

# Optics with robotics

**C**lose to £250,000 has been spent on Tant Laboratories of Bishops Stortford in the past three years on everything from Weco glazing systems to a dust-free environment.

What is perhaps most surprising is that the man spearheading the spend is an accountant – Tant’s managing director Gerard Donovan, who liked the company so much when doing a feasibility study on it he asked if he could work there.

This was five years ago when Nelson Hawkes, former MD of lens companies from Signet Armorlite to Essilor UK (now celebrating his 40th year in optics), was contemplating taking over the firm, then known as Tant Plastics.

Under Hawkes’ tutorage, Donovan worked as operations director for four years, taking over as MD in February with Hawkes becoming chairman. While Donovan admits he knew little about optics at the outset, his commercial background was founded with blue chip companies such as GE Capital, a background he describes as a valuable asset in the ongoing development of Tant.

‘Joining Tant gave me the opportunity to work with Nelson and benefit from his extensive knowledge and experience of the industry. I’ve been introduced to great people and been able to visit and learn from many different labs because of his reputation. I am very grateful to Nelson for the opportunities he has given me over the past five years.’

The first change at Tant was the re-naming to Tant Laboratories. ‘Laboratories is synonymous with a clean environment and cleanliness in production is vital,’ he explains.

A sophisticated dust extraction system was installed, which is a lot less noisy than the industrial vacuums it replaced, and natural daylight-type lighting emphasises the bright and clean environment. In fact, staff could probably eat their lunch off the floor, were it not for the fact that a new canteen has also been provided.

## FOCUS ON CLEANLINESS

Adding to this image of cleanliness, employees sport white uniforms, from lab coats in surfacing to polo shirts in glazing.

Donovan explains that he was influenced by a visit to a lab in Germany: ‘It carried out 1,000 jobs a day, but had the atmosphere of a library. It looked like they were doing very little, rather than

**Rory Brogan visits Tant Laboratories and finds that computerisation, a clean environment and Weco machinery, including a robot, are all part of ongoing improvements at the plant**



The glazing department at Tant with the Weco robot pictured top right

somewhere where they think they have to look busy to be successful. The footfall is wrong if you have people running around everywhere.’

The focus on cleanliness is demonstrated with a pristine seven-stage ultrasonic cleaning unit in the surfacing lab, where lenses are cleaned before final inspection and dispatch.

‘It’s unusual to have ultrasonic cleaning in a lab with outsourced AR coating,’ he adds.

The laboratory at Tant is spacious, at 10,000sq ft, with surfacing, computerisation and customer services on the ground floor and air conditioned glazing, tinting and a training area above.

Other developments at the lab include computerisation, enabling jobs to be traced all the way through, without searching for trays, as well as leaner stock levels. A central telephone line was also installed for queries and order taking, either through the customer service team or direct dial to one of the section managers – ‘just like people using a garage sometimes want to speak to the technician rather than service reception,’ he says.

A Weco glazing lab was put in place just over 12 months ago, making Tant the first Weco reference centre that can be used as a showroom for the company’s equipment. Thanks to this link with Weco, the lab gets regular updates and servicing, ‘making sure it is run at its most efficient with the latest technology’.

‘We needed to step up to a system suited for a growing medium-sized lab,’ he explains. ‘Weco had the industrial solution when we needed to change.’

As well as three Weco glazing machines,



and a computerised CNC Optidrill for rimless, the centrepiece of this area is the 862 Weco robot, that can carry out up to 120 jobs a day. While the machine is glazing one lens, after verifying the Rx, the second lens is being verified, without the need for marking up or blocking prior to glazing.

## HIGH-TECH EFFICIENCY

‘It took a short time to bed in, but we’re very happy with it as it has brought a lot of efficiency.’

While such a comment could be taken as code for redundancies, he adds: ‘Staff numbers have stayed the same. If we hadn’t taken on the equipment we’d have



**Gerard Donovan: 'When we see an emerging technology we have to look at it..'**

taken on more staff, but the work flow and capacity have improved. The people we have now do more diverse things and multi-task, for example we have technicians who also work on customer services.'

Staff retention is something else the 25-year-old company can pride itself on.

Alan Larke the surfacing manager has been at Tant since day one and glazing manager Neil McFarlane is a more recent convert with 15 years under his belt. Staff are sent on various SMC training courses, including customer care and NVQs for technicians. 'We're big believers in training,' says Donovan. 'It's an investment and forward thinking as staff in return feel more valued.'

Another area of development is in Electronic Data Interchange, where practices can order their jobs online, taking away any risk of inputting or hearing errors and getting the work into the system in the shortest possible time.

## COMPANY TIE-UPS

'We are focused on making it easy for the customer and are working closely with the software providers on EDI for independents. It's still at its early stages and is an emerging opportunity for labs.'

The company has seen an increase, not necessarily in quantity, but in the quality of jobs over the past five years. 'The client base has grown, but the type of work from them is different, with not so much of the commodity-based product. We're doing more with materials like Trivex, PNX and Airwear, not necessarily just in rimless. These materials are emerging as a quality product for every-day use.'

While rimless eyewear is still strong, the lab is also successful with sunglasses, with a tinting and hard coating facility. It holds frame and sunglass stocks from Marchon, International Eyewear, Optical Services and Continental Eyewear, as well as being an American Optical Partner Laboratory and an Essilor Varilux Specialist Laboratory. Company tie-ups are reinforced with joint promotions, for example with Transitions through Essilor and AO, as well as tailor-making its own promotions through Hawkes' daughter, Joanne Adam, now in marketing after years in practice. A recent example is Tant's teaming up of Minima rimless frames with Hoya lenses at a promotional price.

'The independent needs to work on marketing and selling their own business. People may have a perception that independent opticians are expensive, but that's not the reality,' says Donovan.

The company can provide anything from stock lenses to the most complex Rx and he wants it to be a 'one-stop shop', short of taking on AR coating itself. 'There are enough coating specialists and their turnaround is good so there is no real incentive to invest in AR coating.'

Donovan is, however, keeping a close eye on free-form lens technology and monitoring the clinical and commercial developments before investing in the equipment. 'When we see an emerging technology we have to look at it, especially when it becomes economical in terms of price for equipment and facilities.'

Ever the accountant, you might think, but there's little chance of a return to his former profession. 'I've got the optics bug. I'm in it for the rest of my career. I'm thoroughly enjoying it and the shareholders and directors of Tant are in it for the long term,' he says.