

Technology: DataArt shares UK expansion plans

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By Matthew Parsons

Custom software development firm DataArt is promoting its offer in the UK, with an eye on growth. Matthew Parsons reports

Back in 2004, software technology company DataArt was helping to develop Nexgen - an OTA that, at the time, was tipped to become as large as Expedia, or Lastminute. Unfortunately, Nexgen fell foul of a shortage of funding, but DataArt capitalised on that rapid “scaling” experience, and then entered the travel industry, which to this date remains one of its specialites, alongside its work in the finance and healthcare sectors, among others.

As a result, says Charlotte Lamp Davies, vice-president, travel and hospitality, Europe, the company knows all about scale, and the need to expand rapidly, when it comes to travel websites. With many clients in the US and the rest of Europe, it’s now targeting the UK, and last year brought Lamp Davies in to help that growth.

She has spent the past year getting to know the business, having come from a publishing background. She was co-founder of Travolution (fellow co-founder Simon Ferguson now similarly works in technology, and is currently UK and Ireland managing director at Travelport), and overall spent 15 years at Reed Business Information.

Now her mission is to spread the word about DataArt - and what she calls its “elastic IT” message.

DataArt has headquarters in New York, Zurich and London, but the bulk of its 900 staff resides in Russia (with 300 developers in

Voronezh), while it has R&D centres in Kharkiv and Kherson in Ukraine.

It's now in a "major expansion phase", says Lamp Davies. It has worked with VisitBritain (on mobile technology); Collette Vacations (re-engineering its site, booking engine and online marketing tools); Hotelbeds.com; Digital Visitor (for cruiseminded) and Miki Travel (booking systems). It has also built mobile apps for Betfair and Ocado.

"We now want to work more with travel agencies, of a significant size," says Lamp Davies, "and ones that have a history and legacy, where a re-engineering is needed. We have built agencies from scratch."

Bigger things

DataArt, which is in the same space as developer CodeGen (which powers Virgin Holidays' booking technology) is also looking to work with larger OTAs, hotel groups and any technology companies in travel.

Lamp Davies claims the advantage with DataArt is that it can help build up companies quickly. "In 1997, we were building the biggest online travel agency. It didn't take off, but it showed that we could scale, and that we could react."

Currently, the company builds booking engines that can handle up to 45 million bookings per year.

Its developers, in Russia and Ukraine, offer cost savings compared with developing in the US or UK, yet Lamp Davies points out that DataArt is about more than just "off-shoring".

"In Russia and Ukraine, there's a real pool of talent. They understand how to do business with the West, and the minimal time difference helps.

"Many technology companies build a system, get paid and go. But we often get called back. We want to be a partner; we can

upscale, or downscale, and we work well with in-house teams. We'd like to work more with companies like Comtec. We bring products to market quickly."

DataArt also offers a consultancy service, and has worked with the likes of Online Travel Training in this capacity.

Engaging the audience

It might seem a tough job, promoting a company that offers bespoke building - and one that doesn't own a single product itself.

Yet Lamp Davies is drawing on her publishing background: the DataArt brand is being exposed via Question Time sessions, where the audience is "peer to peer".

"The calibre of the audience matches that of the speakers," Lamp Davies explains.

"The audience is not looking up to the panel - they're looking at them."

Hackathons, where developers are tasked with creating apps within a short period of time - sometimes hours - also feature. "We let developers become specialists, they get engaged", she says. "In a recent hackathon, our developers created an app called fitour that allows travellers to combine fitness and tourism. You need to excite your developers."

For her own role, Lamp Davies is based in the London office (where there are 25 people - mostly account managers), but spends a lot of time flying, often visiting potential clients: "I talk to a lot of chief technical officers, or operations officers. I bring someone on site because it's important for developers to know what we're doing."

More than 15 years on from the dot-com crash, it seems DataArt now pictures itself as more than ready to make an impact on the UK sector.