

# applying – not just creating

The definition of a knowledge-based company?

A good starting point is a company which applies knowledge to differentiate itself from others in its sector.

But a knowledge-based company doesn't always have to be a creator of technology.

It can be a skilful user, because a knowledge-based company is one which applies knowledge to gain a competitive advantage.

As this report, the first of two commissioned by Menzies, the chartered accountants and business advisers, will reveal.

# How to go faster and quieter

“I could see it was important to steer the boat building industry towards a more scientific approach,” says Mark Russell, managing director of CJR Propulsion, the UK’s leading designer and manufacturer of precision-engineered propellers and related sterngear.

“Historically, boat builders are very poor at collecting data,” he explains, “mainly I think because they have simply grown from building small boats to producing bigger boats. However, we are very interested in looking at what water is doing around the boat’s hull and what affects the underwater drag, and with the computational fluid dynamics (CFD) software that we’ve developed in-house we can show our customers how they can make a faster, quieter boat.

“A boat can go a knot to a knot and a half faster just by using the right propeller, even more if it optimised through the CFD analysis. It means our business is changing from being focused on the manufacturing side, to a design based business. We’re approaching the builders to come and see us at the very first stages of the production process for new boats to demonstrate the potential of what we can do.

“Our main clients today are the super yacht manufacturers, such as Sunseeker, and Fairline, as well as workboat and production yacht builders, but my grandfather started the business as a metal polisher. He polished propellers for the MoD in the second world war, and built up the business until the early eighties. But in 1976, our major



customer was finding things very hard, so we started to look for work in new areas and decided to invest in opening our own foundry. Even today we sub contract very little. You need volume to make anything off -shore. As customer demands have changed, we have become more design focused, and I believe we now make the finest propeller and sterngear systems available anywhere in the world.

“We’ve recently tied up with Southampton University’s engineering department as part of the government backed Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme; that means we are able to have a post graduate student working for us full time - and doing some very clever work. The next step in terms of materials will be composites, so we are already looking at using those with the university. Using composites would give a boat a real weight advantage, as well as being cheaper to manufacture.

“For the past five years, we’ve won Sunseeker’s awards for the best supplier in some form or another,” says Russell. “The CFD software, which tests how underwater appendages, such as propellers and rudders interact with the water, ticks a lot of boxes because, by making propellers more efficient, it not only makes boats go faster, but also makes them ‘greener’ because of the improvement in fuel efficiency and longevity. There is no other manufacturer in the UK investing in this sort of technology, and I think the reason is that the designs are so complex that without considerable investment in the latest equipment, it would be impossible to produce them.

“The competition doesn’t have the design and manufacturing capability that we have, but our problem is getting the message across. People will spend £100,000 on an engine with enormous horsepower to make their boat go faster, so our job is to show them that we can achieve the same speed increase if they spend just £5000 on a better propeller.”

“Looking ahead, we need to reduce the amount

of time it takes to analyse a hull using the CFD software,” Russell explains. “Currently it takes three to four weeks, but for it to be commercially viable, and reduce labour costs, it needs to be done in much less time - days even. We are working with the university to look at automating the process – and my dream is of having a fully automated factory here. At the moment some of our competition is in the Far East, but if we can reduce labour costs by automating more of our manufacturing processes, it will make us much more competitive internationally.

“It’s one of the reasons why we invested <euros>two million in new technology, including a precision robot for the finishing work on the propellers. I used to have a team doing it by hand, but actually the constant vibrations can cause people to lose feeling in their finger tips, so that was another reason why we had to look at other ways of doing things. Now, some of those same people are in charge of programming the robot instead. It’s great to see a machine doing a dangerous job that a human used to have to do. I find it fascinating.

“Unfortunately, all our investment doesn’t make us impervious to new technology. Cruise ships are already using a ‘pod’ arrangement rather than a conventional drive shaft, incorporating a specific, patented type of propeller, and Volvo has brought out a version for smaller boats. The advantage they have is that they can be driven by a simple joystick. If we can make our propellers compete on speed, we may win out in the long term, as the joystick alternative is still significantly more expensive.”

**[www.cjrprop.com](http://www.cjrprop.com)**

James Cawkell



## Knowing how to make a real difference

The sharp-end is probably what differentiates Adaptsys. The founder/managing director James Cawkell knows from direct experience what it's like to be a customer of his kind of company.

"My father had a company, MTL Microtesting, which was the first test house for semi conductors in Europe. I started with him, and then set up Diagnosys with him to manufacture automatic test equipment, which we sold in 2003," he explains. "Then we started Adaptsys to specifically provide cost-effective, state-of-the-art products to help electronics manufacturers meet their production challenges."

That's 'help' as in providing something which delivers more than an existing, generic offering. One area is in tape and reeling, the process of packing components into individual pockets on carrier tape which is then wound around a reel that is loaded onto production machine or line.

"Previously, sourcing carrier tape had been a slow and expensive process for companies, due to the set up time and minimum order levels, but we recognised they wanted to reduce costs, reduce inventory, but still be able to have tape as and when they needed it," says Cawkell.

"Using a new forming and tooling technique we developed a patented method of producing the

tape more quickly and cheaper, and customised for the customer. We also distribute the machines that pack components onto the tape.

But that's only one element of Adaptsys' 'production challenge' meeting attributes. The company is also involved in automated production equipment and programming devices.

The latter gives customers more control by having the ability to programme microchips in-house. "One client, for example, is a Freeview set-top box manufacturer," explains Cawkell. "The latest technology has very large capacity chips. For them, having the ability to programme in-house and put the software in the 'boxes' themselves significantly reduces their costs.

"In 2004 we opened an office in France, and in 2005 we opened in Hungary. We could see electronics companies like Panasonic were moving their manufacturing to Eastern Europe and Hungary has a good infrastructure, as well as good links to Slovenia. It was an open area, and having a growing automotive industry there suited us too, so when the opportunity came up we went for it."

**[www.adaptsys.com](http://www.adaptsys.com)**

## What to do after making a stand

“Knowledge underpins our expertise to see what it is that the customer really wants, even if they don’t know themselves exactly how that can be realised,” explains Sunjay Saini, managing director of Quadvision. “We’ve even had our competitors come to us to buy our systems because we are very good at putting the package together.”

“My business partner Robin Hughes and I started the business six or seven years ago. I’ve got an electronics background and he was MD of the European division of a company distributing graphics cards. It was from listening to his customers that he came up with the idea of producing mechanical stands for PC monitors, the biggest of them holding eight, twenty-four-inch monitors off one base. The stands can be used in a variety of environments, but research has shown that if you work using two computer screens, rather than one, you can increase your productivity by 10 to 30%, and it’s not a very costly investment.

“The PA for Terry Pratchett happened to spot one of our multi-screen stands, and recognised its value to a writer, so his last five books were written using six monitors on a six-output high end workstation system, which allowed him to view previous documents, research material and other reference documents simultaneously.

“We design the stands, assemble them and ship them out from here, but we sub contract the machining. We’re not the cheapest manufacturer, but the quality of our stands is apparent in terms of being able to hold multiple monitors safely.

“The stands are still an important part of the business, but after a while, we started to also push towards supplying complete solutions for people needing multiple screens, such as traders on dealing floors. There were already companies out there doing video walls, but we were the first who could knowledgeably offer a complete solution.

“Initially,” says Saini, “the demand was largely for the reception areas of large offices, such as The Daily Telegraph Media Group. They were our first big customer in 1997/98, followed by the Met

Office, who had opened their new headquarters in Exeter and wanted a six-screen LCD monitor installation in their reception. We were able to provide them with the complete solution, from installing the screens into a false wall, to the digital signage software to control the content.

“Because of our ‘whole package’ offer, we can come in at ground level and advise on the concept and what’s needed in a practical sense. For example, Clinique had the idea of having a video running around the beauty counter, so we went in and advised them on the practicalities, which involved doing some nifty stuff, shaping the installation so that it would fit a curved counter.

“We’ve been doing some work for Toyota, who wanted a system that enables someone centrally to be able to control what all the screens in their different dealerships are showing. They can’t get that from the large screen manufacturers. And last year we created Visifica, a screens package aimed at the retail market. We’ve already provided screens for Harrods and for Estee Lauder, Clinique and Bobbi Brown in Selfridges, which is a good start.

“We are engineers and we want to build organically, not go to the banks, so we’re looking at maybe partnering some major marketing companies, or, in the case of Visifica, with architects.”

“We’re at a crossroads now,” muses Saini.

“We’ve got our technology right and we have a strong customer base, so we just need to market ourselves well. To be honest, the sky’s the limit. The London Trocadero recently met with us and asked if we could provide not just the screens, but also the sales team to sell the advertising on the screens. That could be an interesting possibility for us – again, if we had the resource. We know it works; Harrods spent a fortune on installing their screens, but admitted to us that they’d recouped that money in six months from the screens’ advertising sales.

“We need to focus, as we are doing so much already – but then it’s doing ‘too much’ that’s kept us in business!”

**[www.quadvision.co.uk](http://www.quadvision.co.uk)**

# Different dimension to staying on track

“We are different, says John Owen, director and co-owner of Data Track Technology plc, “because we wholly own every process. We bring in a few component parts, but otherwise we do everything - the design, the manufacturing, the servicing. Why don’t we outsource more? We run a lot of government network services, so it is important we can control everything in this building. It also means that we can consistently manufacture to a standard. Owning the whole process from start to finish is a major differentiator.”

The company enables its customers to manage voice and data communication and started thirty-one years ago as a hardware manufacturer. “Downstairs, we still do design, testing and manufacturing,” says Owen, “but back in the mid eighties we set up a software business, Foundation Data Systems because it was becoming clear that hardware itself was not enough – we needed software to sell hardware. In the mid-nineties the two companies merged and formed Data Track Technology. And today we are a software company that also sells hardware. Now our software can also run on other hardware which makes us more of a service company

“We established managed services, or as some call it, cloud-ware computing – a pay-as-you-use type of service for customers. We were early adopters of cloud based computing, mainly because our customers were asking for it. We measure our volume on the number of telephone extensions that

we report on and we’re by far the largest company offering that service, I’d say globally. We have our people working on site for major operators like BT, providing service to their customers on their behalf.

“It’s a legal requirement for the public sector to be able to produce their call data – and most commercial organisations believe it is best practice to know how their calls systems are operating so the service we provide is very valuable to them,



Michael Owen

and they are happy to outsource it to us. When we set it up, we thought it would be great for SMEs wanting to save capital costs, but we’ve found that the companies that we’ve signed have actually been very big, some with hundreds of outlets, each of them running like a little SME, with the head office wanting to have overall group control. But our on-site software solutions still remains a strong business and we have installations now in

every country where there's a British presence.

"We can offer so much analysis and reporting, and at such a complex level that for on-site systems we have to deploy an engineer to a customer's site to set it all up. The people we're competing with can offer just some aspects of the service we offer – and only have to send out a CD to a new customer! Our competitors will have more people working on their help desks, simply because they are getting the customer to do all of the initial configuration work, and they need the back up.

"We've enjoyed a 98.5% contract renewal rate on managed services – that's a very nice position to be in. We have a very low customer churn, and staff turnover."

"Data Track has a legacy of being very technical and product focused," says Michael Owen, John's son who joined the business nearly three years ago to take responsibility for marketing after running a telecoms consultancy. "In some ways, that's a strength because we know that whatever we make works extremely well, but the negative side of that is that it can take us longer to get something out there.

"What's happened over the years is that, yes, the competition has been catching up, but technology has also got more complex, and the needs of SMEs have also grown – so they now want the same level of service that the big companies have. We're moving down the value chain to exploit that growing market."

As well as moving sideways to move forward. "About five years ago we acquired 80% of a company called 2021," says Michael Owen. "They had been a customer and distributor of ours – buying the software and putting it into the hospitality sector – so that has opened up a new market for us. Around the same time, we also opened a satellite office in the States to service big contracts there. The US government has wanted to ensure that the energy companies know their assets and have greater security, which has meant a lot of them there have suddenly needed all the stuff that we do. It's a major operational change that is going to take them years to take on board, but is very good news for us.

"Our plans now are for major growth in the US. The experience of seeing how the

opportunity with the energy sector came about has meant that we want to move away from the approach of 'here's a new product, and this is how it fits that market'. We'd rather be looking at the requirements of certain sectors and considering how we can meet them.

We've just been working on security for one of the UK's largest banks for example. In the past, contractors would have access to the bank's system to log in for maintenance, but it left the bank vulnerable, and the government is paranoid about cyber terrorism. We've developed an application that required engineers to be authenticated before they can access the system. We also keep an audit trail of who has accessed it and we can randomly change system passwords every thirty days. We'll be launching the application this year and it could potentially be a massive growth area."

"The problem," says Michael Owen, "is that we have a strong brand identity for our hardware and our telephony reporting systems, as we have been doing that for 15 years, and so making the shift to other areas, such as network security can be a challenge, in terms of how others perceive us. On one side we are already doing 'fault management' so 'access management' sits nicely alongside that, but moving from just providing information to customers to having management input is quite a shift.

"We're also trying to have a more long-term road map in terms of what Microsoft and Cisco will be doing in 'x' years time and seeing how we can fit in to that development. You've got the likes of IBM and HP coming in, and that opens up opportunities and threats, so we need to look at partnerships and integration.

"It's not finding people with the right skills which is an issue in terms of being able to grow; it's the application of those skills and transferring them into revenue. We are also continually wrestling with the issue of which potential developments to fund, and which need less urgent attention. If you wait until the need is urgent, it can often be too late, but you can't fund everything so we have to look at customer and sector requirements to make the judgement call."

**[www.datatrackplc.com](http://www.datatrackplc.com)**

## Evolution maintains the competitive advantage

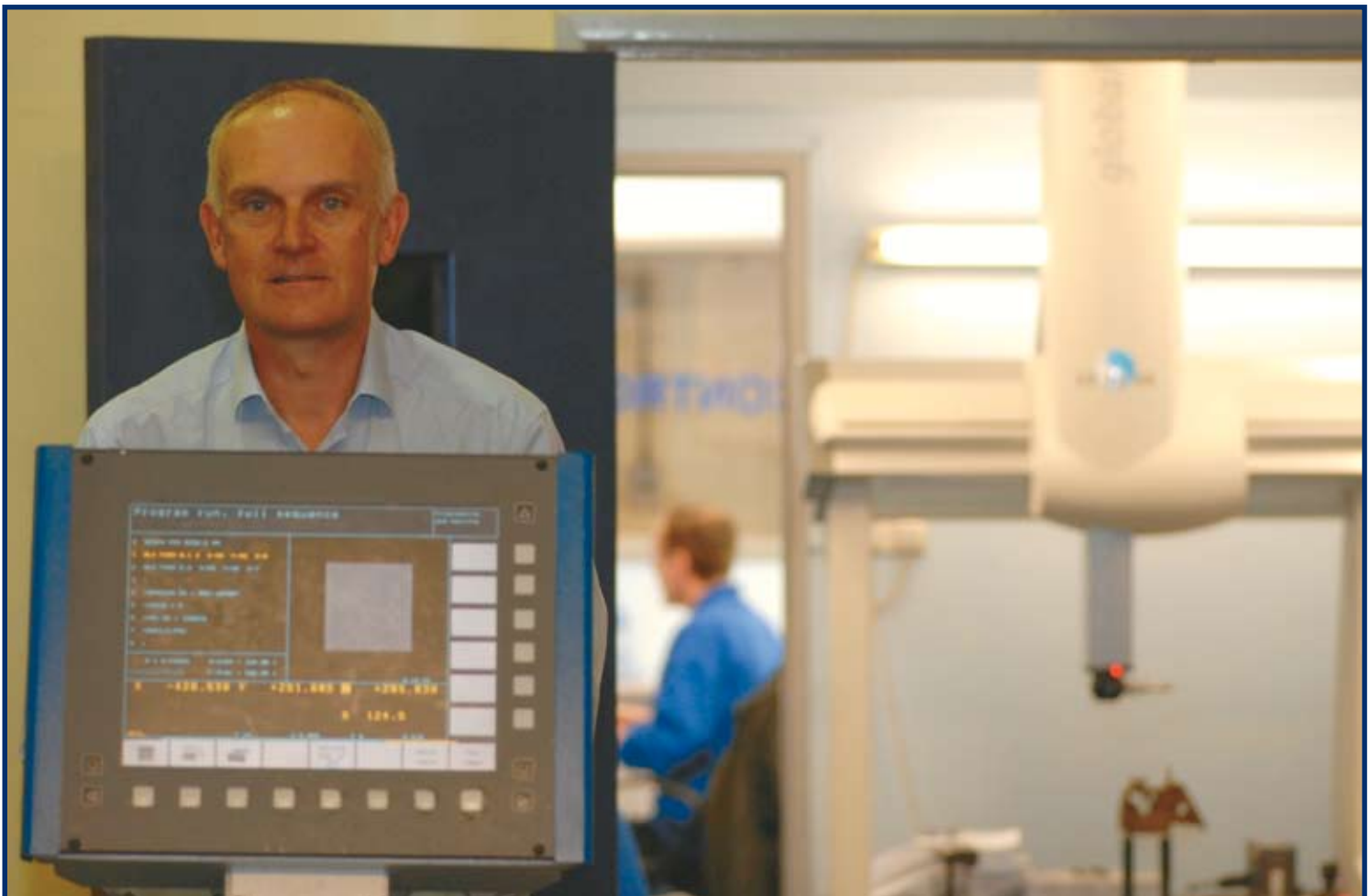
It's not just about quality, delivering on time and at a competitive price - another requirement is solving problems for the customer by being able to apply your knowledge and vision," suggests David Light, managing director of The Di-Spark Group.

"Di-Spark evolved out of another engineering company, started by my father, which made press tools. This was a labour intensive business, but in 1977 he saw a machine at an exhibition that he knew would revolutionise the process. The machine was called an EDM (electrical discharge machining), and he was so impressed with it, he bought two of them. The technique, also known as spark erosion, removes metal by producing a rapid series of repeated electrical discharges between an electrode and the piece of metal being

machined - it literally melts the metal away, and is more intricate than conventional machining.

"Local companies heard of it and wanted us to help them out with their machining, and so my dad, recognising the opportunity, started Di-Spark in 1980 as a sideline to the main business. The business continued to grow into the mid nineties, and then dad decided to retire and sold the original company. He was looking for an exit for Di-Spark, but hadn't planned it very well. He was always more of a hands-on guy, whereas I'm more of a planner, more academic, and he ended up selling (not giving!) me the business in 1997.

"I took stock and planned, and decided to evolve the business into being a provider of complete machine parts rather than just a provider of



David Light

a specialist sub-contract machining process; I wanted Di-Spark to be a value added contractor. We also branched into other advanced machining technologies so that now EDM makes up only 50% of the business as opposed to 75% ten years ago, but we're in the top three of EDM contract businesses in the UK. Through 2011, I can see that the trend will continue, so in a sense our name – which reflects EDM – is a bit of a hindrance.

“Investing in advanced machining technology has stood us in good stead, and what I've also tried to do is aspire to world-class practices and benchmarks in all areas of the business; for instance, we have Investor in People accreditation. That said, it's all very well having the best machines, but if no-one knows who you are, or the value you can add, they're worth nothing. So we made the strategic decision to take on a new business manager a few years ago and to focus our sales strategy on ten key customers from our 500 accounts. We chose customers who were in markets which meant we knew it would mean we could have a long relationship with them.

“Most of our subsequent business has been working with them, rather than from looking for new customers all of the time. Eighteen months ago, with the world changing, a few dropped off the scale, but the rest had strong trading potential, so I feel I made a good call – or at least, an educated guess – in making that choice.

“Now we're a manufacturer in a broader market place, we have a lot of competition, but our high investment route has actually given us a competitive advantage,” Light argues. “The lowest cost model is starting to unravel now I think. If companies take into account the total cost of outsourcing abroad in terms of lead times and resolving quality problems, the low cost contractors don't come out on top. One of our aerospace customers, for example, decided to put their machining out to tender to fifteen different suppliers, driven by

their corporate owners. We made forty of those parts. Our customer audited each supplier and did the credit checks and we got into the last four. I had knowledge of the parts and quoted keenly, but we didn't win the work. I was disappointed, and the company moved the work to a precision engineering in the north which had come in at 30% cheaper. Within three months the chosen supplier had gone bust. So, I feel frustrated by people undercutting me, but not threatened, because if I can't be competitive using advanced machining technologies then I'm in the wrong business.

“I'm the thinking in the darkened room, planning man – I leave my business development manager in charge of customer relations. As the owner/manager of a small business, I can be a bit of a control freak, but that can be a constraining factor in a small business. I had a health scare a few years ago which made me really re-assess and let go a bit more.

“I'm now at a cross roads. We occupy 12,000sqft in three units on an industrial estate right alongside a motorway, but we've run out of space. I know we could do more, but do I really want to relocate my business and invest in a 20,000sqft factory? When an economy is in transition there are opportunities to be made though, so, I'm in a bit of a dilemma at the moment. We could grow by going down the acquisition route although I bought a company eight years ago which didn't work out, so I'm cautious about doing that again.

“We have all the blocks in place for growth, and although there is a lack of skills in this sector, rather than sit and moan about it, we introduced apprenticeships; half of those that I employ have come through the scheme.”

**[www.di-spark.co.uk](http://www.di-spark.co.uk)**

# Taking a uniquely simple approach

“We homed in on bar codes when they were fairly new,” says John Poole, managing director of Image Computer Systems, “created the hardware for printing them, then inevitably started developing software. First it was for PCs to enable them to produce the bar codes, then Windows arrived and we developed the first labelling software for them.

“We made a real success out of it, so I retired early and became a commercial pilot, flying helicopters, which I’d always wanted to do. Effectively it meant I neglected the company for seventeen years. Then five years ago, when profits were going in one direction - down - I came back to it. We’d lost market share, in particular to an American company which had bought copies of our software, looked at it and thought – this is a good idea! You can’t patent software, so there was little we could do about it.

“Prior to my retirement we’d also been working for the retail sector, doing signage for companies such as B&Q, who were also using our software in store to print their own labels,” explains Poole. “When I came back to the company, I could see that the retail market was now just too difficult. Our competitors were better at marketing than us, even if their product was inferior, and you can never find anyone who will take control of a problem in the large retail organisations. I realised it was better for us to tie up with people doing the bureau printing. We’re better at working with partners, as our strength is very much in our products. I’m a product person, not a marketing person. So, we’re now focusing on improving the labelling software instead – it’s a massive market.

“Competitors keep adding more and more features to their products, but down the line, the

end user doesn’t use most of them so instead, we’ve concentrated on simplifying our product to make it more intuitive and we’ve hidden the complexities beneath the surface. The interface is so important. I’ve been dealing with customers a lot more and their feedback has been so important to us.

“We’ve developed a product called SOLO, based around a keyboard, which is a unique stand alone label printing solution, allowing the users to design templates for their labels in any format, with barcodes, images and any other symbols, in a matter of minutes. It can be applied to a variety of environments, and used by even non-technical staff.

“The knowledge is, I suppose, in me – and in one of my developer guys. But I’d say it’s our experience that sets us apart though. Modern programmers don’t understand computers in the same way as someone like myself, who has grown up with their development. I have an intimate knowledge of all aspects of computing – not just the software. If we just had knowledge of programming, we wouldn’t be able to create a product that’s as fast as ours, for example. We can adapt the printer itself to make it more efficient. We can also bypass drivers and make the software communicate directly with the printer to make it much faster, even if it is printing variable data. We know printer command language so we can talk to it directly and get better performance.

“We’ve been very domestic-facing until now, but my plan – once the software is right – is to launch into other English speaking markets. We need an international product in order to grow. We want to steal the market back from the people who took it from us some years ago! Our plan is to sell our software worldwide, to work on any sort of printer.

“We’ve created a relationship with an Asian company with a range of thermal transfer printers. They were an emerging company and very good at engineering a product. About 50% of our business is now distributing their product with our software. We understand their product well and have bundled up a simpler package than the competition’s product which, if you opened the box, is a mess of parts made by different people.”

“It’s a tough market though,” muses Poole. “We used to go to exhibitions and get a year’s worth of leads. Now, promoting yourself doesn’t seem to lead to anything. There aren’t any exhibitions for general labelling now, they are all specialist exhibitions. It means our market penetration has to be done via a dealer, the web and word of mouth.

“We do run the risk of Microsoft suddenly deciding that labelling is a good market and adding it as a function to Office, but they haven’t so far and I don’t think they will. Most people don’t know about bar coding – it’s only my years of experience that have given me this knowledge.

“When I was out of the business the quality of the product slipped, and dealers weren’t impressed.

We lost our reputation and it has been an uphill battle to convince them. It was almost like starting again, but we need dealers to believe in us if we are to develop strong relationships with them.

“And we need to ensure that most customers buy through dealers and get the whole service so that the product works well for them. If they simply buy it on the web, and don’t know how to use it, they won’t understand its potential, and that’s frustrating.”

“Looking ahead,” says Poole, “there is the potential to make this a cloud product. We’re a cash rich company, so it’s not money topping us – just finding the personnel. If I could find more programmers like the ones I’ve got now, it would be great, but I’m not sure that I will. The potential we have is achievable with just the people I have, but it will take longer.

“I thought bar codes would have been superceded by now, but the alternatives are just too complicated, so it’s still a growing market.”

**[www.image-cs.co.uk](http://www.image-cs.co.uk)**

## Making it possible to tackle urgent need

In simple terms, it’s the equivalent of a bridge over troubled waters. Technically speaking it’s a breakthrough of global significance. And just in time, as Adam Kingdon, chief executive of i2O explains.

“The UN forecasts that by 2025, two thirds of the world’s population will have insufficient water,” he says. “The demand for clean drinking water continues to rise rapidly due to population growth and increasing urbanisation. At the same time there is less fresh water available as aquifers fall, glaciers disappear, reservoirs dry up and many rivers no longer make it to the sea. This makes it all the more urgent to tackle one of the world’s other big problems - leakage. The World Bank estimates that every year 32billion cubic metres of treated water is lost from urban water supplies around the world.”

What i2O Water have developed is a system

which significantly reduces leakage without the capital cost of replacing mains infrastructure and disruption to the public of digging up the roads.

At its hub is the i2O server, with i2O sensors and controllers fitted to the water distribution network to monitor and feed precise data back to the server on a regular basis.

The system works by continuously adjusting the pressure in the network so that at all times of the day and night, the pressure is kept at the optimum level - sufficient to provide what the customer needs but low enough to prevent the usual leakage.

“Our competitors have come up with a manual solution of adjusting the pressure, but our system fully automates the process,” says Kingdon. “The system continually relearns the patterns of demand in the network and downloads updated control



Adam Kingdon

algorithms to the controller on a daily basis. The controller uses these algorithms to ensure that the pressure reducing valves in the network are set to the optimum pressure at all times.

“The i2O system has three innovative developments. First, the advanced pilot valve (APV) which uses the hydraulic pressure of the water to adjust the pressure reducing valves; secondly the communication, which thanks to its smart technology can be left on automatic or be sent commands; and finally the artificial intelligence, the algorithm. Combined, these features enable the i2O intelligent pressure management system to reduce leakage by 20%.”

“We sell the hardware and companies subscribe to the software so it’s an on-going relationship,” says chief financial officer Ian Tobin. “There are twenty-three water companies in the UK and fifteen of them have trialled the system now. Two of the largest of them are going into full implementation of the technology and we also have contracts in Spain, Italy, South Africa, Malaysia and the Philippines. The fifty systems installed in Malaysia to date are saving 10million litres of drinking water each day.

“Andrew Burrows, our chief technical officer

and co-founder of i2O, was named designer of the year at the 2010 British Engineering Excellence Awards, as well as achieving the British Engineering Excellence Grand Prix award for designing i2O’s intelligent pressure management system.”

“The system was only ready to sell last year, and we’ve developed the business plan for the next five years,” says Kingdon. “It’s all about using our first mover advantage to get into the key markets as quickly as possible. We will use resellers who already work for the water companies, and we’re also looking at partnering with manufacturers of the valves and pumps – it’s an obvious route to market. We also need to provide local, technical support; we now have offices in Malaysia and Spain and will gradually open more hubs in each of our key markets.

“We outsource the manufacture of the components to a UK company and then assemble and test them here. But during the next twelve months we plan to outsource all of the manufacture and distribution to a global contract electronics manufacturing company which can manufacture close to our markets.”

**[www.i2Owater.com](http://www.i2Owater.com)**



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We hope you gain something from the articles contained herein, and look forward to sharing our experiences and knowledge with you in the future.”

– Adrian Price, Partner