HARNESSING IT

INTERVIEWS

Stephen Blatchford

EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN

blatchford

Taylor Made
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

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.

HARNESSING IT

HAVING ACQUIRED FOUR businesses, some of which have multiple shareholders, Stephen Blatchford is busy enough, but all the more so because the deals have meant his company found itself with five different IT systems.

The executive chairman of Blatchford Group, which develops and manufactures prosthetic limbs and other orthopaedic products and services, says the actual deals to buy the four Norwegian clinics were easier than he'd expected, given the numerous shareholder relationships. The real time-consuming challenge is unifying IT across the group.

There are two elements to the business. A UK-based clinical services division, which serves the NHS (its biggest single customer), the military and operates a private clinic; and a products division based in the UK and US that designs and makes prosthetic components for worldwide export, through overseas offices and a network of distributors.

The different aspects of the business's work mean it has several different systems anyway. Blatchford accepts it would be difficult to find one to do everything but he'd like to have a more flexible interface between systems.

"In terms of getting data out of the system, we need to think in a structured way about what we want," he explains. "When a company is growing rapidly, some processes are found to be not as slick as they could be. Having less double entry of information throughout the organisation would be helpful, for example, and I'd like the accounting software to yield more precise information about

the true cost of manufacture."

Better unified collection of statistics like this would make life easier and increase productivity. For example, although they have a "reasonably smooth" manufacturing ERP system that was developed in-house, they're not yet using bar coding properly.

Blatchford's interest in IT is focused on providing the information to enable a closer relationships with customers. "When I was younger I was very switched on by how fast things work, but now I'm not. IT for IT's sake doesn't particularly excite me, which sounds odd as I was a computer programmer and mathematician and I love numbers. I'm more excited by what it can do, what we can get out of it, how we can drill down and find out exactly what's going on."

Blatchford joined the 127-year-old family business in 1985 and has overseen its growth from £6million to a turnover of more than £70million. The group employs more than 800 worldwide. Interestingly, growth is partly because amputations are on the increase globally because of the prevalence of diabetes.

He now sees the need to expand the company further to keep in step with the relative size of bigger, wealthier competitors. Having smaller

budgets means, he says, that they need to think outside the box and the company has a major strategic review of its IT systems every five years to set an overall requirement, as well as a smaller review annually.

"We are engineers and we think in terms of things and what they can do, rather than more nebulous concepts, so traditionally the business has been more of a follower than a leader in terms of its IT," explains Blatchford. Which is the diametric opposite to product development.

"We have an increasing focus on breakthrough technologies and services, with the aim to base products on bio-mimetic design principles that work perfectly in sync with the human body," Blatchford says.

"A lot of more conceptual stuff is going on in terms of the development of apps that can operate microprocessor controlled products. For example, electronics could control the workings of the hydraulics in a prosthetic ankle (which are rather like the suspension in a car).

"We can do clever things to create different sensations for the user and make the foot easier to use," Blatchford says. "We can make them more symmetrical in the way they walk so there is less stress on the skeletal system. And an app would allow the user to play around with that. Once the system is calibrated it can be adjusted."

One issue here has been that the industry generally has come from PC-based platforms but a lot of developers prefer to use Apple. "Do we go with Apple or Android or both?" muses Blatchford. "And at the same time standards keep changing, particularly with Bluetooth and wi-fi."

He doesn't believe that having apps will increase revenue as such, partly since only a small proportion of customers have microprocessors in their limbs. "People will see apps as a benefit but will it influence them to buy from us? It's more a hygiene factor: if we don't have apps, that might become a problem."

Notably, the company is the lead in a major new project concerned with assisted movement and that ties in very much with developments in robotics, he says. "But car makers for example are looking at it from a different angle," he adds. "They're not so much interested in how it looks, how quiet it is, while we are."

The Internet of Things could also have implications for the business but Blatchford worries about the security implications. "The benefits would be the user having to do less because the leg would be doing more, but there is the potential for hackers to access somebody's prosthetic. Just thinking about my own experience with my home network, with the printer going wrong, we're nowhere near close enough to these things working properly. Programmers like developing shiny new things, but I sense that testing them exhaustively to make sure they work properly can be anathema to them."

The company's data is stored on site or at an external data centre. Blatchford believes there are security issues about the cloud. "I'm not sure conceptually that I like the idea of the cloud. I like to know where my data is," he says. "If everything goes wrong and you have your own server you know where things are and you have less dependency on things outside your control," he says. "And there's an extra complication in that we have to be inter-operable with the NHS and they have very tight criteria about data storage."

HARNESSING IT

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.
Taylor Made are a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, HP Preferred Partner and a NetApp Silver Partner.

Services include:

IT support, IT strategy, IT consultancy, hosted telephony, project management, Securo online back-up, hosted solutions, remote management and monitoring, cloud solutions, disaster recovery, remote access, outsource engineering, security, service desk support.

Researched and published by
DECISION magazine
www.decisionmagazine.co.uk

Taylor Made
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

CamsHall Estate, Leroux House, Fareham PO16 8UL.
Office 01329 239 900 **Support** 01329 226 900 **Email** enquiries@tmcs.co.uk
www.tmcs.co.uk