

The abundance of infrastructure projects in the Middle East creates opportunities across the construction industry, and construction software is a vital tool to ensure the smooth running of such vast operations, says Nigel Cope, co-founder of COINS

Supporting construction with software

How does your software assist construction projects?

The COINS platform provides an integrated software solution to support the whole lifecycle of a construction project. The key processes are: Estimating and budgeting (although many customers use other standalone tools for this aspect of their work, and we simply import and manipulate the bill of quantities); procurement (the process by which suppliers are selected and orders placed); cost control (managing labour, materials, plant, subcontract and prelims costs against budget); commercial (managing the process of applications to the client, variations and subcontract liabilities); project (managing meeting, documents, submittals, transmittals, etc).

Other key areas include human resource management, automated time and attendance, and plant or equipment management. Where feasible we deploy technologies such as mobile, biometrics and radio-frequency identification (RFID) to automate data collection and validation, to eliminate errors and duplication of effort.

How was the Middle East identified as a potential area for growth?

We've had customers working in the region for many years, such as Bachy Soletanche, Kier Construction, Laing O'Rourke and Sisk. These are all companies that have been using COINS in other regions for 15 to 20 years. Our customers are generally very proficient in configuring the COINS platform for specific requirements, so we had not had a great deal of involvement directly in their Middle East operations.

In late 2007 we decided to look more closely at the Middle East market, due to the phenomenal amount of construction that was taking place at that time and with a number of people who had previous experience of COINS taking employment in the



region. We had not anticipated the recession, but some of the survivors definitely wanted to seize the opportunity to make themselves more efficient and more effective, so there continued to be a great deal of interest in the COINS platform beyond 2008.

You reached double-digit growth in your second year, what do you think is the key to this success?

The double-digit growth was principally down to us signing agreements with new customers in the Middle East, the most notable being Habtoor Leighton Group (HLG), one of the leading diversified international contractors in the MENA region. HLG is now using the COINS platform for construction risk management (CRM), procurement, plant, finance and commercials across around 70 projects within 20 separate legal entities throughout the Middle East.

Did you encounter any difficulties setting up in the region?

Setting up in the region was relatively straightforward, although there is a degree of bureaucracy and red tape. For compliance reasons we decided to establish a free zone business (100 percent owned by our UK Group) with an onshore entity as a branch office of the free zone business, where we deliver our professional services from. Some of the working practices encountered in the Middle East seem a little old-fashioned compared with Western best practice, for example multiple levels of approval for purchases, but the COINS platform is flexible enough to handle these. We did have to do some product localisation to handle things like advance payments and post-dated cheques, but this was relatively straightforward.

We have a good mix of customers in Dubai. Around one third are British, but we have French and US-owned businesses, as well as a growing number of local companies.



How is moving into the Middle East different to working in other countries around the world?

The COINS platform is being used in more than 40 countries around the globe, and of course this helped in moving into the Middle East because it meant we already had a number of local references. But the Middle East does have its own challenges, principally those around working practices being what many people would see as overly bureaucratic, or more complex than necessary.

Last year COINS won the Queen's Award for International Trade. Do you have any plans to move into other countries in the region other than Dubai?

We are working with customers all over the region, including Baku in Azerbaijan and Istanbul in Turkey. We are starting to achieve 'critical mass' with a growing customer base in Qatar, so it is inevitable that we will open an office there in due course. Trading with customers in Qatar from our UAE base means that payments are subject to withholding tax, so establishing an office in Qatar would achieve an immediate saving of around 10 percent of revenues.

What construction projects used COINS software in Dubai?

Al Naboodah Laing O'Rourke used the COINS

NIGEL COPE



Nigel was co-founder of COINS in 1986 with Chairman, Larry Sullivan. As CEO of Emerging Markets, he leads the Middle East, Australia, and Asia Pacific areas of COINS. Nigel is often the driving force behind new solutions and ventures, such as the Built Environment Solutions Team (BEST) and COINS Electronic Trading Community (COINS-etc). Nigel is a well-respected figure in Construction IT. He has been a member of the Management Board of Construct IT for Business since 2003, and is a member of the IT & Controls Committee at CIBSE.

platform to support the engineering, procurement and construction of the third terminal substructure at Dubai Airport, with a peak workforce of 10,000. The complete structure is approximately one kilometre long and 100 metres wide.

HLG is using the COINS platform on its various projects in Dubai, including the construction of Al Habtoor City, which stands on the site of one of Dubai's oldest hotels, the Metropolitan on Sheikh Zayed Road. We recently started a project with developer Meydan Sobha and its delivery partner MS Construction to introduce the COINS platform to manage the development, construction, sales and customer care at Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum City - District One, which has 47 million square feet of low-density real estate, surrounded by over 600 acres of natural surroundings.

Elsewhere in the region, the COINS platform is used by Kier Construction working in partnership with the Saudi Comedat Company Limited (SCCL), to develop the Al Jalamid phosphate deposit on behalf of Ma'aden, the Saudi Arabian state owned Mining and Mineral holding company.

Our initial work has been with contractors that work on civil engineering and commercial construction projects, but we are now moving into the residential development arena as well.

COINS was involved in opening an education centre for children with learning disabilities in Dubai. How important is it for business to connect with the local community?

The COINS Foundation is part of what we do, not just an afterthought. So when we formed the business in UAE, it was inevitable that we would be seeking for opportunities to 'put something back' into the local community. Hence the creation of the Widad Center in Al Satwa, Dubai. It is a truly unique environment committed to the principles of social inclusion and environmental responsibility, all working towards changing education in Dubai for the betterment of society where all children are included, including those with learning difficulties.

At COINS, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not simply a tick in the credibility box; we see it as our duty to create value in the local communities in which our businesses operate. We were all born into a comparatively privileged position, and it's right and proper that we should do something to make a difference for those less fortunate.

The reaction of our customers and the support they offer has been amazing. For example one of my good friends and customer, an Emirati, has provided his services as local sponsor for Widad Center free of charge, another recently organised the donation of two brand new gas cookers. So we are now at the point where the children at Widad Center can fulfil the corporate cookie orders we have secured from customers and contacts, as part of Widad Center's journey towards financial independence and sustainability.

Further information

www.coins-global.com