

LEADING THE WAY

Facebook Ireland's upbeat general manager Gareth Lambe understands the value of broad cultural awareness as the 1.7 billion user platform gears up for 'three big plays'

Facebook's Irish operation is such an established part of the tech landscape here it's easy to forget it started out with a landing team of only 30 people just over six years ago.

Today, Facebook's international headquarters employs 1,500 people. It recently doubled its premises in Grand Canal Square, Dublin, taking over an adjacent building and generating capacity for up to 2,000 people.

This year sees further growth, with the construction of its new data centre in Clonee, Co Meath. Equivalent in size to eight Aviva Stadiums, and powered by renewable energy, it is only the second data centre to be built by Facebook outside of the US.

If it's a hectic time for Gareth Lambe, who heads up the company's Irish operations, it doesn't show. Facebook Ireland's general manager is relaxed and upbeat, and not just about the Irish performance but about the company's future growth plans generally. It no doubt helps that he's just back from a sabbatical.

"We have an initiative here where, when you're five years in the company, you get a month's paid sabbatical to recharge, and you're strongly encouraged to take it. Your managers will insist you go off the grid entirely and make sure you don't come back to a billion emails either, so it's great," he says.

That he chose to spend his in California is no cause for alarm either. "I must have been out there 40 times in the last few years but I'd never got beyond Palo Alto. This time I went out with my wife and kids and we explored all over. It was terrific."

Back on the day



job, much of his time is spent managing the needs of what is one of Facebook's most diverse operations.

Of the company's 1,500 staff, the biggest single nationality is Irish. However, the majority of its employees come from overseas, working across a wide range of operations.

The largest of these is its community operations team, which is responsible for trust and safety issues in relation to users. "The reason we have so many different nationalities working here is because it's not just about having people who speak the language, it's about having people who really understand the cultures of our users around the world too," says Lambe.

His second largest team is sales, which looks after business development across the EMEA region. The next largest cohort of staff is made up of engineers responsible for infrastructural engineering, data centres and network applications. After that come a wide variety of smaller specialist teams, from finance to legal.

"We have the greatest diversity of functions, operations and employee nationalities outside of the US," says Lambe.

Shift to mobile

Right now all are geared towards growth. One of the biggest factors driving this is the shift from desktop to mobile. Of Facebook's 1.7 billion users, more than 1 billion now access it via mobile phone. In Ireland that ratio is even higher; of 2.6 million monthly users here, 2.4 million access Facebook via their mobile.

User engagement is growing too. The average amount of time people spend globally on Facebook has grown to 50 minutes a day.

The expansion of Facebook's subsidiaries, which include ac-

quisitions Instagram and WhatsApp as well as its own service Messenger, has also driven growth.

The shift to video is gathering pace too. "One of the reasons we are building the data centre is to manage increased traffic on Facebook, not just in terms of users but also because of the fact that video is exploding now," says Lambe. "People used to communicate primarily through text, then photos, now it is video. In the future we are going to see the majority of communications coming through video."

The advent of news feeds has also fuelled growth. "There is so much content published online now that it's hard for people to distil it. I think perhaps the biggest single innovation of the last 10 years has been the news feed, that personal feed through the lens of your friends."

For future growth the company is making "three big bets", he says. The first is in relation to connectivity. "Our mission is to connect to the internet all the people in the world who are not connected to it. Right now, of the 7 billion people in the world, 4 billion don't have that connectivity, either they can't or they cannot afford the data. We see connectivity as an important right because not having it, not having that access to information, promotes inequality."

Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence will also loom large. "When you mention AI sometimes people take a negative view and think of things like *Terminator*. Unsurprisingly for a technology firm, we take a much more positive view. After all, predictive text on your mobile phone is a simple example of artificial intelligence in action. We're also looking at using AI for new initiatives such as to help blind people use the internet.



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“One example is an automated captioning tool that will help the visually impaired ‘see’ a photo on Facebook by describing what’s in it”

The company’s third big play is around what is for him “personally the most mind boggling” technological advancement—virtual reality.

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Average number of minutes Facebook’s 1.7 billion users spend on the service daily; 1 billion of them access the system on their mobile phones

example, it could allow a child in Africa to walk around the Sistine Chapel. In Med-tech you’re talking about getting right inside a microscope. Socially you’re talking about people not just communicating with each other, but families sitting around a table together. The potential is huge.”

It is, he admits, very early days for virtual reality but the other thing it is easy to forget about Facebook is that it is headed up by someone, Mark Zuckerberg, who is still just 32 – “and the only Fortune 500 CEO who is a millennial”, he points out. Long-term plays come easier to him than, perhaps, to companies whose “CEOs are at the top of the pyramid at the end of their term”, says Lambe. It also suggests that, despite the breakneck pace of growth to date, Facebook – and Facebook Ireland – is only getting started.