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connections

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Why steady growth works for Instalec

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Over the past 30 years Instalec has gone from a one-man band to a successful regional firm with nationwide clients. And despite the looming retirement of its original founder, company director Lesley Jeffs sees no sign of business slowing down

Steady progress

By Richard Pagett

Instalec is based in Luton and contractors work around the south-east, but you will sometimes see vans travelling further afield when they are working for their numerous nationwide clients.

The company was formed more than 30 years ago by Paul Jones, then a sole trader. Today Instalec is a thriving company involved in all aspects of electrical work, with an impressive client list including large construction companies, various educational establishments and commercial clients such as rightmove.co.uk, The Clancy Group and Morrison Utilities.

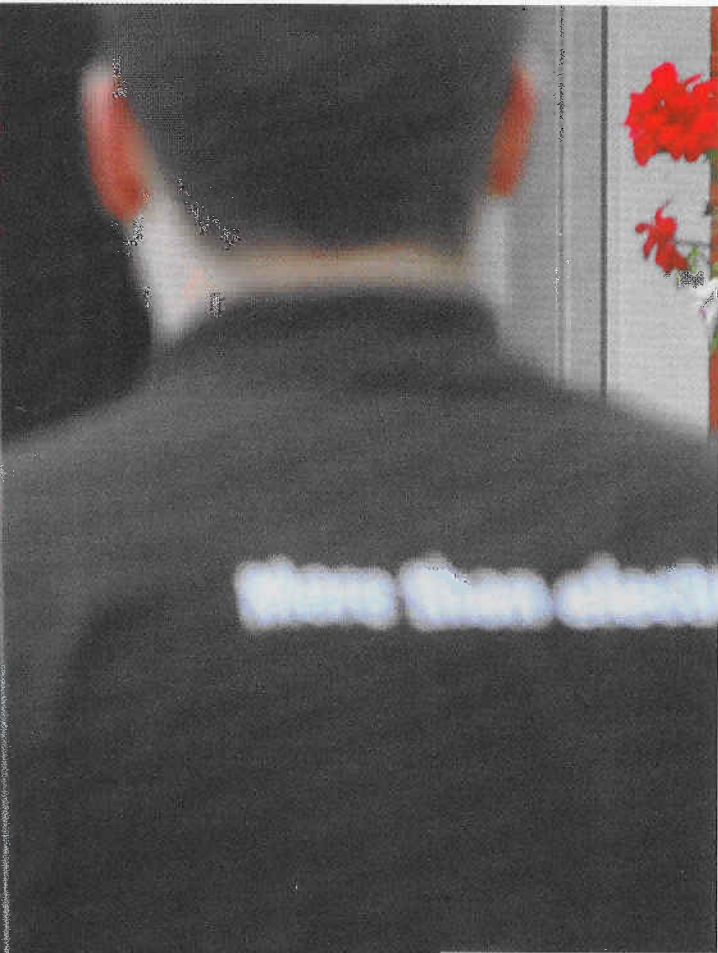
Jones is still involved in the business, but *Connections* spoke to his colleague Lesley Jeffs, director and company secretary. Jeffs won the Bedfordshire businesswoman of the year award in 2002 and for good reason – office-based, she is integral to the running of this efficient and professional business.

"Instalec became an Approved Contractor in 1984," Jeffs explains. "It was a business decision, and the right one. The company started to really grow in the past eight years. Paul had a back injury, which meant he had to step back from the physical aspects of the work, instead running and marketing Instalec, taking on new staff and bigger contracts. We became a 'proper' company, if you like."

Personnel issues

Jeffs has been involved since 1995 and became a company director in 2000. "Business is fantastic," she says. "It has been one of our most stressful yet bumper years. But we're not immune to the issues affecting the whole of the industry. One of our biggest issues is finding good personnel, as I expect it is with many electrical contractors. We have been down the agency route, and we spend a lot of money on advertising, but





'We always train – externally and internally – and believe that we do indeed learn something new every day. We've all grown as individuals and as a company because of that'



the good guys are being looked after by their companies or working for themselves."

The company does take on apprentices – Neil Rees and Joseph Dupree have been entered into the JTL apprentice of the year awards and are now in their third year – and Jeffs firmly believes that some of the best people they have are those Instalec have had since day one of their electrical careers. Jamie Swan is now a director

of the company, but not so long ago he was a postman, fitting in a round in the morning before starting work at Instalec. The company soon took him on permanently and the rest is history – he won the employee of the year award at the Bedfordshire and Luton business excellence awards in 2004.

Business patterns are fluctuating, and being able to predict when more personnel will be needed is getting harder, says Jeffs. The electrical wholesalers she speaks to experience the same problem and this unpredictability compounds the staffing issues she already has to deal with.

As Instalec grows as a business it has introduced team tasks to develop its entire staff. For instance, one person is responsible for the test equipment, ensuring it is calibrated; another is responsible for the vehicles, checking and maintaining oil and tyre pressures; and another staff member has responsibility for social events.

"Personnel issues are frustrating, but so is the amount of red tape," Jeffs continues. "Health and safety, for instance, has become more stringent and the responsibility has

> AT A GLANCE

INSTALEC COMPANY FACT FILE

- Formed more than 30 years ago
- Approved Contractor since 1984
- 15 employees
- All types of electrical work undertaken
- Key projects include Paul Jones's interior lighting design and installation; church of St Mary, Luton town centre; refurbishment work at College of Law, London; St Paul's Cathedral; and County Hall, Bedford

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hit home, particularly since I became a director. We still do spot checks on site, making sure our guys are wearing personal protection equipment such as steel toecaps, but proving it means more administrative work, with all the documentation and risk assessment. Of course we recognise why we have to do it, but it is excessive on top of the other red tape we have to contend with."

As for Part P, Instalec found no problems or change to its business when this regulation amendment came into force in January 2005; as Jeffs points out, job notification takes five minutes on the web. But Jeffs is frustrated by the lack of government publicity available for householders, and she believes more could have been done to promote the benefits of Part P.

Planning ahead

Jeffs does, however, take a positive view on the red-tape overload because, combined with the other pressures business brings, it helps to focus her mind. Although Instalec has to jump through numerous and time-consuming hoops, this pushes her and her fellow directors to plan both for future business and for the worst-case scenario.

"We have learned over the years that contingency planning is crucially important," Jeffs says. "Thinking that things won't happen to you is wrong; they do." One example of this contingency planning has been to keep all copies of company stationery at home, in case of fire or flooding. With the terrible floods that the UK has experienced this year, this does not seem as drastic as it sounds, and is a good lesson for businesses of all types.

Another key project for the directors this year is a succession plan for when Jones retires from the business.



> INFORMATION

CONNECTING PEOPLE: NICEIC CONTRACTOR PROFILES

NICEIC Approved Contractor and Domestic Installer companies represent the full range of electrical contracting companies; from the very small to the very large. Some NICEIC registered contractors specialise in a certain kind of work, whether industrial, commercial or domestic. Others take on the full raft of electrical work, from the simple plug socket to huge terminal buildings at Britain's largest airport. Above all, they represent the best in the industry and their tales of industry and working life are different.

Over the coming issues of *Connections*, we will be profiling some of NICEIC's contractors, outlining their business and history, finding out their views on electrical contracting issues and getting an insight into how other electrical contracting businesses operate.

Why not share your experiences of the electrical contracting industry? If you would like to be considered for inclusion in *Connections*, please email editor@niceicconnections.co.uk

The fleet of Instalec vans heading down the M1 is a familiar sight in Luton and this summer Instalec decided to install vehicle-tracking devices. "At first we were concerned about the Big Brother effect," says Jeffs, "but it has become the company toy – the guys come in to see what's going on.

"The system is especially good for locating emergency call-outs and the mileage log is useful for administrative tax purposes," she adds. "We did trial a different system when we were refurbishing the reception areas at County Hall in Bedford. That allowed us not only to track the vehicles but also to monitor when our employees were clocking in on site and this made it easy for us to pay them."

Both Instalec's business and the industry as a whole are thriving at the moment and although the company shares the same pressures as many electrical contractors of a similar size, Jeffs is optimistic about the future. "We always train – externally and internally – and believe that we do indeed learn something new every day," she reflects. "We've all grown as individuals and as a company because of that."