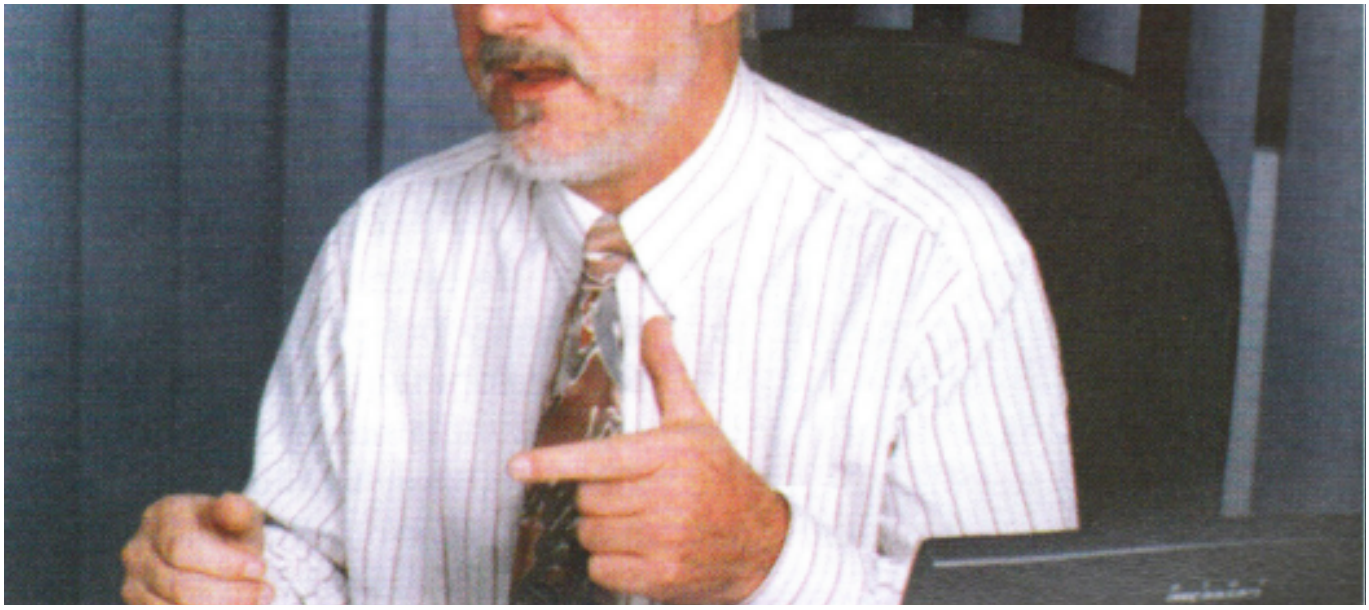


Software Giant in Sri Lanka – Nalika Fernando



John Sharplin

‘I forecast South East Asia to be the largest emerging software market. We will use Sri Lanka as a base to expand our selves into the South East Asian Market from a development and a support viewpoint,’ says John Sharplin, managing director JBA Software Products Lanka, in an interview with Business Today.

What was the impetus to open shop in Sri Lanka?

We’ve had a long association with Sri Lanka through EDS our agent in Sri Lanka and in the Asia Pacific region. We actually own about 15% of EDS. About 4 years ago we elected to put some development projects into EDS under the supervision of the JBA management to strengthen our ties with EDS and to take advantage of some of their programming expertise. This worked reasonably well. A year later I was sent down here as senior JBA manager to enhance that relationship and to increase the number of people that EDS was actually contracted to use. By the time I had

increased that number from about 8 to nearly 80, the amount of stream development we were doing in Sri Lanka
for JBA was too large for a subsidiary to handle. Once you get to that stage starting our own company was the next step in the logical succession of events. We took a number of EDS staff to our own company. It was an amicable exercise where we had the total support of EDS. Through this long association we know the Sri Lankan people, the technical skills and creativity they have and are capable of having. We are very happy with the country and the skills set.

What is your investment in this venture?

At this given moment it's It is profiled to increase to the order of about one million pounds in the near future.

What exactly is your operation here?

Our principal exercise is to sell software solutions. We sell to very large multinational companies. What we do here on behalf of JBA is we develop elements of that software. We develop a suite in applications or some new element within that suite in applications. We then test it, quality control it, etc. We send it back to the UK where it's put through the business testing unit, so that it gets fully tested from the business functional
viewpoint in the CK. Then, it be- comes a standard product which is sold by our sales outlets. It gets
marketed back to Sri Lanka through our agents. We do not market directly in Sri Lanka and we do not intend to do so.

What is your recruitment criteria?
Graduate or very good A-levels. Preferably with some experience in the computer field. Computer
science graduates will be the first people to look for but not exclusively. Business graduates are very important too, because we develop business software.

would you give more preference to — a British Computer Society qualified person or a local computer science graduate? I would give preference to neither I would look at the specific skills of the individual. I do see a trend in the local computer science graduates to continue their education with BCS or ACS. We promote the continuance of education We give study leave, time off for exams. We

even pay examination fees provided that they pass.

Do you provide overseas training? Yes. of course. We provide overseas training in the UK and in our other operations in the Asia Pacific region. Last year, I sent 12 people to the UK for a period of three months. At this moment I'm wondering how to send 10 people for overseas training without impacting their work here.

what do you think of the infrastructure in Sri Lanka?

About 3 or 4 years ago the infrastructure was difficult. Principally, in terms Of telecommunications. During the past year there has been a significant increase in infrastructure. The multiplicity of internet access and the additional telephone companies licensed by the SLT to provide telecommunications. In our view, the infrastructure has improved enormously over the last 12-15 months which makes it quite viable for investment opportunities.

How do you feel about the The BOI ?

The BOI has been extremely helpful to us. They have been most assistive in forming this particular operation. They've cooperated with us. perhaps even beyond the call of duty, I've great understanding of the BOI's objectives and great appreciation of the way they are implementing it.

At the opening ceremony Thilan "Wijeysinghe mentioned his intention Of opening a science for the IT industry. What would this mean to you?
I don't know a great deal about it right now but I see it as a positive step. It would be an excellent facility to provide training and work experience for the IT industry in Sri Lanka. Maybe we could input to it as well and get a synergistic approach to multiply ourselves more quickly. I look forward to it with great favor.

JBA is the first software giant to come into Sri Lanka. Do you think this would bring other software giants into the country?

Yes. I would imagine it would. If a company with the size and visibility of JBA is prepared to invest in Sri Lanka, other software companies across the world are going to look with interest as to why we did this and how well it is geared. You might not see this in the next couple of months but certainly in the next couple of years.

What are your plans for the future?

We intend to expand our operations here given that we succeed in the South East Asian market. We will expand to 2 or 3 hundred people in the next two years. The focus of those 2 to 3 hundred people will be development. We are a development arm so we certainly won't be selling in Sri Lanka- We will support growing regions across South East Asia as we in actual fact increase ourselves in these regions continued growth, continued expansion With primary focus on development and secondary focus on support.

I would also like to mention that towards the end of June we will be opening a language translating unit here. The initial focus of which is translating Chinese.

As an IT company what would you like to see in Sri Lankan that would enable you to function more effectively?

I would like to see a larger software industry with a larger labor pool of skilled personnel. Then those people in return could enhance their own skills by moving from one company to another. This would grow the industry and improve the skills set more quickly, We have plans to participate in this growth. I've already spoken to professor Samaranayake to see how we could assist in improving the computer science degree in the local universities. There is a lot of common ground where we would help each other. The whole focus we would like to see is an expanding labor pool and an expanding skills set within that labor pool.