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The relentless 'can do' man

Revenue's turnaround expert joins board of Huge Group and forms own company

KEN JARVIS – former chief information officer (CIO) at the SA Revenue Service – earned an inexorable reputation as a turnaround specialist when he helped put the systems in place that turned Revenue from just any old normal (mostly inefficient) Government department into South Africa's case study for how it should/can be done.

Jarvis recently joined the board as a non-executive director of Huge Group, the AltX-listed managed telecoms company run by young entrepreneur Anton Potgieter.

Although not an executive role, the move puts Jarvis back in the limelight after an 18-month relative absence from the public eye (as CIO of AA Autobay) and a long absence from the JSE, where he sat on the board of the old Idion Technology Holdings (where I first met him).

Jarvis had been brought in to head Idion's SA operations. But the fruits of his labour never really came to fruition after a long-running hostile bid from Canadian Group DataMirror – which excluded the SA

operations – took the wind out of their sails. Idion later sold Vision Solutions, its US operations, to a management-supported private equity group and delisted from the JSE.

Prior to Idion, Jarvis had already had a long career in the IT sector – to date, he's had 34 years' experience – with previous positions at IBM, Nedcor, Momentum Life, Amplats and MultiChoice. Jarvis says he learned very specific skills in each former role that all came in handy at Revenue.

Despite his wide acclaim, he's very modest about his role at Revenue, attributing its success to being part of a great team. He says he put simple plans in place that just seemed to somehow come together and each built upon the success of the last. "The more we did, it just seemed to feed on itself," he says.

It appears the same formula might be worth trying in other departments, such as Home Affairs. But Jarvis just smiles and shakes his head when asked to comment on what needs to be done elsewhere.

His mandate at Revenue had been to fix its "IT shop" and get on top of customer-facing systems. So he removed the legacy of having mostly contract staff and populated the department with permanent (60%) black staffers. He also helped put the right systems and processes in place about procurement (mostly black empowerment, but not excluding multinational giants such as Microsoft and IBM).

Another highlight for Jarvis was getting e-filing up and running, although current CIO Barry Hore must take credit for the host of new features the system now boasts, Jarvis says.

Jarvis may be in demand as a CIO elsewhere but he has other aspirations. In August last year he set up his own company – Jika Africa – which started off as a consultancy and mentoring operation. Jarvis says while at Revenue he enjoyed helping to nurture and mentor young, mostly black, talent and watch them develop into "outstanding IT executives". He says he has a talent for working behind the scenes with people and wanted to do the same elsewhere. So Jika contracts him out to

companies, governments and other organisations that need him to play that role on a one-off or ongoing basis, from junior managers to senior executives.

However, his "big picture" aspirations for Jika are far greater. The second part of its name – "Africa" – is no accident, Jarvis says. He believes in the potential for the continent and wants to be part of the boom that's taking place in companies and governments. Jika already has contracts and/or potential clients in Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland, Ghana and Kenya. "There's a massive opportunity in Africa," Jarvis says, adding the rebuilding of Zimbabwe's economy to that list.

He has also not confined himself to consulting or technology, for that matter. Jika has a stake in a small, low-cost housing company that uses a new technology from Sweden called the Imison system. Essentially, it involves building houses from expanded polystyrene and then strengthening the walls with a fibre/cement spray called Fibrecote.

Jarvis says the technology makes it cheaper and faster to build houses than using traditional brick and mortar and the end product is surprisingly strong and robust. According to documentation he provided, a 40sq m house takes just five days to build – from laying its foundation to occupation. For starters, it has a contract for 1 800 houses in Soweto.

Jarvis first met Potgieter and his right-hand man, chief financial officer James Herbst, when they were searching for a CIO at Huge. He wasn't interested in that particular role but accepted a position on the board to play the necessary fiduciary governance role required of a non-executive and also to help the company grow.

Jarvis says he didn't take the appointment lightly and first assured himself of the company's potential and financial soundness. He says following recent developments on the deregulation front, the telecoms sector is an "open market" with new, exciting opportunities up for grabs.

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Believes in potential for Africa.
Ken Jarvis