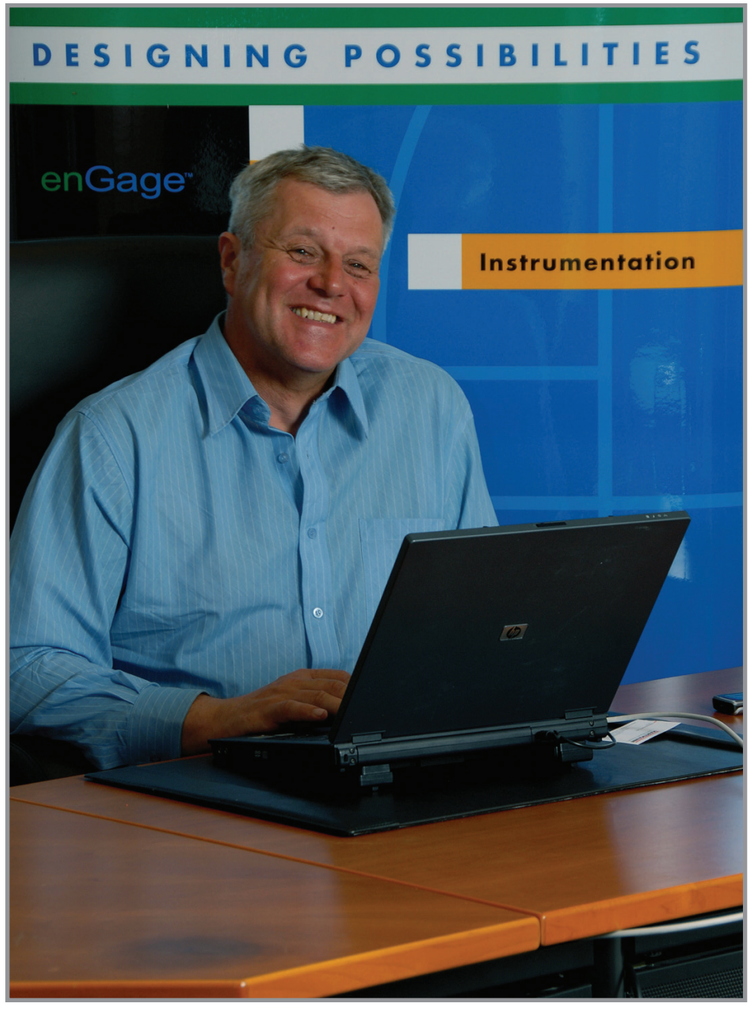
PRODUCTS & SERVICES

# The future is electric

## WHETHER IT'S FINDING NEW APPLICATIONS FOR SPECIALITY ELECTRIC-POWERED MACHINERY OR COMBINING EUROPEAN DESIGN WITH ASIAN MANUFACTURING, ELECTRIC DRIVE IS THE FUTURE, BELIEVES LEIF SVENSSON

Leif Svensson, VP of sales Western Europe for Curtis Instruments, directs continent-wide sales organisations in the UK, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden. With a demanding travel schedule, Svensson uses his time on the road to listen to audio-books as well as contemplate solutions for today's electric vehicle business challenges. We caught up with him recently near his HQ in Stenkullen, Sweden, and asked some questions about the industrial vehicle industry. Here are a few of his insights.




**What technological developments do you foresee in the European forklift and materials handling industry over the next five years?**
Today's sophisticated forklift trucks constitute a heavy investment in materials handling and a very competitive situation. Manufacturers will therefore continue to evolve more user-friendly equipment and higher-efficiency trucks.

For efficiency, battery life is important, but so is the quality and reliability of the trucks, which should have a very low downtime. The equipment needs to be regularly serviced of course, but in-between breakdowns are not acceptable. Downtime costs end-users a lot of money so they want efficient equipment that works. This is a challenge with trucks that are used in demanding situations. There's a lot of wear and tear, not only because of the industrial environment but also because they are driven hard. So it's not just the technology that has to keep evolving – the trucks themselves must compete in withstanding rough use.

**Have recent European economic events affected the trend towards electric vehicles?**
When there is a downturn in the economy there are always fewer government-sponsored environmental programmes, so from that perspective it slows down development. Still, there is a huge movement in Europe towards electric vehicles of all kinds.

**Are there any other notable trends in the electric vehicle marketplace?**
We are seeing a big shift in municipal utility vehicle use, going from petrol to electric-powered, in functions such as public transport and delivery. That trend is ongoing, irrespective of the European economic situation; it just moves faster whenever there is more government legislation concerning noise and air pollution.

For industrial vehicles, the trend is towards more types of speciality electric vehicles. For example there is an EV to empty a container packed with boxes. You just drive it up to a container, insert a transportation belt and unload the contents.

There are so many more applications today for an EV. At an airport you'll see all sorts in use, such as pushback tractors to move aircraft on the tarmac – again, driven by legislation demanding lower $CO_2$ emissions. We need more politicians who are brave enough to make those decisions, to pass legislation that will drive the push towards electric.

**What do you see as the greatest challenges facing your business today?**
Customisation for specific applications – that's what it's all about. At Curtis, we take our standard products and adapt them for the customer's use – mainly through customisation of the software. So we have dedicated technical teams throughout Europe who are capable of supporting the customer. Technical customer support is a good proportion of our strength. So is logistics.

Manufacturers don't want to have a huge stock or long delivery times. That challenge, that cost, has shifted to the supplier. We have two logistics centres in Europe keeping a huge supply available to support just-in-time delivery for our customers.

There is always the challenge to be better than your competition. For our long-term growth that means being the best value for money but not necessarily the cheapest. We have a huge investment in customer support to make sure they get the best out of the product – to optimise its possibilities.

**Likewise, what do you see as the greatest opportunities?**
We will see growing use of forklifts and specialised industrial vehicles; new designs to support new materials handling efficiencies. There are many potential applications, as we have already seen in airports – moving people and positioning aircraft, etc. We are also working on many projects for specialised utility vehicles.

**Do you have any advice for industrial vehicle manufacturers seeking to develop their business in European markets?**
There's an interesting example of a Chinese forklift company selling trucks, but two years later the customers could not get spare parts or the level of support they expected. So what is important for anyone looking to sell materials handling equipment into Europe is that they ensure that the service and supply are independent of the importer, so that even if the importer disappears, there are still spare parts available for European customers. That's been a big issue for several of the Chinese forklift manufacturers. A brand name can be destroyed when someone needs spare parts and cannot find them because the importer has gone. My advice to anyone wanting to sell in Europe is to make a good contract with a service and spare parts organisation.

**Speaking of that example, how do you perceive the increasing strength of Asian competitors in the European forklift market?**
I see a critical move to less complex, lower value forklift trucks manufactured in Asia, in terms of both parts and full assembly. Some large US companies have manufacturing plants in Asia for lower-end machines such as pedestrian forklift trucks. They are high volume, similar in look and less complex. It's a big shift for Curtis. We went from being the leader in supplying electronics for those smaller, less complex EVs, to being the leader in supplying more complex trucks that require many controllers, a lot of software, lots of special features. We may be doing less volume but the dollar value goes up because of the complexity. That's a definite shift industry wide, with Asia taking over the lower end of the market.

**You manage a European-wide operation. Can you talk about your leadership style? How do you motivate your pan-European team?**
Management is useless. People don't want or need to be managed. People look for leadership. Leading people is different from managing them. It takes more effort and commitment, better communications. If people trust their leadership they will always give their utmost.

Leadership is complex, we could talk about that for hours! What's important in an organisation is that you're allowed to take the initiative and make mistakes. If you're afraid to make a mistake you'll never do anything. So I hope we've created an environment where people feel they are allowed to try ideas and if a mistake is made it's not the end of the world; we correct the mistake and move forwards.

You also have to be fair to everyone and that means that you have to treat everyone differently. If you believe you can be fair by treating everyone the same then I think you have missed the whole point of what leadership is about. If you believe everyone should work exactly the same way, you will find a lot of people being inefficient. If you allow them to be different, and work towards a common objective, they will be much more efficient and have more motivation in their work.

It's important that people know they have the freedom to achieve in their own unique way for the company, and to be rewarded for that – not for following a uniform way of working.

**As part of a global company, do you also interact with your counterparts in Asia, North America and South America? What kinds of information do you find it useful to share?**
We use our global strategy to support collaborative projects. For example, in Europe we are developing projects with a German subsidiary of a manufacturer, including a forklift truck that is to be designed in Europe for European use but produced in Asia at low cost. We work intensively with those companies in Europe on the development phase. We have all kinds of support engineers at those companies to design the vehicles and develop software and do the tests, and then they are manufactured in Asia.

That's the beauty of owning subsidiaries in 17 countries worldwide and the benefit of having sister companies in Asia. Being as strong as we are in Europe is very important in helping our counterparts in Asia design products specific to the European market. It's a truly global effort and a key to our success that we can help our customers design their vehicles in Europe for manufacture in Asia.

**How do environmental issues guide your business strategy?**
Our business strategy is led from Mt Kisco, New York. We are striving to be a green company and are working towards ISO 14000 certification in all our locations. As we work with electric drive systems, and that is considered to be environmentally friendly, we constantly see new applications for EVs. From that perspective we are consistently monitoring trends and redirecting our business strategy as needed. We are currently exploring more light on-highway applications and adding resources to support our customers strongly for legislation and everything else involved in designing street-legal electric vehicles.

In Europe we have about 30 light on-highway products we are actively working on, in all different sizes and time frames – from a few to many years. It's something that is coming, of course. We see it happening now in cities that legislate green zones where only electric or hybrid vehicles are allowed. This is a development we are watching very carefully.

**Any closing thoughts?**
Electric drive is the future! **iVT**

*L S Harris is a business and technology writer based in the New York City area. She can be reached at lshwrite@optonline.net*

**CONTACT**
www.curtisinstruments.com
www.evbatterymonitoring.com