



# MAKING IT AMAZING

Interview with  
**GARY HILL**  
**MANAGING DIRECTOR**  
**HEARING DIRECT**

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IT FOR BUSINESS

Why do we have the paradox that instead of improving agility and cohesion, 'enabling' more flexible working patterns, the opposite can be the case with IT investment?

Instead of better information flow, for example, access to relevant data is more complex, while any expected reduction in the operational costs of the business fail to materialise.

The implications are increased vulnerability, as well as an impact on effectiveness, an increased difficulty in remaining competitive and being on the same wavelength as their customers.

For a report being researched and written by DECISION magazine for HB Tech, companies consider what they need to address if IT is to deliver key objectives.

This is one of the papers to be published in the report.

“OUR WHOLE BUSINESS is intrinsically based on IT - without the internet we couldn't have revolutionised the market and we wouldn't be here.”

Gary Hill isn't exaggerating. But the co-founder of Hearing Direct is understating the need to be able to 'read' technology and see how its application can create an opportunity in what might be considered a conservative sector.

Hill and Stuart Canterbury were working for a hearing aid manufacturer - the former as marketing director, the latter as MD - when they identified a digital-based retail opportunity.

That notion was strengthened in 2017 when the US government signed the Over The Counter Hearing Aid, deregulation which encouraged new retail entrants into the market.

Thinking that business trends on the other side of the Atlantic eventually reach these shores, Hill and Canterbury came up with the concept of internet-based Hearing Direct. Their company launched with four different hearing aids. “It took us three days to make our first sale - it came in at 1030 on a Friday night from Pontefract,” says Hill. It turned out to be their first return as well.

Today Hearing Direct has five web sites, sells on Amazon, and in five countries. They have close to 1000 skus (stock keeping units) which include accessories and consumables. Last year the company sold 10million hearing aid batteries alone.

There's also on-line competition now, but Hill was expecting that as technology reduced barriers to entry. “Ten years ago when we started, the process of setting up an on-line business was much more complex - first, there was registration of a domain name with one company, then you had to go to another which would do the hosting, and another who would be the e-commerce provider,” he recalls. “They all had to be synchronised, and just setting up an internet presence, without any design in place, could take a week, all going well, which it rarely did.

“Today anyone can register a domain, build a new website with an e-commerce platform, and have it up all in an afternoon. It's unbelievable to think that a start-up business can be up and trading globally in an instant, and it fascinates me that someone could think of a business idea in the morning, and have it up and running by the end of the day thanks to IT. That said, attracting customers to it in any numbers is quite another thing.”

And embracing cloud hosting has enabled the company to have some members of its team working from home - as far away as South Africa in one instance.

The original plan for Hearing Direct was to have everything up on one ERP system, but initially their e-commerce platform was reluctant to integrate. Today, everything is seamlessly generated and processed by a single system, from order intake, printing out the pick ticket, the customer receipt, through to the shipping document. "It is essential if e-commerce is to work effectively that it can cope with the fragmentation of international trade, and the different shipping options which drive efficiencies and meet the demands of the customer," says Hill.

"Amazon has created the expectation of immediacy, but IT should enable an SME to nail it as well," he continues. "I can see a time when you order, for example, a T-shirt in a particular shade, but the vendor has no stock whatsoever; the garment is made on a 3D printer in the truck which is delivering it to the customer.

Whether that is going to happen or not isn't the point. Hill is demonstrating the need for an on-line retailer to focus not just on product but the future of manufacturing, selling, and

distributing the product, as well as the digital shopfront.

Technology means that the customer can take an on-line hearing test (it takes three minutes), and if a hearing aid is purchased, it can be adjusted on their smartphone. "There will always be consumers who will want a consultation in person," says Hill, "but it will be interesting to see what the new generation of technophilic rather than technophobic customers will demand."

And despite opticians adding audiology to their repertoire, there's still a uniqueness to the Hearing Direct model. "We realised that it's not just about selling hearing aids," explains Hill.

"What we discovered is that there is a whole raft of products and consumables that some customers have found difficult to find and buy, and that there is a trend for them to want a complete end-to-end service. If they buy their batteries from us and get good service, then when it comes to a new hearing aid, it stands to reason they are more likely to get in touch with us about it. And knowing what accessories they are buying means we know what hearing aid they currently have and we can make them aware of particular offers."

In this respect - and Hill is talking about data - IT has blurred the boundaries when it comes to the definition of a company. Would Hearing Direct be described as being a sector-specific provider of product, an IT-based distribution business, or as being in both categories?

“Technology he has given us an epiphany,” says Hill. “We now realise the value of Hearing Direct isn’t just our top and bottom line, or our brand and IP, but additionally the data which other internet and certainly bricks and mortar retailers aren’t able to gather so readily, which is why the latter have loyalty cards in an attempt to build the same kind of picture that we are able to.

“The developing world is interesting because I don’t think it is going to be about changes to distribution models but how to add value and convenience for a customer, and for that to happen, because it is dependent on IT, which drives our entire functionality, we have to be one step ahead.”

And the safety nets have been disappearing. Hill provides a salient example. “If a company is hacked and can’t ship for a week, it is now nearly impossible to revert to ‘pen and paper’ methods while everything is sorted out,” he point out, “if only because it is

likely their suppliers and shippers will have systems which won’t be able to take ‘manual’ instructions.”



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