

COVID-19: Interview with Jonathan Lewis, Chief Executive, TruLife Optics

The world is increasingly digital and contactless, so it was timely that Maddyness spoke with Jonathan Lewis, Chief Executive, to understand how the company is coping during the COVID-19 pandemic and what the future holds.

Temps de lecture : minute

12 August 2020

At TruLife Optics we design and make bespoke holographic optics for Augmented Reality and car Head-Up Displays (HUD's). We have been a world leader in full-colour holography for many years and used to make image holograms for advertising and retail.

In 2015 we saw the need for holographic optics to enable a transparent and thin optic to go on glasses and in a car windshield to act as a sophisticated mirror to reflect and magnify an image to the eye in a way that you can read the digital image while also seeing the real world.

We have clients (global technology giants and smaller start-ups) working with us to develop systems incorporating our holograms as the central optical technology in their system, such as smart glasses.

What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown?

We are laboratory-based, and while some of my colleagues spend a lot of time computer modelling, most need to access the labs. Luckily we have

12 separate labs and so we could adapt the facility to enable working during COVID - the main issue was the communication of results since we have a big team of researchers (15, including 8 PhD's) and we get success by having multiple views and ideas on each project - colleagues are used to popping into each other's labs to give advice and see other's progress. It is this that has suffered due to COVID, although we have instigated Team meetings via video.

The biggest ray of sunshine is that we developed a floating image hologram technique to allow floating cues for applications like a contactless ATM or elevator keypad or call button.

What have been the biggest personal challenges during lockdown?

I love to be at the centre of the office, seeing and hearing of results as they happen and making sure that everything is running smoothly. Given my "desk" based role I have been in the office much less and so I have had to phone people regularly to keep track of what they are up to.

It feels very frustrating not being present while others are making discoveries and fulfilling client requests! Client wise, existing clients have taken longer to test samples, but only one customer paused and none stopped work during COVID. It did mean I saw more of my young children (2 and 4) which was great.

Was remote working a new thing for you and if so will you be adapting your work to allow more of it?

I used to work from home on Fridays and I have found that on some work I and colleagues have become more productive namely thought based

projects. During COVID we applied for a Smart Grant (no announcement yet on winners of that round) and we submitted a patent. Both are long and challenging things to write and were both done in record time.

So yes I will block off more time to get major thought projects done faster and encourage colleagues to do the same. We have always had the philosophy of getting the job done rather than work set hours - some colleagues work late into the night when making good progress and they don't want to stop, and then they will take it easier for a few days after.

How have you been keeping your employees happy?

Some are happier than others. It is tough working from home in a small flat and so we have encouraged communication and some changes to roles to give variety. We have instigated two rules - comply with all government guidelines but also respect for colleagues risk appetite - so some employees have wanted more protection and have not wanted to come in while others are in the labs - this we have accommodated with shift working and flexibility.

We have made it clear that no colleague should put any pressure on others to work or not work in a particular way, everyone has their own way of feeling safe and we must respect that.

As a leader, have you successfully managed your (and your teams) mental resilience through lockdown?

The team have each responded differently to the situation - some more cautious and vulnerable than others. The main focus has been on treating each person as an individual and respecting their needs rather than

having a blanket rule for all. Given that our business did not suffer, we didn't have the worry of job losses and worse that other companies have sadly faced.

What changes have you made to keep your business running?

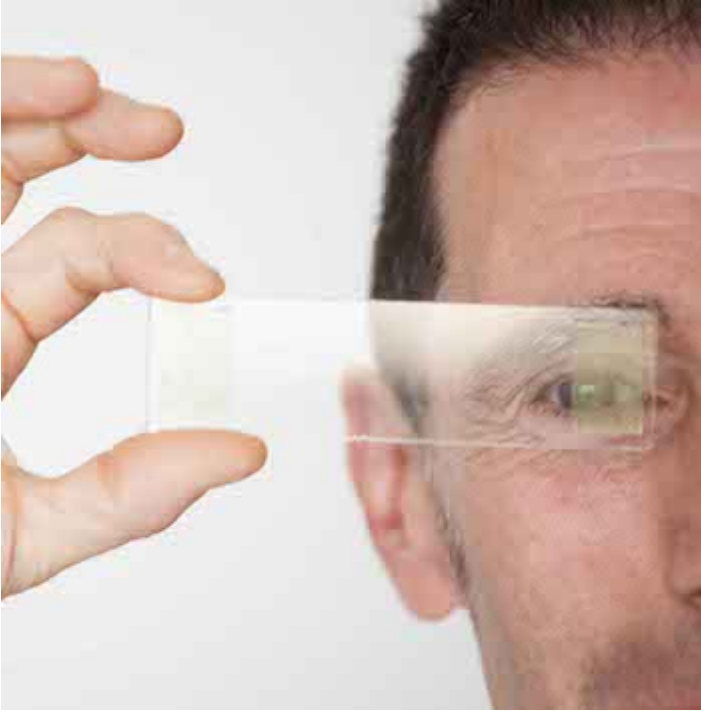
Mainly we have adopted very flexible working so as to minimise interaction but still allow work to go on. We have actually tried to push ahead with new investment and new products since we are financially strong and want to emerge from the pandemic on the front foot.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

Our clients have liked the fact that we have stayed open and responsive to their needs. We have also developed the floating holograms and marketed these with good success meaning that we have new revenue streams soon to come through that were not possible before the pandemic.

How is your relationship with your investors?

We have a number of Angel investors and they have been extremely supportive. They are always coming up with ideas and information on existing and potential markets and some have even opened doors that were locked before.



*What do you think of the support packages for startups offered by the government?
What have you been able to use?*

The government has responded quickly to try and keep people employed during the crisis - we have not had to furlough any staff, and this has a great positive impact on team morale. We have also applied for a Smart Grant to help develop our contactless holographic interface.

The main change I would have made is to allocate much more funding for growth companies to help them maintain growth, rather than help so many companies such as restaurants that may fail regardless of the help. Also, some industries have skills which when lost are hard to replace and so the key should be on keeping and developing high-level skills.

Do you feel confident in your business post-COVID?

We will leave COVID with more products and more clients and look forward to the post-COVID world. COVID is likely to increase demand for contactless solutions and also products such as augmented reality since it will allow a hands-free visual experience. We feel very sorry for those companies and employees badly affected by revenue loss through no fault by them.

Are there any changes in society/economy that you think will help you?

The move towards a more digital and contactless world will increase the demand for our services and see more potential clients looking at our products. We hear of banks looking to mandate contactless when the appropriate technology is validated.

Tell us about your future post-COVID?

Our aim is to grow but stay focussed on holographic optics. We are the partner of choice of many companies looking to use a hologram as the core optic in a pair of glasses or car windshield and so we want to maintain our strength in these markets. We hope to double our staff and triple our turnover in the next 3 years.

Then holographic optic powered Smart Glasses and Holographic displays will be becoming mainstream and our company will be at the centre of the next major technology cycles.



Read also

[COVID-19: Interview with Graham Mills, co-founder & MD of techspert.io](#)

Article by Jonathan Lewis