

# MANUFACTURING MATTERS

Interview with  
**JOHN POLLOCK**  
**MANAGING DIRECTOR**  
**IXIA UK**



In a series of interviews with the partners of Knill James, manufacturers talk about their ambitions and reveal the issues which are mission-critical for them to address in achieving their goals.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

AS SPECIALISATIONS GO, being the only company which is completely focused on a particular market for its core product should be distinctive enough.

Not for John Pollock, managing director of iXIA UK, manufacturers of denesters, which pick and place containers onto production lines, to then be filled with food products. The machines are easily adapted, via a quick change of tooling, to accommodate different sizes and shapes of container. In their library they have tools relating to 2500 different trays.

"With plastic packaging so prominent in the news at the moment, we also have to be at the forefront of developments to enable recycling. "As a country we need to learn how to handle and dispose of plastic and have better ways to detect plastic which can be recycled," he insists.

Which translates to iXIA working closely with the tray manufacturers - as well as with their own customers, the food producers. Pollock is often asked by tray producers to liaise direct with the food producer and he would ideally like to "join the dots" between tray manufacturers, food producers and supermarkets.

"If we were all talking to each other we could make more progress," he says. Supermarkets and food producers are slowly coming to the conclusion that they to think sustainability, quality, and

then price, that they have to take the long view and to do it now!"

And progress is being made. One major tray supplier now owns a recycling plant where old trays can be recycled and used to make new ones. And iXIA themselves have already proven that recyclable trays and new trays made from pulp can easily work in an automated environment and with iXIA denesters. "We could switch to sustainable and recyclable packaging now, not in years to come," says Pollock.

iXIA supply machines to dozens of food manufacturers; though most (with a couple of notable exceptions, such as Youngs Seafoods, and Hovis) are not well-known brand names, though many are large, high-volume producers. "We have just put in another machine at a company in Leicester where they have twenty-six production lines and maybe 3000 people," says Pollock, "and this is just one of their eighteen sites."

A key attribute of a market leader is understanding what the customer is using the product for, and how that can be best achieved. "For us, it's not just about knowing how to design and make a machine, but knowing for example the basis of how plastics, aluminium, coppiceboard, and fibres work in a different way in a seafood environment to a ready-meal environment or a bakery business."

Pollock himself is an accountant with a background in other industries including the men's clothing industry and the motor trade, and has built up several other businesses. He was an early investor in iXIA and then in 2010 was "talked into buying the company."

But, he explains, he could see the potential which wasn't being realised. When he bought the company the focus in the industry was on robotics to increase automation, but he saw this as expensive and inflexible. His focus was on pneumatics: using air instead of electricity to 'power' the machines.

The pneumatic system basically sucks to extract a food tray from the stacked 'nest' of hundreds of empty trays then hovers over the conveyor belt and blows to place the tray onto the appropriate position so it can be filled with food.

All this is done at high speed: as fast as one tray per second, though the speed varies according to the type of food – with a sauce for example, it has to be done more slowly to prevent spillages.

The fully automated system, which can run continuously only requires an air supply, is designed to wait for an simple twenty-four-volt signal telling it when another tray is needed. "It looks continuous as it goes so fast," says

Pollock, "but it's actually pausing for a nanosecond while it waits for the signal".

The beauty of pneumatic machines, he says, is that they can be designed to be easy to use and maintain. "The test of any machine is that it's accountant proof. If I can work it, anyone can. You simply change the tool inside the machine according to the type of tray or the type of food being packaged, and just plug and play. It's easy to explain, even to workers who don't have English as a first language. It's quite a unique process and it goes wrong only if somebody damages the tooling, otherwise there is virtually 100% consistency."

In many food factories, the process of placing the trays on the line is still done by hand but Pollock doesn't see his role as replacing people with machines.

"It's about moving people to other parts of the production line, away from the most boring job in the world, which can bring the risk of repetitive strain injury," he explains. Studies also show that it's not good for the brain to do the same kind of repetitive work all the time."

For a number of companies, iXIA were able to make machines which put a lid on the tray and closes it, something which would normally be done by hand.

One of the dilemmas for manufacturers in iXIA's position is that they can be at the mercy of others higher up in the supply chain. So a major challenge for Pollock is planning and scheduling production of the machines, given that they take at least six weeks to make and that lead-times are always an issue for customers. "Our equipment is one of the least expensive parts of a food production line and that means we are not high enough up on the agenda to get to meet the actual decision-makers," he says ruefully.

"So our concept of what should happen often goes out of the window because of changes to the customer's production plans which are out of our control. Sometimes a customer will defer their order because they can't get the kit for another part of the process, which then affects our part of the project. One customer paid for his machine but then other parts of equipment didn't turn up so he wanted to delay delivery."

Pollock's ambition is for the company to become the Hoover (or maybe that should be Dyson) of his industry sector: in other words, the generic name for food packaging placement machines.

He's also looking ahead, at how to replace himself as MD of "my baby" in due course. "I want to get a young,

bright person to come on board, who can learn what I do and then incrementally increase sales over the years," he explains. "I could give them percentages of the company over time until I own none of it. Then they can use me if they want just to help clinch deals.

"We also need to bring apprentices on board, not only to learn about engineering manufacture but also about pneumatics; this is becoming a lost skill. Government help and incentives would help small companies achieve this"



The specialist manufacturing group at Knill James provides in addition to audit and tax services:

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- Advice on profit maximisation through examination of product and unit costing and implementation and management of stock control systems.
- Assistance with evaluation of proposed investments and examination of options for financing decisions.
- Production and analysis of benchmarking reports, examining Key Performance Indicators against peer group and competitors.
- Advice on optimisation of factory plant and machinery tax allowances.
- Guidance on Research and Development Tax Relief.
- Management of cashflow especially where exposure to exchange and interest rate volatility is involved.
- Assistance with management accounting systems and the production of internal financial reports.

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