

# BUSINESS ENTERPRISE

## PROFILE

# Platform for niche success

A chat with a friend was the catalyst for a new business that has designs on the disabled access market, writes **Mark Fenton-Jones**.

**L**ike many migrants, Clive Hammond was still finding his professional feet after moving here from the United Kingdom in 2002 when a fellow Briton mentioned he needed some lifts for an apartment block he was constructing in one of Sydney's northern beach suburbs.

It was a fortuitous discussion for Hammond, who had been working as an IT consultant and staying at home to look after his children.

Back in the UK in 2000, he had helped an old school friend, Sean O'Sullivan, set up a business to supply platform lifts manufactured in Italy and Sweden.

Both men had worked together for another lift manufacturer, but while Hammond had set up his own IT business in 1999, O'Sullivan took aim at the disabled access market in the UK that was coming under increasing legislative and regulatory pressure.

In the UK, the Disability and Discrimination Act of 1995 required service providers and employers to make the necessary adjustments so their premises were accessible to disabled people. Since then, the Disability Rights Commission is reported to be considering about 20,000 cases for prosecution against businesses that haven't made the changes.

Hammond's involvement was solely to provide guidance in establishing a business based on his own experience a year earlier. But he remained in contact with O'Sullivan even after he sold his British IT business and took off for Sydney with his family.

After calling O'Sullivan about the lifts query from his friend, the discussion turned to the feasibility of further sales in Australia.

In 2006, four years after arriving in Australia, Hammond started to research the disabled access market and concluded that a gap existed for a specialist disabled access company.

His confidence was fuelled by the changing demographics in Australia, which mirrored the UK experience. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, about 20 per cent of the population has a reported disability and, as the population gets older, demands for disabled access are expected to intensify.

The level of prosecutions for breaches of the Disability Discrimination Act are not as high as in the UK, although a year ago, the human rights and disability commissioner, Graeme Innes, wrote that since 2004, the Australian Building Codes Board, along with disability advocates, design professionals, government and the property industry, had been preparing a new access standard for buildings.

The board was asked to draft changes to the Building Code to meet the level of access required by the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992.

"This will mean that when developers and designers create buildings that comply with the BCA they will also be complying with the disability standard and will be protected from DDA complaints," Innes wrote.

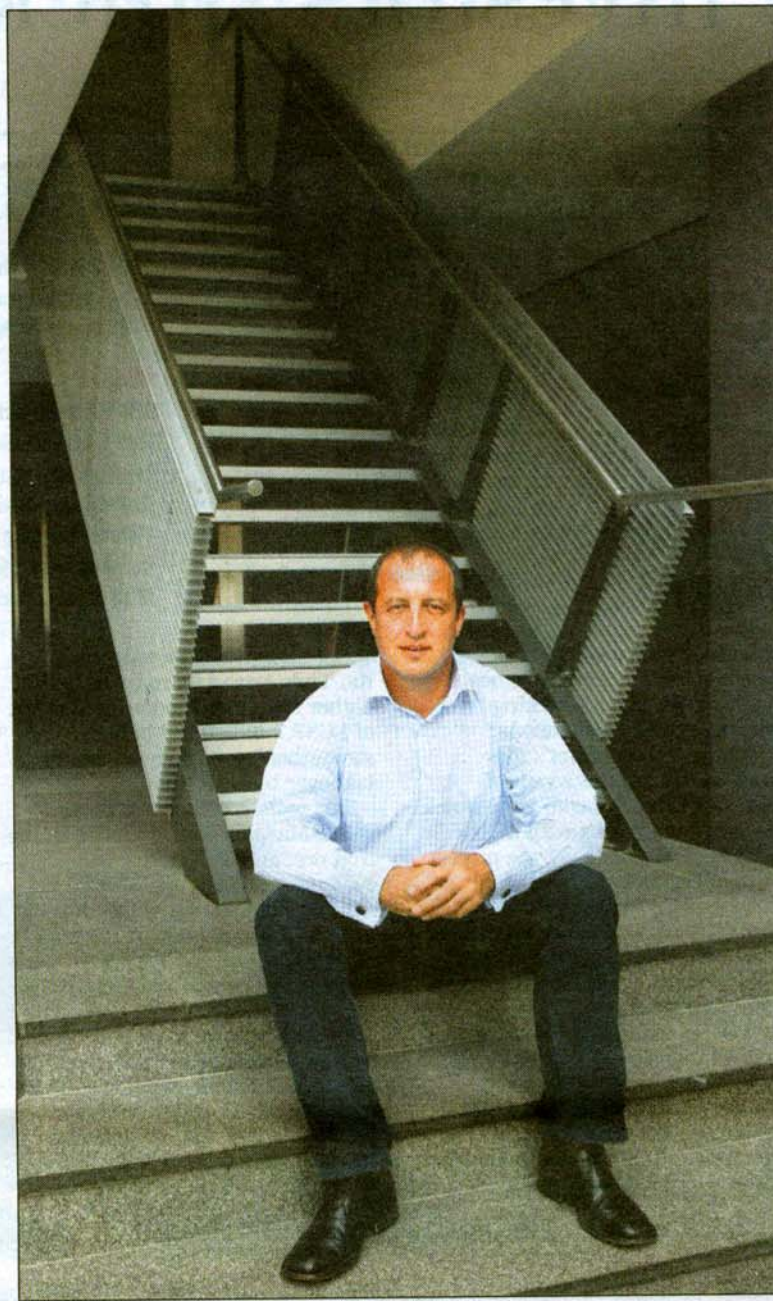
At this stage, however, a new access standard has not been finalised.

Viewing these developments, Hammond established The Platform Lift Company in September 2006 as a wholly owned Australian company which acquired a licence from the UK company he had helped set up in 2000 to distribute platform lifts in Australia, New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates.

"We basically used the model they'd set up quite successfully in the UK and have worked with lift manufacturers to get a package for Australia," he says.

All product is designed and manufactured in Europe because of the economies of scale.

"There is no manufacturing set



Clive Hammond of The Platform Lift Company... 'we get deposits upfront, so you've got immediate cash flow'. Photo Jim Rice

compliance with relevant Australian standards, but unlike Europe, which has a standard disability access code, Australia has a number of compliance hurdles. Registration came through in November 2006.

"Australia has a Lift Code with many parts. It has a Disability Discrimination Act and it has a Building Code, which doesn't really talk together. Plus we've got eight different states and territories of WorkCover," Hammond says.

Initially working from home, the two partners would usually visit prospective clients. And most leads from architects and property developers were generated from their website. Eventually, the company received a few orders.

"We are very fortunate in the industry where any product that gets ordered we get deposits upfront. So you've got immediate cash flow," Hammond says.

Because of a number of contracts, the firm has not had to resort to equity financing.

Last month, it won a contract to supply wheelchair lifts for four high-speed vehicle-passenger ferries being built by West Australian shipbuilder Austal Ships for a Middle Eastern client. They will be manufactured in Italy and sent to Perth for installation during the next few months.

February has been busy too. The business has moved to new leased premises at Dee Why. And although it subcontracts engineers to install the lifts, it has brought in its own platform lift engineer from the UK and appointed a marketing manager.

Turnover was about \$850,000 in the first full financial year, a figure that is expected at least to double next year.

In 2007 the company established a subsidiary in Dubai with a local partner holding 51 per cent, and it recently won a contract for the Qatar National Bank in Doha through an initial internet inquiry.

up for platform lifts and disabled access lifts here," Hammond says.

The company has three products: stair risers, vertical platform lifts and short-range vertical lifts.

"You could call it a niche market in the lift industry - we are not a lift company, we are a disabled access company," he emphasises.

Hammond also took on a partner with a background in construction who owns the other half of the business.

"He understands the building side, which is important because we deal with builders and architects and the like."

Despite recent proposals to revise the BCA's disabled access standards, getting their imported lifts registered required

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