

MANUFACTURING MATTERS

Interview with
ALAN EDMONDS
MANAGING DIRECTOR
SI PROTECH



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.

IMAGINE BEING far away from the nearest fridge or bar on a hot day yet still being able to have a nice cold beer – simply by twisting the top of the can. The technology to make that happen is now available in the form of the world's first self-chilling drinks can, the patented Chill-Can – and SI Protech helped to make it happen.

The injection moulding specialist helped with the design and made vital parts for the new technology, which is to go into volume production at a new factory in the USA, which is also owned by Mitchell Joseph's American business, Joseph Co.

Developing intellectual property isn't something new for SI Protech. One of their specialisms is product development for the brewing and beverage industry, where noteworthy products they have worked on include beer can widgets for Boddingtons and a keg for Heineken that doesn't need a CO2 cartridge.

But the target is for half of (much increased) turnover to be through their own products by 2022, says managing director Alan Edmonds, a consultant to the business who came on board as managing director in 2016 when the company was sold to Joseph, who had been a customer.

The business was originally started by Mark Sillince – a former development

engineer for Whitbread – mainly as a design consultancy which then developed as a manufacturing business with design and development bolted on. For example, an existing process meant a worker having to don protective clothing and breathing equipment to handle chemicals. "We found a way to automate that dirty process," says Edmonds.

"Contract manufacturing provides predictability and means we can plan with some confidence, but if customers don't always get their forecasts right and they sneeze, then we catch cold."

Which is why Edmonds is edging SI Protech back to the original model of having their own intellectual property. The goal is to develop their own products, possibly selling them under licence and earning royalties.

"Or we could simply sell the IP," he adds. "If we could have our cake and eat it, it would be to sell the IP, agree a royalty and get the manufacturing rights as well. It makes sense because we have an intimate knowledge of design and development and know how to manufacture the product."

The pace of new product development is a challenge. "With new product development, it's better to overspend on capital expenditure than be late to

market," Edmonds believes. "If you have to, throw more bodies at it to get it out of the door. Have the courage to make the investment, knowing the financial reward will come off at the back end."

It's a risk, he concedes: "But if a company is really creative and innovative there is always going to be risk; Tom Peters once said that if you get it right first time every time, it wasn't a very interesting idea in the first place."

As well as injection moulding and assembly of components and products, SI Protech have at their 22,000sqft factory additive manufacturing (3D printing) and fully-integrated robotics for 'untouched' handling and error checking.

Edmonds has adopted principles used in the automotive industry to improve supply chain management. "If the tools, equipment and people are all up to the right specification, the product should come out right," he maintains. "You need statistics to make sure your process produces the same quality at six in the evening on a Friday as it does at six o'clock on a Monday morning."

Exports form 75% of the business and with Brexit SI Protech have been considering having a factory in Poland "That would also give us a low-cost

manufacturing base for our own products," he says.

The Brexit process has "crucified" manufacturing businesses," he observes gloomily, referring not just to tariffs but also to the issue of staffing.

"Manufacturers have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince. Brexit has compounded the skills shortage because the well of Eastern European engineers in particular is running dry. About fifty per cent of our workforce comes from outside the UK and the improved economies back home is now a lure for many. They have made their lives here and their children speak English, and while I have tried to reassure them after the Brexit vote, there has been such a long period of uncertainty about what will happen."

Most of the company's skilled people are in their fifties, and for that reason, SI Protech have launched a training scheme for staff to learn new skills.

This will be a "fantastic" way to motivate staff , says Edmonds, a former business coach and lecturer. "It will improve skills throughout the business, in areas like team leadership, for example." But he believes that higher education needs some re-calibration if it is to deliver "ready for work" graduates.

"We had a chap who went on a course to learn SolidWorks, a CAD program," Edmonds explains "He said there were all these young designers who left him standing with their understanding of the technology and that made him despondent. But when they had to say how they would make the design, he found they really didn't have a clue about manufacturing processes.

"Universities are turning out creative designers who know their way around CAD, but design engineers need to be able to take a design into manufacture, to know how what they are creating can be made."

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

- Strategic development and business improvement consultancy services, encompassing 'lean manufacturing' guidance.
- 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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