

Manufacturing a 21st century facelift

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WHEN LiveTiles co-founder and CEO Karl Redenbach was asked why the company chose Geelong as the location for its new Asia-Pacific headquarters and Innovation Centre, his answer was emphatic.

"It's got a great creative culture," Mr Redenbach declared, standing alongside Premier Daniel Andrews and the Minister for Trade and Investment, Innovation and the Digital Economy and Small Business, Philip Dalidakis, overlooking Corio Bay.

"It's got some of the smartest people in the world and Geelong is the place to be."

That's pretty strong vindication from a global company — that boasts Nike, Pepsi and Estee Lauder among its 400 clients — that it sees Geelong's economy only growing stronger and a great base from which to do business going forward. It's also a strong endorsement of the Clever and Creative vision adopted by the City of Greater Geelong late last year.

While we are a great location for start-ups, Geelong is rapidly earning a reputation for its innovation in advanced manufacturing.

The vision of the Geelong Manufacturing Council, which the Geelong Chamber of Commerce collaborates and supports, is to position Geelong as a leading technologically advanced, internationally competitive manufacturing centre.

Manufacturing is still one of Geelong's top three industry sectors for employment with more than 10,000 people working in this sector. While manufacturing may have changed from its traditional focus, it is still a major driving force of our regional economy.



SMART MOVE: LiveTiles boss Karl Redenbach.

PHOTO BY ALISON WYND

Just before Christmas I was given a tour of the Fibre Tech Solutions headquarters at Avalon airport and heard from director Tristan Cross about its groundbreaking work. Not only is it contracted to the Australian Defence Force to upgrade critical combat equipment, it is also providing innovative, hi-tech solutions for the Country Fire Authority, Metropolitan Fire Brigade and a host of agricultural, logging and mining companies.

Fibre Tech has developed a unique process of weaving using high-strength synthetic fibre that can outperform

traditional materials in the most demanding of applications.

The resultant products very high tensile strength, extremely low stretch rate, light weight and water resistance have been hailed as a game changer in a world that increasingly searches for innovative and cost-effective solutions.

Fibre Tech's customised towing and lifting technologies are replacing traditional materials like steel and wire.

Its technology is not only changing work practices, it is creating more opportunities

for diversity within previous traditional male-dominated fields where physical strength has been a factor, especially within the defence and essential services sectors.

Fibre Tech recently performed a successful demonstration for defence personnel at Sydney's Garden Island to show how easily a drone can fly along with a tethered underwater camera using its new technology.

Helicopter load cables and cargo nets strong enough to carry tonnes of weight are just some of the products being developed and supplied by

Fibre Tech. All of these are being developed and tested locally.

Fibre Tech's products are so highly regarded that other defence forces around the world are now sending it out to investigate upgrading their own outdated equipment.

Importantly, Fibre Tech is providing a bridge between Geelong's manufacturing past, present and future. As a value-added textile manufacturer, it builds upon Geelong's rich history as a centre for textile manufacturing, giving it a 21st century facelift.

The company marries the old with the new, providing job opportunities for workers in semi-skilled roles such as sewing machining operation.

The blend of traditional with advanced manufacturing processes has uniquely positioned Fibre Tech as an important new growth company within our region.

Geelong is leading the way in Australian advanced manufacturing with \$10 million allocated to four Geelong manufacturers in the first round of the Federal Government's Advanced Manufacturing Growth Fund.

A mix of government support and private investment — such as the initiative by US company LeMond Composites in partnership with Deakin University in 2018 and beyond — will continue to allow this rapidly-developing industry sector to invest in the innovation and skills needed to help position Geelong as a global player and to access new and emerging world markets.

Companies such as LiveTiles and Fibre Tech will not only tap into our region's diverse talent pool, but will ensure that Geelong's advanced manufacturing community continues to uniquely shape its globally competitive edge, underpinning an ethos of a clever and creative city-region. Bernadette Uzelac is CEO of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce. Twitter: @GeelongChamber