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Bozzo happy with IBI’s niche in the UK’s intelligent transport market

IBI Group has built a reputation in the UK as a specialist consultancy in the Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) sector. **Andrew Forster** spoke to director **Mario Bozzo** about market opportunities

Technology has revolutionised traffic management and control in the last 30 years and many local authorities have established traffic control centres, with walls of CCTV screens monitoring the road network, supplemented by data from other sources such as in-road sensors. The centres conduct data analysis, put in place operational plans, and feed out information to the public through media such as websites, social media, radio and TV.

But what is the future for these centres in the increasingly cash-strapped environment councils find themselves in? Mario Bozzo, a director of consultant IBI Group, which has carved out a niche in the UK’s intelligent transport systems (ITS) sector, says some councils are starting to see potential for economies of scale by making their traffic control centres the foundation for something altogether bigger.

Any local authority may currently have two or three control centres doing different things, he explains, one covering traffic, another community safety (CCTV cameras), and another perhaps providing telecare monitoring – sensors and panic buttons in homes to monitor the elderly and people with disabilities. “I think we’re going to start seeing people asking questions about could we bring these operations centres together?”

Some, in fact, have already done so. “We’ve just developed Glasgow’s operations centre – Glasgow has an operations centre now that consolidates community safety – CCTV essentially – and traffic management.”

IBI has won similar work with the London Borough of Brent and Bristol City Council. “Brent is CCTV for community safety and traffic management but they’re now looking at integrating other city functions within that. They’re saying, ‘How can we incrementally add other functions to create these economies of scale?’” The

sort of services that could be added are telecare delivery for health and social services, and an out-of-hours customer contact centre.

“In Bristol it started off as part of their property strategy – they were rationalising their property portfolio from 38 sites to five – and there were two separate control centres, one was traffic and the other was community safety and telecare,” Bozzo explains. “They’re now calling it the Bristol operations centre because it’s not just performing traffic management functions.”

Bozzo finds the new thinking exciting and emphasises that IBI has all the capabilities to advise on this widening picture. “I think the era of transport being seen in isolation is slowly disappearing. Previously, everyone made decisions in isolation from one another but because of the financial pressures they just can’t do that any more.

“We understand the technology – so we understand that when you’re integrating operations, you have to integrate systems as well, so we can comfortably play in that space and talk to that space.

“I look at it as ‘how do you integrate the operational management of a city?’ That’s essentially the question we’re trying to answer. Every city has these issues, every city needs to integrate more and collaborate more internally, every city is going to be faced with an onslaught of technology to help solve problems.

“Transport and community safety appear to be a lever because there already is some sort of traffic management or community safety operations centre in place.”

In the background

Before meeting up with Bozzo, I searched *LTT*’s back issues via the TransportXtra website, to get a flavour for the projects IBI works on in the UK. To my surprise, I

found hardly any references to the company at all.

Bozzo admits that much of the consultancy’s work goes “under the radar”. “I would say there was a point where it was purposefully so,” he says, but this is now changing. “We’ve just hired a global marketing communications director for the first time in our history because we do want to tell our story a little bit more.”

That story goes back to 1974 when IBI was formed in Canada. The IBI Group is now a global architecture, planning, engineering and technology organisation employing more than 2,400 staff in 69 offices worldwide – the majority in North America. Although it conducts a range of transport planning work in other countries, in the UK it has carved out a niche in the field of intelligent transport systems.

Bozzo is comfortable with this UK reputation. “I’m not sure we’re going to hire a bunch of transport planners – there’s a lot of competition to do a transport plan for an authority and I’m not sure we have the in-house expertise and the brand to go after these. But I think we can contribute to the transport planning discourse. When somebody’s writing a transportation masterplan for a local authority I’m not sure they could do so without talking about the technology components, whether it’s smart ticketing or traffic control centres, and I think that’s something we can add to.”

IBI entered the UK market in 1992 and Bozzo’s association with the UK and IBI is almost as long. He’d completed an urban planning degree in Canada in the early 1990s and, keen to specialise in transportation, saw there was a transport planning Masters degree course at the Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds. “I thought why not, I’ll go for a year.”

After completing the MSc, he applied to work for IBI back in Canada and was immediately posted to Glasgow. “They had a small piece of work in Glasgow

to bring some North American expertise in motorway management systems because at that time Glasgow was upgrading its motorway management.” He spent three years there, helping establish Scotland’s first national traffic control centre.

IBI then won a major piece of work from the Highways Agency in 1998, serving as technical advisor for the national traffic control centre, which was being set up at Quinton in the West Midlands. “We were involved in that for ten years from 1998 to 2008 more or less. Our prime responsibility was to develop the service specification for the PFI contractor [Serco]. Then, when the contractor came on board, we supervised all their work.”

The Highways Agency remains an important client today. IBI helped develop the operational regime for smart motorways, advises on asset management, and is part of Mouchel’s supply chain in the HA’s new collaborative delivery framework for major infrastructure projects.

Bozzo explains that IBI is also developing a ‘concept of operations’ for the strategic road network as part of a business transformation study for the HA in the run-up to it becoming a Government company, Highways England, in April. “We’re part of a framework in a consortium of Arup, URS, PA Consulting and Mouchel,” he explains. “There is no consolidated information strategy within the Highways Agency at the moment and so part of that scope is to put a strategy in place. Highways England is going to have to respond to much more customer-focused challenges.”

He believes there is a strong case for collaborative working between Highways England and local authorities. “If you look at the road network the HA only manages a small proportion. And local highway authorities are looking to rethink how to manage their networks. I see an obvious marriage there of more integration between road networks. Because, from a customer perspective, a customer does not care about the operational boundaries of the road network, so I think it’s going to enable Highways England and the local authorities to discuss things on a more integrated basis.”

More than just transport

IBI has been on the acquisition trail since 2000, acquiring about 30 companies globally. (The group however, reported what it said were “unacceptable” financial results for 2013 and subsequently enacted a restructuring plan). Two of its acquisitions were in the UK: Nightingale Architects Ltd, a healthcare architectural practice, in 2010, and Taylor Young, an architectural and planning practice based in the north-west of England, in 2012. These were fully integrated last year and so IBI’s UK activities, which Bozzo says

are profitable, are now about much more than just ITS. “It’s much easier for me to call on a planner or a healthcare specialist now because we are under the one team. It’s one profit centre, one business, so it’s quite easy for us to work across geographic boundaries and functional boundaries. I’ve worked on a few healthcare projects, for example.”

Bozzo likes both the mix of work and staff. “Within our offices you have artists and scientists together. Architects at the end of the day, they’re artists, they have a very creative side to them and our ITS practice comes at it from the science. For me it’s a beautiful blend. We’re co-ordinating a few corporate initiatives from the UK, including our equivalent of Smart Cities that we brand IBIQ.”

In all, IBI has about 260 staff in the UK and Ireland – about 70 are transport professionals – working from 11

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offices: Glasgow, Liverpool, Rochdale, Handforth (Cheshire), Birmingham, Newark, Harwell (Oxfordshire), Cardiff, London, Brighton, and Dublin.

David and Goliath

When bidding for ITS work, IBI finds itself up against some of the big engineering consultancies: “It’s the URS’s [now AECOM], it’s Arup, it’s WSP, it’s Mott MacDonald, I guess all the big engineering outfits,” says Bozzo. “So I’ve kind of thrived on David and Goliath. Although we’re small, we’re pretty big in a niche area. We’re not in that commodity market – we don’t have the 200 engineers – so our rates are usually a bit higher because we’re in a niche area. We’re specialists.”

IBI supplies some of its expertise through joint ventures with a range of other firms. “You usually find a fit,” says Bozzo. “With Mouchel we have a pretty good strategic alliance because we have both a breadth and a depth in that ITS space that they don’t occupy in numbers. We get on well with PA Consulting – we see eye-to-eye on a lot of things. We’re working with Cubic Transportation on Traffic Scotland work.”

Unsurprisingly, long-term relationships with clients are highly prized. “It’s more sustaining as a business,” he says. “It’s a tough business when you’re managing short-term contracts all the time.”

Transport for London is an important client. IBI helped establish TfL’s first traffic management capability in 2000 and subsequently developed the concept and preliminary layout for TfL’s Surface Transport and Traffic Operations Centre (STTOC).

IBI also developed the travel demand management (TDM) strategy for the London 2012 Games, a contract that lasted for four years. “We actually manned the travel demand management desk in the Olympic transport co-ordination centre,” explains Bozzo. It subsequently secured a slice of TDM work for last year’s Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and IBI is now the delivery partner for the transportation aspects of this year’s Pan American Games in Toronto – the group’s headquarters city. “We’re bringing UK experience to the table,” says Bozzo, who is personally involved in the project.

Following its work on the Olympic and Paralympic Games, IBI is now retained by TfL for TDM work. “Our TDM support for TfL sits within its marketing and communications [division] – that gives a real statement of what the focus should be: all of our work for TfL is about how is this going to benefit the customer?”

“It’s about very practical challenges – the road programme is an example. There’s a lot of disruption on the network so the question is asked: how are we going to relay this information on where the disruption is, to what extent and during what time periods, to the customer? We’ve got people in there, so it’s day-to-day operational and technical support for TfL too.”

In Scotland, IBI helped establish the Traffic Scotland information service and continues to deliver the service under a framework contract with Transport Scotland. It also wrote the ITS strategy for the Forth replacement crossing, encompassing technologies such as variable message signing, speed signalling systems, and automatic numberplate recognition cameras.

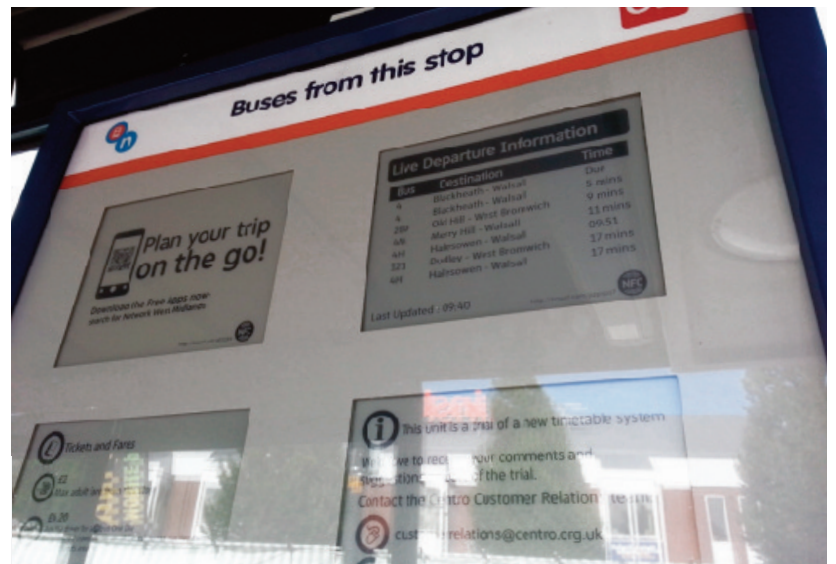
It provided tolling and traffic management expertise for Halton Borough Council’s Mersey Gateway project, and has a long-term relationship with transport data specialists Sky High Technology Ltd. The two firms have developed a Bluetooth-based movement analysis and reporting system for traffic and pedestrian movement that has been used in numerous surveys.

On public transport, IBI worked with Centro to develop a Kindle-type electronic timetable information display for bus stops and shelters.

One field in which IBI has so far failed to make its mark in the UK is public transport ticketing. “A lot of our ticketing experience is in North America,” says Bozzo. “We did ticketing in Dublin but we haven’t really cracked the smart ticketing market [in the UK]. I don’t know why. We’ve tried. I guess there are established firms. For some reason it either goes to SYSTRA or the big management consultants.” **LT**



Councillor Gordon Matheson, leader of Glasgow City Council, at the opening of the Glasgow Operations Centre



IBI developed e-paper bus timetables for Centro in the West Midlands