



Local manufacturer resurgent under new leadership

Premier Tech Aqua UK (PTAU) is an industry leader in packaged water and waste water solutions across the UK and Ireland. The business, previously known as Condor Products, first opened its doors in Peterlee, County Durham, 44-years ago. It since played an integral role in the UK's environmental technologies industry, offering an impressive range of innovative product lines. In 2013, the company became part of Canadian multinational, Premier Tech, adopting its name and integrating into its Environmental Technologies Group.



The move strengthened the company's position and enhanced Premier Tech Aqua's presence in Europe. Though, as with any integration, the process of embedding a new identity and engaging and uniting the workforce under a renewed vision, takes time. Since Steve Joyce's appointment as Managing Director

in mid-2016, however, that process has accelerated. He tells Nigel Wright what attracted him to the opportunity and outlines his achievements so far, as well as PTAU's plans for further growth during the next three years.

Premier Tech launched over 90 years ago in Québec State, Canada, where its Headquarters is still based. Today, it has over 3,800 team members across 24 countries and is a genuine global player in Agriculture & Horticulture, Packaging Machinery and Environmental Technologies markets. In managing a Premier Tech Business Unit (BU), Steve confirmed there's a high demand to deliver quality products at fair prices whilst continuing the growth plans for the BU and the Group:

"We're looking to grow quickly and, as well as being a leading brand, my attraction to this opportunity was the

level of autonomy afforded to the local Management Team. For me that means a winning combination of being a 'Glocal' partner for clients, with the flexibility to support local markets assisted by the global Premier Tech family. Our market growth potential and strong global identity will enable PTAU to play an integral part in the Group's ambitious expansion plans and develop the UK BU into a major player in the packaged, small flow wastewater treatment market in the coming years."

During the past 18 months, two significant teams have been brought together to develop the business in the UK. A new "dynamic" management team has been assembled which, in Steve's view, allows PTAU to align itself with up-to-date manufacturing methodologies and modern approaches to marketing and digital communication. Also, a fully resourced sales team will drive improved market share for PTAU's products and enable the



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business to achieve organic growth. Meanwhile, Steve and his leadership team have a target list of potential acquisitions that will help PTAU develop its existing portfolio, as well as enter new market segments: “We have a superb team in place to underpin the next phase of the growth strategy; a focused group of people offering depth and breadth across different areas, driven and excited about delivering a better business.”

While successful commercial and leadership improvements have been conceived and enacted during his first 18 months in the job, Steve admits his most satisfying achievement so far has been the impact he and his team have had on morale. Simple yet effective communication and actions have been the key to this development and Steve believes they have helped team members feel more engaged. This is evident in the number of improvement suggestions (over 100) and the number of Single Point Improvements (SPIs, again over 100) that the teams have been involved in during the past 12 months, allowing PTAU to make positive small-step changes: “Levels of inquisitiveness and more people wanting responsibility, immersing themselves in the team working ethic at PTAU, is having a snowball effect on organisational change. Team members now

show willingness to propose improvements and deliver them too.”

Recruitment at all levels has also been deliberately focused on re-energising PTAU's culture. Steve claims there's now a better mix of experience and emerging talent in the business. While 70% of the workforce has worked at the Peterlee site for more than ten years, 20% of team members joined within the last three years, creating a balance between experience and knowledge alongside new ideas and fresh energy. Furthermore, new development initiatives including measuring all team members on current and future skills and broadening internal training programmes to ensure people have the capabilities to perform their jobs, as well as provide cover for other roles, has facilitated positive change. This, Steve confirms, is driven by PTAU's mantra: 'recruit attitude; develop skill'.

The successful launch of Solido SMART – a shallow-dig waste treatment plant and a new addition to Premier Tech's global portfolio – was the first product launch managed entirely by PTAU, showcasing Steve and his team's impact during the last 18 months. While divisional input during early phases was provided by German and French team members; the final design,





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prototyping, testing, pre-production, production and marketing were all delivered by the Peterlee team. It was the first product from the Peterlee plant since Steve joined and he highlighted its effect on belief and confidence: “Everyone here recognises that we have the depth of experience and enough discipline and drive to deliver a successful project. We are now applying similar principles and cross BU teamworking to the transfer of the Ecoflo product from our French BU to Peterlee.”

A particularly pleasing outcome of the Solido SMART launch is the emergence of new talent. One young engineer, Dan Espley, for example, showed such appetite and desire to lead a successful project as part of the launch, that he will now join other team members in Premier Tech’s Management development programme at the University of Premier Tech in Canada in early 2018: “This illustration of hunger and ambition is indicative of the types of people we need in this business and the University of Premier Tech, launched two years ago, will enable us to hone the skills and attitudes of PTAU’s future managers.”

Steve noted several career development avenues available at Premier Tech, including internal training, as well as sponsorship for further education, internships and apprenticeships. He praised the region’s educational, structure which he believes has a depth from entry through to university level, and said PTAU has always been impressed with and benefited from training programs available across the North East to support individuals and the broader business community. A recent collaboration with Durham University saw two final year engineering students join PTAU during the summer to work on projects relevant to their dissertations. The research conducted by one of the students has had a big impact on the business, helping to identify where several process improvements could be made. That individual has since remained in contact with PTAU and plans to visit the site again soon.

PTAU will also take on apprentices for the first time in over a decade in 2018, offering them mixed experience across commercial, maintenance and manufacturing areas of the business, while three team members will work as enterprise advisers for a local schools’ programme, promoting career opportunities within manufacturing: “As a North East employer, it’s our responsibility to nurture local talent. We never overlook the region’s



workforce when recruiting and participate in educating the available talent pool about manufacturing opportunities and the types of careers people can build within PTAU. There’s a variety of manufacturing jobs at PTAU and your career has the potential to develop from Peterlee to anywhere in the world where Premier Tech operates.”

Other activities taking place since Steve’s appointment have been focused on bringing PTAU and the other business units that form Premier Tech’s Environmental Technologies European Division, closer together. During the summer, a new system for exchanging technologies, best practices and improvement ideas was launched and Steve confirmed regular pan-European visits which have helped team members across the group become familiar with how their peers work overseas. Steve himself has travelled to Canada and France several times this year, and other PTAU team members have visited sites in Portugal and France, with those from France and Germany joining the Peterlee team to take part in shared development activities.

Another mantra ‘no surprise, never a surprise’ – indicative of the genuine openness inside Premier Tech – is further reinforced by 282, the Group’s global intranet, named after the shade of blue used in the business’s logo. As Steve explained: “The emphasis is on sharing experiences, good and bad, enabling the emphasis to be on finding solutions. The platform enables visibility across the whole



Premier Tech enterprise, where team members can interact, see what is happening in different parts of the world, share ideas and cross pollinate between business units. Growing our digital presence is something we're focusing on during the next 12 months, and our partners can look forward to a clearer and easier interaction with PTAU on all digital platforms."

When asked about any insecurities he or PTAU may have about the future of manufacturing in the region, Steve remained upbeat. Firstly, he sees Peterlee as an ideal location for exporting, with good access to the main road arteries (A19 and the A1) and local ports. Beyond that, the heritage of manufacturing in the North East, for Steve, means given the correct levels of investment

and interest by Government, it will undoubtedly have a strong future. Even the prospect of Brexit isn't too alarming: "With the correct investment, the depth of knowledge and experience in manufacturing within the UK will ensure we'll maintain a successful manufacturing base."

As such, Steve says PTAU has no intention of leaving the region and confirmed a recently agreed 15-year extension to the Peterlee site, with plans to develop the infrastructure during the next two to three years. He added: "The key message is we're here for the long term. PTAU is proud to have roots here in the North East and we want to make the best possible improvements to the business because we're building here for the future."

