

COVER INTERVIEW

journey of development

After more than 50 years, Weir Minerals Africa still believes its future growth lies in diversifying, says sales and marketing director Gavin Dyer. By KERRY DIMMER

Although the name Weir is synonymous with slurry pumps, the company has over its history successfully built a reputation for taking on the engineering challenges of the day. These challenges are as diverse as boiler feed pumps for steam ships to the Autogiro (the forerunner of the modern day helicopter).

Today, Weir Minerals Africa leverages this reputation for quality engineering and manufacturing to produce and support processing equipment to the mining, mineral processing and power (oil and gas) sectors, as well as general industry.

A focused approach and strategic vision has been integral to its success and growth. Not unlike the business, the pillars on which this strategy is based are constantly evolving to meet current market needs.

Gavin Dyer, sales and marketing director for the African and Middle East regions, says the original three pillars have been central to the organisation's growth and success for some years. They also form a crucial link to the relationships that Weir Minerals encourages between its customers as well as employees.

'Innovative action, collaborative mindsets and global capability each have merits on their own, but together they provide the platform for best-in-class solutions across the diverse markets we operate within. With the addition of a fourth pillar – value

chain excellence – we will be able to ensure that all our offerings, be that product or service delivery across the entire spectrum are of a superior standard,' says Dyer.

The spectrum Dyer refers to is substantial and covers every aspect of mining. It includes open-cast or underground mining; slurry plant and mine dewatering equipment, inclusive of pumps, hydrocyclones, valves, screens, hoses and wear resistant linings; transport and waste management, and solutions for mining sand and aggregates.

The range of products includes branding synonymous with mining excellence for decades, including Warman, Geho, Linatex, Vulco, Floway and Envirotech. Such product offerings are part of a deliberate customer-focused strategy that ensures performance benefits while maximising a return on investment. This is especially important when looking at customer-critical applications that require development.

A host of case studies demonstrate product successes, improved production and efficiencies, all of which result in a lower cost of ownership. The company is so confident in the technological superiority of its products that many are offered on a trial basis in order to prove their success in customer operations.

As part of the larger Weir Group PLC, which operates in more than 70 countries

with 14 000 staff, Weir Minerals Africa is able to provide some of the best technological solutions in the industry.

Dyer describes how the three divisions – minerals, oil and gas, and power and industrial – each host design centres that focus on the development of different products, or work to create a product solution for a specific application.

He says: 'Each centre – although focused on one specific range of products, for example in Australia where our range of slurry pumps are produced – designs to global standards so that all arms of the Weir Group are able to leverage and take advantage of expertise and technological advances no matter where in the world the solution is required.

'This aspect of the business is especially valuable to our customers because each processing plant carries unique features, and so may require a specific engineering solution to an already existing product or perhaps the development of a new one.'

The design centre for vibrating screens is based in Johannesburg, with four design engineers dedicated to current developments that will significantly increase Weir Minerals' offering and competitive advantage.

'Further we have a partnership with the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow, Scotland, where within its engineering faculty's technology and innovation centre, we have

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created and funded the Weir Advanced Research Centre (WARC), which further substantiates the Weir Group's dedication to innovation and collaboration.'

The University of Strathclyde is a leading international technology institution whose engineering faculty is the largest and best rated in Scotland for research.

WARC's mission is to provide support for a pipeline of new product innovation and significant improvements to existing product performance. Not just a centre to support long- and short-term research and development projects, it also acts as an innovation hub for the Weir Group. Here staff work on projects in collaboration with the Strathclyde team such as ideation exercises focusing on specific problems, determining possible solutions, as well as prototype development or concept testing.

Project proposals are filtered and prioritised before being presented to the Weir Group executive for ratification. A Weir/Strathclyde leadership team then monitors the direction and progress of selected projects to ensure conformance with objectives and timescales.

WARC is proving to be very valuable for not only the Weir Group as a whole, but also any interested party seeking academic or research information relevant to product development.

Dyer believes that WARC will be a significant contributor to Weir Minerals' offerings on the continent. 'African mining

has a number of unique features within the processing of minerals. We are seeing significant growth in West Africa, even though we have seen the spend on original equipment reduce slightly. But this is normal given the cyclical nature of mining.'

However, Dyer says that Weir Minerals continues to experience increasing demand for its products in Africa's mining sector. 'Our hydrocyclone range, for example, shows double-digit compound growth. The slurry range too remains attractive given that it is the mainstay of our business.'

Growth for Weir Minerals is a two-prong approach – product range development enhanced by geographical footprint expansion. A number of new service centres add to the minerals service footprint in South Africa, the US, Russia, Scandinavia, Spain, Turkey, the Netherlands, Colombia and Australia.

This, in turn, provides opportunities to better support customers and offer ancillary products and services. Within the year, three new Weir Minerals sales and service centres will be opened in Africa.

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This creates opportunities for new business enterprise and local job creation given that Weir Minerals is committed to providing skills training where required,

and encourages the development of wholly owned Weir subsidiaries.

In Ghana, for instance, only one of 40 employees is an expatriate. And on the subject of people, Dyer stresses that the Weir Group is focused on ensuring that the company has an enabling environment so that individual creativity can be expressed. This is in line with the Weir Group's aim of being an innovative organisation.

So while the West and Central African regions show great promise for growth and development, East and South Africa tell a slightly different story. The somewhat flatlining of the South African mining sector that is largely attributed to the Marikana tragedy in 2012 – and other strike activity – does not discourage Weir Minerals.

'In fact, we are invested in the promise that South Africa holds, irrespective of events or market conditions. So much so in fact that last year we acquired Weir Heavy Bay Foundry to support our manufacturing base in South Africa. Its location, close to the deep water port of Ngqura near Port Elizabeth, has facilitated our improved export potential.

'This acquisition also demonstrates our commitment to South Africa, not just from a business or investment perspective, but also our confidence in it as a central manufacturing location for the worldwide Weir Group.' This focus and dedication is proving to be a winning formula. **MD**