

Building on the success of 13 years: The MD of Pod-Trak on his optimism for the future

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It might be an unlucky number for some, but the founder and the Managing Director of Pod-Trak, Paul O'Donnell, hopes their 13th year since being established will be one of opportunity.

It will be no easy feat. As well as taking into account the challenges everyone is facing with the COVID-19 crisis, the multidisciplinary engineering solutions provider has to find a way to build on the rapid success it has enjoyed since its inception in 2007.

But the specialists in the construction and maintenance of transport infrastructure have got off to an impressive start, having been accepted by Network Rail to act as a Principal Contractor. This builds on successes with the likes of Transport for London, Transport for Greater Manchester and Heathrow Airport.

It opens up a whole new avenue of specialist works with the owners, operators and developers of Britain's railway infrastructure.

Paul has spoken to railbusinessdaily.com about the company's journey so far.

"It has been a bit of a rollercoaster from there to here with a lot of hard work and some ups and downs, but mainly ups," he said.

"Where we are now has exceeded my original expectations. When I established Pod-Trak I only expected to become a subcontractor with a small team.

"The idea for the business came about because we thought we could do things better ourselves than what we were seeing other contractors doing at the time.

"We saw a real opportunity and worked closely with a lot of clients and they helped us develop, especially with our systems. Everything we have achieved so far has not just been done by just us. We've had a lot of support, guidance and advice over the years from some really good people."

Paul set up Pod-Trak after spending six years working throughout the UK and Ireland working on various rail and infrastructure projects.

The business all started in his kitchen, and it is in his home where he speaks via video link to us today due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

"When we established Pod-Trak in 2007, I had 10 people working with me. I was working out of a van myself while my fiancée was doing the books at the kitchen table," he said

"We weren't married at the time and I was working long shifts at night in Birmingham and shifts in London during the day – complying with the Hidden 18 recommendations of course.

"A lot of hard went into the first couple of years, but I always believed we could make a success of the business.

"We knew it could be successful and we ran a very tight ship – and we operated like that for two years until 2009 when we moved into our first office. The first couple of years we literally planned and administered everything from our kitchen table."

The company now has office locations across the UK and Ireland and has years of experience in delivering complex and specialist technical projects successfully, particularly in the railway, airport and civil engineering sectors.

He said: "I am very proud of where we are. We set the company up on very honest, modest beginnings. Honesty is a big part in everything we do, and we believe that reinvestment in the latest technology alongside heavy plant and equipment is very important. Our people are our biggest asset though and that is why we recruit well and plough as much as we can into training and development.

"We are growing strongly because we spend time planning so that we can always deliver safely and deliver well.

"We employ some fantastic people at Pod-Trak and they in turn provide us with an excellent work ethic

and commitment to the Pod-Trak brand.

“Safety is number one for us – to deliver well and deliver safely. But people are the key to this. We don’t have a big turnover of personnel and do invest a lot in training and are continually investing in our people.

“We’re hoping that will stand us in good stead for the future – to be a great business to work for and a great business to work with.”

However, like every organisation, the biggest challenge at the moment is the effects on business due to the Coronavirus crisis.

Many sites have been closed and tighter working restrictions have been established in a bid to stop the spread of the virus and keep workers safe.

Paul said: “As has been the case for most organisations, this pandemic has created incredible challenges and it has put a massive strain on business. However, we are very resilient, and we managed to set systems up quickly to enable our people to work from home and keep our sites going, for as many clients as possible.

“We have put in place robust procedures and briefings around social distancing so that we can keep our people, supply chain partners, customers and the general public safe. We’ve also cut our costs on some non-essential items that we felt we could do without, making sure that we don’t adversely affect the service we deliver for our customers.

“Where we can, we have redeployed some of our people, but it hasn’t been possible in all areas of the business. One challenge we faced was with our overhead line teams. These highly skilled operatives work in close confinement in baskets which are 1.5-metre wide and you need two workers to deliver most tasks.

“We are constantly looking at solutions such as masks and different air flow systems. Another part of that was the decision by Transport for London taking a blanket ban across all of their sites and shutting everything. We had quite a lot of staff working on TfL projects. We are readying ourselves for when things start operating again.

“Our priority is making sure that our people are safe. We also want to be in a position when we come out of the other side of this awful pandemic, that we are ready to remobilise our team quickly and efficiently – making up for lost time and missed opportunities so that we continue to grow and deliver the projects that our customers want, need and quite rightly expect.”

Despite the challenges, Paul is optimistic about the future and is predicting a strong future for Pod-Trak.

He said: “It was going to be our best financial year, but now I think we’ll be in line with what did last year – probably a drop of 10%-15% maybe on where we should be. At present we are operating at about 60% which isn’t bad considering everything going on out there.

“I think the key to getting through this period is to think innovatively and look at how we can do things

differently to add value.

“In the future I think companies will embrace new ways of working, and they will look at how they can do things more effectively when things get back to normal. What the lockdown period has shown us all is that there are definitely huge benefits in homeworking policies and videoconferencing which at one time might have been approached with caution I think they will become custom and practice in some businesses going forward due to the clear efficiency benefits we have seen.

“We’re also looking at different ways for manual handling, new ways we can manufacture more off site and deliver onto site using mechanical excavators, etc. We are thinking and working differently from the norm and I believe Britain’s railways will really benefit from this. The benefits of more offsite work for example is that we won’t have as many workers operating on live sites – enabling us to build on our deliver well, deliver safely policy.

“CP6 got off to a bit of a slow start for us as projects were still largely in the design phase until the end of the year. For installation companies like us there wasn’t a lot of work around in the early stages, so we adapted and built other work streams to maintain our market share.

“That has started to change now and the opportunities are coming through thick and fast. We are looking forward to both the challenges and opportunities ahead.”

One thing that hasn’t changed since the company was formed in 2007 is the way in which the team embraces family. Paul’s wife, Brenda, still works in the office keeping an eye on administration and the Finances. And, if you pop in on a weekend, you will often find their children – Cillian, 10, Charley, 8 and Maggie, 5 – helping out with the filing!! Pod-Trak is a fantastic story of a company that saw an opportunity, grasped it and has gone on to do incredibly well. This is because the founders, its team and its supply chain partners are absolutely committed to doing the right thing and building a better railway for Britain.

Today, Pod-Trak employs and contracts over 250 people across the UK. The company is headquartered in Perivale, West London with offices in Bristol, Manchester, Doncaster and Ireland.

Visit www.pod-trak.com to find out more.