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not just business as usual

# SERVICE EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2005



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# Winner

## MANUFACTURING/ENGINEERING COUGAR AUTOMATION LTD

Software engineers are not the most naturally extrovert and demonstrative people. But at Cougar Automation, a small system integrator in Waterlooville, near Portsmouth, they think differently. The firm's tagline is 'Real people - real solutions', and it's reflected in the slides they put up during their presentations - not endless PowerPoint slides of data but Cougar people in various offbeat guises: windsurfing, mountaineering or spending time with their family.

Cougar's staff are relaxed, empowered and work as a big family - their mantra is 'Happy people equals happy customers'. They've learned the power of listening to customers rather than talking to them; their way of working with clients is centred on mutual trust and open communication, rather than rigidly adhering to service agreements or contractual small print.

Cougar has embarked on a significant journey in the past couple of years. When its managing director Clive Hutchinson joined three and a half years ago, the 16-year-old business was in a crisis brought on by

vides the refuelling system for aircraft at Heathrow airport. The latest project for Heathrow has involved expanding the system to include the new Terminal 5. This involves working late at night when there are no planes flying, but it's a reflection of Cougar's operational excellence that there has been only one downtime call in two years of working at the airport.

Largely project-based, Cougar's work draws teams together from across the company for each assignment. But rather than having myriad templates for managing projects and copiously documented procedures, Cougar takes a contrarian tack. 'I don't believe in formalising procedures and processes unless it's strictly necessary,' says Hutchinson. 'We want people to think about what they're doing at a higher level and to interpret for their own style and for the needs of the customer.'

Employees are encouraged to innovate, even to make mistakes on occasion if that means they learn in the process. The company prides itself on listening to

**'We used to think better technology was the key to our success, but now we know it's the attitude of our people'**

customers and acting on their feedback. It surveys every customer in depth about their level of satisfaction with Cougar's service, and one of the areas in which the company under-scored in the past was the unpopular task of final acceptance testing. The team involved set about rethinking how this was done and came up with the idea of pre-testing systems before the client arrived, so that many are now happy with simply carrying out a sample of the testing required.

Cougar focuses on winning the right sort of new business, rather than taking the shotgun approach. The stance has paid dividends. 'We often get new business now from negotiated agreement, rather than competitive tender,' says Burron.

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