



Small enterprise big ideas

INTERVIEW BY PAUL HUTTON

Nick Hewitson has been involved in the ITS industry for more than 30 years and, as the owner of Smart CCTV, delivers a number of key security and detection systems on our road network. Paul Hutton chatted to him about the slow pace of change in the industry, their shared frustration at present procurement rules, and about a one-off car he owns

Q You're a classic entrepreneur – and fairly rare in our industry which is dominated by big companies winning big Government contracts. How did you end up working in this sector?

In the mid 1980s I was working for Fairchild Semiconductor on a contract when they were taken

Above: Nick Hewitson works through the gear changes in his beloved 1994 Marcos Mantula

over by National Semiconductor. I had been doing a lot of work for the CCD Imaging Division, which was excluded from the takeover due to their contracts with Fairchild Weston Systems, so suddenly the CCD Division didn't have any

representation and so I became their representative in the UK. Selling the imaging chips progressed into cameras and then machine vision (industrial automation) software. Eventually we looked around to see what other markets there

“ There seems to be a culture of just doing it the way we have always done it ”



were for real time image processing and security and resilience was an obvious choice. That is how we have ended up doing road and tunnel incident detection systems and physical security solutions for significant national infrastructure assets.

Q In fact, the location of one of your first installations was involved in one of the most dramatic TV news events of the 80s, wasn't it?

We were asked by a major CCTV installer to provide a video analytics based security system for the then Saudi Arabian Ambassador's residence in London. This is a terraced property near Hyde Park and the adjoining building was the Iranian Embassy. In fact I believe that the Saudis had lent the Ambassador's residence to the SAS when they had to go next door so they could end the siege. There is good TV coverage of men with guns crossing the roof and abseiling into the building. On the basis that if you can go one direction you can go the other, the Ambassador's security team wanted to be able to check if anyone was up on the roof.

Q So Smart CCTV is a solutions provider to more than the transport sector?

To be successful as a small company you have to find a niche market, so over time we have built up more and more experience in the transport sector, especially in solutions to manage and protect major assets like bridges and tunnels, so whilst we do some work outside the transport area, ITS is our core market.

Q What do you feel is the ITS industry's biggest challenge?

To me a really surprising thing



SMART CCTV

Above: one of Nick's first CCTV installations was in the Saudi embassy, adjoining the Iranian embassy which was involved in the famous siege of 1980

Below: computing development has continued apace since the days of the ZX Spectrum. Has transport moved as quickly since the M25 opened?

is the very slow pace of change. Since I started working for myself, and that was a time when a state of the art personal computer was a ZX Spectrum, the resolution of CCD chips has increased by about ten thousand times. Look at the computing power in a mobile phone today (another mid 80s innovation) let alone a PC. Yet the most common



sensor technology used on the roads today is an inductive loop, technology from the early 1980s. You have to remember that 1986 was the year when the M25 was completed, how much has the strategic road network developed since then?

There seems to be a culture of just doing it the way we have always done it everyone knows the issues related to using an in road technology like the inductive loop. It is not as though there aren't competitive above ground technologies available: Bluetooth, laser scanners and video analytics jump to mind. These can be very cost effective, are reliable, used in many other countries but take up in the UK has been very slow and I believe that the main reason is the fact that the vast majority of UK end customers are extremely risk adverse.

This becomes self perpetuating the brightest electronics and software engineers either don't want to enter the industry or become frustrated and move to an industry where the rate of change is high and they can make their mark.

Q As you know, when I'm not editing Smart Highways I work with a couple of SMEs in the sector myself. One of the things that really irritates me is when politicians of either colour talk about SMEs being the bedrock of our economy, when I feel that it's all words and that the odds of winning Government contracts are stacked against us...

The first problem you have to deal with is the definition of an SME. If you asked the man in the street, or I suspect most of your readers, they would think that a small company would employ 5 to 10 people and a medium company maybe up to 50. The EU definition, which is what a Politician uses, is a micro business is less than 10 staff and less than €2 million turnover, a small business is 11 to 50 staff and €2million to €10 million turnover and a medium business is from 50 to 250 staff and turnover from €10 million to €50 million per year (£40 million).

In the recent Highways Agency CDF framework the smallest size lot is up to £25 million per project. Normal





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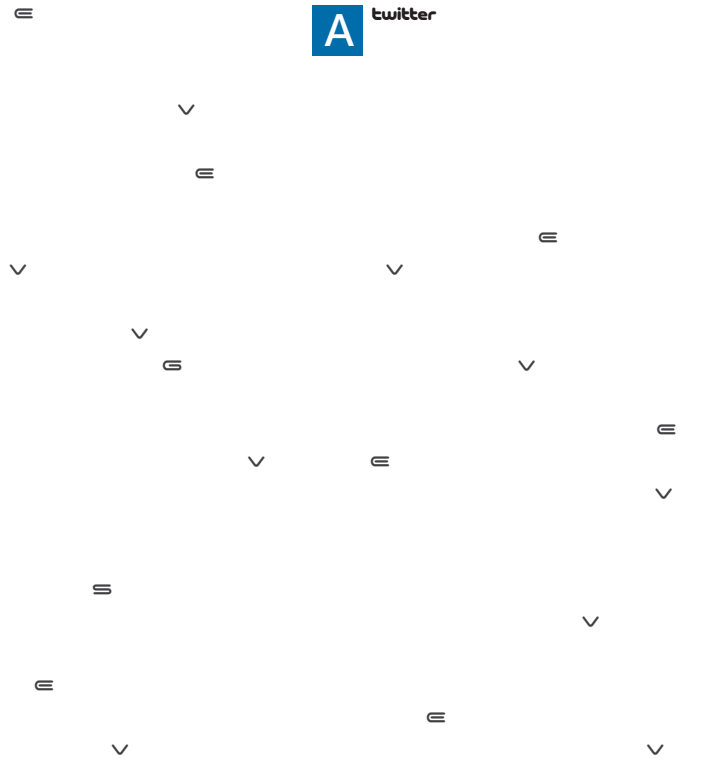
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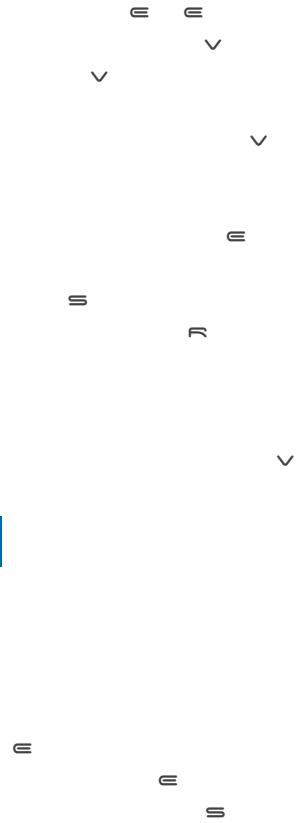
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Nick picked up the sailing bug upon moving to Portsmouth for a sales job

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HI If there are any sailors out there who would like to be involved in an ITS sailing competition, Smart CCTV would be up for the challenge

