

October 2019



Not many people's career paths will have started from the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, but that is where it all began for Mark Belton who in February celebrated 20 years at the global fastenings group Trifast, known in the industry as TR Fastenings.

**Initially Mark trained as an accountant with KPMG. "As soon as I qualified, I left and went travelling. I didn't want to be an auditor as I preferred making the decisions, rather than checking other people's work. Plus, travelling really gave me a greater understanding of working with other nations and cultures."**

"It was at the top of Mount Kilimanjaro where, by chance, I met another accountant who was working for a charity organisation in Africa. After learning about the qualities required for such a role, I realised this would be a great opportunity for me to use my skills and travel at the same time. I applied and got a position at the same charity, which was based in Tanzania, Zaire (as it was then) and Rwanda, working with refugees."

"I worked alongside the UN, getting involved with logistics, admin, finance, dealing with the press; you name it, I got involved in it. It was very much about pulling the team together."

"It was an unbelievable and humbling experience that usually an accountant would rarely have. Once I got back to the UK, I still had the buzz to work with different cultures, so I became a global accountant – working for several companies before joining Trifast, just over 20 years ago."

"One of the beauties of being in a Group finance role is that you are involved in absolutely everything. You are dealing with employees from operations across the USA, Asia and Europe. By doing this you get to know all the different parts of the business because ultimately every decision made comes back to a financial implication. That was a really good foundation for me to grow within TR."

A big impact on the market and TR was the financial crisis in 2009. "There was a restructuring of the company and I was involved in getting the business back into 1.830 shape. We really had to start at the beginning and once again set the foundations. I became group finance director and along with Malcolm Diamond (chairman), Jim Barker (CEO) and the rest of the board, began to get morale back into the business and do the simple things right.

That progressed very well and we started to grow again and develop our global accounts."

Once back in a profitable position, to help with TR's evolution and to build its position within key markets, the next step was a period of acquisitions. "We added TR PSEP (Malaysia) in 2011, TR VIC (Italy) in 2014, and TR Kuhlmann (Germany) in 2015, to the TR family. Adding these companies helped develop our business in key areas, with each adding different qualities and aspects to the overall Group. The most significant factor was that each business we acquired had the same mentality, culture and philosophy as us. A lot of companies talk about having a 'unique culture' but we really have something special. You can go to any of our sites around the world and it is the same culture – investing in people, investing in quality, and treating staff, customers and suppliers with respect and fairness. That ethos is crucial to the way we work and to our success."

**"Adding these companies helped develop our business in key areas, with each adding different qualities and aspects to the overall Group. The most significant factor was that each business we acquired had the same mentality, culture and philosophy as us."**

October 2019

As the business grew there were a lot of opportunities to make some step changes, with Mark becoming CEO in 2015. “Jim and Malcolm came to me and encouraged me to apply for the CEO role. Besides the experience I had gathered over more than fifteen years at TR, I knew the people in the organisation, I knew the business and, importantly, I knew the culture. Having such a great team within TR also made it an easy decision for me to make.”

“At times, I see myself like a conductor of an orchestra; my job is to pull together all these instruments to make great music. Being able to collaborate with everyone and guide and support them, is essential. Our people know their functions and roles, so it is a case of letting them know where we are going as a business and motivating them to achieve our goals. They then understand the part they are going to play in delivering the vision.”

The Group’s strategy of investment has recently continued with the acquisition of UK-based Precision Technology Supplies (PTS) in 2018. “PTS has been a great acquisition, it has a strong management team and adds a lot of product knowledge to the Group, especially in stainless steel, which will assist us with our sourcing going forward. The addition of PTS has also improved our position in the distributor sector, an area in which we have been performing phenomenally – not only in the UK but also across the rest of Europe. We have 34 Master Distributors around Europe, helping us reach the parts we can’t reach ourselves – predominantly selling our TR branded product ranges.”

“As for the end user markets, automotive is a key sector for us and despite the current negative media around this sector, we are continuing to build market share thanks to our global capabilities and the emergence of new technologies resulting from the ongoing evolution of electric vehicles. We monitor the market closely for the next exciting areas of opportunity and we are flexible enough to move quickly when required.”

“At the moment we are seeing automotive companies consolidating their supply chain, preferring global players that they can rely on to deliver a full service across the world. We have our own manufacturing facilities in Asia, Europe, and the UK, and we are continuously investing in the quality and capacity of our manufacturing sites, most of which have recently been accredited to IATF 16949, putting us in a very strong position. A key aspect of working with automotive customers is being able to offer the same specific part to different global locations. Thanks to our global network and our shared market knowledge, we are able to deliver the right solution for each customer wherever it is needed.”

**“... we are continuously investing in the quality and capacity of our manufacturing sites, most of which have recently been accredited to IATF 16949, putting us in a very strong position.”**

Where TR is winning when it comes the automotive industry is by getting its parts ‘designed in’ to new models and by working with the electric vehicle (EV) sector. “For the bigger accounts, the key thing is staying close to the customer and adding value by getting involved at the early stages of R&D. We have a very strong partnership with our customers.

Our engineers talk to the customers’ engineers and work with them on applications and solutions, including products into plastics, mouldings and plastic composite. Working with the customer and being able to manufacture the parts ourselves gives us greater control of quality, which is another big positive with customers because they know we are in control of the supply chain.”

**TR has its own manufacturing facilities in Asia, Europe, and the UK, and is continuously investing in the quality and capacity of its manufacturing sites**



October 2019

**“Working with the customer and being able to manufacture the parts ourselves gives us greater control of quality, which is another big positive with customers because they know we are in control of the supply chain.”**

“When it comes to automotive, it really doesn’t matter if a car is electric, hybrid, petrol or diesel, as the majority of our parts goes into the chassis, dashboard, seating, lighting and the interior of a car.”

“Going forward, China will be one of the fastest growing areas for EV, as it is dedicated to reducing the high levels of pollution it has in the country. Also, the USA, with a number of start-up EV companies emerging, will be an opportunity. We are keeping close to these markets and our customers’ R&D technical centres, as well as focusing on Europe, which is also rapidly developing EV solutions.”

“We have set up an Innovation and Technical Centre in Gothenburg, Sweden, an area in which many of the key players are developing forward-thinking solutions for the automotive market, including EV technology. It is a prime location for us to be based in and we are working on some exciting projects. We will also be opening an Innovation and Technical Centre in the Midlands, UK, in the summer and will be working with some big OEMs through our tier 1 customers.”

“Interestingly, we are seeing more of our electronic customers entering the EV arena, especially in battery and EV charging units. We have a large presence in the electronics sector and we are already working with customers in this area.”

“Electronics is a more competitive market for us, with slightly more commodity items than ‘designed in’ parts. This often leads to a focus on cost, however, more companies are beginning to realise it’s about the total cost of ownership (TCO) rather than the price of individual parts. At TR, we are all about providing the whole package, including a consistent, quality supply of products, backed by excellent customer service.”

Another key sector for the Group is domestic appliances, which has shown steady growth in recent years. “When we acquired TR VIC, it gave us a really good footprint in the domestic appliance sector. TR VIC is one of the largest European fastener manufacturers to the white goods sector and, since the acquisition, it has gone from strength to strength. We also enjoy success in Asia, where we have a number of large domestic appliance customers, where having close relationships between our engineers and customer engineering teams is key.”

With a head office in the UK, a big unknown for the Group is the potential impact of BREXIT. “As soon as it was announced two years ago, we set up a cross-functional BREXIT team across the company in the UK, as well as involving our European colleagues. We carried out reviews with our customers and with our supply chains, so we understood the whole picture. From that we have Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, etc, based on the eventual outcome.”

“Our main concern is around supply delivery, which is why we are increasing our inventory levels. The last thing we ever want to do is stop a customer’s production line, so we are taking steps to ensure this doesn’t happen. With our distributors, we are ensuring we have the right products to hand, supported by impeccable quality and service, and are there to offer help with any technical issues they may have.”

“We are in a good position, but an unknown factor is ultimately how our customers will be impacted by BREXIT. We are staying close to our customers to ensure we fully understand what their requirements will be. This will help us to assist them where necessary, whatever the outcome of BREXIT.”

Looking to the development of the fastener industry, Mark believes that consolidation is inevitable. “I believe there will be further sector consolidation in the next 5 – 10 years, as it is getting harder for smaller companies to keep on top of increasing changes in legislation and quality requirements. That said, there will always be a place for smaller fastener companies who have carved out a niche for themselves.”

October 2019

**“We have just embarked on a substantial investment programme, Project ATLAS. This is the largest organic investment we have ever made – GB£15 million over four years.”**

“A big ‘game changer’ for the industry will be digitalisation, which will provide the efficiencies the supply chain needs. That is why we are investing heavily in this area. We have just embarked on a substantial investment programme, Project ATLAS. This is the largest organic investment we have ever made – GB£15 million over four years.



Before pushing the green light, our team spent a great deal of time going around the business looking at the IT infrastructure, management information systems and processes, which highlighted the benefits of bringing all of these aspects together within the Group.”

“We are very much a decentralised group, as each site has its own P&L, although, over the top of this we provide Group

services to give support (Group sales and marketing, HR, IT, etc). From this structure, we benefit by pulling best practice together around the Group and sharing knowledge, skills, as well as customer and supplier information.”

“ATLAS is an exciting project and it is something we are really embracing. It is not just an ERP implementation, it is a global business transformation, drawing the Group even closer together.”

Whilst digitalisation provides a big opportunity within the industry, Mark is clear it needs to go hand in hand with investing in engineering and people. “People buy off people. People want help; they want to know about the part; they want to talk to an engineer about its capabilities and understand the product. We have lots of colleagues at TR who have a great deal of product knowledge and our aim is to feed that knowledge down into the next generation via training schemes and apprenticeships. We are committed to developing our people’s talent and giving them training and support to reach their potential.”

“Equally as important is to increase the capacity and efficiencies of our machines and manufacturing capabilities, to support our external customers and inter-company business alike. To really grow our presence, it is about investing in our people, our capacity, our products and our service, as well as looking for like-minded businesses to join the TR family that fit our culture, which is very special.”