



# HARNESSING IT

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## INTERVIEWS

Lisa Edwards

MANAGING DIRECTOR

**MAATS**  
TECH LIMITED

**Taylor Made**  
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

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## INTERVIEWS



In a series of interviews with Taylor Made Computer Solutions, directors reveal what they perceive to be the issues if IT is to deliver key objectives.

**The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.**

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### **WHAT PROMPTS A company to take a longer, harder look at its IT? A restructure and growth at marine engineering company MAATS Tech led managing director Lisa Edwards doing an audit to establish just what is needed as part of a three-year plan.**

Using IT equipment until it dies – the approach when the company was just Edwards and her father - is no longer an option when a business has grown in size to more than forty people,” she explains.

“There is much more focus on IT when staff numbers increase. Our audit, looked at laptops, desktop, servers, software, licences, and has enabled us to forecast what expenditure we need as part of the three-year plan so we can look forward knowing what we will have to replace and how much it will cost.”

Edwards says a strategic approach is important since it's easy to get sucked into buying new kit that's not really suitable. For example, she is less enamoured by a new material requirements planning (MRP) system after some testing.

“In reality it doesn't really do what we wanted,” she says. “That's probably because things have changed so much since we first looked at it.”

As a design-focused business, MAATS use a variety of high-tech design tools, notably AutoCAD, Inventor (for 3D modelling), and SketchUp (for making quick visuals to show clients). There is also specialist software for finite element analysis (which predicts how a product will withstand physical effects like vibration, heat and pressure).

All these are fairly core to what the business does,

but Edwards thinks there's a danger of buying kit just because staff or customers like it. “Our engineers would get every bit of software available if we let them, but we have to make sure everyone is using the same system,” she says. “Sometimes we have clients who like using a particular software and they encourage us to use the same, so we have to be careful we don't get into a situation of spending an awful lot of money on software that we don't use again.”

Edwards' father, John, a consultant engineer, started the business in 1989 as a specialist engineering business. (The name was originally Maritime Audit And Technical Services, later shortened to just the acronym.)

It later expanded into the design and manufacture of pipe laying equipment, initially contracting out all the work.

Edwards was working in cargo logistics when she joined the business in a PA role. At that time, in 2001, with just Edwards and her father working there, the idea was to close the business when her father retired.

But then they won two big contracts and decided, rather than close the business, to expand it and bring more of the work in house.

That enabled them to compete for and win bigger contracts, notably a contract for the Petrobras oil

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company in 2010 which led to a fairly rapid trebling of staff numbers. The business now supplies carousels, cable, and loading and unloading equipment to major offshore contractors and shipyards, as well as doing ship design.

Last year MAATS restructured the business, after the retirement of an existing shareholder left just Edwards and her father as the equity holders. They brought in a non-executive chairman and non-executive directors. This has given us better corporate governance and additional technical expertise, she explains, and has made it less like a family business. Edwards herself became managing director as part of the changes.

Having just completed the IT audit, she says that the experience has taught her that IT can be a distraction. “Emails are the worst because we are continually checking them. You have to discipline yourself. Everyone in the world copies you in on emails, often unnecessarily. I am copied in on hundreds of emails every day. Most of them I don’t need to read but others will have a commercial implication.”

Edwards says it’s important to resist the impulse to reply too quickly. “People expect you to reply immediately but I have to slow myself down. If you respond too quickly you might not express your meaning clearly or you might make snap decisions. Angry emails are the worst. I say to my staff, if

you are feeling angry thump it out on the keyboard but don’t press the ‘send’ button for twenty-four hours.”

She also regrets the fact that ready access to email makes people reluctant to pick the phone up and that it reduces the face-to-face communication that can often lead to better outcomes. “A lot of our work has been won from sitting with someone having a coffee and keeping our ears to the ground,” says Edwards. “If I just sit here sending emails it doesn’t work; and it’s so difficult to get people to read emails. How do you get someone to meet you without being a nuisance?”

With that in mind she is making a positive effort to go to more networking events, conferences and trade shows, particularly in the US, where Edwards sees a lot of potential. IT will come into play here in that they will take not only working models with them but also video showing their products in action on vessels.

The ideal IT for Edwards would be anything that makes the business more efficient in any aspect of its work. “Anywhere we can save time would be an advantage, for example by getting quicker access to the information we need to do bids, which in turn saves costs and helps us win more work.”

The idea of the manufacturing MRP, for example, was to move away from having Excel spreadsheets,

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with everything – for example purchase orders, invoices, design, bids - in one place. But for now, Edwards believes that spreadsheets are still a relatively easy way of keeping accounts although as the business gets more complex it takes longer to get the information she needs.

The major problem with IT, she said, is its obsolescence. “As fast as you get it, it’s out of date. It’s difficult to keep up. That’s why having a non-executive director with an IT background is useful; it means we can ask what do you think of this, how can we use it and what else is coming in that we should be looking at?”

One of their challenges is competition, she says, which has been intensified by technology. “In the past we might be up against three or four companies, now it could be six or more. In the past we had connections and won work on our reputation. Now we are having to increase our marketing presence. When you have not really had to do it before it’s a challenge. We are in the early days of utilising social media to its full potential, through Twitter and LinkedIn.

“They are good ways to promote yourself and find out who is doing what in the industry,” says Edwards. They also use WhatsApp internally to enable instant communicate between staff in situations where they don’t have access to email.

Like many businesses, MAATS has been affected by cyber crime, with scammers increasingly convincing and plausible. Edwards recalls: “My accountant received an e-mail, supposedly from me, asking her to pay some money. It was very convincing. We spotted it but only after an amount had gone out, and we had no insurance cover for it. Cyber crime is getting worse and businesses need to be more aware of it. Companies are going under

because of this and the police are just not interested unless it’s tens of millions involved.”

Another way scammers operate, she warns, is pretending to be potential customers who want to place orders. “These people say give us your bank details and we will pay you.” These scams are easier to spot, says Edwards. “That’s not the way we do business; our customers never place an order straight away, no-one just orders a carousel before a design discussion.”

She holds regular cyber security updates for staff so that they are aware of the risks, and she is wary of email approaches supposedly from potential customers. “We might lose business because we think an email is not legitimate but my attitude is that if they really want to contact us, they’ll ring.”

Another type of scam is job-related. Edwards tells of how one of her foreign contractors was offered another job and was asked by the new ‘employer’ to pay for a licence to work in the UK. Edwards contacted the company supposedly behind the offer, and they told her it was a scam.

“They said they get this all the time. They have reported it time and time again and nothing gets done. The offer letter looked so legitimate.”

As far as storage is concerned, MAATS, have their own servers with off-site back-up. Edwards admits she is still suspicious about the cloud as a storage option, but is not sure about the reason. “I think it’s a generational thing,” she suggests.

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I N T E R V I E W S



**Established in 1994, Taylor Made Computer Solutions are one of the largest and most highly-ranked IT service and support organisations in the south, currently employing over 110 staff.**

Taylor Made are the first technology company in the region to have gained a third consecutive gold award from Investors in People. Taylor Made are also ISO 9001:2008 certified.

The company has been ranked in the top 10 managed service providers in Europe the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) in a leading annual industry survey from MSPmentor since 2012.

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Researched and published by

**DECISION magazine**

[www.decisionmagazine.co.uk](http://www.decisionmagazine.co.uk)

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