

10 minutes with...

Michael Hayes

Specialty Gases 'lifer'



Q Mike, thanks for taking the time out with gasworld for its specialty gases edition. You've been around

specialty gases for a few decades now. How has the sector changed in the past 25 years?

One of the biggest changes is that some of the integrated industrial gases companies are losing the ability to listen to the specialty gases customer. Every major company is running lean, and when you run lean you run out of time. As a result, the market price has dropped to the point that most of the specialty gas mixes are now commodities.

Have you seen a trend in various business ownership models?

The number of specialty gases suppliers has decreased due to mergers and acquisitions. As a result, some majors are too big and cannot react quickly enough. But I think we will see a resurgence of smaller independent specialty gas companies over the next decade. They will be better suited to respond to customer needs and react to market trends. This was the spirit that thrived at Spectra Gases when I started there 25 years ago.

Tell us more about Spectra Gases when it was starting up...

When I got there in 1995 the culture was one that I have not experienced in any other organisation. We were truly a family, from the occasional

verbal disagreements to the sense of unity and purpose. The top team were always readily available. If you needed something you could call them up or stop them in the hallway. Decisions were made right on the spot, and we did whatever it took to get the job done.

Any particular memories?

I remember the excitement of going to work. Having the freedom to create mixtures like the TO 15 protocol gases or elemental mercury standards. To work on the high-end mixtures, experience failures, learn from them and create the best possible product – that was the buzz.

And you referred to occasional disagreements – were there any tense moments?

I remember one meeting where the company owners made it clear they were not pleased with progress in the new Environmental Division. They said we should treat it as our own entrepreneurial business. So, we did, and we chose to focus on the most difficult mixtures that competitors would find hard to replicate. The owners provided the resources and mentoring, we provided the ambition and skill, and it just worked.

Comparing Spectra Gases to the majors where you have worked, what were the differences?

The main differences are speed and nimbleness. At Spectra, change was

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viewed as an opportunity – a chance to develop a new product, to be the first to market. I did not experience that freedom to create, fail, learn, develop and succeed in all of the corporate majors.

Were there any downsides as a smaller organisation though? Surely resource was not as readily available?

The main issue was in fact that we had limited resources. The good thing about being part of an international major were that more resources were potentially available. On the other hand, we were sometimes competing with 20 other projects for the same money in a risk averse culture: your project had to be a proven success before it would be considered for serious funding. [gw](#)

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