



Gideon Smith engaging with a client.

# HUMANS AND ROBOTS: IT'S NOT ALWAYS A COMPETITION

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**S**INCE its humble beginnings S4 has grown from a small firm to an international automation and software powerhouse, all in the heart of Port Elizabeth. Part of the company's secret to success is being able to evolve constantly in a changing industry.

After attending the S4 Knowledge Day, the Nelson Mandela Bay Business Chamber was quite intrigued by what S4 Integration does and what they stand for. It is clear that we no longer live in a world where humans have to fear the opportunity of working with robots. At S4 Integration, innovation is the only way forward. They promote this through growth, robotics and their four S's: Systems, Solutions, Software and Support.

Gideon Smith, Marketing Manager at S4 Integration, shares some more insight into this proudly Nelson Mandela Bay company – who was recently named Overall Exporter of the Year 2018 by Exporters Eastern Cape.

## *Why S4? What does this mean?*

Selecting a company name was not an easy task. The management team back in the day decided to do a brainstorming session on selecting a name that would represent what the core of the company will be. A couple of names were written down on a whiteboard but nothing truly represented what the company would be offering. A different approach was then taken by deciding to rather look at what the company would be offering.

From the beginning, it was clear we would be integrating Solutions through Systems, Software and Support. It was then clear what our core business would be. Systems, Solutions, Software and Support giving you the four S's and that is where S4 comes from.

*Robots are being designed to work around people rather than the other way around now. Please tell us why the company takes this approach.*

At S4 we want to be the industry leader when it comes to innovations. We are continuously looking for new innovative products and solutions we can offer our customers. The "Cobot" is a whole new concept of robotics and is part of the next technological breakthrough innovation, leading to Industry 4.0 with smart factories and robotics democratization. A Cobot (or Collaborative Robot) is a robot intended to physically interact with humans and work hand-in-hand in a shared workspace. This is in contrast to full-fledged robots that are designed to operate autonomously

Gideon Smith, S4 Marketing Manager





Chris Ford, S4 Sales Representative intriguing young learners about S4's solutions and capabilities.



Guests at S4 Knowledge Day captivated by the functionality of a collaborative robot.

or with limited guidance. Cobots excel at repetitive, precise tasks, freeing up valuable employees for more rewarding roles and providing fast return on investment for our customers.

The ease of use and flexibility are changing the world of automation. In the past automation was only possible for larger companies that had engineering resources and bigger capital budgets. Nobody focused on the small/medium segment and its flexible requirements. The Cobots are now filling that gap and more, by offering a “tool” that is cost-effective, flexible, safe, and easy to use. It is helping us assist our customers to increase their quality and overall competitiveness.

***Your staff are in a field where their skills are in high demand. What innovative awards/incentives do you provide to retain them and keep them inspired?***

At S4 our employees are not ‘just another number’, they are the cornerstone of our business and the key to our success. We employ only the best and brightest minds, creating an environment that is conducive to creativity, collaboration and disruptive innovation. The best way, we feel, to motivate employees is by leading by example, giving people responsibility and then recognising achievements. Our management team emphasises a friendly company culture with an open-door policy. We continuously benchmark ourselves and innovate the work environment. An example of this is the appointment of a Barista. If you talk to any of our employees you will hear about the S4 culture.

***What would the market be surprised to learn about S4 Integration?***

Unlike most of our competitors, S4 has a generic focus. As a market-orientated company we have designed and built a vast amount of special purpose machinery and production lines from conveyors, walking beam transfer systems, heavy material handling and lifting equipment to storage and retrieval systems (SRS), robotic welding cells and automated production lines. Some of the unique elements we have to offer include all the expertise in industrial automation but also our software development. Due to this we can offer our customers a true turnkey solution that starts from concept to design, from design to manufacture, from manufacture to installation with total

integration at all levels. Currently S4 is the number one employer of BSc. Hons. Computer Science students from Nelson Mandela University.

Our Software Development team has become an integral part of our business and this was showcased at the prestigious 2018 Exporters of the Year Awards where S4 won the following awards:

- » IDC Job Creation Merit Award
- » Best Exporter: Small Business
- » Overall Exporter of the Year Award

The awards are based on all exports (of which the bulk is Software Development) and a small portion of machinery. This is a testimony that S4 is also a true software house.



Andrew White, S4 General Manager

***What do you love about working at the company?***

The only way to be successful is to love what you do. You need to have a passion and it must excite you. S4 is dynamic and I get exposed to so many different technologies and industries. At S4 you get the sense that the company genuinely cares about their people and customers. They are true to their values and encourage the staff to try new things and be innovative. At S4 your opinion matters and so does everybody else's, whatever level you are. Ultimately, when you love your job, invariably you perform better.