

# The giant stirs

Since being appointed head of access at Hewden, Nick Childs has made subtle yet significant changes that are helping to re-establish the hire giant. Mark Darwin fires the questions.

In less than 10 years, Nick Childs has climbed the ladder from delivery driver to head of access at one of the UK's largest plant hirers, Hewden.

During this meteoric rise, he worked for various divisions within the company - tools, plant, operated plant and now access - unusual but very beneficial in a company that is now trying to 'pull together' all of its divisions and promote a single 'Hewden' image.

When he took over the powered access division in March 2007 he said that he was unhappy that the company had slipped to fourth position in the sector and that a three year plan would help rebuild a strong identity and raise the company profile. Now more than half way through that period, are the changes he has implemented starting to work?



Nick Childs

"I was initially uncomfortable with a single manufacturer (Genie) accounting for 65 percent of the access fleet," said Childs, "so set about re-profiling the fleet and while this will continue, I am happy with the results so far."

Re-profiling a fleet of about 3,000 units means a potential problem with trade-ins - distributors don't want them.

"We are fortunate to have the Hewden Auction brand where all of the equipment must be sold," says



C&a

face to face

Childs. "Despite general equipment prices dipping from 2007 to 2008, they have improved slightly for access equipment. In the first auction in 2005, all sales had to be to overseas customers, while these days around 80 percent of the used access equipment heads overseas, particularly countries such as Poland and Lithuania."

But when do you decide to get rid of a machine?

"It is difficult to give an answer to this because it depends on the type of machine and various other factors. Generally though, manufacturers tend to be slower with technological improvements on the larger machines so they do not date as fast as smaller units, so a five year old model may be very similar to a brand new machine."

Steel erectors have traditionally gone for the 45ft and 65ft straight booms but Childs sees this changing with demand now split 50:50 with articulated platforms.

"We tend to keep the larger, more expensive straight booms longer and will use our Castleford facility to refurbish machines built later than 1999 that have four wheel drive. We can currently refurbish about 60 to 70 aerial lifts per year and the facility can also work on general plant and repainting cranes. Additional refurbishment capacity may be added in the future."

So with the current economic climate, is there money to spend on new equipment next year?

"We are probably one of the few large hirers that is planning to purchase new equipment in 2009. We added 150 Haulotte lifts (about five percent of the fleet) last year and have been exceptionally pleased with their performance and reliability

and customers like them. They also have the added benefit of being painted almost Hewden yellow as standard. This has been a big problem for us with manufacturers either significantly increasing delivery times or charging additional costs to paint equipment in our colour."

"Haulotte has had a slightly chequered reputation in the UK, but over the past year or two, managing director Phillip James has sorted it, they are always very easy to do business with and deliver on what they promise. Overall they have a good product, good service and a good price - so much so that Haulotte will probably get a good proportion of next year's spend - whatever that may be as it is still to be decided."

Because of Haulotte's good performance, Hewden is now looking at Genie and Haulotte as the primary suppliers with JLG filling in the gaps. It also has specialist models, such as Holland Lift, and will continue to look for niche machines that give a good return.

But how do you decide on which manufacturer or model?





"We initially identify a particular model that is needed - such as a 20ft electric scissor or 100ft boom - and then list all the 'must have features' such as deck size, deck capacity, power to the basket etc," says Childs. "This is done by gaining the input of my senior management team who cover the UK. The specifications from the primary suppliers are then scrutinised and if they don't include the 'must haves' - they are immediately eliminated. The right specification is probably the most important factor when we look to purchase a machine. Almost as important is reliability because of the nature of the clients and type of contracts we supply. Although we have excellent service we are looking for machines to perform faultlessly between routine servicing. The purchase price is not the main deciding factor but it helps of course if it is competitive."

The Holland Lift scissor lifts that Hewden has purchased illustrate this point.

"When we decided on adding large scissors to the fleet, we identified Holland Lift as a possible supplier and asked other users about the machine and its reliability. The feedback was excellent. Next I sent in our technical guys to 'pull the machines



apart' and make sure that they were well built. For smaller models we sometimes put several units into the fleet to gauge their performance and customer feedback. We put one, 21 metre Holland Lift scissor into the fleet for six months. It performed impeccably and with all the other boxes ticked, we purchased some further units including the 32 metre G320, the largest scissor in the UK.

"All the Holland Lift models have been very reliable, they go out on site and apart from visiting to service them, there have not been any other problems. We are planning to buy another 32 metre G320 scissor in the second quarter 2009 which will be only the seventh of its type in the UK. Holland Lift is not the cheapest - we probably pay a 10 to 15 percent premium - but this has been repaid by being ultra-reliable, working for major clients it would damage our reputation.

And while we look for good spares and service backup, we always send in a Hewden service engineer first.

"Another good example of this is the 32 metre Haulotte HA32PX. With a working height of 104ft (31.8 metres) it has a good 70ft outreach and fills the gap between the 85ft and 120ft machines. Haulotte addressed one of our comments about increasing the size of the basket and the brand has proven itself as being very reliable. We will be looking to auction our older Grove AMZ machines and replace them with the HA32PX."

With many new access manufacturers looking to enter the UK market - such as PB, Iteco and JCHI for example - would Hewden be interested?

"We are at the point of concentrating on our primary suppliers which have proven equipment, reliability and backup. Why would we start looking at unproven equipment?" says Childs. "We will still evaluate niche equipment that adds to our product offering, but we will not be looking at other mainstream equipment for the foreseeable future."

With investments planned for next year - how do you see the access market?

"Rates are starting to suffer with the larger rental companies putting equipment out at less than favourable rates, rather than having it sitting in the yard. Because we are part of a large general plant hire group we do benefit from a wide variety of hires and not from supplying one type of contract such as shopping centre developments which have been hit particularly badly at the moment."

"We have seen the market level off, but it has certainly not 'dropped off the edge of a cliff' as some would have you believe. I make between three and five customer visits per week so I am very much involved at the sharp end and keep in touch with our customers and what is happening in the industry. The levelling off of demand is also a combination of market saturation of equipment

and too many suppliers."

Have you achieved what you set out to do 20 months ago?

"Our fleet has increased from about 2,800 to 3,000 since I started and with Lavendon Access very kindly consolidating companies this means Hewden has now moved up the fleet rankings from fourth to third," says Childs with a smile.

"We have also opened a few new depots (Bristol, Ipswich and Aberdeen) which means the access depot network is now up to 19. Our ultimate goal is to have Hewden product within one hour of the customer, wherever they are in the UK."

"Between 1968 and 2004, Hewden acquired a staggering 89 different businesses, each with its own culture and operating systems. The huge investment in the new Movex computer system which is now fully operational is helping to streamline the rental side of the business as well as reduce costs and increase efficiency throughout the company.

This computer system is the same as that being considered for installation into other parts of Finning and the worldwide Caterpillar dealer network which will help both with the future integration of all divisions within Hewden as well as Hewden with Finning and Caterpillar."

Better integration within Hewden means more visibility and increased accessibility to all 106 depots. Availability, reliability and customers are the three main areas I am looking at and we are now quite a way down the line to achieving this. Last year, Cranes & Access did an interview with Hewden that said 'Has the sleeping giant woken? A year ago, it hadn't, but I think the giant is now stirring and will be awake very soon!'"

