

# KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS

## CASE STUDY:

Chris Fifield | Safe Training Systems Ltd



### About Me:

*I graduated from the University of Reading with a masters in physics and now work at Safe Training Systems Ltd, continuing as an employee after my KTP finished.*



**Project duration: 2 years**

**End date 17/04/2013**

### How did you initially hear about the opportunity of becoming a KTP Associate?

After I graduated I began to think what direction I'd be looking to head in and contemplated a PhD, but once I reviewed what that would actually entail I felt it may steer me in a direction I wasn't really looking to go in. Instead I began looking at engineering positions, and just when I felt that I may change gears and move in another direction I was contacted by my previous lecturer at the University to advise me the Associate position had opened up. It felt very much like I was in the right place at the right time, as the opportunity was perfectly suited to what I was looking to do.

### Please could you provide a summary of the project, and what your role was?

STS were looking to develop and 'modernise' their radiation training instrumentation which essentially means that radiation workers can train in a safe environment without risk of exposure. I was brought in to redesign an existing product, bringing it to the next level, and develop that into something that can be implemented efficiently and effectively in today's market.

### How did you find the support once the partnership began?

I had a reasonable knowledge in business but certainly not in a comprehensive sense, so coming into an established company felt quite daunting as the focus changes from academia and research to corporate. That's the contrast between academia and business; academia is always looking for the pinnacle of design, research and innovation, whereas business is more about the functionality and, ultimately, the profitability. Because of that juxtaposition, the adjustment for me should in theory have been quite difficult, but every party offered continued and unhindered support whenever I needed it, and suggested business courses for me to complete which I did and helped no end. No one assumes that you'll know

exactly what you're doing from the offset, so STS, the University (the KTC), and my Academic Supervisor were always more than happy to give me their time to talk me through anything I may have otherwise found overwhelming.

### How did the triangular relationship between the business, the University, and yourself result in being a key factor in your development?

The KTP network works as an anchoring point so you know you always have support. My Academic Supervisor was supporting me with my technical and scientific work, and the company fully embraced the spirit of KTP and didn't divert my focus away from the KTP project by asking me to take on any other internal projects unless I specifically requested to do so. All parties left me to my own devices to manage my KTP project in a positive way so I always felt in control of the project, but I knew the avenues were there should I have needed any additional help. There were bi-weekly meetings to ensure everyone was on the same page and that there were no underlying issues to be made aware of, so the relationship of everyone involved was key to my development and the success of the KTP.

### What impact could you see on the company as a direct result of your role as the KTP Associate?

I found that there was an immediate impact as I could apply my 'scientific eye' and provide a new, innovative approach to how we could

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work in an effective way. I felt I changed the ethos of the company to be more results driven, and actually more business-like in some respects. STS were 25 years old when I started, but when I came in it revitalised their work ethic; the KTP gave a new drive and a new focus which, although I had no point of comparison, felt very apparent to me and was clear that my introduction created an instant impact on how the business was looking to evolve. Right the way through the project and even now after the culmination, I feel very much in the driving seat and that I'm partly responsible for shaping the business into what it is today and the forecasted successes for the future.

It's all in the name; a Knowledge Transfer Partnership, the transferring of knowledge from academia to businesses. But it's not just knowledge, it's also workforce, it's new and innovative members of the team coming in, and that's something that can have such a dramatic impact. Bringing in someone who hasn't been part of the business before means they look at everything with fresh eyes, reassessing the different avenues in which the company can evolve in an effective way.

### **Are there any other factors that aided your successful undertaking of the Associate position?**

The business training really helped and prepared me for the corporate side of the project. Additionally, the support of the Knowledge Transfer Centre was extremely helpful as they ensured that I was on top of everything and that I was capitalising on any training that I may have needed to aid the success of the project and my own personal development.

### **What did you see as being the key successes to the project?**

The input and direction from the Academic Supervisor kept me on track design-wise was definitely a key factor. The Academic Supervisor had a key interest in the design and how the product could be further developed, whereas the company was more interested in the functionality and how it physically looked. Although these two parties had different focusses, they married together very well and helped the product evolve to its full capabilities from both sides of the partnership spectrum. In addition, the confidence the company had in me was certainly a key factor; if they had been perhaps more reluctant to trust me or my work it may have resulted in me second guessing what I was doing, but having that sureness in me from the offset meant I felt that I could complete the project successfully. Really, it was the support of everyone involved which was key to the accomplishment of the project; no one was ever too busy to lend their particular expertise and would always take the time to ensure both the project and I were being nurtured accordingly.

### **You had £2k each year to spend on your own personal career development; what was the most beneficial use and outcome for you?**

I utilised the budget by attending several business and trade conferences across the country, and by gaining training in radiation and radiation safety, which was very insightful and extremely helpful. I was relatively conservative with my expenditure and used the training budget on smaller things to aid the project, but having it to utilise as and when necessitated was a phenomenal benefit to have available to me.

### **Please could you describe the other benefits of becoming an Associate, especially with regard to after the project had finished?**

In the two years I was an Associate, I went from being someone with only a knowledge background in physics to having to apply all that knowledge. I had to learn how to design circuits, how to write software, and doing all of that from the bottom up. The initial learning and advanced development of those skills are so valuable in my own personal progress as well as the progress of the project and the company as a whole. I also gained a Masters of Research (MRES) in Systems Engineering, which was a dissertation based qualification which I created using STS and the KTP as a reference. As a result, I was also able to obtain some electrical and software training which helped me fill any gaps in my knowledge and further develop my individual capabilities.

### **How do you think being employed under the partnership would differ from a standard post-graduate employment?**

A standard post-grad job would most likely entail moving around departments to understand all levels of a business when that isn't always

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relevant, whereas in the KTP it's clearly laid out from the beginning what you're there to do, and you in turn take control of that focus and the project itself. There's a very clear objective with a KTP, and there's something immensely satisfying at the end to be able to point to a physical product, or culture change, or system development, and say "I did this, I developed this, and this is something I can put on my CV". Also, I couldn't envisage that the support you have available to you in a standard post-grad job would be comparable to the vast levels of knowledge readily available in an Associate position; there simply wouldn't be such a varied level of expertise which in a KTP you get from the Academic Supervisor, the company supervisor, the University, and anyone else affiliated.

### **What challenges did you face during your time as an Associate and what did you, the company, or UoR do to help you overcome these to ensure continued success within the KTP project?**

The only obstacles I faced were on the technical side in the form of software and coding. My experience with these was very limited at the beginning, but everyone was supportive of the fact that I was learning and offered suitable training to help me ascertain and develop my skillset.

### **What happened at the end of your KTP?**

The company were keen to keep me and we had the discussion about my future quite early on. STS didn't just see the KTP as product focussed, they saw it as a way to utilise me and my expertise, giving them so many more options on how they can grow as a business outside of the project itself. STS is a small company and during the two year KTP I began to feel more like a partner than an employee, so I was elated to stay. We are now also looking at exploring the route of a second KTP as a direct result of the success of mine, which is a great testament to the work I did and have continued doing since the project finished.

### **Would you recommend KTP to other graduates? If so, why?**

Absolutely; it's a great transition from academia to a work place. You may not have ever experienced any fundamental business ideas, but you will get brought up to speed very quickly. There's always the safety net in that you'll be provisionally measured on the project you've been brought in to do, but as you develop you gain the ability and the confidence to offer more which you're supported to do. It's a great way to start a momentum in building a career as you can really take control, steer your own ship, and capitalise on all the levels of expertise available to you for you to develop.

### **What one piece of advice would you give to a graduate considering KTP?**

Once you start to build up your momentum, maybe even as early as a few months in to your Associate position, take a look at your project plan and revise it. When I started, STS had a plan of what I was meant to be doing, and after I found my feet I could see that some of the components weren't beneficial to either the project or me. You have control of the project and only you truly appreciate exactly what it is you're doing, so if you feel strongly about changing the focus to something else or that one route is better than another, then don't be afraid to speak up about it. The company or the University may decide to disagree, and if so then fine, but it may be that you have been able to see something that no one else has which could be key to a far more successful project outcome. Just be confident and voice your suggestions and ideas in a professional and respectful way; even if they don't agree, the University and the company will always listen and discuss your points constructively.