

Meet TEKEVER, developing drones and satellites to detect threats and provide intelligence

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Ricardo Mendes CEO and founder of TEKEVER, about developing and operating drones, pushing your boundaries and flying beyond the sky.

Temps de lecture : minute

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What was the catalyst for launching TEKEVER?

We founded the company in 2001 with a vision of harnessing the power of collective intelligence to improve society. We strongly believed that one day everything would be connected, and that using AI to process, learn and determine action from that infinite pool of data would unleash a transformative power. At the time, we believed that everything-network would be called “the evernet”, and so the company’s name became TEKEVER, after its motto “Technologies for the Evernet”. Turns out our vision was very accurate, but of course, we all know it now as “the internet”.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how

you reach customers and so on?

TEKEVER develops and operates drones (or Unmanned Aerial Systems - UAS) that survey ultra-wide, hard-to-reach areas and use AI to detect threats to human life and the environment. We describe this as Intelligence-as-a-Service that allows customers to take rapid and effective action. For example, we monitor the English Channel for threats such as human trafficking, drugs smuggling and illegal fishing, allowing the UK Home Office to take prompt action, saving lives and preventing economic and environmental damage.

Our UAS are complex feats of technology that are able to operate in extreme terrains and conditions, making them the ideal reconnaissance tool.

We work with customers across both the public and private sector including the *European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA)*, multiple defence ministries across the globe, as well as private companies in the energy and oil industry.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Our initial focus was on building software that could run on and connect as many devices as possible, creating intelligent distributed systems that could have a tremendous impact. Around 2009, we recognised that UAS would eventually become omnipresent and offered a huge opportunity. At that time, the UAS market was dominated by defence players who focused on hardware, but we believed that software and AI were critical to unlock the true potential of UAS. This led us to start creating the devices themselves, beyond just creating the software. We think of our drones as 'computers with wings' rather than aircraft that carry computers onboard.

We began offering commercial services in 2018 - this was transformational for us. It increased the awareness of our brand beyond the wider software and technology industries thus allowing us to scale at a fast rate.

We have always developed satellite technology alongside our UAS business. We have recently expanded significantly in the space sector and brought these two parts of our business together to provide the most comprehensive aerial surveillance service that combines UAS and satellite data.

Tell us about the working culture at TEKEVER

TEKEVER is the European market leader in UAS and one of the most important companies in the global aerospace and defence market. One of the fundamental reasons for our success in this market is that we approach technology and product development in a radically different way. We believe that people, not only tech, are at the core of what we do; we believe that to truly help our customers succeed in their missions we need to be radically agile; and we believe in aligning people towards common goals, and then truly trusting and empowering them.

Working at TEKEVER isn't easy or comfortable. We have a very fast-paced environment, and everyone is encouraged to be agile, think differently and push boundaries. We've been able to bring together some of the best technical minds in the global UAS and Space market, that are working side-by-side to create game-changing products that serve customers around the world.

However, people tend to stay at the company for a very long time because they want to help us change the world for better and because of our daily commitment to helping them develop and grow as professionals,

as individuals and as leaders. This is perhaps our biggest and most important investment.

How are you funded?

We bootstrapped the company from 5 people in 2001 to more than 500 today, with customers around the globe. We raised €20 million in a Series A led by UK-based investor Ventura Capital, who specialise in pre-IPO technology companies, in January 2022.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Creating a truly agile culture in a company that operates at scale in very conservative markets like aerospace and defence is perhaps one of our biggest challenges. Doing it at full throttle and growing at 100% is extremely challenging.

We overcome it by keeping true to our values, attracting the best talent, communicating clearly, promoting alignment, and empowering and trusting our teams. If we do this well, we will continue being the best at what we do, and our customers' successes will drive our growth.

How does TEKEVER answer an unmet need?

Unlike the big defence players in the drone market, we're a tech company. Like any software-focused company, we develop technology-enabled solutions in rapid, iterative cycles that allow us to constantly be on the pulse of development, in line with evolving societal needs. This means we can be agile, adapt technology to evolving needs and ensure customers are receiving the latest innovations.

Let me give you an example - our drones survey waters and detect boats

in distress. It is hugely distressing for our pilots to see human life in danger via the drone's video feed, but not be able to do anything other than alert the coastguard. We therefore developed a new payload for our AR5 drone that has the capability to autonomously and precisely deploy lifesaving rescue rafts from the air, and we brought the initial idea to life in only a few weeks.

Simply put, we are constantly identifying unmet needs and, because of our agile business model, we can quickly develop solutions to address them.

What's in store for the future?

In our case, the sky is actually not the limit.

We're always working relentlessly to improve our products by developing, integrating and testing the latest technologies. Beyond this constant innovation, we're developing several new products and services. We're targeting the launch of a new product line later next year and, like our AR3 and AR5, it will be category-defining.

The next few years will also be full of news in our space division. We're working hard on deep space missions that will allow our scientists to better understand how we can defend our civilisation from existential threats. As with our drones, our mesh networking technology is enabling ground-breaking deep space missions that will study asteroids and comets in detail, to understand how, for the first time in history, we can take control of our own destiny and protect our Earth from incoming space bodies.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Resilience is probably the most undervalued quality a leader must have, and probably the most important one. Everything else comes second.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

My day is always dynamic and unpredictable, but there are routines I like to maintain. I enjoy getting up early while the house is still silent, and I'm usually greeted by Olivia, our puppy. I love taking our 4-year-old daughter to school and then heading to one of our offices or on some trip. I'm always reading a number of books and articles, and I try to find time to read and listen to music whenever I can - it allows me some reflection time. My wife is a writer and culture is a big part of our life, influencing everything we do, both personally and professionally.

Ricardo Mendes is the CEO & founder of [TEKEVER](#).