

Focus on Leadership

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OPUS team succeeds with unique approach

Scribble an idea for a breathtaking new real estate development on a cocktail napkin, hand it to Calgary's own OPUS Corporation, sit back for 18 months and then host the grand opening party.

That might be an oversimplification of the process, but not a major one, says Hannes Kovac, the company's president and CEO.

"We provide all the expertise and services required in-house. We are developers, builders, project managers and marketers — among other things," he explains. "Taking a napkin idea to the grand opening party — that's what we do."

The company works on large-scale projects — high-rise downtown buildings, power centre retail developments and million-square-foot industrial warehouse projects, for example — with just 18 employees.

"Very often when people come to our office, they look at the projects that are shown on our web page, and they say 'You did all this with these people?' I say, 'Yeah.'"

"We have a unique process, with controls in place to ensure we keep a very good handle on the project. That allows us to do an amazing volume and size of projects, considering the size of company we are."

The OPUS team includes engineers, architects, graphic designers, estimators, project managers, financial analysts and a team of very versatile support staff, he says.

"It's a unique skill set that was assembled over the years, and a unique process that we developed to stay in control of all these different pieces."

"It's very user friendly, from a client perspective, because for every single step of the project, they're only dealing with OPUS."

OPUS was founded as a construction company about 25 years ago by owners who are no longer involved in the company — Kovac is now the sole proprietor. It was largely under his stewardship that the company's development method evolved.

"The OPUS process is unique, but not uniquely applicable to



Hannes Kovac is president and CEO of OPUS Corporation.

Calgary. We're looking at real estate projects as far east as Ontario, and we've done projects as far west as Vancouver Island," Kovac explains.

"We always break the project down into the same steps; the approving authority may be different to deal with, and the building codes, the tenants may be different, but at the end of the day, you have to watch out for the same pitfalls and the same transition points."

The company has a number of projects on the go, but one of its most exciting for an owner/investor is the Atlantic Avenue Art Block in Inglewood.

The building will feature a four-storey atrium featuring a stainless steel sculpture from Germany, as well as a main-floor high-end food retail experience.

"What's also unique is that it will feature Calgary's first privately owned art gallery that's for viewing pleasure only — not for selling art. It will have its home on the top floor of the building," Kovac says.

"We're also working to build a creative office hub on Levels 2, 3 and 4, with architects, interior designers, graphic artists and designers and marketing companies, to create a vibe and a buzz around the building."

City builds on finance expertise

When people around the world think of the energy business, they think of Calgary.

But that's only the beginning of the potential of the city's finance sector, says John Hankins, vice-president of investment and trade development with Calgary Economic Development (CED).

"Calgary is already seen as a global financial centre in relation to energy. The number and size of deals that are done here are significant; some would claim it's the biggest in the world."

"If you can do it for energy, you can start to broaden that to natural resources in general, and beyond. We're looking to build on the strengths we already have, and expand outside that energy niche."

And those strengths are considerable, says Dave Mowat, president and CEO of ATB Financial.

"We have some unusual concentrations here. The big banks have a lot of specialists right in Calgary; the credit union movement is unusually strong in Alberta; we've got Canada Western Bank, we've got Western Financial, we've got ATB," he says. "All of those are fairly unique organizations, and when you start adding them all together, it's a pretty significant asset for Calgary."

Mowat is a member of CED's Financial Sector Advisory Committee — a team of 21 of the city's top banking officials, recruited last year to help plan and implement Calgary's journey to greater financial diversity.

"The committee is very integral to this process. They provide tremendous insight as an advisory board," Hankins says.

Gordon Ritchie, vice-chairman of RBC Capital Markets, Calgary joined the committee to help position the city to be ready for the next wave of economic growth, which he expects to take hold in 2011.

"I believe a tremendous influx of capital and higher commodity prices are going to create an increased demand for banking facilities in Alberta and in Calgary," he says. "This initiative is very timely. CED is partnering with industry and various levels of government, in advance of the influx, so the economy is prepared for it."

Hankins says the world is already starting to take notice of Calgary's financial strength, noting in March, the Inter-American Development Bank will host its annual general meeting and conference in Calgary, bringing in officials from Europe, Asia and Latin America. "We're working with an organization called Latin Finance to organize a seminar during that conference, which will really put Calgary in the spotlight as an emerging financial centre," Hankins says.

Between 1999 and 2008, Calgary had the second highest financial sector employment growth in Canada, next to Montreal. The sector experienced a 40 per cent increase in employment, creating 7,000 incremental jobs in Calgary.

Companies looking to move west from Toronto have started to look increasingly at Calgary, rather than Vancouver.

"Compared to New York or London, the cost of living is fairly reasonable in Calgary and you can still work on significant and interesting deals."



Wil Andruschak photos

TELUS is no longer "your grandmother's telephone company," says Ali Jafri, the company's vice-president of sales for the small-medium business marketplace in Alberta.

TELUS brings technology home

TELUS Corporation hasn't forgotten that its roots in Alberta date back 100 years, but the company is clearly focused on the future — and on its clients.

"We're not your grandmother's telephone company anymore," says Ali Jafri, vice-president of sales for the small-medium business marketplace in Alberta.

"Many businesses are struggling with the new world of communication, and we're very proud of our ability to help our client base navigate through all of this, by being an integrated communications provider."

Providing the infrastructure is important to TELUS — the company invested more than \$20 billion on capital projects in Alberta during the past decade, and is spending another \$650 million this year to upgrade its networks in the province.

The investment will facilitate numerous service and product improvements, including Optik — a new, extremely versatile TV service.

"It's one way we are helping Canadians leverage the power

of technology. It's one thing for us to engineer and develop these world-class technical solutions, but it's another thing to bring real value," Jafri says.

"From a consumer standpoint, the upgraded infrastructure allows us to bring these types of solutions to the marketplace."

Moving beyond the cables, routers and cellphone towers to meaningfully connect with the people who use them is business as usual for TELUS, Jafri says.

For example, the company works closely with Calgary Economic Development on WORKshift — a program aimed at increasing the capacity of the city's workforce to do its jobs from home.

TELUS does much more than simply provide the hardware and software to connect office and home, Jafri notes.

"We have trained account executives that will go out and investigate the clients' current environment, and do some analysis for them and build a business case — and determine whether or not it makes sense to move in this direction."

Increasing telecommuting is good for employee morale, takes pressure off of the city's infrastructure and reduces carbon emissions from vehicle exhaust, so TELUS has embraced the WORKshift idea for its own workers.

About 1,000 of TELUS's 30,000 employees (Canada-wide) work exclusively at home, and a few thousand more telecommute one or two days per week. And other companies are following suit, he says.

"In the past, I think there was some hesitancy about the difficulty of effectively managing remote employees. But now that the infrastructure is there and the technology has developed, you're seeing more interest from the marketplace and more uptake on it."

Calgary is home to about 3,200 TELUS employees, including 15 of the company's senior leaders. The company is also an active partner in Calgary Economic Development's corporate partnership program, Action Calgary.

"Action Calgary is an opportunity for us to work with other

leaders to promote Calgary as a destination of choice for businesses, to provide innovative and leading-edge global solutions," Jafri says.

"Together, as a sort of consortium, we hope to invite investment into the city and province. Alberta and Calgary are a special place for TELUS."

The company makes a habit of putting its money where it heart is, contributing more than \$50 million to charities in the province in recent years.

Earlier this year, the Virginia-based Association of Fundraising Professionals gave TELUS the Freeman Philanthropic Services Award for Outstanding Corporation.

"Our mantra is we give where we live. Our business owners are an active part of the community — from the Calgary Science Centre to Hockey Canada to all of the charitable hours that our employees contribute to the community," Jafri says.

"We have volunteer days and days of service, and we're very proud of being an active part of the community. I think that's an absolutely wonderful part of what we do."

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