

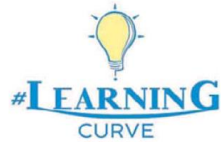
# Evolving with the times pays off

## Odette Parfitt

parfitt@tisoblackstar.co.za

Since its humble beginnings, S4 Integration has grown from a small firm to an international automation and software powerhouse, all in the heart of PE.

A part of the company's secret to success, general manager Andrew White and marketing manager Gideon Smith said, was being able to evolve constantly in a changing industry.



Can you give me some background on how and when the company was started?

Andrew: The company was started in 1994, by Vaughn Fulton and the late Hilary Fisher.

They started out in the IT field and it was started as a company called Man Machine Dynamics, which was later changed to S4 Integration in 1996.

Since the early days, we've evolved. We've gone from an IT and software background to more of an industrial automation field.

When I started working here in 1994 or 1995, there were five employees including myself.

Today, we are about 170 employees with another 10 to 15 positions that are vacant at the moment.

We started off in a small house in North End, which was 38m<sup>2</sup>, and now we're occupying about 3,800m<sup>2</sup>.

Vaughn is still involved in the business as a director of the



EMBRACING CHANGING TECHNOLOGY: S4 Integration marketing manager Gideon Smith, left, and general manager Andrew White Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAAN

company, but he is semi-retired.

**What is your core service?**  
Andrew: There are two main areas to the business.

The first one is industrial automation and we've only been doing this for about six years, but that is more than 50% of the business.

The other side of the business is software development, where we do the development of industrial software largely

for European companies. We have a smaller team of developers for the local market.

On the automation side, our clients are almost completely local.

**What is your target market?**

Andrew: For the automation side, it is mostly clients from the automotive industry, including original equipment manufacturers and tier suppliers.

From a software perspective, it is mostly overseas com-

panies who are also involved in the automotive industry.

**What makes S4 unique within its industry?**

Andrew: We would say it is our mind-set and culture. We are willing to accept short-term losses for long-term gain.

We consider strategy as a key function in the organisation and we are not afraid of adapting or changing for long-term survival.

**How would someone copy your business model?**

Andrew: We don't think this is possible. Our business and corporate culture is something that has evolved over time.

As an example, we have business relationships that are built on more than 20 years of trust – there is no quick fix.

**How do you keep up with constant changes in the industry?**

Andrew: We do have strategic

planning meetings on a fairly regular basis, but strategy development is always in the back of our minds and we continually look out for opportunities and threats, and align ourselves years in advance of the anticipated threat or opportunity.

**What are some of your biggest challenges in day-to-day business operations?**

Andrew: All of our senior management and staff have a back-

ground in engineering. Engineers are generally taught there is a right way and a wrong way to achieve a goal. There are no grey areas.

Interacting with people is very different. Every person has their own ambitions, expectations and priorities.

The challenge is to tailor the engineering mind-set and approach, to better equip staff in dealing with the context in our day-to-day interaction with each other and our clients.

**What is the best advice you've received about success?**

Andrew: Align yourself with the right people and build long-term relationships based on trust.

**How do you measure success in this business?**

Gideon: In the past we've measured it through actual growth, and the retention of staff.

**What are some of the best practices that have made the business successful?**

Gideon: One of the key points is our open-door policy. We value our employees.

**How important is social media and an online presence for S4?**

Andrew: I think the website is critical, in our industry, but we haven't been very active on social media.

We haven't yet seen the benefits of it – it's been a very recent effort. Social media is also important from a recruiting point of view because it's difficult to find good engineers.

Through social media, you can find talent – especially with LinkedIn.

**What do you think are key traits for a successful entrepreneur?**

Gideon: You need to be driven, and be able to see things through.

**What are the greatest challenges and advantages of running a business in PE?**

Andrew: Port Elizabeth brings lower labour rates and operating costs.

It is close to the automotive industry and there are a lot of young engineers available. The lifestyle is also a big advantage.

The more difficult part is that the market is growing in Gauteng, and the small size of the local market.

**What are some of your highlights in the business?**

Andrew: It has been an ongoing journey of growth with many small victories and fewer significant events.

If we look back, the two events that come to mind was when our German supplier bought a share in S4, and also when we acquired Mosmech Engineering and became a full turnkey automation provider.

Aside from this, the continual upward growth and expansion has been a highlight.

**What do you wish people knew about the industrial automation industry?**

Andrew: It is a very exciting and ever-changing industry.

There are always new technologies and challenges. It is not a 9-to-5 job!

## Tips for budding entrepreneurs

- Andrew's tip for new business owners: Be patient. It takes a long time to start a business, establish a client base and build on it.