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CEO Spotlight, Dr. Homaira Akbari, SkyBitz

dcTechSource.com spoke with Dr. Akbari about her career, her views on leadership and the road to growth she is blazing for SkyBitz.

By Dave Liss | June 22, 2010

Based in Sterling Virginia, **SkyBitz** is a remote asset management and information service provider. The company serves over 700 public, military, private and public safety customers and tracks hundreds of thousands of mobile assets on a daily basis.



SkyBitz President and CEO Dr. Homaira Akbari

Company President and CEO, Dr. Homaira Akbari took charge of SkyBitz in October 2007. Dr. Akbari came to the company after serving as Executive VP for Operations with TruePosition, a wireless location technology provider. Her experience includes stints as a senior director for Microsoft, as a corporate vice president at Thales and as a scientist for CERN, the European Center for Nuclear Research.

Dr. Akbari holds a Ph.D. with honors in particle physics from Tufts University and an MBA with distinction from Carnegie Mellon University. She has published more than 50 scientific articles in international journals — all before turning 30.

dcTechSource.com spoke with Dr. Akbari about her career, her views on leadership and the road to growth she is blazing for SkyBitz.

What does SkyBitz do and what markets do you serve?

SkyBitz works with both government and private sector organizations that need to manage and track remote, unpowered assets. The success of many businesses depends on their ability to reliably deliver goods and services from one place to another as quickly and securely as possible.

We offer a very sophisticated solution for companies to remotely identify, locate and monitor a variety of motorized and unpowered assets. The SkyBitz GLS technology is the best in the industry and excels in power efficiency, accuracy and reliability. This has enabled SkyBitz to acquire the largest market share of trailer and asset tracking in the U.S. and Canada.

Our initial funding came from several research grants totaling nearly \$1 million from The Department of Defense's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). DARPA is responsible for the development of new technology for use by the government. SkyBitz is one of a very select group of companies to successfully create tangible commercial products from a DARPA research grant.

Who is your primary competition and what are your key differentiators?

SkyBitz is now the industry leader in remote asset tracking. We track, manage and provide remote access for over 200,000 active assets, or over 30% of market share for a universe of 700,000 total assets. These assets include: rail cars, trailers, barges, tankers and trucks.

Our two largest competitors are Qualcomm Enterprise Services and I.D. Systems. Respectively, these companies have the second and third highest market share. Between SkyBitz and these companies we control nearly 70% of the market.

The SkyBitz solution has both hardware and web services components. The hardware consists of physical tags for client assets. Our web services provide an end-to-end communications infrastructure and a sophisticated software application and user friendly interface for the enterprise to manage their assets.

One of the keys to our success has been our ability to build an ecosystem of providers and partners.

How has the economic downturn affected Skybitz and the primary industries you serve?

Despite these economic problems, SkyBitz came out of last year as a better, stronger company. We grew our top line by 7%, were profitable, reduced operating expenses and became more efficient.

But, despite our success, many of the markets we serve have had trouble. Last year freight shipping across all modes of transportation decreased by 50%.

Because of the economic downturn retailers were not selling products, businesses depleted their inventory and freight shipping decreased dramatically.

What was your biggest business challenge in the last 12 months? What has been your biggest success?

Our biggest business challenge was to transform the culture of the company. In the past, Skybitz was more oriented towards engineering. The mindset was, "We own it and we don't want to share." We changed from being an inward focused technology company to become an externally based, market focused enterprise. Now, as a result of these efforts we have created an ecosystem of partners and suppliers.

When I joined the company, it was not EBITDA positive. Now we are. We have been able to make the company profitable in a terrible economic climate.

Our market share was approximately 18% late 2006 and the largest competitors' market share was around 35%. Today our market share is 30% and the same competitors is around 12%.

How did you come to be CEO at SkyBitz?

I have been working in and out of location-based technology services since 2001 and have always been a great networker. I met one of the SkyBitz board members in 2007. We kept in touch and built a relationship. Eventually I was called and offered the CEO position.

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What are your primary roles in the company?

Since joining the company I have focused on many different areas: customer relationships, building partnerships and increasing revenues per person for each of our 50 employees.

Now a primary focus for me is to expand the company's business from being primarily a North American concern to new customer segments in global markets. Initially our business was focused on trucking. Today we are expanding into oil & gas, construction, intermodal and government markets around the world. One example of this focus is the partnership we are building with Iridium Satellite Company.

How would you characterize your leadership style?

What successful leadership is will vary based on business demands, the stage of a company's growth and the strength and the executive team.

I always try to lead by example and practice what I preach.

My goal is always to motivate our team to believe and buy into the mission and vision of the tasks at hand. When people believe in the mission and vision of a task they can better propagate to ensure success.

How would you describe the SkyBitz culture?

As a business, our focus is to provide the highest quality service to our customers and to constantly grow and innovate.

Our corporate culture is focused on being: fast, entrepreneurial, innovative and customer focused.

Does SkyBitz have a focus on green technology?

It has been shown that through the efficient management of assets, our business solutions decrease energy costs by 15% per asset managed under our enterprise solution.

Are there any current legislation issues that you are closely following and why?

One regulatory issue we are monitoring is Comprehensive Safety Analysis 2010, CSA 2010. This is an initiative by a division of the U.S. Department of Transportation to improve large truck and bus safety.

Our concern is that the new rules will have a harmful effect on our customers and companies that operate and manage trucks, to invest into new technologies which help them to manage their business more efficiently.

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