

## Ottawa tech sector's good news day

Dell to confirm 500 jobs for west-end call centre

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It started with an invitation, shrouded in secrecy, to give a presentation on Ottawa to a "Fortune 100 company."

When the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation was invited to Toronto in January by the provincial Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, OCRI staff had no idea who the mysterious company was. At the meeting, company officials only identified themselves on condition that OCRI stay tight lipped.

So began a six-month push by OCRI to attract Dell Inc. to the city, a campaign that culminates today with the announcement that the computer giant will establish a call centre here.

The "customer contact centre" is expected to open in February and employ roughly 500 people over the next several years.

That's considerably fewer than the 1,000 or more employees mentioned in some circles.

The company has signed a sublease with Nokia Corp. to occupy a 156,000-square-foot building in the Kanata Research Park on Solandt Road. Nokia built the complex several years ago but never occupied it.

The call centre will provide technical and sales support for Dell's North American customers.

In announcing the move, Dell said it was attracted by Ottawa's highly educated workforce and proximity to higher-education institutions. Company spokesman Richard Binhammer said the city's high level of bilingualism was also an asset.

"This is positive for the region," said Mike Darch, executive director of OCRI's global marketing program. "It gives us another company to build on."

Kitchener-Waterloo and Kingston were also in the running, said Mr. Darch, who led the OCRI campaign.

The company was certainly thorough in its due diligence.

"Dell has a very exhaustive evaluation process," said Mr. Darch. "The first thing they do is verify that you have the talent pool to meet their needs."

Dell's "site-selection" team spent about four months checking everything from technology-sector employment numbers to the quality of training available at universities and colleges in town, and turnover rates at Ottawa firms, he said.

The secrecy did not end at the meeting with OCRI. Ottawa technology firms and educational institutions were also invited to "blind briefings" at which Dell officials declined to hand out business cards.

Mr. Darch said credit-card company MBNA Corp. was also secretive when it set up a call centre in Ottawa several years ago, but not to the same degree as Dell.

"They're not a Fortune 50 company for nothing. They want to make sure they're making the right decisions and getting the best deal they can."

The company, however, couldn't stop the rumours from swirling. Last month, the Citizen reported that Dell was eyeing the site.

The final two months were spent negotiating financial details, including government incentives and the terms of the sublease with Nokia, which were not disclosed. "I would surmise that they got a reasonable deal on the sublease," said Mr. Darch.

The company will also benefit from the apprenticeship-training tax credit, introduced by the Ontario government in the 2004 budget. The credit allows Dell to claim \$5,000 per employee every year for three years, up to a maximum of \$15,000 per employee.

If salaries are in the same range as a call centre in Edmonton, that could cover a decent portion of Dell's wage costs. Most employees at the Edmonton centre, which opened in the fall, earn between \$28,000 and \$45,000 a year, the Edmonton Journal has reported.

Premier Dalton McGuinty, who is from Ottawa, played a key role in courting Dell. Mr. McGuinty met with Economic Development Minister Joe Cordiano and Dell executive Kip Thompson in April to promote Ottawa as the ideal location for the call centre. The premier then called

Mr. Thompson on June 22 to finalize the deal.

The City of Ottawa and the federal department of International Trade also helped to lure Dell to the national capital.

Mr. Darch of OCRI brushed off the suggestion that call-centre positions are considered less sophisticated than other technology jobs.

"We look at it from a different perspective, he said. "First of all, Dell is a highly successful company.

"Secondly, just like Dell did a lot of homework on us, we did a lot of homework on them. They've been very successful with their direct-sales model ... and they empower their employees to make decisions."

He said Dell's entry should help to diversify the region's technology workforce, and could eventually lead to spinoffs from Dell-trained entrepreneurs. Dell's sales and marketing expertise will be welcome in Ottawa, which has traditionally been stronger at engineering, he added.

Dell, which is headquartered in Texas, employs about 55,000 people worldwide. Its Canadian unit is headquartered in Toronto. In addition to Edmonton, the company has customer support centres in Texas, Tennessee, Oregon, Idaho, Oklahoma, El Salvador and Panama.

Recruiting for management and professional positions in human resources, training and facilities will begin this fall. In the winter, the company will start hiring technicians to provide hardware and software support. Some of the positions will call for bilingual ability.

More information for job seekers is available at [www.dell.com/ottawa](http://www.dell.com/ottawa).