

But what we did do was shave two months off the project, which was brilliant, and then we're handing the keys over to them a couple of days earlier than what we even said.

We didn't really know where we wanted to take automation. It was manual from day dot, the same processes that we implemented 12 years ago. How do we modernise the DC?

Do we open up a new, completely modern DC with millions and millions of pounds worth of CapEx investment? Or do we see what we can do within our current operations?

My bias was towards us doing this in-house, but also we had to make a commercial decision. We're a company that has grown our top line sales and we need to manage our profitability. Could we keep people in employment? So we're a local employer in Rochdale, that's a big one. Could we maintain a core competency? Would it add value to us as a business, both as a private equity asset and as a business that wants to challenge the industry and be there for our consumers?

And it ticked every box in that sense.

AutoStore systems are highly simple when you get into the guts of it. AutoStore the last five years has evolved, I think, internally and externally how it's viewed from just a simple storage and retrieval system to now a complete platform.

This is bottom-up redoing their complete operation. It's gone from a manual to a complete automated system with all SKUs going inside of it. You're talking about systems that can do in excess 40,000 to 50,000 bin presentations or lines per hour over a 24 hour period. Now that has to have some resilience built into it, has to have some serious science behind it to make that happen.

The storage density that the auto store allowed when we first looked at it meant that we could condense into one, which means I can have everybody under one roof. So if I just start from like a leadership and strategic perspective, we've got that sort of cultural element where we can make a really sound and fun and engaging working environment for everybody.

It's about knowing our consumer, being hyper-local, having these great brands, and then how do we back that up operationally so that we don't posture into them in one way and then let them down.

So we found a hybrid solution between offering them forms of CapEx and forms of robots as a service, just the financial construct suited them specifically. So we tailored our offering specifically to their needs.

So that what they saw within our capabilities is our ability to be able to supply them with the operational prowess and the software to be able to enable that half a million pound growth. And

it's not just going to come from operations, of course, but that's got to be sound. You fail delivery, they don't come back. Simple.

But before the build stage, we ran 80,000 simulations to make sure that we had the right amount of robots, right amount of ports. So yeah, it was really smooth. I think it was both companies' first times negotiating an AutoStore contract, one as a distributor and one as a customer. And that took the most time. It got right up to the point where if we didn't sign and didn't start, we wouldn't be able to do it before peak.

Now, doing an AutoStore wasn't in question, but when we did it, and I didn't want to go through another manual peak if we didn't have to. But we got it over the line and I think it was signed late one Friday night, and probably the Monday would have been the absolute last day ever that we could have done it.

Really what you want is the highest peak periods of the year to have the ability to pull the most volume out at those moments in time to just facilitate your customer promise at the checkout. The next challenge for them is just understanding how to use the new tools, right? They don't know what the problems are, if that makes sense. The next problem is it can creep up on you. So there's so many things to look at that's outside of the form of automation that we've called it sold them. That actually we're a partner that's going to help them understand the full supply chain and get the best out of what they've purchased.

We wouldn't want to sell anyone a form of automation and then walk away and move on to the next big thing.

THG have just handled everything and every hiccup that we might have had, they've worked with us.

So we've got the knowledge of what we need to do operationally, what we need for our business, the relationships locally with our landlord and things like the fire service that I wouldn't have even considered at the start of this that we'd need to get them involved. Maybe naive for me, but it's not first thought is everything going to set on fire.

But the way that that's been handled has been exceptional. Whatever we learn from this peak, we'll be able to take into the next one and be more aggressive and perhaps think about, you know, what we trade when and all of that sort of stuff because we know that we can handle the volume.

We as an operation don't just become a cost centre and a function that everybody doesn't care about. We can actually become part of the marketing department if you like. It gives us the ability to do things that we weren't able to do.

To be able to compete and compete strongly in a very tough environment. Systems now that are deployed need to be highly resilient, they need to be adaptable, and they need to grow with the company's needs as their customer demands change.

The development of Cubeverse and AutoStore intelligence has driven this. So it's using AI to analyse data on live grids to drive robot path efficiencies, better understanding of what's in each bin to storage optimisation.

And the result of this is we're seeing the perception externally and the ability to actually do this go from it's a storage and retrieval system to no, this is a system that has scaled with us over time and our business as an end user is now built on the AutoStores ability to extend cutoff times. It's the software and the data that's driving this.

The software is the crown jewel within the whole thing. It doesn't exist without our suite of engineers. They're like ninjas, honestly. We see it in financial numbers sometimes when they change a process and we shave 10 seconds out or something.

I firstly mentioned the hardware. The hardware is world class. It's been tested by us and it's been robustly tested by us to the point where we've challenged AutoStore consistently and now we bleed every second out of it and there's still seconds left in that system. But you only find the seconds through the software. So we built our warehouse control system because we were obsessed about every second available.

The best analogy for this is Formula One. Last year I can change my tyres in 8.5 seconds. This year I'm changing it in 4.2. But the challenge then is every microsecond or every half a second you gain, you save tons of money. It's millions of pounds a year. So you've got to be obsessed about the seconds and find and change your processes on a consistent basis. And you can't be complacent with it at all.

It's meant for Footasylum that we are, one, gaining loads of efficiencies, so speed, speed to consumer. Can we do later cut-offs? Can we offer more to our consumer? We're in an incredibly competitive market with an absolute monolithic competitor. So we have to be able to be agile and do things that they perhaps can't do.

It just gives us flexibility in our operations that we couldn't have dreamt of with a manual one.

They want to be tech enabled like we're tech enabled. For us to be able to grant them the access to our software, the warehouse control system that runs the robotics, and potentially our WMS in the future. Both teams worked seamlessly towards a timeline plan and met those timelines. If anything, we exceeded them. We shaved two months off the project.

Fantastic achievement in such a short space of time for a high-valued retailer to completely change its operation.

Is there a specific moment from this project that you think you'll carry with you?

Yeah, first robot going on was nice because we got everybody together. I said a few words about how appreciative I was with everybody, which I liked because it gave me the opportunity to say that in front of everybody and it feels like one team, which is great.

And then for me, the sort of nerdiness of like how the AutoStore, like how it gets levelled, just the fact that somebody at AutoStore thought of these little red wedges that need to be done at every 3 metres squared. which means you now don't have to diamond grind a floor at millions of pounds worth of cost. Somebody's thought of that and I love that. I love that sort of innovation and the fact that you can tell that somebody's been where that problem is and gone, how do I fix that? Well, that's actually quite easy.

What has this project taught you that changes how you approach the next one? Is there anything you would do differently?

Yeah, I'd do 100 at once next time.

It has been almost too good our fortnightly steerco with our private equity owners, Aurelius, who have been really keen to do this. And they say that our steerco is the world's smoothest steerco, to the point where at one point I think they thought we were lying to them. Like, what are you not telling us?

And we were like, no, come and have a look, fly over, come and have a look, everything's going fine. But yeah, I'm sure at one point they were like, this can't be the case, you've done a million of these and they never do, they never go like that.

Ultimately the whole thing doesn't exist without the extended team at all. The projects team who enable all the automation in our own network and externally. You've got the finance function that helps shape everything. You've got the marketing function that's made it look just mega cool, in my opinion. I think I'm so proud of the way the product looks. And then you've got everybody else, you know, even the sales teams and stuff that we're erecting now internationally. I just think it's pretty cool.

The team have just pulled out all the stops to deliver it for us, and it has, and it looks incredible.

Like genuinely, I went into it thinking like, oh, I'll hate that. Like because I thought this is going to be 9 months of me getting grilled, it's going to be difficult, all of that. I knew the outcome would be fine, but I had no experience of the process.

But it has been absolutely brilliant. So yeah, just as simple as that.