



LIGHTNING'S BRIGHT FUTURE



Redfern is benefitting from being in a network

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NEW ownership has sparked a wave of changes in a factory and secured its long term future.

Engineer Andrew Redfern sealed his commitment to British manufacturing and job creation last year when he bought Lightning Aerospace, a sheet metal fabricator making components for customers like Rolls Royce and the

military's armoured vehicles protecting troops in Afghanistan.

Since the 39-year-old's arrival at Lightning, investment in the latest specialist technology has taken turnover to £3 million, backed by a 40 per cent annual growth rate.

The increase in the skilled workforce from 31 to 42 "reflects the sales and our confidence in the future order pipeline", says Redfern whose big vision is about transforming operations both inside and outside the Coventry-based firm to create a competitive one-stop shop for engineering services and special design projects.

Major introductions to extend its engineering capability and diversify its customer base include a wire harness (cabling) production unit, an assembly area and laser equipment.

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Andrew Redfern, part of the Midlands Assembly Network (MAN)

Redfern himself is an advocate of water jet technology, which uses high pressure streams to cut materials, and the firm features a state-of-the-art five-axis robot arm machine.

"We can now deliver the full range of services to manufacture and supply complex electro-mechanical assemblies," he explains.

"That's the case with other similar-sized companies. But Lightning does it with the care, flexibility and customer focus of a specialist boutique business. We've the capacity to run production batch sizes and produce bespoke prototypes, all to the demanding defence and aerospace quality standards.

"We pride ourselves on rapid turnaround – 24 hours if need be. That combination that is our unique selling point and, undoubtedly, helped by the fantastic skills base we have here in the west Midlands."

The company's most successful business areas recently have been the manufacture of complex electro-mechanical parts for sophisticated products like bomb disposal robots and trolley systems.

"Historically we've served one or two large companies in the defence industry and up to 70 per cent of the output concentrated in one client," Redfern continues.

"In the last four months though there have been significant changes within Lightning with more focus on operation and structuring for growth. Today as we grow we expect a higher level of diversity in both customers and industries like transport, flood defence, printing and lighting.

"Nobody knows which parts of the economy are sure to grow or contract in future so we can best prepare by being more commercially-minded and flexible enough to win orders in a wide range of markets."

And that includes something businesses often forget: trawling the books to identify past customers that have dropped off the radar.

"We have actively engaged with those who haven't been with us for a while," adds Redfern, "and it's worked: stimulating orders for new projects with local specialist automotive and aerospace companies."

Before Lightning Redfern, a Cambridge engineering graduate, ran a consultancy for a decade.

One of the attractions in buying Lightning he says was the opportunity for the company to join a bigger group of independents and get the advantages of pooling expertise, best practice, contacts and resources.

The business is now the latest and tenth member of the Midlands Assembly Network (MAN), a subscription-based collective of sub-contract manufacturers. Its ranks include plastics, chemical, engineering and electrical solution providers, employing over 600 on a £70 million turnover.

Redfern reckons he spends a day a month with MAN in return for noticeable rewards. "There's the new sales opportunities that come from being part of an innovative, forward-thinking group, far more than being a lone small business," he explains.

"For example we share tradeshow costs. But it's also very helpful to tap into the knowledge of nine other complimentary businesses when dealing with everyday issues. I think so far at least £200,000 business has been generated by contact with the group. The contacts are priceless.

"One of our key objectives is to offer added value to our customers and this enables us to bring more electrical and electronic work in house where we know another MAN member has the capability. It's definitely a model manufacturers elsewhere should explore."

More sales building this year at Lightning will be followed by further expansion, promises Redfern. "We'll strengthen the management team and consider other company acquisitions, now we have raised the bar for quality and delivery performance. Wherever you go in Lightning, you'll find a 'can do' spirit."

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