



INTERVIEW OF THE WEEK: Emmet O'Rafferty, founder of Top Security

Expansion-minded security chief won't drop his guard

A big player in South Africa, the firm is eyeing other markets

EMMET O'Rafferty's grip on the security business he has built up over the past three decades appears about as tight as the one he had as a second-row forward with Leinster in his younger days.

The founder and chairman of Top Security stands as something of a lone voice among indigenous security firms after his company's main domestic rival, Omada, led by Michael Fenton, sold most of its business last week to G4S, the world's largest security solutions group.

"I haven't lost my ambition to grow yet. We'd certainly like to continue to develop in Ireland. We'd also be keen to move into some of the emerging markets in Europe," he said.

New markets hold no fear for the well-built O'Rafferty, having led one of the first outside security companies to venture into the South African market as the apartheid regime crumbled in the early 1990s.

"I was coaching a Wanderers team that did a rugby tour of Zimbabwe in 1992 and went down to South Africa on spec afterwards," he said. "It was an amazing time just before Mandela took power (in 1994). People were literally rushing to the supermarkets to stock up on canned foods at the time. They were expecting chaos."

As it happened, the transition went surprisingly smoothly, but it presented an opportunity to develop a business internationally. "I

felt that the big guys would just hang back and wait for things to settle before moving in. There was an opportunity for smaller guys to get in there first — and we jumped at it."

South Africa, where Top Security has grown through acquisition over the past 13 years to become one of the country's top three players, now accounts for about 30pc of his business.

The group's €45m annual turnover is generated from a number of areas, including security guarding, alarm and CCTV monitoring and IT security. It currently employs over 2,500 in Ireland, South Africa and the UK, where it has a small presence in the IT security sector.

On the IT side, the company recently unveiled what it claims to be the world's first secure webmail service — Topmail — provided by a physical security company.

"We hope it will get people to more readily identify us not just as a physical security firm but also an IT security firm. This product should help us sell additional products. Our ambition is that we will be able to roll Topmail out to 30 countries," he said.

At present, 65pc of revenues are still generated in Ireland, where O'Rafferty has gradually built up a presence since 1979 to become one of the leading security firms in the country. G4S, formed by the merger of Securicor and Group 4 Falk three years ago, has just consolidated its leading presence by buying Omada's manned security, firefighting and alarm busi-

nesses. But Top Security is battling it out with Chubb for second position.

"These big international companies don't give their Irish revenues, but we'd be far bigger than Chubb on the monitoring side and possibly smaller than them in manned guarding," said O'Rafferty.

The 54-year-old Dubliner puts his foray into the security business more down to chance than design.

While most of his classmates at Castleknock College went on to third-level education, O'Rafferty went out into the world of work, starting off in customer service in Berger Paints in Coolock in Dublin.

"I went on to try a couple of other things that didn't work. I set up a business printing pictures on people's t-shirts. I bought the equipment in the UK for £10,000 at the time and set up stall in Clery's and did a couple of shows in the RDS. It didn't catch on," he said. "That taught me a very valuable lesson in business: you've got to understand your product and your market."

Bruised by his initial business failure, O'Rafferty did a bit of doorman and private investigator work — "It mainly involved checking up on people who were supposed to be off sick from work" — before his entrepreneurial spirit kicked in again.

Starting up essentially as a keyholding service in the late 1970s, O'Rafferty's then fledgling part-time business soon got its first break with a

manned guarding contract at a printing company in Celbridge that was being liquidated.

The next big gig landed O'Rafferty in the middle of a raging industrial dispute at the Talbot Ireland car assembly plant in Santry, Dublin. "The strikers out in Talbot at the time were intent on not letting any outsiders in. The only way the company secretary could get me on to the premises was in the boot of his car — and I'm not a small bloke. We got a nice contract out of it after the dispute was settled."

From the outset, O'Rafferty believed that the only way to survive and grow the business was by establishing a reputation for having unyielding standards.

"At the end of the day, we're in the business of providing people with confidence. If something goes wrong with your washing machine while you're away, you're not going to be too worried. It's an entirely different matter if something goes wrong with your security."

O'Rafferty admits to having struggled over the years with delegating control to those around him as he strove to maintain standards. "I'm a nitty-gritty person, but I've had to try and be less like that in order to grow the business," he said.

"But the mantra I've developed is this: once I've developed sufficient comfort in somebody to do something to the standards I'm looking for, then I start to release."

Still, it seems hard for

O'Rafferty to loosen his second-row-forward-type grasp. "I'm not one for committee meetings. The more people you have in the room, the less sense is made. The only committee to have is of two — with one fella always out sick."

**Joe
Brennan**

PROFILE

NAME: Emmet O'Rafferty

POSITION: Founder and chairman of Top Security

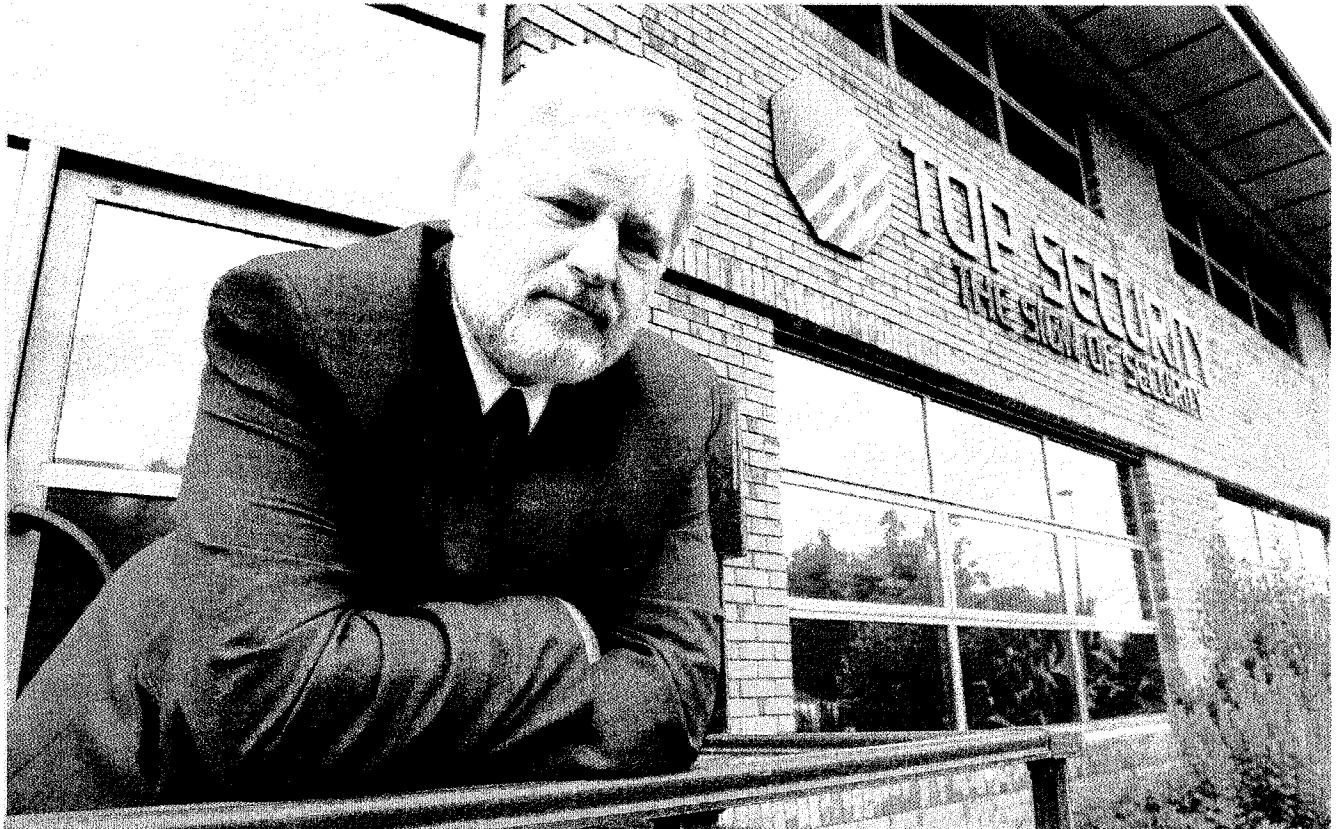
AGE: 54

LIVES: Mount Merrion

HOBBIES: 'I was very involved in rugby. I play the odd game of golf. I'm much more into theatre than cinema. The most recent things I've been to see were Sweeney Todd and 84 Charing Cross Road'

LAST FILM: The Departed

LAST BOOK: The Naming of the Dead, by Ian Rankin



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