



Smart Fabrication founder Simon Kennedy

Get Smart

'Think big' could be the motto of former tradie Simon Kennedy, who has worked hard to ensure his steel fabrication company shares in the Defence Industry boom.

BY KATE NASH



Simon Kennedy has spent much of his life proving his critics wrong.

The high-school dropout, who left school in Year 10 with his teacher telling him the best he could hope for was to work as a welder, now presides over a specialist engineering company with 20 employees and an annual turnover of more than \$3 million. He also recently bought an Adelaide shipbuilding company.

After qualifying as a welder and boilermaker, he joined the Australian Submarine Corporation but left after several years because it could not satisfy his hyperactive spirit. He dreamed of running his own state-of-the-art workshop and facilities, and keeping at the forefront of technology and safety.

Mr Kennedy was ridiculed when he told his tradesmen mates that one day he would run his own company and supply to the corporation. "The guys on the shop floor thought it was a bit of a giggle," he says.

But within 10 years he had made his dream come true. He has since employed former colleagues to work on projects that his company, Smart Fabrication, has completed for the giant Defence organisation.

"Here we are now, 14 years later, as a preferred supplier to the ASC," he says.

Mr Kennedy uses what he calls "rare sense" to keep his workforce happy and safe, and believes this keeps Smart Fabrication workers productive and motivated. It also helps ensure his business is continually improving.

Smart Fabrication plans, designs, constructs and installs a wide range of steel fabrication products, including everything

We now have a reputation for innovation and as a company that reacts quickly

from small light and camera guards for mining clients to overhead cranes and water tankers. It is currently building a \$250,000 production line for Holden. Smart Fabrication's other clients include SA Water, Hitachi and Michell.

Mr Kennedy says he recently defied the critics again with work on a confidential project for the Collins Class submarines.

Most thought the project couldn't be completed within the three-month time frame. Mr Kennedy says his firm completed the \$125,000 project in 30 days – at half the cost and a quarter of the time of a previous quote.

"I quoted on it within four days and it was completed within a month of getting the go-ahead.

"It required a lot of initiative and I had to pull a lot of strings and draw on a lot of favours, but we exceeded beyond all expectations. We now have a reputation for innovation and as a company that reacts quickly."

The job also won Smart Fabrication preferred supplier status to the ASC, and made the Defence Industry sit up and take notice. Mr Kennedy is determined to get a share of the \$250 billion the Australian Navy plans to spend over the next 15 years.

He has spent the past five years getting "Defence-ready" – achieving International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) certification; gaining a reputation as an on-time, on-budget supplier; building a quality and safety system into the business, and attending Defence networking events.

Mr Kennedy says he has spent four years working on the business rather than in it, after completing a management course at North-West Business Development Centre in Port Adelaide.

"The 12-month business owner's/coaching program taught me to dissect the business and start working on individual aspects," he says. "I then employed a manager and stepped down from being general manager and worked on the company's systems."

He identified inefficiencies in his business, severed a million-dollar contract with a Victorian company, and focussed on high-quality work.

Recognising the need for bigger premises, Mr Kennedy bought the Adelaide Ship Construction International (ASCI) company. At 30,000sqm, its site is about 11 times bigger than his current premises.

"This is just the beginning. It gives Smartfab much more potential to do larger jobs, and plenty of room for storage and warehousing finished product.

"As a director of both companies, I will continue to do Defence work through Smart Fabrication and try to transform the ASCI site into Adelaide's premier smaller boat manufacture and service yard for the marine and naval industries.

"Combining our quality management systems with their 30 years' experience in building boats and expertise in the marine industry in servicing boats makes us a phenomenal team. It gives us a very exciting future in the Defence Industry in this country."

Mr Kennedy is proud of what he has achieved while building up a successful business – including raising three children who now work in the business and, with his wife by his side, renovating houses, teaching karate and gaining third-dan black-belt qualifications.

"If you give more than you take, life will always smile on you," he says.

