Interview: Maria Cristina G. ‘Beng’ Coronel, President, Pointwest Technologies, Philippines



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Maria Cristina G. Coronel (‘Beng’), President of Pointwest Technologies, and colleagues Rhea Latoga and Ma. Lillibeth Daffon (‘Beth’), discuss the current high growth rate within the healthcare sector, why being both an IT and BPO company, Pointwest Technologies has an edge over companies that focus on BPO alone, and how to stop the brain drain from the Philippines to other countries.

From when the company was first created in 2003, Pointwest Technologies has grown into a sizeable Information Technology and Business Process Outsourcing (IT-BPO) company today, covering different sectors. Healthcare Information Management (HIM), however, has been the fastest growing sector within the global BPO landscape. Has the healthcare sector subsequently gained in importance for Pointwest Technologies?

Beng: As an organization, Pointwest Technologies is organized into market circles. The healthcare sector is one of our market circles, testament to the importance we give to this sector. To a large extent, we are attracted to this area because of the high growth rate the sector is currently experiencing, as many reports currently indicate.

Today, Pointwest Technologies provides BPO services in pharmacy benefit management (PBM). We have an army of pharmacists, registered nurses and data analysts to solve the problems of our

clients in the USA. Our goal is to expand further into this area, especially as we have the potential to further capitalize on our IT capabilities.

US companies are facing a deadline on October 1, 2014 to switch from ICD-9 to ICD-10 when it comes to their coding needs. Our company has also prepared a solution to help companies cope with this mandatory change.

The requirement to tap into mobile solutions, data analytics and big data solutions is growing too. We feel that Pointwest Technologies has the potential to contribute to all of these areas.

Rhea: We recognize that the healthcare sector is a sector of growing importance to the BPO industry. Pointwest Technologies is growing its people in this area, in both BPO and IT.

Apart from preparing for the ICD-9 to ICD-10 deadline, Pointwest Technologies has also done a scan of the North American market. There are a number of hospitals requiring IT services in the territory. Our business development partner in the US has been looking at certain targeted segments in the healthcare provider and payer space where there is a good fit between client needs and Pointwest capabilities.

There are indications that a growing number of IT companies are starting to service organizations such as insurance companies, physician practices, and so forth. Today, the large hospital systems are already served by the largest IT players, but we believe that the smaller and mid-sized hospitals and health plans are underserved, and so that’s where an opportunity exists for Pointwest.

How do you compare yourself to big players such as SPi Global and Cognizant, when it comes to healthcare expertise?

Beng: Since we are both an IT and BPO company, Pointwest Technologies has an edge over companies that focus on BPO alone. Our IT expertise serves as an enabler to our BPO solutions.

Rhea: Here in the Philippines, our industry is transitioning from Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) into Business Process Management (BPM). This is a reflection of the convergence between IT and BPO services. As companies focus on integrated end-to-end solutions, there is a need to be able to support the IT systems that serve as the underlying foundation for BPO solutions.

There is also a growing demand from local companies in the Philippines for BPM services. We expect local companies to participate in the move to cloud services. Pointwest is ideally situated to provide the expertise, talent and solutions in this area.

Beth: Most BPO companies in the Philippines started as call centers. Now, many are trying to reposition their voice services to address the needs of the healthcare market. For its part, Pointwest Technologies decided to move into pharmacy benefit management (PBM).

PBM is a unique feature of mature markets or developed economies like the US. For most of the European economies, the state provides healthcare services. In the US, however, the private sector can opt to sign up for prescription drug coverage for their employees, in addition to their health plans.

We are now active in this segment, and recognize the importance of healthcare in both the US and developed countries in general, where changing legislation is increasing demand for IT and BPM services.

Has the trend towards BPM already reshaped your organization?

Beng: Although we have not seen significant changes for our existing clients, we are starting to see this trend trickling down to particular areas. We are already in talks with our end-clients to be able to position ourselves to take over a larger part of their services portfolio.

Some of the leading BPO companies have actively pushed the US market to allow for certain services to be outsourced outside of US borders, and set up the required certification system to do so. Do you feel that Pointwest Technologies has the power to drive such changes?

Rhea: Pointwest already has key certifications in place such as CMMI for both development and services. At present, we are undergoing training and internal certification from the PBM companies we work with. As we extend our reach to the healthcare provider space, there will be additional certifications needed, and so we are forging relationships with local training and certification entities.

Certification is a major cost factor for any company that wants to join the outsourcing industry. Though we are constantly looking at ways to better manage and reduce these costs, we understand the benefits, which is why we've always been committed to obtaining the necessary certifications.

Talent has been named as a key success factor that made the Philippines a BPO hub. How do you reflect on this element with Pointwest Technologies?

Beth: Our people are indeed our strength. From a resource development perspective, the Philippines is full of opportunities. From an intellectual, personality and behavioral point of view, we are confident that our people will succeed at exceeding customer expectations, because of their innate service orientation.

Beng: When we first started this business, our clients were mainly outsourcing low-level tasks. As we started to progress and increase our capabilities, the value of our work started to go up in terms of the value chain. We have always been trying to break the glass ceiling, which merely is a theoretical thing. By constantly breaking this ceiling, we have become a much more attractive company and industry.

It helps greatly that the Philippine government is supportive of the BPO industry. When we first started in 2003, BPO was a very new factor in the healthcare sector. When it comes to recruitment, we now go to the colleges and universities. We reach out to these institutions to market the BPO industry as an alternative career for pharmacists.

Rhea: Our registered pharmacists are as good as those that can be found in the US. During the first years of operations, these pharmacists had very limited career options. This has changed. Our people are certified by the Philippine Regulatory Commission (PRC) and have proven their mettle in taking on complex tasks

What is Pointwest Technologies' current approach to markets other than the US?

Beng: The domestic market of the Philippines is picking up. The largest set of service requirements here comes from the Philippine government, through healthcare organizations such as PhilHealth, though they are not yet being serviced by specific providers.

Rhea: I recently participated in a regional conference of HIM organizations, called Digital Healthcare Week in Singapore. It is indeed a burgeoning market, be it in a mature market like the US or a developing country like the Philippines.

Among the many topics discussed there, a major focus of discussion was the growing empowerment of patients through mobile devices, and this presents a tremendous opportunity for the local Philippine and regional Asian markets, because the younger demographics here means high use and comfort with mobile.

When we speak of an increased use of mobile devices and tablets, there must be a significant difference between mature markets such as the US versus developing markets such as the Philippines. How do you adapt your business development

approach accordingly?

Rhea: In the Philippines, for example, the adoption rate of electronic medical records (EMRs) is very low compared to markets such as the US and Australia. We try to learn from markets such as the US, to better understand what technologies can be used and deployed.

Having realized that, we have come to the conclusion that in countries like the Philippines we will first need to focus on the larger cities. We can still follow the example of developed markets because, eventually, that is the direction the emerging economies will be moving into.

Beng: There are providers in the Philippines that are already offering Telehealth services, for example in the area of radiology. This trend has already taken off in markets such as Sri Lanka and India.

Our experience in reaching those Filipinos that do not have access to hospitals comes from the banking sector. We are servicing the 'unbanked segment' through a mobile system that gives them access to banking facilities, in the same manner that health can be brought to the people. We feel this model can also be applied to the field of healthcare, so that segments of the population who have no access to hospitals can, through mobile phones, tablets, and other technologies, obtain healthcare services.

Telehealth will require a trailblazing effort in the same manner that we have taken banking to the unbanked.

We have already cooperated with the telecommunications companies to create such solutions. Especially in emerging markets, it is almost inevitable for players of different industries to partner and work together on some of these systems.

Unlike some of the big BPO players with operations in the Philippines, Pointwest Technologies is a Filipino-owned company. Does this make you more philanthropic when it comes to finding solutions to 'serve the nation'?

Beng: Our heart will always be here, but we also feel that we need a strong partner such as Zuellig, Mercury Drug, Globe, United Laboratories, and so forth. This will help us reach those parts of the population that do not have access to healthcare.

We try to do our part in making local work attractive and competitive. By showing Filipinos that they have the option of working here in the country, then we've done our part in helping stop the brain drain to other nations. We might even end up repatriating Filipinos working abroad!

Pointwest is also very active in several business organizations for the IT-BPO industry. I once sat as President of the Philippine Software Industry Association (PSIA) and currently serve as one of its Directors alongside being Chairperson of the Capability Development Committee. I was recently elected to the Board of Trustees of the Healthcare Information Management Outsourcing Association of the Philippines (HIMOAP).

Through our membership in these organizations, we hope to take the lead in making the IT-BPO industry in the Philippines a better one and in helping promote the quality and level of skill of Filipino IT-BPO specialists.

This year, Pointwest gained twin certifications for CMMI Maturity Level 3, one in CMMI-Development v1.3 and the other for CMMI-Services v1.3. We're just the 29th worldwide, only the third in Asia and the first in Southeast Asia to attain two CMMI certifications at the same time. That a fully-Filipino firm can do so will hopefully be viewed as a sign among those looking for partners in the IT-BPO field that the Philippines offers them quality services for their money.

Going forward, what will be the biggest challenge for Pointwest Technologies to grow in the healthcare sector?

Beng: We will need real partners to grow the business. As of now, we are just building up our marketing group to address such areas. This is also one of the reasons why we have a business development officer in the US.

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