



DEMAND SOARS

Submersible motors take off

■ Peter Klinger

When Jayson Bennett and his colleagues set up Submersible Motor Engineering as a niche product player in 2001, they expected to be churning out 40 to 50 of their electronic motors a year.

Today, the employee-owned Maddington firm produces about 1000 units a year as it struggles to keep up with a booming offshore oil and gas market and soaring demand for submersible motors in the US, particularly in the areas of irrigation and municipal water supply.

Whether it be subsea trenching equipment, remote operated diving vehicles, fire pumps, seawater reinjection or mine site dewatering systems, they are likely to be powered by an SME motor.

Mr Bennett, who runs SME's sales department, says the company's success has "absolutely" exceeded his expectations.

"Particularly the subsea stuff, we thought we would be maybe building 40 to 50 motors a year, the market was quite small. Now we are finding that as one of the market leaders, we are building hundreds if not thousands of them," he said.

"It's like any business. It's a lot of time and effort for very little reward in the beginning but you hope for the rewards down the track. To a certain extent we are still waiting now (for the rewards), it's a moving feast, particularly in a business like ours where we have grown so rapidly. You are continually adding new machinery,



Deep thinking: Jayson Bennett looking at the interior of one of the submersibles. Picture: Michael O'Brien

new equipment, which has a big capital cost."

Mr Bennett and many of SME's founders trace their beginnings to a small WA company which ended up in the hands of a Singaporean parent when Mr Bennett and team

decided to return to Perth and set out on their own.

Employing 27 staff in Maddington and another 14 at its subsidiary in Phoenix, Arizona, SME turns over more than \$8 million a year by selling its motors to customers

such as Perry Slingsby Systems and Soil Machine Dynamics.

SME is a finalist in this year's WA Industry & Export awards, nominated in the small to medium manufacturer export category. Winners of the awards, which are

TURN ON THE POWER

1000kW

The upper end of the power range of SME's subsea electric motors. They start at 1kW.

supported by *WestBusiness*, will be announced by Commerce Minister Simon O'Brien at a gala dinner next Friday.

"With the expansion of the subsea industry, we have continued to grow with it," Mr Bennett said.

"People were going deeper and wanted more power. Our product range continues to evolve as that industry evolves."

Asked how difficult it is for a small company such as SME to be disciplined enough to maintain its spending on research and development, Mr Bennett says a lot of the work is underwritten by customers realising that they need to constantly advance their own technology. What was up to date five years ago no longer is.

"It's probably easier for us being a smaller company because we are a lot more nimble," he said. "There is not a great deal of competition in quite a lot of our marketplace, so it's almost the situation that if people want to do something a bit different, or they want to develop something new, they pretty much have to come to us."