

A TALE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

What drives an entrepreneur? Some would say that they are people meant to stand out from the crowd, whose vision and drive are behind a country's most successful business ventures. Others praise their courage to follow their passions on their own innovative path, no matter what the future might hold for them.



Meet a couple – in business and life - who not only contributed to the South African business sector, but started with what they knew best.

“Whilst driving through the beautiful Irish countryside in 2004, my wife Marlyn and I had this crazy idea of establishing a robotics and automation company together, robotics being my passion and business being hers. After our holiday we returned to South Africa, where one thing after another fell into place and which led us to start our own company”, says Altus Mostert.

He founded Robotic Innovations in November 2004, now established in Irene, Centurion. The company’s goal was to provide automated robotic solutions for companies in the automotive, mining and consumer goods industries.

Altus has been in the robotics playground since its senior years, when he was lucky enough to work in Germany as an exchange student for an automation and robotics company, after he completed his studies in Process and Instrumentation at the Technicon of Pretoria, better known today as TUT. The company’s management approached him to start up a branch for them in South Africa. He hasn’t looked back since. Shortly after, he started in the position of Managing Director of the South African branch.

His wife Marlyn, studied Marketing Management at the University of Pretoria and joined the Liberty Group in a software development and marketing related position after graduating with an honors degree.



“The plan from the beginning was a collaborative one and after spending eight years with the Liberty Group, Marlyn joined Robotic Innovations in the beginning of 2007. Our dream became a reality that we would love one day and detest the next... but will have it no other way. It has not been plain sailing all the way, with many hard lessons learnt”, explains Mostert.

The couple proved to be a successful business team: Altus gained the necessary knowledge of robotics and automation from his time spent in Germany, and having been involved in the start-up and running of the local company as Managing Director, while Marlyn set about handling the finance, human resources and marketing

departments. Now a recognized player in robotic system innovation and integration, designing in-house turnkey automated solutions for a number of manufacturing applications, the company was initially run from a small home office for a period of four months equipped only with a desk, laptop and fax/printer.

The market response was promising and the company employed two staff members in its first year (2004) in which Robotic Innovations reported a turnover of only R55,000. It was a slow start, but the company reportedly succeeded in catching the eye of its competitors, all fighting for a bigger slice of the cake in this very specialised industry.

“Due to the nature of our business and the various services we are able to provide, from automated welding solutions to project management, we compete with numerous companies in different sectors. However, robotics remains our main focus and we are part of only a handful of companies that lead the way in terms of innovative integrated robotic solutions”, says Altus.

The company now employs 13 specialist individuals, and has taken on a number of international agencies. Its annual turnover is now in the millions, despite the economic downturn. “From the beginning we planned to keep our business small and specialized. This has not changed and yes we have some room to grow still”, says Marlyn.

“The initial capital lay-out in terms of computer systems and expensive software packages (CAD), office equipment etc, has a tremendous impact on a company’s funds. Having had to finance big projects initially was a costly exercise in the early days and finding the right people proved to be a bigger challenge than we had anticipated, adds Marlyn. More importantly, Altus and Marlyn had a difficult and challenging mission ahead: to educate South African companies of the benefits of such products and services to speed up and aid their manufacturing processes and convince their clients of the value-added potential that robotics have to offer.

“We have had to make many sacrifices along the way”, states Altus and Marlyn, sacrifices which included long working hours and keeping the bar raised in one of the most difficult time periods for Robotic Innovations. “The past couple of months and the impact that the global economic recession has had on South Africa’s economy, has also affected RI”.

The couple also admits that “it is very difficult to switch off from work when you have your own business. It takes a concerted effort to switch off and we luckily have various hobbies that occupy our little free time over weekends: mountain biking, off-road motorcycles in the countryside or playing a round of golf”.

Surprisingly enough, the couple had their fair amount of recognition early on after embracing entrepreneurship, comprising of coverage in business magazines such as Entrepreneur, profile publications and a nomination in the Business Partners’ Entrepreneur of the Year finalists for 2007, an award honouring entrepreneurs for their innovative contribution to small and medium business enterprises in South Africa.

