

MAKING THE BIG DECISIONS

**Interview with
TONY BARNETT
MANAGING DIRECTOR
BARNBROOK SYSTEMS**



HOW TO RAISE the barrier to entry even higher - and in a sector where having Civil Aviation Authority and Federal Aviation Authority approvals are just the starting point anyway? The answer is obvious to Tony Barnett, managing director of Barnbrook Systems. Move up from being simply a sub-contractor, no matter how good you might be at being one.

"What's different now is that we've moved from being a subby through an exponential curve to being recognised for our own technical knowledge. Developing our own IP means we can make quite an important to our customers' design and manufacturing."

The company makes electromechanical switching devices for aeronautical, defence, marine and commercial applications, such as brake control units for trains and fuel switches for helicopters.

Barnett says what drives him is the will to succeed as an "inventive, productive, research-focused" British company exporting around the world - including, to his satisfaction, to India and China. Those characteristics need a catalyst, which he believes is the ability to understand the customer's business so well that as a supplier, Barnbrook can identify and anticipate their issues and needs.

He gives the example of when the company identified that train engineers needed a way of remotely identifying issues with the on-board air conditioning. Barnbrook duly developed a mobile app which enabled them to communicate with the units on each train. Which prompts him to add a further key characteristic. "A thirst for knowledge is also useful, says Barnett. "There are too many people who seem to want to stay in their comfort zone and not ask questions." He recalls going to a seminar with eighty delegates there from around the industry. "Only two asked questions and one of them was me."

"In a sense, that interest in what's going on has to start 'at home', he adds. "I think that where a lot of companies go wrong is that the chief executive is too far removed from the factory floor. If the chief executive won't walk around the factory to see what's going on, that can be interpreted as a complete absence of interest from the top. That has a knock-on effect

because they only get a narrow and sanitised view of what's going on. A boss once told me that I shouldn't be in the office after six as I wouldn't learn anything because everyone on the shop floor had gone home for the day. At the time I thought he was a bit of a prat, but he had a point."

Similarly, businesses can make themselves remote from their customers as well as their staff. "They don't want to pay for a receptionist for example," says Barnett, "so they automate their systems and that turns customers off. It's delusional to think that providing a caller with a list of options is in their interests because it means they know they are going to get through to the right department straight away."

Barnett regrets the fact that the UK has lost ownership of so much of its intellectual property. "IP is not only crucial to generate new products," he says, "but it should be generating wealth for this country." He also regrets the fact that so many well-known British manufacturing names have disappeared, and blames short-term political expediency for so much manufacturing going overseas as well as the banks, who have "lost the plot in terms of what we need as a creative nation".

He explains: "I've been very fortunate with ours, but generally I have no time for banks; forget relationship managers: we used to have bank managers. I remember my bank manager making a decision to issue me with a cheque for £30,000 when our property came up for auction. They had discretion then and they were able to make judgments. The business world was not about automated decisions; it was more about individual needs."

Not surprisingly, Barnett is resolute in his determination to keep manufacturing in the UK "with the wealth of technical expertise that we have here, not least the worldclass understanding of maths, chemistry and electronic



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