

Small but mighty

Why a Newfoundland engineering firm wants to stay on the cutting edge of electric controls instrumentation

AVALON CONTROLS LTD. president Gerald Guy says he's about '75-80 per cent' happy with where his company stands as 2018 draws to a close.

"I've probably never been better than that. Satisfaction sometimes leads to stagnation and that is the ultimate killer disease," says the co-founder of this company based in Mount Pearl, Newfoundland and Labrador.

It is unlikely Avalon Controls will stagnate with Guy at the helm. The business specializes in electrical controls instrumentation engineering. In layperson's terms, the company designs, develops, installs, manages and maintains electric control engineering systems, machinery and processes.

That is not a market's play in, especially in Atlantic Canada. And operating in this niche has helped the company, founded by Guy and vice-president Ken Power in 1987, prosper. "In some cases we can take something right from concept to final installation, and after installation, support," Guy says. "It puts us in a class of our own in this area."

Both Guy and Power are Memorial University graduates—Guy studied engineering and mathematics, while Power was in engineering. They formed the company to take advantage of their expertise in designing and installing electrical controls instrumentation, which had just started to be introduced into industries like mining, oil and gas and the fishery after debuting in the automobile sector.

The fledgling company's first job was in the oil and gas sector with Husky Energy. An oil rig the Calgary-based firm was using for exploration on the Grand Banks had a serious electrical fire and needed repairs. Avalon worked as a subcontractor on the repair work. The entire project was completed ahead of schedule. It proved to be a springboard for more work for Avalon Controls.

Fast forward more than 30 years, and Avalon Controls still does a lot of work in the offshore oil sector. Guy estimates that over 40 per cent of its business comes from offshore oil and mining work. However, oil and gas and mining form just a portion of its portfolio. The marine industry accounts for another 30 per cent of its business, and a number of other sectors—food and beverage, the fishery, construction and utilities—make up the remaining 30 per cent.

With only 23 full-time employees, Avalon Controls is small but that hasn't stopped it from securing big contracts with multinational companies. In 2017 it finished work on ExxonMobil's \$14-billion Hebron offshore oil project. It provided the ballasting control, instrumentation and power systems engineering for Hebron's gravity-based structure that anchors its production and storage platform. This work was later expanded to include all the instrumentation and monitoring systems on the flotilla, which was an assembly of vessels and barges used to support construction work. Finally, Avalon did the detailed engineering and supervision of the work for the temporary power systems used for the platform's topsides during construction, tow out and installation phases.

"We're hoping the Hebron projects will lead to other work on Husky's West White Rose development and Equinor's Bay du Nord development," Guy says.



Photo courtesy Avalon Controls

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Gerald Guy, president, Avalon Controls Ltd.

Getting that work will require the company maintain the high standards it's established at hundreds of jobs since 1987. Guy sounds confident that will happen with the investments it's made in the company over the past five years, including expanding its Mount Pearl building and doubling its office space. It also has a highly-educated and skilled workforce that it has put a lot of effort into recruiting and retaining. "We are going to continue doing things we've done in the past," Guy says. "That's to develop specialized engineering and technical expertise in areas of high demand, especially areas where there are few suppliers locally or even in Canada. We want to be first out of the gate in the supply of products and services, whether its new technology or adapting existing technology to meet new regulatory requirements."

And even though Guy has been doing this highly technical, complicated work for over 30 years, he insists he's as excited about the work, and Avalon Control's future, as he was when he started. No need to worry about stagnation here. "A lot of people ask me why I don't step back and retire. I can't imagine waking up in the morning and not having Avalon to come to," Guy says. "I'm just as excited about this as I was in the beginning, if not more. The only difference is I'm a little bit smarter." |nrm

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