

Business with Pleasure

The adoption of CEO Steve Kent's "learn, have fun, make money" philosophy has ensured that e-clinical solutions provider ClinPhone continues to go from strength to strength.

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I seem a little overdressed when I arrive at ClinPhone's Nottingham (UK) headquarters. I'm buttoned up in a suit and tie, and feel a bit starchy when I look around at the decidedly dressed-down approach of the employees dining in the canteen where I'm set to meet CEO Steve Kent. Steve's arrival itself does little to alleviate my slight sense of awkwardness; he has gone for the open-necked-shirt look. All this casualness is completely sensible, of course: it has turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year.

This isn't about to unfold as an article about the ClinPhone dress code, but taking



note of the sartorial policy does serve to underline the company's 'cool' approach to looking after its staff. With an average employee age of 33, its Nottingham headquarters resemble a campus more than a state-of-the-art, multimillion dollar company. And Steve Kent likes it this way. After all, taking a 'modern' approach to the needs and ambitions of its young staff has helped ClinPhone gain a reputation as one of the UK's most attractive employers. Earlier this year, for example, the company won the City and Guilds Employer of the Year award for the Midlands and East of England region.

Trial support

The business of ClinPhone, of course, is much more serious and successful than its laid-back atmosphere suggests. The company was established to improve the clinical trial process by providing centralized support services available around the clock, 365 days a year. Its MO is to use telephone and the internet to collect data directly from patients and from investigators.

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Steve explains: "The information we collect from investigators is typically about randomization and trial supply management. Say we have a potential patient in America who sees an advert in a newspaper placed by a pharmaceutical company; it might say 'If you're interested in enrolling in a cardiovascular trial, phone this number.' That number terminates here in Nottingham. But it's a freephone number in America and when the potential patient phones they actually get answered by our system that runs a voice prompt in an American accent. The potential patient will be asked a series of questions and effectively be pre-screened. If they pass, they will be forwarded to the investigator site and asked more questions and then recruited."

"At this point an investigator will ring the same freephone number, authenticate themselves to the system and then enter data about that patient. From the basis of the data that is entered, the patient will be randomized into a trial, either into the active ingredient or into the control group to be prescribed placebo. We are running the algorithm that decides whether they're in the control group or not."

ClinPhone balances trials on the basis of trial entry criteria. Steve continues: "We're minimizing the amount of patients, we're collecting data about the trial, and then because we know who's in the trial, because we know who's being randomized into active or placebo, we are then able to make sensible decisions about where the trial supply — the

medpacks — should be going, we know the high recruiting sites and low recruiting sites, and we direct the trial supply chain so we will effectively integrate our data with companies that pack the medpacks and distribute them to the trial sites."

Staying ahead

With experience in over 1680 clinical trials, ClinPhone's service has developed to comprise a wealth of other technical solutions, such as a clinical trial management systems, electronic patient reported outcomes; trial supply simulation; drug accountability and e-clinical integration. Being at the sharp edge of technology, of course, has been the company's *raison d'être* since it was established in 1993. But in 2006, with so many small companies jumping onto the electronic solutions bandwagon, how does ClinPhone stay ahead?

"The problem for those smaller companies is that they have to get big very quickly or they'll miss the boat," says Steve. "The market is condensing down to a few larger players; that's important for the customers because they are running large and important trials. If they're using a system that's been provided to them by a 30-person company, there's the question of how long the product is going to be supported by that company, how long are they going to be around and so on. I don't think there's anything unusual in our market compared to others, it's just a case of the market becoming more mature. We are one of the longest running companies in this field — we invented the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) market — so it's not surprising that we're one of the largest. Eventually we think there'll be half a dozen companies that offer a much broader range of services than is available today."

The company will also receive a technology boost from its recent windfall — its June 2006 stock market flotation raised over £94 million. Steve intends to invest some of this amount in buying in new technology. "We can't develop the sort of technology we need in-house, at least not in the time needed, so that means acquisitions," he explains.

Location, location, location

The extra funds raised in June will also go towards ClinPhone's ongoing global expansion. Along with sites in New Jersey and Chicago, the company has recently opened US operations in North Carolina and San Francisco. There are also plans to develop activities in the emerging markets, where, of course, the clinical trials industry has begun to invest heavily in recent years. Steve reiterates the importance of having customer-facing operatives who speak the same language, both linguistically and culturally, as the clients: "It's easier to communicate — if you're face to face or on the phone — if you're from the same cultural background. The UK is culturally as close to the US as anywhere but there are still big differences and of course there are significant time zone differences. As for other territories, we need to establish a presence there as well so that we're not only in the same time zone, but the same cultural context."

Nottingham will nevertheless remain the centre of ClinPhone's back office activities. The company has operated



from the city (where its founders, Drs Neil Rotherham and Jonathan Engler, worked at the headquarters of the giant pharmacy chain, Boots) since its inception. ClinPhone's commitment to Nottingham, over thirteen years on, is just as solid as it has always been, even in the face of its global expansion. There are a number of reasons for this, as Steve points out. "Recruitment here is easier than it would otherwise be. There are two universities within five minutes of here, both with strong leanings towards biochemistry and pharmacology, as well as computer science."

"It's also a cheaper place to operate from," Steve adds. "It's not like London. It makes a lot of economic sense for the customer for us to operate out of two big data centres based here — the cost of transmission is so low."

Learn, have fun, make money

Certainly the Nottingham site seems to be full of confidence and vitality. ClinPhone has always recognized the importance of the work-life balance but it was Steve who brought along the "learn, have fun, make money" credo when he joined in 2002. This has further helped to secure the company's reputation as an employer with a progressive attitude to staff motivation, as well as win awards such as Employer of the Year.

"If you're learning, that's fun anyway. The only way you're going to get career advancement is by learning. Having fun is also fundamental to the work-life balance," says Steve. Of course, it helps if candidates looking for a job at ClinPhone *want* to have fun. "We recruit on personality: candidates are interviewed on the basis of the CV, but we also give them a psychometric test, for which there are no wrong or right answers, and which establishes what kind of person they are. We're looking for the types of people that we know will fit in here. If you're not gregarious and friendly, you might struggle a bit."

Those who are successful in joining ClinPhone will find themselves working for a flexible organization that very much invests in its people. This is evident in popular schemes such as the sabbatical programme that allows employees to take a six-month career break if, for example, they want to go travelling. It's also there in the little things, such as offering staff free fruit every day. "We do this to make it a more pleasant working environment," says Steve. "And because it's a pleasant place to work, people want to stay longer."

The investment in people — and in technology — is certainly paying off for ClinPhone. And there's no question that, under Steve Kent's leadership, the company will still be around when its smaller competitors have long since disappeared. ●