Q and A

As the newly appointed head of Snowden Technologies, Nic Pollock shares with *Australian Mining's* WA correspondent Jamie Wade his vision to streamline, simplify and improve information systems in mining.

AM: ***You've joined Snowden role as group general manager of the technologies division. What is the scope of that role and what is your remit?***

NP: The role sits on the Executive Leadership Team of Snowden reporting to the CEO with direct responsibility for Technologies to define and execute the strategy for the Technology Group globally within Snowden. The role is based here in Australia, but it's a global remit to work with all regional offices to deliver those technologies through our global network.

AM: ***Can you elaborate on that new strategy?***

NP: Initially the strategy is to mature the Technologies Group. Snowden Technologies is now over ten years old, however some of the practices don't necessarily reflect that. What has made us successful as a mining consulting house is not necessarily the best model for a technology company so we need to have a fresh look at how we go to market.The other part of that strategy is to refine our focus on core areas of customer value. Traditionally we have been too willing to build bespoke systems for customers purely because they were willing to pay for them rather than determining our strategic focus and choosing projects which fitted into that direction. Consequently the Snowden Technologies message is lost in the marketplace; people don't really know what we're about, so number one is to let people know what it is we do and reminding, educating about what we're good at and what we're going to keep doing.

AM: ***Your career thus far has included senior roles at Mincom, Gemcom and founding Viewlocity in Australia. What changes have you seen in your career? What would you characterise as the most significant changes in information systems in mining?***

NP: The number one thing I've seen (in mining) is maturation of the technology marketplace. When I entered the mining software market I was quite shocked at where the customers were in their infrastructure and use of technology from an enterprise perspective. On the one hand you had incredibly advanced technical software that was very clever being used by mining engineers and geologists. However, from an enterprise computing point of view, mining was far behind the rest of the world.

Software in mining has a serious problem with cross integration, Pollock says..

Automation will be the biggest driver of that maturation in mining information systems; it's allowed software to integrate data or control systems into the hardware. That wouldn't be possible without huge improvements in networking and comms to enable that.

The other big change is the take up of commercial off-the-shelf software. This fits well with our strategy of moving away from bespoke software development for mining customers. The whole reason you go into software development is repeatability – not one-off projects; each time there's a bespoke project we throw an anchor out the back of our boat to slow us down. Yes, we'll honour our commitments to key customers, but there's going to be more rigour on what we take on. And that's better for them too.

AM: ***What are the end users of mining software and IT services demanding?***

NP: Simplicity through better integration of the software and therefore processes, applications, and increasingly between operational technologies (OT) and information technologies (IT), and ultimately to or from mobile devices. People want access to information readily from anywhere. There is an increasing reliance on mobile devices everywhere – particularly in mining where most of the workforce is out in the field.

Regrettably, the mining software business is characterised by too many bespoke and discrete systems that don't integrate. Therefore, delivering that simplicity through better integration is the key challenge to vendors of information systems. However, let's not escape the fact that some of these applications are very complex and powerful, so we shouldn't dumb them down either.

AM: ***What are the opportunities to vendors of information systems to the mining sector?***

NP: The opportunities lie in that maturation I was referring to earlier. That is those that can help the customer standardise as much as possible without too much negative impact on functionality. That takes much more than just technology but being able to enable best practice through a change management process otherwise it won't survive. That's why the Snowden Technologies story is so compelling, it's not just the software but the best practice we provide. Reconciliation is a great example. We obviously sell a product called Reconcilor however anybody can do that, but ours came out of our field experience of our 170 odd professionals in the field and the development of a best practice around reconciliation. It's driven by mining professionals, not just product managers.

AM: ***How are some of the latest developments in information systems to the mining sector improving efficiency and productivity?***

NP: Clearly Automation is driving most of these gains. A lot of people confuse automation with staff reduction. It's not; it's about optimising the way that you mine a particular resource throughout the whole process. That obviously implies more than just automation of big yellow vehicles.