



Dave Smith and Eric Paterson not only offer a complete interior partitioning fit-out solution through Docklands Systems, but are working on a new product with the potential to shake up the sector. Business Link is a trusted part of how they do business.

Making light work of interior fit-outs, and planning to change the world of partitions

A carpentry and joinery machinist by trade, Dave Smith has worked in the partitioning business since 1990, striking out on his own in 2004. Initially, Dave developed unique partitioning systems for the trade market, until he joined forces with a former supplier, Eric Paterson, who had a steel fabrication and powder coating business. Together, the partners could offer a complete interior fit-out service. Dave also had a brand new product under development, which could change the way partitioning systems are installed.

According to Dave, the new range of lightweight partitioning has the potential to introduce leaner installation processes and even revolutionise the partitioning marketplace. “The new partitions have been designed to be below the maximum weight that health and safety regulations say can be carried by one worker,” he explains. “That means one person can install a system that previously took two or more, and because we’ve specifically designed the system for rapid assembly, it takes less time to install than other partitioning.”



Dave’s journey has been a bumpy one, made smoother recently with support from Business Link. “Although I’ve worked on the Montage Partitions’ product range since 1990, technically it has been for different businesses,” he explains. “So I’ve been through a divestment by the original group owning the product lines, a management buy out and private investor acquisition by an entrepreneur in that time!” Dave’s decision to go it alone in 2004 was in part based on a long-held desire to work for himself. But he also wanted to market a new 60mm partitioning product, which he developed by combining his carpentry and joinery background with his extensive experience manufacturing and selling partitioning systems.

Industrial ▼ & office ▲ partitioning



Combining expertise to form Docklands Systems

“I initially set up in London, hence the ‘Docklands’ part of the business name,” says Dave continues. “From there, I manufactured partitioning systems for offices, laboratories, workshops and warehouses – any space that needs partitioning. We have always only sold to contractors, not end-user clients, and as a result found that we were increasingly producing partitioning for mezzanine floors. That brings a steelwork contractor into the mix, and one of our biggest suppliers was a steelworks business called PSS Ltd, owned by Eric Paterson. It made sound commercial sense for us to explore the possibility of joining forces, and that’s just what we did in 2007.”

By combining their expertise as Docklands Systems, the entrepreneurial pair were able to offer a one-stop shop offering a partitioning, mezzanine flooring and stairways solution direct to contractors. Partitions began to be manufactured to Dave’s design in a dedicated factory, and this freed up a little of his time to focus on developing the next stage of lightweight partitioning.



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Doorstep delivery of business support

But designing a product and bringing it to market require very different skill-sets, particularly as Dave and Eric also wanted to see the business grow quickly. Fortunately, a solution arrived on their doorstep, almost literally. Dave explains: "One day, Business Link's mobile unit arrived at our industrial estate. Eric and I visited out of interest, and that's when we first chatted to Chris Phasey, one of the Business Link Advisers on the van."

Business Link helped us map out a clear plan of action, and the referral to the Manufacturing Advisory Service has given us focus as we bring our innovation to market
Dave Smith, Docklands Systems

As Chris explains, it quickly became clear that Docklands Systems had three challenges: "First, Dave was spending too much time on the production line and not enough time on marketing. To free up his time, the second challenge was to improve shopfloor productivity. And the third challenge was to further develop the new lightweight partitioning system and take it to market."

Leaner manufacturing, more marketing, future growth

Chris helped the Docklands Systems duo produce a clear plan of action. He explains: "We broke all their challenges down into manageable tasks, and from a Business Link perspective, my first task was to send a referral to the Manufacturing Advisory Service [MAS] East." MAS East completed a one-day review and recommended that Docklands Systems use a specialist planning tool to help set strategic direction. "The one-day visit was so successful that we invested in having a MAS East consultant spend an additional four days assessing our manufacturing processes and offering recommendations," says Dave. "This was partly funded by a Leadership and Management grant, and resulting efficiencies have freed-up my time to get off the shopfloor and back out on the road, selling to and interacting with customers."

As sales and production has increased, Dave has recruited a new foreman to completely replace him. Dave says: "I have now come off the factory floor so that I can spend more time on face-to-face meetings with potential customers, and I can now be on the road for half the week." And he estimates that new customer enquiries have increased significantly as a result of the extra marketing and sales time he has, plus the acquisition of the Montage Partitions company name means that well known brand can be used on certain partitioning ranges. The next steps are underway and Dave has appointed an agency to upgrade the website and create an online marketing campaign creating links between the new Docklands Systems website and customers.

Eric and Dave are delighted with the ongoing assistance they have received. Dave says: "Working with Business Link has given us a real focus. We're entering an exciting phase, and we'll certainly continue to use Business Link to help us achieve our ambitious growth plans."



A 'mezzanine' industrial partitioning system in mid-build, demonstrating the joint expertise of Dave and Eric

NOTES TO EDITORS

About Business Link

Business Link is a government initiative to promote enterprise. In the East of England, it is funded by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), to support businesses and entrepreneurs in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. Business Link's services include:

- One-to-one support from an experienced business adviser (free for established businesses)
- Workshops and briefings on a range of relevant business subjects
- Effective telephone and online support through Business Link's Information and Intelligence Service (BLIIS).

Logos and photographs

High-resolution versions of the Business Link logo and images to accompany this story are available from the Business Link Press Office, details of which follow.

Business Link Press Office

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Additional information:	
Client / company name	Docklands Systems
Trading vehicle	Limited company
Size	12 full-time employees across three factory units
Sector	Manufacturing, building & construction, construction materials, office furniture
Location	Haverhill, Suffolk
Web address	www.docklandssystems.com

Business Link services the client has accessed / benefited from	(✓)
Information & Intelligence Service (BLIIS)	
Business advice – 1:1 / Online Adviser (OLA)	✓
Attendance at workshops / other events	
Brokerage using Supplier Brokerage Service (SBS)	
Brokerage to partner / other service	✓ MAS East
Grant / voucher / project funding	✓ Leadership and Management
Other Business Link services	

Any additional performance data (GVA, turnover, profitability, etc)



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