

Relaxed Owens leaves Ottawa audience impressed by vision, style, confidence

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The Ottawa Citizen

September 10, 2004

Ottawa's technology community poured forth yesterday to hear Nortel's new leader speak and came away impressed by his frankness, relaxed confidence and strategic vision.

Strolling across the stage with a microphone, Mr. Owens spoke without notes and seemed at ease talking in detail about the company, its business and its competitors. He also had soothing words for high-technology intelligentsia, praising the city's talented university graduates and hard-working professionals.

For an industry ravaged by massive layoffs and bankruptcies over the past three years, they were welcome words.

"Ottawa needed to hear that," said Jeffrey Dale, president and chief executive of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation. "It's nice to hear leaders come in and acknowledge the contribution Ottawa has made."

Others were impressed by the openness of Mr. Owens, who mostly avoided Nortel's accounting troubles but spoke freely about its precipitous stock decline and huge downsizing.

"He was very balanced and very open. That's something Nortel has needed," said Pat Dipietro, managing partner VenGrowth Capital Partners. Before joining VenGrowth in 2001, he was vice president of 3G wireless at Nortel.

He said he agreed with Mr. Owens' strategy of cutting costs, raising cash and partnering with vendors to build bundled solutions.

"All the technology thrusts and market thrusts he mentioned make a lot of sense."

Mr. Dipietro, who keeps in touch with Nortel employees, said staff are glad to have a technology-savvy leader again after Frank Dunn, who had a finance background. Before joining Nortel, Mr. Owens headed satellite communications company Teledesic and wrote a book about using technology to modernize the military.

"The internal mid- to high-level executives love (Mr. Owens's) open style. They also like the fact he has a technology heritage himself. People who work at an engineering-centric company respect that."

His emphasis on partnering also likely came as a pleasant surprise to Ottawa companies in attendance. "Nortel has historically built its product in a vertical supply chain, so the talk about more partnering is significant," said Mr. Dale. "This is a very different Nortel."

Marcel Lavoie, account manager at Sun Microsystems of Canada, said that could mean more partnering opportunities for vendors like his company.

Those who attended also picked up an operational focus in Mr. Owens perhaps not present in past leaders.

"He's personally committed to the company, whereas I found the other CEOs were more interested in making themselves big," said Sanjay Chadha, founder and chief executive of wireless company S5Systems.

Mr. Owens also has a more restrained vision than John Roth, who led Nortel on its aggressive acquisition binge in the late 1990s.

"I think (Mr. Owens) will be more focused on the operational performance of the company," said former Nortel employee Ron Killeen. "John, in his days, was really focused on the revenue -- grow the company. And he really had this thing about killing Cisco."