

# How a \$17bn Silicon Valley fintech giant is bringing 150 jobs to Nenagh

BY TOM LYONS

After a 17-year career in Silicon Valley, John Leenane is finally coming home. Last Tuesday morning the final international moving crate from California arrived at his new home outside Limerick.

The 44-year-old moved to the United States in 2000 with Irish technology firm Trintech before going on to work for well-known names such as Paypal and Verisign, as well as co-founding start-ups and dipping his toe in venture capital.

Leenane loved working in the Valley but, with four sons aged between six and 13, he and his wife wanted to move back home.

"We made a decision as a family to come back to Ireland some time ago. My family has been back in Ireland for over a year now," he said.

With his experience he knew he would be able to find work. However he was not sure he would ever be able to live near

where he grew up in Nenagh, Co Tipperary, and get a top-drawer technology job.

Luckily, he got a job with First Data, a \$17 billion New York Stock Exchange-listed fintech giant, not long after it announced plans to set up an R&D hub in Nenagh.

First Data is seriously big. It handles \$2.2 trillion in transactions a year. It works with six million merchants and 4,000 banks globally.

Leenane - whose full title is senior vice president, technology - has been made site lead in Nenagh. He is looking to hire 150 in a facility that would not look out of place in Silicon Docks in Dublin. The building can house 300 people, giving First Data flexibility down the road.

"How quickly we hire depends how quickly the projects move and we get the right people," Leenane said. "We will have maybe 20 folks by the end of the year and will then ramp it up in 2018."

The new centre, called LakeWorx because of its proximity to Lough Derg,



Interview

John Leenane: 'These are high-performing jobs. This is not a call centre'

Picture: Bryan Meade

will host a team working on the future of First Data. The jobs, he says, will be comparable to those typically found in the Valley or San Francisco.

"These are high-performing jobs. This is not a call centre," Leenane said laughing.

"This is not like a lot of the multinationals in Ireland which provide support around a core offering to help a company in the Valley. This is about Nenagh being the epicentre and doing core product development work that can be taken to other parts of the business around the world."

He said working in Nenagh offered the benefits of a rewarding job without

the traffic, spiralling rents or expensive houses faced in Dublin.

"There is pent-up demand among people who want to work in places other than Dublin," he said. "We are offering great career opportunities with the added benefit of a lifestyle away from the city."

"When you go through those lists [of why you do something], you come to not why, but why not. Nenagh is pretty much in the centre of the country and is an easy commute from Limerick, Galway or Athlone."

He says domestic and international success stories in Limerick and Kerry prove that technology and fintech clusters

can happen outside Dublin and Cork.

"For me it's not about where you come from but the skills and attitude that you bring to bear," Leenane said. "When people have the passion to get things done they can do a lot of good things."

First Data has a good track record in Ireland. It employs 350 people here, including 40 contractors. It has had a campus in Clonskeagh for ten years. Some of its staff have been with the company indirectly even longer, since it bought a stake in Irish company OmniPay, a provider of card and electronic payment processing services, in 2002. First Data took full control of this business in 2012.

"We have a 17-year heritage in terms of people working in technology and payments," Leenane said, pointing to a joint venture with AIB merchant services as another long-running collaboration.

Most consumers in Ireland have used First Data without knowing it. "People would have interacted with those white devices we have now put into merchant stores and the small tablet interface where you can tap your card to pay. Some people have even used a mobile device. All that is Clover, and that is basically a First Data product offering. We make both hardware and software for that environment."

In Nenagh, Leenane's team will be doing R&D in three areas. One is intelligent infrastructure. "That is really about productivity. We want to make our customers more productive and get to market faster."

The second area is international commerce services: "How can we bring new services to market much faster... how will marketplaces change... how will the Internet of Things change how you interact with a payment mechanism?"

The third area is data science. "The amount of information we have can be used in everything. It is both using data to keep our customers safer and giving them insights into how they can grow."

"Facebook, Google, Amazon... when you think about the data that is out there. Sure, Facebook has the social data, and Google has the search data, but First Data has the commerce data."

Analysing this data can deliver powerful insights.

"Consider the hurricanes which just tragically went through, Irma and so on. We could actually see from our data that when Irma hit there was a 72 per cent dip in retail sales in the region and as it passed we could see... normality returning."

First Data's Nenagh team will work with its 24,000 employees around the world.

"We want a start-up mentality to help the company. How do you create something that is new and different? That is basically what Nenagh is about."

## Kavaleer can do: animation studio signs 90-territory deal with Nick Jr

BY COLETTE SEXTON

Dublin animation studio Kavaleer has signed a deal with Nick Jr spanning 90 territories for its show Kiva Can Do.

Brokered by Brian Lacey, who was responsible for the distribution of Pokémon and Yu-Gi-Oh, the licence will see Kiva air next year in Belgium,

the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines for both pay and free TV. It will also air in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, India, South Korea, Israel and the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa - region

pay TV.

Kiva Can Do is the third original property developed by Kavaleer chief executive Andrew Kavanagh and produced by business partner and Kavaleer managing director Gary Timpson. The show, which had a global budget of between €2.7 million and €3 million, follows the exploits of a kid inventor, Kiva Kain,

who was based on inventor and former director of product design at NUI Maynooth Damini Kumar.

"The message of the show was every bit as important to us as the production values," Kavanagh said. "We wanted to create a character that not only entertained but also inspired kids."

James Hickey, Irish Film

Board chief executive, said that it was fantastic to see an original programme developed and produced in Ireland with Irish talent selling across the globe.

Pauline Macnamara of RTÉjr added: "Kiva Can Do! premiered on RTÉjr in 2016 and has been delighting our young audiences ever since. It's fantastic to see an original Irish

animation series receiving the international recognition it so deserves in this global deal."

Kavaleer focuses on creating programming which it describes as "pro-social". It recently partnered with Belfast's Paper Owl to produce the animation for the first immersive preschool show about autism, Pablo, which launches on CBeebies later

this month. The show, which has previously been licenced to France's Gulli and Hong Kong's TVB, is currently airing on RTÉjr.

Kavaleer is working on three other projects. These include 52 by 11 minute preschool show Alva and the Trolls, which will have a global budget of between €5 and €5.5 million. Another project,

Dougie Noir, a 52 by 11 minute show for six-to-eight-year-olds which will have a global budget of €6 million, has signed on with WDR in Germany as a distributor. Kavaleer has also just launched Neenawsaurs, a preschool show which received development funding from the Irish Film Board and will have a budget of about €7 million.

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