

Local system integrator lands unexpected boost to the big-time

By Steven Meyer, editor, SA Instrumentation and Control.

Business innovation award could power Saryx Engineering to global expansion say founders.

KZN-based system integrator Saryx Engineering Group announced its class when it lifted this year's FNB Business Innovation Award from a pile of over 600 entries. A success of note when one considers the catch-all makeup of the selection criteria and exhaustive judging processes.

According to organisers FNB Business and Endeavour South Africa, "The award celebrates high-impact entrepreneurs who create scalable world-class companies with unique ways of doing business." Two such high-impact individuals, Ingrid Osborne and Julie Mathieson, founded the Saryx Engineering Group in 2007. Osborne, an electronic engineer, and Mathieson, a computer scientist, believed that if they pooled their resources they could provide a complete range of integrated industrial automation solutions to the manufacturing sector. Their differentiator would be the capability to add advanced data management services and web-based user interfaces.

SA Instrumentation and Control had the opportunity to chat to now Saryx MD Ingrid Osborne about the influence of the award on the company's future. "Initially we were like Charlie in a Willy Wonka chocolate factory," she begins, emotionally supercharged on a mixture of nervous energy and elation. "The sense of achievement blocked out everything for a while. It was only when we came down off cloud-nine that we realised the major business benefit the award brings is access to decision makers in organisations which otherwise might never have heard of us."

This will open up completely new markets to Saryx, particularly for its HSEC Online web-hosted document management platform. Osborne explains that when they started the company the core business was project related in the areas of automation and control, as well as ICT. But that changed after an incident that saw them ordered to leave site because a single critical company document had expired. "While we sat around and waited for the new certificates to be issued, we realised that our inability to manage this aspect had cost us money and possibly dented our reputation," she adds. "So, during that forced two week sabbatical, we came up with the idea for an

automated system to manage all our health and safety compliance documentation in the cloud."

HSEC Online arrives on the scene

HSEC Online was conceived out of necessity to solve an internal problem in Saryx's own business processes. Subsequently, it evolved into a product offering in its own right, one which Osborne believes has almost unlimited growth potential. "We needed to free ourselves from the burden of tracking the status of our HSEC (Health Safety Environmental and Compliance) documentation across multiple sites," she explains in tones that show little enthusiasm for administrative chores better managed by computer programs.

Simply put, Saryx was driven to develop the HSEC Online platform to automate its own compliance information management requirements. "We just could not find appropriate software solutions available off the shelf," outlines Osborne. "We needed a system that would automatically generate alerts if any of our regulatory documentation was missing or about to expire. We needed the capability to mirror this across multiple sites, we needed real-time access from anywhere, and we needed it in a hurry."

By the time the expired document had been reissued, the first version of HSEC Online was already in service. The results were impressive. The ability to capture, manage and store compliance-related certificates online had liberated Saryx personnel to concentrate on the more important matters of engineering and project delivery.

HSEC online changes the game

Mission accomplished. But then something happened which changed everything – people started to notice. Saryx had become proficient at managing its compliance documentation to the point that clients began to wonder how they did it. "Suddenly we realised that we had solved an industry-wide problem," says a smiling Osborne. "Then it dawned on us that with more development our platform could scale far wider than just HSEC related certificate control in manufacturing companies. For example, it could be tailored

to suit an insurance company's requirement for managing client records, or a logistic company's need to manage fleet-related documents."

Saryx's 'Eureka' moment had arrived, but was the company ready for it? Osborne continues: "What we found was that our automation and control clients were faced with the same headaches we'd had managing compliance related certificates. For some of them it was even worse as they needed to keep track of multiple contractors all working in different areas, and with different access privileges.

"What one needs to understand is that these HSEC paper trails only become important when something goes wrong on site. But then they become vital, particularly if someone has been injured. So, in ninety five percent of cases the time spent administering these processes is unproductive. Nonetheless it has to be done to cover that five percent chance. The beauty of our system is that it makes this easy for the administrators.

"As an example, consider an access permit that needs to be issued to allow a contractor onto a site. Instead of having to dig out the relevant safety file and manually confirm all the required documents are up to date, HSEC Online simply accesses the contractor's e-records and immediately issues an alert if there is a discrepancy. If everything is good, the system issues the access permit. If not, access is withheld until any missing certificates are verified and loaded. We could also link this with whatever access control system may already be in place."

HSEC requirements are mutually inclusive in that both client and contractor must be compliant. With HSEC Online, both parties have access to the status of any pending applications. The screens are designed so that all parties see exactly the same data and the system allows them to communicate should there be a problem with the documentation.

Both parties can see exactly the same data and the system allows them to communicate should there be a discrepancy? Osborne alluded to scalability earlier; that's it right there! Think of applying for life insurance or a mortgage or vehicle finance. Wouldn't life



Ingrid Osborne



Julie Mathieson

be that much easier if the submission process could be completed remotely along with prompts and examples of exactly what is required – all in your own time? (Except maybe an initial interview for biometric purposes.)

First things first

With its automation clients, Saryx discovered that HSEC Online is often a natural extension to a system integration project. This makes it easy to leverage cross-selling opportunities through the synergy around HSEC compliance. Expanding into industry sectors where there is no common ground and the company is unknown is a completely different proposition. This is where the FNB award becomes integral to Saryx's future growth possibilities. Osborne understands the potential of the opportunity but says their plans are tempered with realism.

"Even though we know our system can scale to suit almost any document compliance management application in any industry sector, we must avoid the trap of a scattergun approach," she explains. "First, we want to set the standard for HSEC compliance in the industrial sector because at the moment there isn't one. Every company has its own proprietary paper-based way of doing things

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and we know they all struggle with efficiency and consistency. Our modular cloud-based platform can solve this, but we need an opportunity to get it in front of the right people. This is why the award is treasure to us. Suddenly we are catching the eye from companies that have never done business with us before."

When I ask if this means that Saryx will focus exclusively on developing the HSEC Online platform in future, Osborne says no. "The first step is to grow the document management side until it is about equal to the projects business," she clarifies. "This will give us a much more predictable revenue stream and allow us to smooth the inevitable peaks and troughs in the project business with the steady annuity-based income generated from HSEC Online's business model. Once we've achieved that then we can consider the move into a

separate company and gear-up for expansion into all those exciting areas I alluded to earlier."

Riding on a system originally developed for its own internal purposes, the FNB Business Innovation Award just earned Saryx a ticket to the big-time. In September, Osborne and Mathieson will attend the Endeavor International Selection Panel in Argentina. Here they will present their company to a bevy of prominent business personalities with a chance to join the prestigious global network of Endeavor Entrepreneurs. References of this calibre usually take a lifetime to develop. When one considers that the technical side of Saryx is well established and what the founders now need are influential business contacts and guidance in the art of profitable expansion, Osborne and Mathieson are more than justified to feel the chocolate factory in their future. We will be following their progress with interest.

[Note: interested readers will find a more detailed description of the HSEC Online document management platform at <http://www.instrumentation.co.za/7959r>.]

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