

Case Study

BIE helps manufacturing start-up meet the toughest of challenges

BIE Interim Executive supplied two 'heavy-hitting' senior executives to meet the toughest of challenges: designing, developing and producing the 'Ocelot', an all-new, special purpose vehicle for the British army in record time.

A 'Black Swan' is an apt description of the brief given by Force Protection Europe (FPE) to BIE Interim Executive in August 2009. The term entered the mainstream in 2007 after Nassim Nicholas Taleb's best-selling business book of the same name, and is used to describe events beyond the realm of normal expectations.

Force Protection is the world's leading manufacturer of ballistic and blast protected vehicles. Its European offshoot, based in Leamington Spa, is a fast-emerging player in the UK defence industry with a bold, innovative and life-saving mission: to design and manufacture, from scratch the Ocelot, an all-new, blast-protected patrol vehicle intended for British army use in the conflict zones of Afghanistan.

FPE learned in September this year that it is the preferred bidder for the MoD's Light Protected Patrol Vehicle programme and is now in contract negotiations with the MoD.

To reach this significant achievement FPE had to re-write the rules about military vehicle design, development and manufacture, explains managing director David Hind: "The big defence contractors have been slow to react to the army's changing needs so that presents a great opportunity for smaller, agile firms like ours.

The time-scale from concept to delivery of an all-new armoured military vehicle is typically ten years. It all happens sequentially. We're going to have Ocelots in volume production in just 18 months, using concurrent engineering techniques proven in motorsport and elsewhere; it's a very aggressive target."

It was this telescoped timescale that led to Hind contacting Steve Dengel of BIE Interim Executive. FPE needed a highly-experienced operations and supply-chain executive to hit the ground running fast, leaving no time to go through the usual hiring process.

But it was also a question of risk, adds Hind: "The person we needed had to be able to produce complex, world-class supply chain and operational strategies in just a few weeks, plus review and approve a plan for the manufacturing systems that would support what was essentially a start-up business. That was quite a tall order and we felt it was less risky hiring a professional interim, with a proven track record of delivery in tough situations.

"BIE certainly rose to the challenge; they quickly understood what we needed and found us some high-calibre people. Steve Dengel was very responsive and flexible in his approach. We had our first candidate meeting one day after we first spoke and within a week had hired two of their interims."

One of these was George Hadley, a senior-level interim executive since 2001, who was hired as FPE's chief operating officer (COO) in November 2009 for two months. Hadley's background is in general management with an emphasis on international industrial manufacturing. His recent interim roles were

at DeLaRue, Unipart and ABB. Hadley says his brief was to produce the strategy documents previously outlined by Hind but in unusual circumstances: "This was unlike any other interim contract I've undertaken. Usually you join an established business to sort out a problem but this was essentially a start-up with only David and one other full-time employee back then. For me, the attraction was a chance to contribute to something completely new and do genuinely purposeful work. The Ocelot vehicle generates a strong emotional ownership for everyone involved; it builds a high-motivation working culture rarely encountered."

Having successfully delivered against the brief, Hadley was asked to stay on for a further four months to work on the mobilisation plan for these strategies with others. One of them is Russell Smith, who also arrived via BIE Interim Executive, but on a permanent basis. BIE's Steve Dengel originally proposed Smith as an alternative to Hadley as interim COO but as he learned more about the company, Smith says he wanted more than a transient role: "This was a unique role in a brand new organisation: it had the financial backing in place but no revenue, no product and had never sold anything at the point I joined'. I saw this as a chance to use every facet of my experience and manage them all under one roof. And on top of all that, Ocelot will save lives and is an all-British designed and built product. I'd never seen such a fantastic and rare opportunity, and I wanted to be part of it."

So Smith entered into negotiations with FPE, leading to his appointment as operations director in January 2010. Since then his job has been to underpin the strategic plans that Hadley originally prepared. This involved working with four strategic partners to ensure FPE had the production and supply chain capabilities to deliver Ocelot vehicles on-time, to the right quality and at the forecast cost and volumes.

All were fundamentals for winning the MOD contract. Seven months into the role, Smith says things have progressed better than imagined: "There's a noticeable 'Team Ocelot' mentality that transcends individual identities; we've had none of the cultural tensions you might find when working closely with people from four different businesses as strategic partners. The business has grown to 40 people, and is forecast to double in size once on contract, with all key functional leaders in place plus the management team to support them. It's all been very high pace, which in itself can create problems, but I've been amazed by how well things have gone. When an MOD team visited us they were also very impressed by what they saw."

September's preferred bidder announcement means the business now enters its next stage of growth - as the team gears up for volume production of the Ocelot. Smith envisages a continuing relationship with BIE: "As a former interim myself, I understand the value a good intermediary can offer. BIE takes time to engage properly with both candidates and customers. They are not afraid to challenge you when necessary and they always seek ways to add value, pre and post assignment. I expect we'll be talking to them again before long."

About the Ocelot

Designed in England by Force Protection Europe and automotive technology specialist Ricardo, the 7.5 ton Ocelot's most distinctive design feature is its V-shaped armoured spine known as the "skateboard". This is used to deflect blast and give maximum occupant protection from mines and deadly improvised explosive devices that have come to characterise the Afghan conflict. The Ocelot is highly manoeuvrable and reportedly handles well at high speed, thanks to the skills of Roland Jacob-Lloyd, former chief engineer of the Mitsubishi World Rally Championship. It is also modular in design, featuring a detachable occupant pod that can be quickly exchanged for other configurations, turning the vehicle into an ambulance or truck. This pod is both lightweight and ballistics-resistant.

More information on the Ocelot here: http://defense-update.com/wp/20100927_ocelot.html

Force Protection Europe's parent company already has a commercial track record in the UK, having already sold over 500 vehicles including Mastiff, Ridgback and Wolfhound to the MoD.