

# Sonera goes global

By Terry L. Wells

The Finnish telecom has targeted Europe, Asia and the United States with its innovative new mobile business portal.

In Europe these days, traditional companies with very traditional ways of doing business are embracing hot, new technology with surprising ease. Case in point: Weilin + Göös, one of Finland's largest publishers and booksellers.

W + G's cookbooks, encyclopedias and educational texts are often sold door to door and at local book fairs, which can make checking inventory and customer credit a hit-or-miss proposition for the company's sales force. In the past this kind of verification frequently required several phone calls to the main office and follow-up visits to customers' homes.

But today, thanks to a powerful new wireless application, W + G salespeople can use their WAP phones to access the company's database to check on a book's availability or review a customer's records. Placing an order, which once meant a call to an office clerk, is now as simple as clicking a button on a cell phone. How times have changed.

W + G's partner in bringing door-to-door sales into the 21st century was Sonera Corporation, Finland's leading telecommunications and Internet service provider and one of the architects of Europe's wireless revolution. Once Finland's state-owned PTT, Telecom Finland, Sonera has transformed itself rapidly, chiefly by exploiting the new business opportunities in the emerging wireless messaging marketplace.

Today the company, which has more than 10,000 employees and whose 2000 revenues totaled €2.06 billion (\$1.8 billion), is working to help build third-generation cellular networks across Europe and Asia.

## Company profile: Sonera Corporation

Headquarters: Helsinki  
President & CEO (acting):  
Aimo Eloholma  
Chair: Tapio Hintikka  
Employees: 10,305  
Revenues (2000): \$1.8 billion  
Net income (2000): \$291 million

Back home Sonera continues to provide wireless, wireline and Internet service to nearly 3 million Finnish residents and businesses. And its rapidly growing Sonera zed unit is providing innovative mobile services and solutions for consumers and businesses in Europe, Asia and the United States.

Among Sonera zed's applications is its mobile business portal, zed for business, which is making life for the Weilin + Göös sales force a lot easier. While other Sonera zed services focus on delivering travel information, news, entertainment, chat rooms and other services to WAP or SMS phones, zed for business was designed specifically for the business needs of a mobile workforce. Its services include mobile e-mail; a personal address book; a calendar; a company bulletin board; news, weather, translator and directory services; and additional Web links.

"What our customers find the most beneficial are the basic services, like mobile access to your company e-mail," notes Jyri Luoma, vice president of zed for business. "And that hasn't been widely available so far."

For companies like Weilin + Göös, which provides employees with wireless access to its corporate database, the benefits of zed for business are even more obvious, according to Luoma. The mobile portal has transformed the way W + G's field sales force does data entry—moving from pen-and-paper forms to a cell phone keypad—and the way the group interacts with the corporate office and database, all resulting in dramatic savings of time and money.

Sonera traces its mobile commerce roots back to its early days as Telecom Finland. Finland historically has enjoyed one of the world's highest

penetration rates for wireless service, so when the company was privatized and changed its name to Sonera in 1998, executives decided to focus on what they did best—provide fixed and mobile communications, Internet service and value-added applications in Finland. But the company also had ambitions beyond Finland's borders.

In 1999 the company created a new business—Sonera zed—to focus on building value-added mobile applications. Sonera zed rapidly expanded into a global operation and established partnerships with local operators in Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Singapore, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. Combined, these operators serve more than 100 million cell phone users—a huge opportunity for zed services.

### Prototype to pilot

The zed for business portal offers a variety of easily configurable information, news and entertainment services. Zed Finder, for instance, contains directory information for 14 countries, providing names, addresses and phone numbers for more than 600 million people and businesses; Translator lets users check definitions on the move; and Mobile Mail allows them to check their business e-mail and to reply instantly via mobile phone. Zed for business also offers standard interfaces for integrating corporate applications, allowing employees to remotely—and securely—tap into company intranet services such as databases, bulletin boards and corporate calendaring systems.

The mobile portal traces its origin to an early prototype developed by a team of Sonera and Accenture employees. "We started by defining what business would be available to a company like Sonera," recalls Juho Malmberg, the Helsinki-based partner

who led the Accenture team. "The outcome was that B2B and [business-to-employee] seemed to have the most potential. From there we did a working prototype with live interfaces to Siebel Systems and Lotus Domino" (two popular business software packages).

The prototype was unveiled in Geneva at Telecom '99, the world's premier telecommunications trade show, and quickly became the talk of the media and conference attendees. The launch of Sonera zed, the business unit that would market the portal, was announced at the same event.

The prototype portal became a pilot project. Accenture was asked to help implement the new service, initially for Sonera employees, then as a business for Sonera zed. The internal pilot allowed Sonera employees to send and receive e-mail, access their personal address books and tap the company's knowledge database; it was delivered in just 100 days, recalls Malmberg. The successful pilot was then revamped for business customers and external piloting began. In February 2001 the service was launched commercially.

### **Partnership**

Sonera's working relationship with Accenture during the hectic startup phase proved critical to the company's ability to develop and launch its product and business simultaneously.

"When you're developing new businesses, it's very difficult when people are engaged with their ongoing daily duties," notes Luoma. "We benefited from Accenture's global organization. Having a team of [their] experienced programmers and managers meant the mobile portal could be developed quickly—without taking much-needed resources away from Sonera's core

business." Accenture also was able to leverage experience gained across the mobile telecom industry and in m-commerce applications, enabling Sonera to develop a best-of-breed solution.

Since its launch, Sonera zed has been caught in the downdraft that has shaken telecom companies worldwide. But Luoma remains optimistic about the long-term prospects for services like the zed for business mobile portal. "This market is still in its infancy, but it's growing fast," he says. "We are focusing our business on meeting the needs of companies that want to wirelessly enable their employees."

Today the zed for business mobile portal is available in Finland and the United Kingdom, while Sonera zed's consumer portal is used in nine countries. Luoma says it is too early to know where zed for business will be offered next. "The vision is that this kind of service will change the way we do work. This kind of service will enable you to do your tasks wherever you are, no matter what kind of connections you have available. It gives you freedom [while] decreasing costs and increasing revenue, depending on the applications. At the end of the day, the bottom line is what counts. It's that simple." ■

*Terry L. Wells is an Atlanta-based business writer.*