

FROM TELCO TO TECHNO

By Simon Warburton

GIBTELECOM
EVOLVES

You would be forgiven for thinking a telecoms company was mainly based around a traditional triple structure of phones, broadband and mobile, but today's communication environment now encompasses myriad disciplines requiring a small army of people to deliver them.

Of course, Gibtelecom provides those phones, broadband and mobile services, but it also features a portfolio of business elements embracing cloud solutions, data storage, Office 365 backup and managed security among countless other options. Gibtelecom has effectively become an IT company with a telecommunications background - one which numbers Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Cloudflare among its competitors - to demonstrate that for a relatively small operation, it punches above its weight.

Gibtelecom is split into three commercial verticals; carrier, consumer and marketing as well as the business unit; the latter function falling under the remit of Director Enterprise, Danny Hook.

"I run the business unit within Gibtelecom which is responsible for everything related to businesses—whether it's the largest multinational we serve or the smallest high street shop, including charities and so forth," he said. "Within my vertical, I also manage two subdivisions: one led by Shaun Zammitt, Head of Business Development, who oversees anything new—be it local, international, new products, or new territories—and the other led by Lianne Garcia, Head of Enterprise Services."

"And within that part of the team, we have a group of dedicated sales and account managers."

Personal account manager

The latter is important to Gibtelecom; it may well have a lot of bells and whistles in technology, but personal and human interaction still form a key pillar of its business approach as Ms Garcia explained. *"Any business taking a significant amount*



Danny Hook, Director of Enterprise



Lianne Garcia, Head of Enterprise Services

of services will have one person that they contact," she said. "We're trying to move towards every business having their own personal account manager who they can consult for whatever they require, for sales or other business needs."

That structure allows business customers to have a Gibtelecom point of contact 24/7, 365 days a year.

"Now we're looking at how we can use mobile technology to solve problems for customers," added Ms Garcia. "So for example, we had a customer at the Port who needed to scan secure passport documents. There was no fixed internet connection there, so as people got off a boat or ship, but couldn't rely on the public internet because of the nature of the documents they were scanning, we came up with a fixed IP SIM card solution where they could use a VPN on their tablet to encrypt that data, to make sure it was all processed securely."

"So, it was no longer just a SIM card, it was a tool which helped them carry out their business. The same as we worked with some utility providers to provide them with some NB-IoT SIM cards, which they use for metering, so they don't have to send people physically to check on each of the meters. They can now obtain the telemetry readings using SIM cards, so it doesn't require the infrastructure rollouts that we've had to rely on in the past. This saves time and greatly improves the efficiency of our customers' businesses."

"We provide a secure data backup on our local cloud environment so that you can have that guaranteed. On a bigger scale, we work for some of the gaming companies who have multi-jurisdiction operations and have their core business model, but obviously the IT requirements for that are quite substantial and we've managed infrastructure rollouts for them across the globe. We've moved them into Curaçao, Brazil, Dublin, Malta, end to end. So we've sourced the IT kept for them, procured it, financed it, shipped it over to the location, set up the data

centre in that country, made sure it has the secure connectivity that's suitable for them. We have sent our people over to rack it, stack it and configure their cloud environments and literally just handed the clients the keys, ready for them to use."

Tech-hungry companies in Gibraltar

Keeping the technological lights on in Gibraltar is crucial as tech-hungry companies, such as crypto and gaming, need this reliability. These days, IT infrastructure is rarely located on a company's premises; it is cloud-based so secure internet connectivity is key and reliable tech is non negotiable.

And it's not just the big players either; many shops on Main Street will either be digitalised or in the process of becoming so, using tools such as Microsoft 365 and Zoom, whose implementation was vastly accelerated because of the pandemic.

"Even the small shop on Main Street is now

a digital business," noted Ms Garcia. "Some of the companies that we were selling enterprise solutions for, also premium broadband and more sophisticated voice solutions, have expanded the solutions which their business needs. A take away, for example. Many of their orders are coming in on phone apps and they cannot run this on a residential grade connection anymore; they need that 24-7 support - the robustness of a business connection because that's their bread and butter now. We have helped many of these businesses to adapt as their businesses have grown."

That reliance on technology however, means if a broadband or Wi-Fi goes down, payments can't be made. "If this happens, this small business with two employees is stopped for a day when they have an issue," said Ms Garcia.

No longer just plug-in phones

"Just because you're small, doesn't mean you don't need to be thinking about cyber risk; there are a lot of small businesses that get hit by cyber-attacks. Maybe you're a small office, but you're running a helpline, or a claims line if you're an insurer, or an appointment line if you are a clinic. Gibtelecom does not just offer the phone now, but the analytics as well so that clients can look at call statistics and trends, monitor queues and use this data to optimise their business processes.

As a power-critical business – and given there is the occasional power cut in Gibraltar – Gibtelecom took the decision some time ago to become autonomous by fitting generators where it can to every site it operates.

"Every single site has enough battery power to last two hours on its own and then it has an additional generator as well, so it takes over before the batteries run out," said Hook.

Encouraging businesses to deliver feedback is an important cog in Gibtelecom's wheel; the company is very much in favour of the process being two-way through account managers, but also using customer surveys to assess needs on the Rock.

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That will inevitably mean some legacy products evolve or are replaced, with for example, all old telephony products running on copper being swapped out for fibre.

Business grade broadband connection

There may have been a time when using telecoms products were viewed as necessary but not top of mind for businesses, but given the inexorable march of progress – not to mention the rise of cyber crime – technology is now assuming primary status in the boardroom.

“A classic example is we received a call from a restaurant once in our Technical Assistance Centre, which had a residential grade broadband connection within the premises,” said Hook. “And they realised that they were having difficulty playing music in the restaurant because they were streaming it over the internet. The agent at the technical assistance centre suggested that they move to a business grade broadband connection which

they did there and then. This upgrade allowed the restaurant to take orders from the waiting staff to the kitchen over WiFi, take secure payments from customers and also stream the music they were playing in the background to create atmosphere.”

Some of the products which the 160+ strong staff work on include smart metering used for parking for example.

“We have a suite of SIM cards, and we can put these into any kind of device,” noted Ms Garcia. “So, we’re actively working with a utility provider locally to use the smart metering. But it also has added use cases, so we could use it for parking metering. But we’ve even had requests for data SIMs, whether it’s logistics tracking or nowadays most things require data connection. There’s a small company that was setting up some charging stations for mobile phones and these required a SIM card for the data to determine how much to charge.

“Everything has a SIM card these days: the scooters you hire downtown, those have the same card in them. We’ve even used some for the gas tanks on the North Mole that need to measure when the tanks reach a certain level. The applications are endless and Gibtelecom is used to adapting the core technology to the business use for each client.”

Business community drives tech adoption

Benchmarking against industry trends and anticipating new ones sees Gibtelecom attend customer industry and technology conferences as well as events, although the size and needs of Gibraltar’s business community drives any adoption.

“Sometimes the technology industry moves at a pace that businesses can’t necessarily keep up with and they come up with products where there’s not really a viable use case at the moment,” added Ms Garcia. “So, we might not necessarily jump to be first to market in those because technology requires a lot of investment.



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"It doesn't always make sense to be first to market in some of these technologies because we can't see the business case for our community. At other times though, some businesses push us to develop something, which might not be readily available, but we are always happy to look at developing a new application for our clients. We've pushed the technology teams to look for a solution there because we're seeing the demand."

Europe India Gateway

Gibtelecom also owns and manages a private network infrastructure allowing its customers in leading business centres to scale and grow their operations into new markets and locations. Its core network is based around the US\$700m Europe India Gateway (EIG) submarine cable system linking Europe, Africa, the Middle East and India.

Gibtelecom is a founding consortium member of the EIG.

The network has multiple redundant European connections as well as a partnership which provides direct global access to hyper-scale providers.

The 15,000km EIG is an international fibre optic submarine cable and the first high bandwidth (3.84 terabits per second) cable system using dense wavelength division multiplexing technology connecting Europe to India. The consortium consists of 18 companies: AT&T, Airtel (Bharti), Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL), BT, Djibouti Telecom, Gibtelecom, Libya International Telecommunications Company, MTN, Omantel, Portugal Telecom, Saudi Telecom, Telecom Egypt, Telkom South Africa, Verizon and Vodafone.

"The EIG goes from Bude, Cornwall through Portugal, Gibraltar, all the way through the Mediterranean, down the Suez Canal, through Egypt," said Ms Garcia.

"We decided to go over Egypt because all the cables go through the Red Sea and there's usually anchors ripping them up," added Hook, who noted at one point Gibtelecom was responsible for chairing the consortium.

"It was very complex to set up and very complex to manage," said Ms Garcia, adding: *"For a number of years we were chairing that entire consortium."*

Cyber risk

For every leap forward in technology, there are also bad actors intent on circumventing



systems for whatever malicious reasons they have and there is a constant cat and mouse game being played out. All companies should have an incident response plan in case they are hacked and, in a similar way to insurance, be prepared to pay for cyber defences to protect their businesses.

So how does Gibtelecom try to mitigate threats? Ms Garcia said: *"Obviously, it's a priority for us as we're a digital business. We have internal cyber security experts, we have ISO 27001, which is information security, which is all about how we look after our data and make sure it's secure, protect it from any breaches, whether it's physical or cyber,"* she noted.

"So, as a business we are doing our homework and putting protection in various layers of our network so that we filter out malicious attacks."

We have recently entered into an exclusive agreement with Thomas Murray as our cybersecurity partners and we offer this as part of our managed service offering to our customers.

"We're all doing something digitally in the UK, it's in the news every day. Smaller businesses, they might not be a likely target, but when they do get hit, it can be make or break for the business. The risk to UK business is £64bn a year in cyber risk - it's not insignificant. So, we have partnered with Thomas Murray, who focus on companies in the financial services sector and are known as the market leader."

"They have recently conducted an analysis of what they deemed to be the main sources of cyber risk for Gibraltar. They compared this with current trends globally, as well. The kind of attacks companies are seeing are, types of data breach, stealing personal data and DDoS [distributed denial of service] attacks, or ransomware, where bad actors will take down IT infrastructure in exchange for payment. All of these are growing and some of those attacks are getting quite sophisticated. They found there is a rising threat of attacks, they use Southern Europe and the UK as a proxy for Gibraltar."

Threats evolve

"Threats go in peaks and troughs and there might be a particular month where there's a new type of ransomware that goes out and that's the main threat for that month and other months it's DDoS. They looked at Gibraltar using a platform which looks at different vulnerabilities. It looks at possible data leaks, any services that are exposed, any certificates that need updating, any publicly exposed information that shouldn't be publicly exposed, and so on."

"We gave them a sample of about 50 companies in the local market so they could perform vulnerability scanning on these across a range of sectors. And the results fell right into the bell

curve of the global average. So, Thomas Murray found that the threats that are found in the rest of the world are also found in Gibraltar. There were some companies that were scoring very well, particularly our local financial services companies."

Gibtelecom uses the Thomas Murray product to sell to its customers, providing them with dashboards, updated weekly, for vulnerability scanning along with any preventive action to take. Some of the issues highlighted by Thomas Murray might include high-risk vulnerable services which are out of date and may require patching; open services which should not be purposely exposed; compromised servers, and stolen credentials.

British call centre for ex-pats

Using Gibtelecom's existing technology infrastructure, the company also has its wholly-owned mobile operator in Spain – Lobster – to cater to English-speaking communities.

"The offices are based in Madrid and it's really targeting the British community, but also German, Dutch, and other communities," said Hook. "Customer services are in English and it's what we call a virtual mobile operator – it does fibre as well, now."

The central technology to Lobster; customer management systems as well as the mobile switch and provisioning, is done by the same

technical teams of Gibtelecom. It is segregated in terms of network, but it is the same teams and uses the same technology.

"It made sense for us," noted Ms Garcia, adding: "There are actually 20-plus mobile operators in Spain, it's quite a competitive market. But a lot of ex-pats who move to Spain don't necessarily learn the language, so they were struggling when they had an issue. So, for us, the USP was, you call and you actually speak to a British call centre."

Roots back to the 1800s

The company supports the community through initiatives such as sponsoring a team for the Cancer Research Walk for Life, which employees took part in. *"We believe it's important to be there and give something back where we can," said Ms Garica. "We support the Business Innovation Award, Start-up Grind, Young Enterprise, anything that brings business to Gibraltar."*

"When new businesses come to Gibraltar, we sit with them and tell them what we can do for them."

"We are ingrained into the fabric of Gibraltar - Gibtelecom has its roots back to the 1800s."



Gibtelecom

"Gibtelecom has effectively become an IT company with a telecommunications background – one which numbers Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Cloudflare among its competitors – to demonstrate that for a relatively small operation, it punches above its weight."



WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE RETAIL SECTOR?

HOW CAN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY, TOGETHER WITH THE GOVERNMENT, OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES AND EMBRACE NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

Over the past number of years, the Retail Sector has been through a challenging period and as one walks through the town area there are an increasing number of vacant premises.

Few can dispute there is a downbeat mood in the retail scene, where Gibraltar's entrepreneurial spirit has been put under strain following various financial crises and the pandemic. Despite this mood, we praise a number of retailers who have continued to invest and upgrade their premises to an international standard.

The Office of Fair Trading has taken a big step forward in the right direction by writing to shops and restaurants in town informing them that racks, sandwich boards and other merchandising items are not permitted on the pavement. The letter states that this is part of the Government's effort "to enhance accessibility, appearance, and overall pedestrian experience along Main Street and Casemates and to ensure a decluttered and more aesthetically pleasing environment for both residents and visitors".

The Chamber welcomes any initiative to make Gibraltar's main shopping thoroughfare a sustained attractive and welcoming experience and hopes that the necessary enforcement follows.

Improving care of the flower-filled hanging baskets along Main Street and better refuse collection also makes for a brighter and positive appearance. There is still a lot that needs to be worked on such as enforcement, landscaping and planting of more greenery and new trees. All of this needs to be maintained.

With growing competition from other destinations such as Cadiz, Estepona, Malaga and Tangiers, the beautification of the town area is essential to assist a retail business recovery.

Encouraging landlords and tenants to invest must play an important role to the retail recovery and we ask the government to create incentives to accelerate this.

We must convey to all who visit Gibraltar that we are ready to welcome visitors and create a business environment within a modern and refreshed town centre. Keeping our town centre clean, with facades both on the ground floor and upper levels presented to a high standard is critical.

A healthy retail environment plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of the community and local businesses play a vital role in preserving the charm of our town centre.

Other important factors facing retail business are the high costs of doing business amid unprecedented levels of external uncertainty.

Tourist numbers have not yet reached pre-pandemic levels but 2025 is predicted to see a further improvement on 2024. The number of tourists will be a key factor to monitor, and we hope that a treaty agreement will allow a greater flow of people to visit Gibraltar and give local businesses an opportunity to capitalise on the anticipated increase in tourist numbers.

We welcome the announcement that an agreement has been reached but the ongoing uncertainty caused by the lack of detailed information on how the treaty will affect traders is the biggest concern for local retailers and this in turn prevents these businesses from being able to plan effectively.

The Retail Sector is bracing itself for what the future holds. The tantalising appeal of expected higher tourist numbers is dampened by the fear of a sharp increase in costs. It will be some time until traders can see if the benefit of the former will outweigh the negative effects of the latter.

Just as it has done in the past on a number of occasions, Gibraltar's Retail Sector will need to reinvent itself and adapt to these huge structural changes. In the coming months local retailers, together with the government, will need

to look at ways to overcome this challenging period, stronger and more reinvigorated.

The Chamber will continue to lobby for the retail sector and is keen to hear from any members with specific initiatives which could be put to government to improve the rapidly changing retail environment.



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