

IT - THE RIGHT DIRECTION

**Interview with
SEAN O'SULLIVAN
MANAGING DIRECTOR
PLATFORM LIFT COMPANY**



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.

NOT SO LONG ago, a broken-down lift would be a time-consuming and expensive incident, involving the cost and time of calling out an engineer – not to mention the drama if people were trapped inside.

But technology has enabled big advances in electronic lift control, which in turn have reduced costs. Sean O'Sullivan, MD of Platform Lift Company, explains: "Even two or three years ago we would have to go out to every call, but now lift control technology means we can dial in from anywhere in the world to fix most problems. We can even send a video to a client to show them how to address particular issues themselves. It saves sending engineers out and it saves the client money as well because lift maintenance and repair can be a considerable cost."

The typical lift used to have a motor room "this big," O'Sullivan says, stretching out his arms to refer to the generously sized meeting room; but now the controls are on the board the size of a laptop. At the same time, lifts have become more reliable; breakdowns, at an average of one per year per lift, are less than a quarter of what they used to be.

O'Sullivan, a former lift engineer,

founded the company in 2000, having spotted a opportunity created by legislation around disabled accessibility. That has very much driven the progress of the business, he says, with major contracts having involved providing step-free access to London Underground and Dubai Metro stations.

"It was very much a start-up industry within an industry at the time and other products were just not fit for purpose," comments O'Sullivan. "We saw the opportunity, and it's still a massive market as only 20% of commercial buildings in the UK are really accessible to disabled people."

Turnover is £5million this year, based on the installation of about twenty lifts per month, which O'Sullivan hopes to double output in five years without having to increase the overhead by a similar percentage – just some extra sales people will be needed resource-wise to achieve that."

The business has about sixty staff and there's a flat management structure, with staff invited onto a steering committee so they can help influence strategy. "The surveyor, the sales guy, fitter's mate," says O'Sullivan. "Nobody actually reports to me."

Staff are given freedom to do what they want within reason. "For example, one member of staff wanted to order a new screen for her computer, which cost £80," says O'Sullivan. "I don't want people to ask me about that sort of thing; and as long as they get the work done, nobody is watching the clock, which I think improves efficiency."

When hiring, he looks for people who will want to embrace IT and says younger applicants are attractive in this respect. "It's second nature to the new generation; they can sit with a new bit of software and be solving problems with it in five minutes. But we have to work hard with the older ones to show them how the technology will benefit them. Last week we had two sessions about what we are doing with IT and some of the older staff really struggled with it."

One vital benefit of embracing technology is that it makes the business appear bigger than it is, says O'Sullivan. "We are just a little company in terms of size but we are able to demonstrate market leadership credentials purely because of the technology we use. It means we can attract work from architects who work on prestigious buildings, such as Kensington Palace."

Talking of which, the company has worked for some interesting clients, including a Russian oligarch who wanted a lift car made of gold and another clad in leather and brass, recalls O'Sullivan. "And a young banker in Knightsbridge wanted a television installed in his lift so he wouldn't have to miss any of Match of the Day when he went to the bathroom upstairs. Another bizarre request was to have a lift that was identical to the ones in the Ritz hotel. Bizarrely that lift was just for show, the client didn't even intend to use it."

Interestingly, the Ritz-lift project was made possible by IT; the Platform Lift Company team were able to go to the hotel, look at the lifts and then replicate the design by using 3D design technology.

The business is gradually migrating from 2D to 3D design software which is bespoke for their needs. "If there was a standard package can be created it would be good as we wouldn't need to do as much training," O'Sullivan muses. "Once it's finished, I suppose the developer will sell it to every other lift company because we won't own the IP - but somebody has to lead the way."

He adds: "It's the same situation with our database, which stores every phone call, every email and the details of 28,000 customers. The American company that developed the software then sold it to other companies. I actually thought it was outrageous we still had to pay for training and upgrades."

The business currently has two servers, with data backed up three times: on the premises, to a local IT company and to an external data centre. But the Platform Lift Company are in the process of moving entirely to the cloud, which O'Sullivan says will be more expensive initially but worth it in the long term."

He feels that fundamentally companies have no choice other than to continually invest in IT if they want to progress as a business. "We could have continued to run design on 2D and having two servers with the addition of some more hard drives, and kept some more money in the bank," says O'Sullivan. "But that isn't an option if you are serious about taking the business forward. We have no choice."

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For 30 years, KFA Connect have been "developing innovative software solutions that make sales order processing, logistics, management reporting, and eCommerce functions run perfectly." This is achieved by uniting the best parts of current systems with modern bespoke software so that it perfectly fits an organisation's own individual processes and ways of doing business.

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Researched and published by
DECISION magazine
www.decisionmagazine.co.uk