

The TSL Group





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Staying well ahead of the technology curve

If ever there was a tale about how personal and professional foresight, determination, boldness, and just plain grit can help grow a business from one that “didn’t have two cents to scratch together” into a major, international player and leader in its field, its title could well be The TSL Story. And its leading character would be J. Nicholas Galt, the far-seeing entrepreneur who founded TSL in 1979, and has, since that time, steered his company through the rocky shoals and shifting currents of the technological revolution that, over the last few decades, has altered the way the

world does business, and changed forever, how information is stored, transmitted, and applied.

Today, TSL, the Caribbean-based technology company with offices in Trinidad & Tobago, Barbados, and St. Lucia, provides hardware, software, networking, consulting, project management, and a full range of ancillary technology services to 20 countries in the region. It employs over 250 individuals who specialize in delivering cost-effective, integrated, and end-to-end solutions in the type of information and communica-

tion technologies that businesses need to stay competitive and efficient. Some of the world-class vendors it partners with include: Xerox, IBM, Juniper, VMWARE, Lenovo, VeriFone, DataCard, Systimax, Cisco, HP, Dell, Microsoft, Citrix, MagTek, JanTek, For the Record, Virtual Doxx, Biamp, and Syspro, among others.

But back then, before personal computers (PCs) sat atop every desk in every office in the land, Galt was merely supplying his customers with the basics. “We were in the business of selling office equipment – typewriters, calculators, office furniture,” he recounts. “But because I realized that the world was going to be, one day, a digital space, I started to move in the direction of trying to learn as much as I could about what type of computer technology was available. In those days, what was available was basically accounting machines - the PC had not yet been launched.

AT A GLANCE

WHO: The TSL Group

WHAT: Provider of end-to-end solutions in all fields of information and communication Technology

WHERE: Headquarters in Port of Spain, Trinidad

WEBSITE: www.thetslgroup.com

The Commodore computer was very small and very inadequate, but by 1981, we got access to the first PC that was manufactured for a company called Monroe Systems for Business, and when we were exposed



Executive Team



to what could be done with those things, I decided to change the company's direction completely and we began to focus all of our energy on learning as much as we could, educating ourselves, and learning how to program, because when those units were delivered there was no software available, at all. All we had was the DOS operating system and a database application which was known as DataFlex."

Galt goes on to relate that how he and his company began its transition: "We morphed the company, more and more into technology, because we realized that that was where our future would lie. The internet was not known, at least not to us. But in that particular decade we got involved in networking, and we realized for the first time that these things could really communicate with each other and could do so very inexpensively. That charted our way forward. We started

to learn how to sell, maintain, service, and deliver excellent support to our customers. By 1989, we had started to sell, from the Green Market, IBM computers, because IBM did not want to deal with us – we were way too small for them."

(The Green Market was the distribution network that dealt in refurbished, used, repaired, recycled, discontinued, or even new products that were still in working condition. These early PCs were sold through brokers and resellers, and not through the original manufacturers. Meanwhile, the companies that actually produced computer equipment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, labeled this resale network, the "Grey Market," in order to persuade customers that they were buying counterfeit or stolen products, or goods in uncertain working condition, or with doubtful warranties. They wanted consumers to buy new products,

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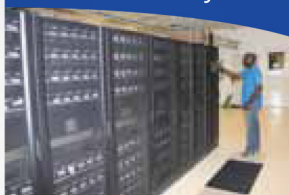
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directly from them.)

This is the place in The TSL Story, where the protagonist figures out a way to make an end run around the biggest player at that time in the PC market – IBM, once known as “Big Blue.” Galt continues: “We were perceived to be an organization that was not going to be anywhere at all. They only wanted to deal with companies that had a nice building façade, and we, unfortunately, did not have that. We had a little hole-in-the wall operation. We didn’t have two cents to scratch together. We were very, very ambitious, but we were undercapitalized, and it was very difficult for us to earn the respect of companies looking to go into technology - either those companies that were downsizing from legacy systems, or companies that were waking up to the fact that there were machines that could automate their processes.” (A legacy system refers to an operating technology, application, or program that is outdated or in need of replacement.)

“So what we did instead was, we appealed to the auditing companies that were here, by putting on a session in a local hotel and showing them the first server-based, networking applications for PCs we had been exposed to,” says Galt. “And I was very bold. I showed them the application that we had done, and I said ‘this is the way the world is going and we need a partner on the ground to be able to implement these systems,



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and the partner has to be a respectable organization, such as a private auditing company, so I'm looking for a partner. The first person to call me by seven o'clock tomorrow morning will be the partner that I will select.'

"It was a bold move, but I got a call at twenty to seven the following morning, from Price-Waterhouse Coopers. The head of IT there said, 'We want to work with you.' So we invested some money in training one of their staff, and we went out in the market with a different face because now we had the auditing company, Price-Waterhouse, fronting this whole thing. We were very happy to stay in the background, do the work, deliver the systems, and make the money in the background.

"And at the same time we started to be so successful that in about two or three years, we downsized almost 100 legacy systems to server-based applications. We were selling IBM computers from the Green Market in Miami, Florida – buying them a few at a time and bringing them back. We had gotten so successful that IBM turned around and asked us to become one of their dealers, locally. And that took place in 1990. Many other companies started to work with Price-Waterhouse, implementing the systems, and over time, those clients started to trust us and started to use us and that's how we gained our recognition.

"A lot has happened since, and a lot of growth has taken place in various directions. What has kept our business alive and growing is the outlook we had to recognize that PCs were going to become a commodity of a kind. We realized that this was not a long-haul process. We were so focused on expanding our technology base that in 1996, we decided that we would not sell PCs anymore. We would only sell PCs if we were delivering a complete end-to-end solution to a company. We didn't want to sell one PC or ten PCs, somewhere, because we could not provide the level of

service given the number of technical people we would have to keep on hand."

But during the six years that TSL was selling IBM PCs, the company was also learning about other emerging technologies. For example, in 1994, TSL became interested in the business of credit card transactions, and the machines, embossers, coders, and other equipment that banks used to produce, secure, and personalize credit and debit cards. It continued to upgrade and promote the Human Resource software that Galt had developed, and also began providing credit card terminals to banks.

The company did so well, that, in 1996, its provider, VeriFone, an American-based, multinational corporation that provides technology for electronic payment transactions and value-added services at the point-of-





sale, made the company its distributor in Trinidad and Tobago and later in the early 2000s its master distributor for the Caribbean. That meant that TSL would now operate in several different countries. It also meant that company's staff had to be able to write and provide the software development for banks throughout the region, so TSL embarked on a robust, internal education campaign. Today, TSL provides about 90 percent of the software development for regional banks. "Any time you walk into a Verifone credit card terminal in the Caribbean, chances are that those are delivered from my organization," says Galt. "And the software that runs them comes from my organization."

Over the years, TSL continued to innovate and expand its business footprint. "There are a lot of different areas of business that we're involved in," Galt says. The company partnered with Xerox to sell its equipment and was able to move its market share from 4.5 percent in 1996, to 34 percent in 1998. In 2001, it launched a digital, air time, cellular phone system in

Trinidad and Tobago. TSL provides recording solutions to judicial courts throughout the Caribbean islands, and serves the oil and gas sector with an application that provides a full 3-D picture of seismic data. Galt, himself, wrote the leading application in the Caribbean for the human resource management field, covering payroll, time, and attendance. TSL also became the first and only local company in the region to write the software for "Chip and Pin" technology, which provides a safer way to utilize credit cards while protecting user information and limiting the liability of the card companies. "We've become the first port of call for any technology company looking to do business in the Caribbean, today. They first seek representation with TSL. We get to cherry-pick the organizations that we want to deal with," says Galt.

Galt believes that TSL differentiates itself from the competition because while some other companies outsource certain services that they can't deliver, TSL won't employ that model. "We stopped doing that a

long time ago because we found that in outsourcing our services to somebody else, we ran the risk of dropping the level of customer satisfaction. If you want to provide an end-to-end solution, it means you have to be involved with everything,” he explains.

Some years ago, TSL embarked on a survey of all of its customers and determined that it had achieved a 98 percent customer-satisfaction rating. “That is where our secret is,” Galt reveals. “Making sure that the customer is happy; being able to be depended upon as the organization that can advise about what technology the customer should work with, how we can support it, and how we can deliver it.”

But merely maintaining the status quo is not something that Galt and TSL is accustomed to doing, because the industry is constantly changing, and foresight, boldness, determination, and just plain grit is what has made TSL the successful enterprise it is today. Or as Galt explains, “And then when we’ve covered everything in technology that’s available to date, we are keeping our eye on emerging technology, because that is something that we are always on top of – what’s happening, how do we get involved in it, and how to get the jump on the next organization. We have a constant thirst for finding technology, for crating technology, and bringing new things to market; because if we had stayed just a supplier of PCs, we would have died a long time ago.”

With the multi-talented and determined Mr. Galt at the helm, Trinidad and Tobago’s pre-eminent communications company should be around for a long, long time, and, certainly, there will be many more chapters to come in The TSL Story.

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