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News

Magnetic North

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ECA president Alan North talks to Andrew Brister about houses, honeymoons and hiking up Mount Kilimanjaro

In his early 60s he may be, but Alan North is showing no signs of slowing down. Not content with taking the reins of the ECA presidency for the next 12 months, when we meet he is busy overseeing the doubling in size of his new home with its stunning views over the Kent countryside. Oh, and he is also getting married to Thelma, his partner of seven years, this summer. There will be no time for a honeymoon as North begins the gruelling schedule of ECA conferences, dinners and golf days. He likes to keep busy. "I think you do need to be under a bit of pressure all of the time."

The new North residence doubles as the offices of A S North, the contracting business he joined as an apprentice back in 1960. Originally set up by his father as North Electrical and Refrigeration, the young Alan remembers helping out a very early age. "If you ever wanted any pocket money you had to earn it," says North. "From around the age of 10 or 11 I was out with Fred the refrigeration engineer charging the gas in people's domestic fridges." Teenage summer holidays were not spent larking about at the coast at nearby Isle of Sheppey or Whitstable. "I was out on site with my father. By the age of 16 I could already wire a house."

An electrical apprenticeship followed. His tutors at Medway College of Technology quickly realised that the young North was already too advanced for the basic installation course and put him forward for the Electrical Technician Certificate.

The days of selling and servicing washing machines and fridges are long gone and today A S North is busy with a range of work including electrical fit-out in the retail sector. "We do a lot of work with the likes of Domino Pizza and Pizza Hut. We must have done about 150 Domino Pizza outlets nationally," says North. The company is also long-established in the local area. Over the years Kent businesses like Ingersoll Rand have come to rely on A S North to test, inspect and maintain electrical services. "We've been here a long time. We don't have to spend a lot on advertising. I guess about 70-80% of our work is repeat business."

A S North also carries out domestic call-out work for insurer Homeserve and was runner-up in its Contractor of the Year Awards for 2004. "We are on call for 24 hours, 365 days a year," explains North. "We probably cover about half the county of Kent, around 3500 policy holders." The business provides a steady income for the company. North gets a fixed fee from Homeserve for call-outs; fine if the work takes 15 minutes, not so good if work lasts 3-4 hours. "We had a call once at 1 am, saying the power was down. I said: 'Can it wait till the morning?'. The chap said: 'If I don't get the heating back on my boa constrictor is going to die!'"

Such home insurance schemes are changing the nature of domestic work and North sees it as essential to keep abreast of changing markets and new technologies if firms want to grow their business. "One of the benefits of being in the ECA is that you learn about the opportunities that are out there." The renovation of his new house sees the introduction of smart home technology and he cites LED lighting as another exciting development for contractors to embrace.

A S North is a relatively small business with a turnover of around £500 000, but as he points out: "The ECA is made up of all types of businesses and probably around 60-70% are around my kind of size." North is content to leave the business at this level, happy with the return on capital employed and also happy not to have some of the cash flow problems of larger firms.

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"It has been a bigger business in the past and certainly there was the potential to grow even more," explains North. But North has long been driven by wider concerns than just electrical contracting. An interest in local government politics saw North become a councillor at 21, going on to be leader of Swale Borough Council covering Sittingbourne, Faversham and the Isle of Sheppey. In 1980 he was mayor of the borough and for 12 years he was chair of the Local Community Health Council. North was some way towards seeking selection as a prospective Conservative MP. "I was due to meet the chair of the Conservative Party. The national rail strike intervened, I missed the appointment and I never rebooked it. I don't know whether I regret that now or not really," he quips.

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Such a background leaves North well equipped to deal with the committee structure of the ECA, where he has been an active member for more than 20 years. North has served as branch chair, SE regional chair, been joint chair of the SE regional JIB and was on the JIB national board from 1986 until 2001. He hasn't lost interest in JIB affairs. "I do hope we are getting to a point where the JIB will make fundamental changes," says North.

He sees the introduction of an NVQ Level 2 into the grading as more than just a commercial gain for employers. "There is a social need to do it. Not everyone can reach the skills of the approved electrician but they still need jobs and we can accommodate them in this industry with our containment work." He sees the growth of off-site fabrication likely to kick-start change. "The skills of the labour force will have to change and some skills will not be required on site in the future. Everybody gets stuck in the past and doesn't want to change. Like it or not, you have to accommodate it and move forward."

The 2012 Olympics, North hopes, will provide a chance to rethink some of the old ways. "This is a showcase for us, we have to get it right and we in the electrical industry have to play our part. If ever there was a reason to make changes, we've got it." North was part of a recent ECA delegation to construction minister Alun Michael, aiming to influence him in setting a procurement strategy for the £8 billion Olympic project. "We said: 'Do you want a Terminal 5 or a Wembley Stadium when it comes to the Olympics?' As well as a legacy for sport, there is an opportunity to leave a legacy of a better framework for the construction industry to work in."


While direct employment of operatives has been at the heart of successful projects like T5 and use of agency labour rife at Wembley, North is not against JIB proposals to welcome agencies and composite companies into the fold. "Eight years ago the labour relations committee was ready to vote in favour of embracing agencies. Now maybe we have left it too late; they may not now need us. Nevertheless, I think we should still seek to come to an accommodation with agencies and seek to include them." Although A S North is an electrical-only business, he also agrees that the JIB should be looking at a joint m&e agreement. "I think this is a direction we should be going in but we have to tread our ground very carefully. There are other players out there, notably the HVCA, and we have to move forward in a consensual style."

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What would North like to see the ECA campaign for during his year in office? "Profitability has to be part of our driving force. The ECA has to help create an environment where members can make a reasonable return on their money." With Part P, Part L, Trustmark and the Fire Safety Order coming up, North is also keen to see that certification and accreditation do not get out of hand. "Accreditation can be advantageous because it may provide a market, but there is a cost to it and we have to make sure that it is not too much of a burden. The same with health and safety. Sometimes it's taken too far. Perhaps we've gone a bit health and safety mad."

North hopes that agreement with Trustmark is imminent and all ECA members will automatically go on the register. "The Quality Mark was doomed to failure but the Trustmark does look like it will take off." This will help to give ECA membership a higher profile among the general public, an area where North thinks more work is needed. "There is some criticism out there that we are not as high profile as we should be and I think that is fair and we've got to look at it."

There will be plenty for North to look at in the months ahead. His daughter Hannah will be running A S North while he concentrates on the role of ECA president and how to fit in that honeymoon. But he's keeping one eye over his shoulder: "I may or may not have a job when I come back," laughs North. Something tells me he is not retiring just yet.

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