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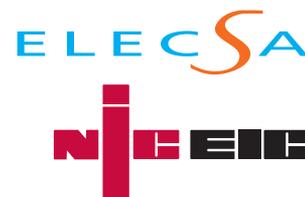
Late and non-payment are all too common. But what are your options?

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Building information modelling can help contractors of all sizes



ONE MAN'S VISION

How Tim Harlock built Alpha Electrical Midlands Limited from the ground up // page 26

COMPANY: Alpha Electrical Midlands Limited

BASED: Leamington Spa

FOUNDED: 1999

MAJOR PROJECTS: Camberley nursing homes, Bedford Street Lofts

STAFF NUMBERS: 22

TURNOVER: £1.2 million

Near and far

First set up in 1999, Leamington Spa-based Alpha Electrical Midlands Limited has built up a local and national client base, with newbuild nursing homes a specialist subject

> Tim Harlock is now supported by project manager Mike Mansell, while Lindsey Booth (below) runs the office. Right, Richard Bartlett performs a few checks at the Bedford Street Lofts apartments

By Nick Martindale

Tucked away in a side street near the centre of the historic town of Leamington Spa lies an ordinary looking house, long since converted into offices. This is the home of Alpha Electrical Midlands Limited; a flourishing electrical business that now employs 22 electricians, headed by managing director Tim Harlock, who started the company in 1999.

Tim grew up in the area, and worked for a number of local companies after completing his apprenticeship before setting up on his own. The town's central location has come in handy – the business takes on work all over the country, with only around 10 per cent of contracts coming from the local area.

Much of the focus is on the commercial sector, and newbuild nursing homes have become a particular speciality, with contracts for a range of national care providers including Life Style Care, Gracewell Healthcare and Care UK.

"The first nursing home we did was in 2007 in Cambridge and it was the first project we'd worked on for that particular contractor, and we impressed them," says Tim. "Then we did another and another, and now we're asked to tender for quite a lot of nursing homes with different client bases, not all for

the same client." The company is currently working on its biggest project to date; a £1.1 million contract on two nursing homes and a care apartment complex in Camberley.

"We do everything electrical, so the lighting, power, data, fire alarms and nurse call systems," says Tim. "We design and install our own fire alarm and emergency lighting systems. We use external companies to test and warranty the systems, but we do all the installs ourselves. It means it's all under our control and we don't have to rely on anyone else."

Relationships with national organisations are one reason why Alpha manages to attract business from all over the UK. "Wherever they have their projects they like to keep the same electrical contractor, which is great for us, and that's why we do the work where we do," says Tim. "We still have to tender for the job, but if they like the price we tend to



Mike Mansell





Tim Harlock

£1.2M:
The company's **turnover** for
the most recent **financial year**



'We're getting a lot more enquiries for the bigger projects; there's a confidence out there that there wasn't before'

get the job." Much of the work the company gets is direct with end clients, he says; he has tendered for contracts with main building contractors, but is wary of being left exposed to late payment.

A major focus at the moment is a newbuild 10-storey student accommodation block with 250 bedrooms in Luton, which started in June and has to be finished by the end of August. "It's all modular so they come completely done and we need to put the infrastructure in," says Tim. "We're the main supplier for that." Contractors spend weeks working away, he adds, either staying in hotels or rented houses for longer projects, and the company also rents a house in south London to act as a base for work in that area.

Other projects are more local, including the transformation of the Bedford Street Lofts apartments, an ultramodern development in the heart of Leamington Spa housed in a former gym.

"The client we work for also owns a couple of nightclubs and bars in Leamington, and a health club," says Tim. "We obviously did something a little bit different to a typical domestic property, so it's all galvanised conduit and it has a very industrial feel to it. We did everything there from the central heating wiring, the data wiring to the TV and intercom systems, as well as the general electrical work."

Solid base

This kind of contract is a far cry from the type of work the business initially undertook when it first started up and consisted of just Tim as a sole trader. "I was working out of an F-reg Escort van and I had a month's work lined up," he recalls. "Originally it was domestic work. I got very friendly with a few letting agents in the area and we did work for them. After the first two or three years we started doing a few bigger projects. The size of project was probably £10-15,000, which was a very big project for me at the time, and they would be anything from four to five apartments to an office refurbishment."

Before long he found he needed to take on staff and move into offices – the company incorporated in 2003 – and focused more on the bigger projects. "The domestic market is very limited and there are a lot of one-man bands around," he says. "I can't compete with them, even though we still do domestic. But the bigger projects also interest me more."

It was when the business incorporated that Tim realised he needed to move away from doing the work himself. "That was the difficult one," he recalls. "In the early days I was on the tools and then I would come home and do quotes. But when we moved into offices it became apparent that I had too much to do to be on the tools as well. By that time I had three very good electricians who were capable of doing the work, along

22:

The number of electricians Alpha has on its books

with the apprentices. So I had to come off the tools, and that was the turning point."

Today, he's supported by office contracts manager Mike Mansell. "I do a lot of the designs myself and Mike will do the cable calculations, and then we have another supplier that will do all our lux calculations for us, so we can offer the whole package, but keep the price tight," he explains. Despite this, he's kept up to speed with training and will dig out the toolbox – he keeps one in his car just in case – when required. "I'm sharing weekends on the Luton project with Mike, just being onsite and doing work that needs to be done," he says.

Responding to recession

The business grew steadily, but Tim admits it had become too big by the time the downturn finally caught up with it, and in 2013 he was forced to lay off three electricians. "There just wasn't the work out there," he says. "We kept busy but we didn't make any money. It was a hard thing to do but it's one of those things you have to take a view on. But they've all got jobs and are fine wherever they are now."

Public sector consolidation has also had an impact. The business used to do quite a few small jobs for Warwickshire County Council, but these have now been absorbed into a bigger contract with Solihull Council. "It all got merged together and work dried up because they had to use one particular company," says Tim.

"But I've always felt that you don't put all your eggs in one basket and you need to be working for many different customers because if something goes horribly wrong in one direction then something else can happen in another." Alpha still undertakes small projects for Warwick Hospital, however, as well as electrical work for a large secondary school and college in Coventry, which tends to happen over the summer.

Tim believes the business is now well positioned to prosper from an upturn in the economy. It turned over £1.2 million last year and delivered a healthy profit, and he expects to see this grow significantly in the next year on the back of the major projects it is currently undertaking. "There's definitely a recovery and it's good to see," he says. "We're getting a lot more enquiries for the bigger projects; there's a confidence out there that there wasn't before. People still had the money but they didn't want to let it out of their hands because they didn't know what was going to happen the next day."

The plan for the next two or three years is steady growth, says Tim, and he can see potential opportunities advising customers around LED lighting and energy efficiency. "We would like to go to our existing customers and show them the options and the kind of payback they could get, and at the

I had enough money in the bank to pay the mortgage and survive for a month and if it didn't work I would have run out of money'



Looking the part

Alpha Electrical Midlands Limited recently took delivery of a new fleet of 10 leased vans, replacing an ageing and costly pool.

"They were all old and starting to break down," recalls managing director Tim Harlock. "My accountant said I could probably find new vans for the same money and not have any problems with them breaking down."

Tim's first port of call was the NICEIC website, where he found out about the partnership with Peugeot. "I went to our local dealer who came up with a good deal and we got the vans through them," he says. "What it was costing me a year to keep the old vans on the road is what it's costing me now to lease them, and I'll get brand new vans every three years."

The vans also help to project a more professional image. "If you turn up in a smart sign-written van it looks better than someone down the road who has come to fix a socket," he says. "It gives the impression that you're a proper company, which is how I want this company to be seen."

same time generate work out of it," he says. "Apart from that, I don't really see there are many other areas we need to touch on that we don't already do. I don't think we'll be an electrical and mechanical contractor; we'll stick to being an electrical contractor because that's all I know."

"I'm quite happy with where the business is, but there's always room for improvement," he adds. "I'd like to see it build a bit more and in a few years' time I'd like to bring another apprentice through the ranks and into the office, the same as with Mike, so that as and when projects become bigger I can hand them over to different people."

Still only 43, Tim is clearly committed to further developing the business. A six-month-old baby has curtailed his finish time from 7pm to 6pm, but he's still in the office every morning at 7am. It's clear, too, just how far he and his enterprise have come since he first took the plunge 15 years ago.

"I had enough money in the bank to pay the mortgage and survive for a month and if it didn't work I would have run out of money," he says. "But it did work, and it's been my determination and drive that have got us where we are. You don't get anything for nothing; you've got to work for it." 📍

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