we have people in Ireland and in New Zealand, as well as dedicated full-time staff in California in the US. We also have people in Canada and the UK, so we are a truly global operation. We can provide our niche service desk and lab IT services 24/7 to customers anywhere in the world.

“We also have excellent recruitment capabilities with well-defined and structured recruitment processes. This enables us to successfully place skilled staff wherever our customers need them.

“And we are a very multinational team. We have around 75 people on our team with about 10 different nationalities represented. Many of our staff also speak more than one language, enhancing both the diversity of our company and the services we provide to customers.”

What are the factors that make Westbourne stand out from the competition?

“We have already touched on some of the key points. The fact we can provide both regular IT service desk solutions and specialist lab IT solutions. Our 24/7 capabilities are another differentiator, as is our industry-leading recruitment capabilities.

“We can also offer these solutions to pharmaceutical companies of any size, including smaller lab operations with very limited internal IT resources.

“Our recruitment focus also sets us apart. It is relatively easy to get IT people, but it is difficult to get IT people to be proficient in the scientific areas that are needed in pharma labs. So, we go the other way, and we are very good at it – recruiting scientific

people with an interest in IT and then providing training to upskill their IT capabilities. This gives us technical resources with a skillset range that is unique and ideally suited to delivering lab IT services.”

Staying with recruitment – why should a potential candidate consider applying for a role in Westbourne IT?

“We've mentioned already our focus on helping our people progress their careers. We have excellent support structures in place for this purpose, with training being a big factor.

“We put a big emphasis on training, so we have a substantial training budget. We put a lot of effort into training people in GxP, for example, to enhance the services we deliver to our clients and to allow our people to progress their careers.

“This is one of the reasons we have a very good retention track record. We operate in a competitive space in terms of recruitment, so I am proud of the fact that people want to continue working with us and progressing their careers.

“Members of our team also get to travel to client sites around the world, and they are exposed to cutting-edge, highly innovative, and interesting technologies.

“Then there is our role in the pharmaceutical industry. This is important to me personally, and I think it is important to a lot of our staff, too, if not all of them. The solutions we provide enable and support pharmaceutical companies to develop and manufacture drugs and other treatments that save lives and transform health outcomes.

“We work with great companies producing great products that make a real difference, and that is very rewarding.”

Final question: What is your view on the industry today and where it is going?

“My sense is there is a huge opportunity in the life sciences sector to provide managed services and lab IT services based on SLAs and a model that works, that is proven. Companies can, in confidence, hand over the running of their IT and know that we will deliver.

“Given the way the sector is evolving, I see that as an opportunity for both Westbourne and our clients. The skills we have and the way we recruit and train our team mean we can bring a diverse range of skills to every project and contract that we work on. We also bring expertise gained over many years working with many different life sciences sector

companies. That is the sort of skills and experience that is difficult, if not impossible, to recruit. But you get it from day one by working with us at Westbourne.

“Plus, you get the flexibility of being able to scale up or down as required. That is very unique, beneficial, and value-adding.

It's an exciting future ahead, and I'm excited to continue working with our fantastic team and great clients.”