



FROM OLD TECH TO HIGH TECH

Creating the offices of the future

When was the last time you thought about the office copier? For one Geelong business, staying at the cutting edge of integrated office technology has seen them rapidly expand and scoop top honours at this year's Powercor Australia Geelong Business Excellence Awards.

SC Technology Group is, in many ways, a very typical Geelong business. Managing Director, Robert Hunter, has worked with copiers since his first Toshiba technician job at age 19. From technician to sales to management to ownership, he learnt the business from the ground up. His wife, Julie, joined the business full-time when they started a family and together the Hunters have continued to innovate and to expand. Along the way, they have gone from a one-man operation to a staff of 26, and opened a second branch in Ballarat in 2013 - all on the back of some not-so-humble office copiers.

The white box in the corner has gone from copy and print, to scanning, to now being multi-function devices that are driving office automation. It isn't the first place you would look for high tech solutions to data management, but Robert explains that the office copier has, "changed from something that sits in the corner and prints to now being a full hub of information, and not only getting information in, but what it does with that information. It's like an on-ramp to the business' network."

The new generation of office automation sees that big white box incorporating software systems designed to receive and divert incoming hard and soft copies of files into different areas of the business. Integrated data management systems can receive, sort and file emails and digital files, diverting information into accounting systems, stock management, sales or customer files

- all tagged and accessible via the company network. These new machines are designed to streamline the paper trail.

"With increasingly mobile workforces, you want to be able to see those documents on a PDA or laptop from anywhere. There is a lot of software involved in the backend that we do," Robert said.

For Robert and Julie, staying at the cutting edge has been driven by their partnership global giant Toshiba. The couple purchased the business in 1992 as an exclusive Toshiba business partner, servicing the Geelong region, and the partnership between SC and Toshiba has strengthened over time, with SC now the highest selling Toshiba dealer in the Australia and South Pacific region, with customers locally, nationally and globally.

The advent of the digital office manager, known by its buzzword moniker of 'office automation' is changing the way we work. No longer do piles of documents and teetering file stacks need to fill the workspace of the person at the front desk. Emails received at a virtual front desk means that customer emails that might be going back and forth separately from five or ten people in the business are all tagged and sorted into a single customer file. Every detail of every interaction and transaction with that customer can then be readily accessed. Just think of the time and headaches that would save.

In a warehouse, multi-function devices (MFDs) can print documents that, once they have been ticked off, can be scanned and then the document erased and the paper reused by the machine. The systems can recognise, scan and systematise barcodes, and the latest machines use voice recognition, so you can be wearing headphones out in the warehouse and tell the machine what stock you need to fill orders for which clients.

For businesses like SC, with sales people on the road, just-in-time stock management and reductions in Cost of Goods Sold are all tangible benefits to the business bottom line. And then there are the less tangible benefits, both in time and providing more responsive, more professional customer service.

"People get an invoice in, they'll check that it's right, enter it into the system, send it on to be approved, a week later it will be ticked off and after all that they get it back to be paid. With these systems, all of that is automated. The document comes in electronically, the system will strip the information out of that document, matching purchase orders with the amount with who authorised it and it goes straight through to accounts payable," Robert said.

"It makes everything easy to track," Julie added, "so you can see in straight away where an invoice or a job is up to and taking away all that heavy data processing time."

And while these smart systems can make a significant difference to small and medium businesses, in cutting costs and raising productivity, imagine the difference these integrated and automated systems could make in data-heavy the health and education sectors, and schools in Geelong have been quick on the uptake of smart systems. Imagine walking into a hospital or medical centre and having all of your health records complete and up to date in real time, all accessible on a tablet computer by every nurse, doctor and specialist you see?

SC Technology Group is part of a citywide growth in business-to-business service providers, and being nominated for the Geelong Business Excellence Awards earlier this year provided the impetus for the Hunters to take stock of how the business has grown in recent years.

"It showed us what we've done and where we've come from. We used to unbox equipment in a car park in Yarra Street and roll it in because we didn't have a warehouse, to now, with all of our stock undercover and secure," Robert said. "It feels a bit like a 25 year progression of an overnight success."

For SC customers, reducing their paper use as part of their overall carbon footprint and reducing costs are key drivers of purchase decisions. Innovations ranging from office automation software solutions to offering the world's first multi-function device to use erasable toner, so print can be erased and the paper reused, as well as customised solutions and no-cost training are helping them stay ahead of the pack.

"When you look around Geelong you see so many good local businesses who have grown, and we've grown with them," Robert said, "and that's great because of all of our profits stay in Geelong."

In the process of taking on four new members of staff, by the end of 2013 SC Technology will have a team of 30 across Geelong and Ballarat. The Ballarat office was opened in 2013, and the expansion into the neighbouring regional city where Southern Cross Business Machines began precipitated the change of name and brand to SC Technology Group.

Before joining Robert in the business full-time as CFO, Julie worked at Deakin University, helping to secure research grants, as well as managing the business accounts. Robert and Julie started a finance company to provide finance to SC customers and, with the business growing and the arrival of the couple's son, Josh, Julie shifted her career over to the business.

The new showroom and office space on West Fyans Street is five-times the size of the original Yarra Street showroom and, while there is room for dozens of staff, I could count only five on site, and was told the business practices what it preaches, using automated and fully networked systems so sales and technician staff can operate remotely.

"We hardly actually see each other at work," Julie said with a laugh. "Rob is mainly selling and I'm doing my own thing here on the admin side. We have our weekends as a family, bike riding or running around the river."

And all three of the Hunters were in training for Run Geelong before a netball injury saw Julie sidelined. SC Technology Group are major sponsors of Run Geelong, along with a host of other community sponsorships, and their enthusiasm for how the business growth has allowed them to give back is palpable.

"I've never seen anything like it," Robert said of Run Geelong. "When you walk along the waterfront and look back across to Geelong and there are people as far as you can see, you can't help but see what a great event it is for Geelong."

The company supports 32 local community organisations and schools, and have committed to ongoing sponsorship of Bravehearts Geelong, to five years as a major sponsor of Run Geelong and a four-year sponsorship of Encompass Community Services, as well as coming on board as the Platinum Partner of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce for a term of five years. They pointed to the extraordinary history of Give Where You Live in driving philanthropy in Geelong, and the company is a major sponsor of Feed Geelong.

"Geelong is an amazing place, with the amount of people who do give and genuinely give back," Robert said.

Community support wasn't the only aspect of the business that the couple had comb through and quantify as part of their Business Excellence Awards application. "We had to look at our client retention rate and we had lost something like one per cent, and that still kills us and we want to know why, so we can learn from that," Julie said. "We really are passionate about our relationships with our clients, and I hope that as we continue to grow that we can keep those relationships."

"It is hard, it's the hardest thing about growing, because when we started it was just Rob and people always dealt with Rob. But because we are bigger now and we have a sales force, Rob can't get out to see everyone. That's why we want to be a part of the local networks, so that people can catch up with us face to face, and we want to hear how they are going."

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