

IT - THE RIGHT DIRECTION

**Interview with
DAVID AYLING
MANAGING DIRECTOR
STRAIGHTPOINT**



In a series of interviews with KFA Connect, company directors talk about the issues which need to be addressed to align IT with their business strategy and operations.

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

THE TASK AT HAND could be the lifting of a nuclear reactor. So it isn't an exaggeration to describe measuring and monitoring the load bearing as mission critical to the operation.

Founded in 1978 by an Oxford University engineering graduate, Straightpoint became the first company to provide the lifting industry with an electronic force measurement device which was both robust and reliable, in place of the cumbersome and obsolete mechanical units.

And ever since, the company has utilised IT to always stay just that little bit ahead. Their products were the first to be Bluetooth enabled with a smartphone app allowing the data to be accessed remotely. Soon, with the internet of things, a customer could log into a load cell manufactured by Straightpoint from anywhere in the world.

Wireless technology is what it is all about now," says managing director David Ayling. "When we acquired the company in 2000, the load cell came with a cable which could be affected by the wind. Either that or people might trip over it. Wind, crane hooks moving and rotating, and cable breaks at the worst moments are other big issues with

cabled systems. Wireless also means the operator can stand at a safe distance, up to 700metres away. The load being monitored can be viewed on a tablet, the information can be downloaded onto a spreadsheet, and the certification can be created there and then."

What also gives Straightpoint a competitive edge is what Ayling describes as an enormous investment in stock. The company's website refers to a \$1million inventory. If a customer orders a 500tonne load cell, they can have it next day; competitors can take two months to deliver.

But it isn't enough that industrial products are state-of-the-art in terms of technology, or that they IT enabled. "They also have to be cutting-edge aesthetically," says Ayling. "We take an apple approach to appearance."

Exports account for 70% of turnover, with forty distributors worldwide and a facility in the USA. Over here, the company installed the first 350tonne calibration and universal test machine in Europe.

While other manufacturers might have been considering on-shoring, Straightpoint have introduced what

could be described as in-housing. "We invested in a machine shop instead of the work being sub-contracted," explains Ayling, "because that gives us flexibility. If the customer wants a product to be ten centimetres shorter, then we can do it."

The company originally focused on the weighing market, but that kind of device gave Far East manufacturers the opportunity to dominate by selling on price.

"Weighing, lifting, and load monitoring is all about safety," explains Ayling. "We sell into China now, because known brands working in that country such as Shell and BP trust our products.

"In Europe there is more regulation and legislation around lifting and a requirement to calculate weight. In the US there are guidelines, with the spectre of litigation a driver to invest in doing it properly."

Intrinsic then is quality, but that doesn't necessarily equate to repeat business. Not within a commercial timeframe anyway, as Straightpoint have discovered, although technology provides a means with which to persuade customers to re-invest in new product.

"We had an enquiry from a customer using one of our load cells they have bought from us in 1985 to ask if we could fix a chipped screen," explains Ayling. "Of course we suggested an upgrade to digital technology.

That's not too decay the technical attributes of the original product, which was considered sufficiently innovative to be featured on the BBC television programme Tomorrow's World. And for subsea applications, where wireless doesn't really work, cabling is still required.

"We have never been afraid to roll the dice here when it comes to technology," says Ayling, "If it doesn't work, we take the positives and try something else. I don't think our office IT has moved as quickly as we have developed product ID. If there is one issue which concerns me about IT, it's that the various software a company needs to deploy doesn't join up well enough."

But he has identified a fundamental behavioural shift which he says IT has brought about. "What companies have to realise and react to positively is that technology is constantly changing the way we communicate,"

he says." What I have seen recently is a move away from email with one of our biggest customers now using WhatsApp Messenger. The trouble with email is that it takes longer and there is just so much spam to contend with.

"It has got to the stage where I know of companies which have had to introduce rules to trim down email use, for example stating there is no need to keep emailing back in some kind of digital who gets the last word competition.

"IT can certainly become more and more time consuming - if you allow it to. Before, every time a colleague would finish a sales call, I would receive an email about it, which I would respond to straight away. Now I'll phone him at the end of the day and we'll talk through how it went. If I get a WhatsApp from him, I'll know it's a priority matter."

Ayling also believes WhatsApp can build a relationship which can't be achieved with email. "I could say to a customer saw your team won on Saturday - did you go?" he explains. "I never do that in an email."

IT should be giving a company more opportunity, enable more doors to be opened, he believes. "Our wireless

technology has been approved for use in hazardous areas such as an oil refinery, and that puts us ten paces further ahead. But technology means you can't then sit back even for a moment, because competitors will catch up."

Technology also means there is a need to be able to think outside of the box, or for Straightpoint in one particular instance, the cage. For a fish farm, the company provided a system for the breeding cages which measured the load bearing on the lines to shore. If there is a storm, but device sends an SMS warning message if the load gets to a certain point. Now that gave Straightpoint the idea to develop the equivalent of an intelligent black box recorder which would identify for example if a crane was becoming overloaded; in addition to dispatching the SMS message, it would record the data.

"The load cell itself hasn't changed for half a century," says Ayling. "It's all about the technology around it, how we use IT to enable the customer to do more with the product."



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