How much risk am I willing to take, to actually do something that's going to fundamentally change my business?

I'm Tom Killeen, Chief Operating Officer for THG Ingenuity. THG Fulfil is our crown jewel within the estate of services that we've got for THG Ingenuity. It is Fulfilment, Courier Management, SaaS based services, and a division for automation.

No one in the world would expect us to be selling automation as an integrator. So, for me, it's game-changing.

At what point did you decide the capability was mature enough to take it to an external client?

Yeah, it was 2:00am, one night, like a Jerry Maguire moment. I'm not even joking. I sent John, my boss, an email saying I reckon we could externalise our operations and allow others to use it. His reply was hilarious: *just hurry up and get on with it then.*

My name's James McGhee, I'm the operations director for Footasylum. So every day in our operation it was all manual except for a few bagging machines. Because we didn't really know where we wanted to take automation. What was said to me about change was how do we modernise the DC?

The job looked boring to people. And to me, there has to be an element of passion for what you're doing for it to be done at its best. Serendipitously got a phone call off somebody here, after I'd seen AutoStore a couple of days before. Saying, would you like to come have a look at ours? We're going to start being able to supply these for people.

Russell Holmes, the Sales Director for United Kingdom and Ireland at AutoStore. I've been at AutoStore for just over five years now. I started as a business development manager, second employee in the UK, now, I'm responsible for the UK entity.

What's keeping me interested, is the realisation now that retailers aren't just deploying automation for storage and retrieval purposes. Their fulfilment platform is becoming how they compete. So these systems now have to be resilient, flexible and adaptable with the growth and the changes they're seeing to meet their customer demands. It's an exciting prospect to have AutoStore and THG Fulfil together. THG Fulfil have been a retailer themselves for over 20 years, so they have that knowledge to leverage to make the correct decisions with the end users to build a complete platform that's relevant for them.

Our customers are incredibly expectant. It's 14-24 year olds, streetwear enthusiasts. They don't have loads of money, they get very excited about things. If they order next day, they want it next day. We can't have a cool, laid-back streetwear style operation. It has to be slick, dedicated, and if we say we're getting it out next day, it's got to be there.

The key thing for me, is the AutoStore's capabilities in terms of volume is 212% what our manual operation gave us. And we go from things like 50 packing benches to 24 whilst being able to do 212% of the volume. It doesn't make logical sense almost, but it's huge for us.

There’s a natural alignment because we’ve both been retailers. They still are, we have been, and we still power God knows how many retailers around the world. It just enables them to shortcut the path to growth, to shortcut, the path to greater retention.

The standout bit on this is obviously the collaboration that THG have had with Footasylum and AutoStore in the background. This is a true platform deployment, changing how a business is going to operate.

It’s the communication. I've been sat here waiting for something catastrophic to happen because that's what happens in big projects and it hasn't and touch wood wherever there is some. Ingenuity, wherever they could, were really good with us. And I'd like to think we were good with them.

This is a partnership for at least a decade, for as long as Footasylum will want us.

When someone asks you externally about this project with Footasylum, what do you actually say?

We're building some proper cool automation in Footasylum's warehouse.

People might watch this and sort of think it was PR or something, right? It has been so smooth that I haven't lost a moment's sleep over the build phase.

So we started the 8th of March and we'll go live, on the 18th of September with an AutoStore the size of a Premier League football pitch with 92,000 bins worth of stock in it.

In the middle of where brands like us sit, and if anybody's sat in there and is thinking, should I automate, should I not? Yes, you should, because it allows you to be creative.

The way that the world is going in terms of costs are increasing, disposable incomes declining, so sales are declining for a lot of retail businesses. There's this world of automation at various different levels which will allow you to unlock those cost savings in ways that you probably haven't fathomed.

You either do it or you end up dying for me.

It's the most resilient, low risk piece of automation you'll ever deploy.

I genuinely think this is going to be the biggest business THG Ingenuity has ever built.

For me, this doesn't feel like a project. My personal fire is burning so much for this product that actually I only think about this. And Man United.

If you had to describe this project in a single sentence, how would you say it?

Fucking class. I've loved it.

Game changing.

It's a fantastic example of how AutoStore's worked with THG Fulfil to bring a fast growing retailer into the future, completely modernizing their fulfillment platform to make it more adaptable.

Proud, yeah, for sure. I'll always sit nervous. I just think the next challenge is around the corner. I think that nervousness helps you stay alert. It doesn't turn into complacency at all. Although I'm proper proud of what everybody's achieved, I just don't want any issues.

Proper boring that, isn't it?

If someone asks me that's not involved or is on the periphery of it and says how the build is going, I do just say really easy. I'm not worried about it at all. As I've said before, I think some people sometimes think I might be trying to cover something up. But I'm not. Don't just take my word for it, come and see it, I'll give you a tour. Because it does seem too good to be true. Genuinely like come and have a look.

It got right up to the point where if we didn't sign and didn't start, then we wouldn't be able to do it before peak.

I see this game like a formula 1 race. You've got to be obsessed about the seconds.

It's the software and the data that's driving this.

They don't know what the problems are. It can creep up on you.