

Helping change along



Managed by Birmingham Chamber and funded by the European Regional Development Fund, Accelerate was set up some 10 years ago to help West Midlands automotive suppliers compete effectively in the world's most demanding global industry.

Since that time the initiative has, according to outgoing programme director David Malpass (see page 84), "worked with over 4,000 companies, safeguarded/created in excess of 60,000 jobs and put plans down for the automotive sector going forward".

No doubt this direct impact is magnified by indirect benefit: if an engineering firm flourishes, there are business opportunities for its suppliers.

Stories with an Accelerate link have been featured in *Machinery's* pages for many years; the initiative must surely be one of the most enduring and successful industry support vehicles with which this magazine has had contact. It is easy to be cynical about official business support initiatives, but time and time again, news from the Accelerate camp has turned up positive examples in what might be termed the 'mature' engineering sector.

The story is often the same; a cataclysmic event challenges the company. Business falls – often linked to the failure of a major customer (Rover, for example), employment shrinks, and disaster looms. Accelerate steps in to offer business support, a new business strategy is born, this typically involving diversification and the application of existing skills to new markets and business sectors. Funding from existing sources may also play a part – Selective Finance for Investment in England (SFIE) grants, for example.

The adoption of modern working practices is always a major element – lean manufacturing – but a key feature is that the company becomes more proactively managed, seeking out opportunities rather than treading the familiar path it has travelled for many years, working with long-standing customers in contracting markets.

While the stories may often be similar, it is always heartening to hear of such turnarounds; always good to see that the traditional business of bashing or cutting metal can still succeed in the UK. And our technology equipment supplier and service provider end-of-year-reports starting on page 45 are testament to the currently improving fortunes in the UK's engineering manufacturing sector.

There will be new challenges in the future, but there will always be companies ready to rise to those challenges, and, it is hoped, initiatives like Accelerate to help the process of change reach successful conclusion.

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Machinery is published on the first Friday of every month by Findlay Publications Ltd, Hawley Mill, Hawley Road, Dartford, Kent DA2 7TJ.

Annual subscription is £115 (UK) and £170 (Overseas).

Origination by JJays, Unit 4, Baron Court, Chandlers Way, Temple Farm Industrial Estate, Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS2 5SE
Printed in England by Wyndeham Heron Ltd, Heybridge, Maldon, Essex CM9 4NW



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