

# Ghana goes for IT lead

**Until now the \$40bn offshore information services industry has by-passed Africa - but one company is determined to change that. AQSolutions, based both in the US and Ghana, wants a slice of this lucrative market and as Kwesi Brah reports, is getting it.**

The offshore information services market is valued at between \$30bn and \$40bn and countries like India, Russia, Ireland, Israel, Barbados, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines, have made a name for themselves with US companies for the high quality and low cost of their services.

Services range from basic data entry to software engineering and the writing of software solutions. Africa has not figured in the equation, but that may be about to change.

An enterprising Ghanaian believes the wave is now lapping at Africa's shores and that Ghana is well positioned to participate fully in the global information technology explosion - and the offshore outsourcing market in particular

An early starter in the outsourcing market, Awo A Quaison-Sackey has built a business, AQSolutions, with offices in Connecticut and Accra based on it. He explains why Ghana is well placed to respond to this market.

With its population of 18m, the country has more than 100 computer-related companies specialising in computer hardware supply and maintenance, software sales and support; software development; Internet services, and computer training.

## Solutions for US firms

Founded in 1999 by Awo Quaison-Sackey, AQSolutions began its operations in Ghana in 2000, bringing with it an offshore development model. AQSolutions is to combine on-site project management in the US with an outstanding software development team in Ghana to deliver cost-effective, high quality solutions to client companies with increasing IT asset productivity.

This client-centric partnership model AQSolutions offers is attractive because it addresses many of the concerns companies have about offshore outsourcing of software

development work.

Each AQSolutions client is assigned a strategic account manager (SAM) who is situated at the client company site and interfaces with the client's project manager and project team.

The SAM is responsible for the entire client relationship and project life cycle, bringing in key AQSolutions resources as needed.

The SAM is also the liaison between the client and the developers in Ghana. AQSolutions employees in Ghana are skilled in and have worked on projects using Visual Basic, Sybase, Oracle, C++, Lotus Notes, and Microsoft Access.

As a resource centre for US clients, AQSolutions is positioned well to develop additional skills.

## Why Ghana?

Why would a company in the US choose AQSolutions in Ghana rather than the tried and tested Indian or Russian companies? Communications is a major concern for companies with no extensive offshore experience:

"Will I be able to understand the people over there and will they understand us?" is the unspoken question.

Many Ghanaians speak English fluently and are well-versed in US commercial culture. The time-difference between Ghana and the US is also a great advantage, as the workday in Ghana overlaps the workday of AQSolutions current customer base on the east coast of the US

AQSolutions has also consciously incorporated international project management and software development standards into a framework to ensure quality in every step of a client engagement.

People are surprised to hear that Ghana has 12 licensed, and three operational ISPs;

Africa's only 10mbs wireless data and voice technology exists in Ghana and the national energy company has a fibre optic network looping the lower half of the country.

Three major wireless technology companies are currently competing to provide corporate intranets to commercial customers, including the Ministries and banks, and private individuals.

A landing station for the undersea Africa-One fibre-optic cable, from South Africa to Portugal, is scheduled for 2002, allowing Ghana to dramatically reduce bandwidth costs, and become a regional access provider for West Africa.

Despite the fall of the local currency in 1999/2000 due to the collapse of coffee and cocoa prices and the doubling of oil prices, Ghana has proved itself an innovator in African economies.

With double the *per capita* output of the poorer West African countries, Ghana has a GDP growth rate of approximately 6%, with privatised key industries and a strong entrepreneurial infrastructure, including a stock exchange.

## Not an easy sell

In spite of all of that, Ghana is not an easy sell. The perception of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' and the stereotype of "the African" have to be overcome.

People are surprised and ultimately pleased to learn that there is an untapped well-educated, professional IT labour source available in Ghana that can compete successfully with anywhere in the world if given half the chance.

The decision to go offshore and where to go is always a critical business decision. The opportunity to provide social benefit to a population that was inaccessible in the past, while meeting one's business objectives, makes it all the more satisfying. ■

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