

Dialogue is key

With his recent appointment as CEO, Alan Banks talks to **Neil Tyler** about the role of TechWorks and his plans for the future

Last month TechWorks, the UK's industry association for deep tech connected communities, announced that Alan Banks would be taking over from Gary Travers as CEO, with immediate effect.

TechWorks, which is the parent organisation to the NMI (semiconductors and electronic systems), Power Electronics UK, AESIN (automotive electronics innovation) and the IoT Security Foundation, was set up to strengthen the UK's leadership in deep tech.

Banks' appointment has been welcomed and he brings to the role a wealth of leadership, business and industry experience across automotive electronics, IT and telecommunications.

"We've certainly succeeded in creating a better understanding about the need for greater collaboration and the need to foster communities as the way forward, but we haven't always been as clear when it comes to the needs of the technology sector in the UK," Banks admits

Banks has chaired the AESIN stream since its inception in 2012. He's played a key role in developing and implementing its vision and strategy for the UK automotive electronic systems sector, building on his 17 years spent at the Tier 1 automotive supplier Visteon, where he was engineering director and developed, then delivered, vehicle cockpit electronics.

According to Sir Hossein Yassaie, TechWorks' chair: "Advances in deep tech, underpinned by engineering excellence and scientific discoveries, are fuelling growth in many contemporary and emerging markets. The UK plays a leadership role in the research, development and application in this field and TechWorks is dedicated to supporting and helping to strengthen this vital role."

Given the complex nature of modern systems Yassaie said that the new CEO would need to have the experience, passion and vision to bring together multiple technology and engineering communities and help them shape advancements to further strengthen the UK's position.

Once-in-a-generation

In his first interview, following news of his appointment, Banks explained to New Electronics that at a time when the UK was facing once-in-a-generation changes, whether in terms of technology; the emergence of new business models or the prospect of new trading arrangements with our withdrawal from the EU, the only way to ensure

UK companies can address these fundamental changes and not only survive but actually thrive, would be through driving much greater collaboration.

"It's only through collaboration that we will succeed and TechWorks is the ideal model for this. We can act as a catalyst and create non-competitive connected communities where we can build successful partnerships and lead innovation in exciting, emerging technology markets," enthuses Banks.

"That's the challenge and despite being a small organisation TechWorks is doing a lot to achieve and deliver on these issues. Where the membership has stepped up and engaged we have achieved a lot – the question, going forward, is how do we keep them engaged? A lot of what our membership does is done free of charge – we only have limited resources."

Banks says that the success of AESIN, which he has been running since it was first established, provides a suitable benchmark for the organisation.

"Despite limited resources AESIN succeeded in engaging with the industry in the form of OEMs and Tier 1 suppliers and with government – we've helped to attract funding and I want to see that same success replicated across TechWorks and the multiple sectors we look to serve and support."

At present there are only four streams: NMI, Power Electronics UK, AESIN and the IoT Security Foundation and Banks wants to add to their number.

"We need to effectively relaunch TechWorks," he concedes, "as we look to get the brand 'out there' and what we do is better understood. We are a hub that brings people together from different industries, where problems can be discussed, and ideas shared.

"Unprecedented change is all around us and TechWorks can help develop and build on the government's Industrial Strategy. That strategy plays to the strengths of the electronics industry whether AI, autonomous driving, clean energy etc. All of them require technology to deliver on some ambitious goals.

"TechWorks can play a leadership role in aligning different industries but looking beyond technology, business itself is changing.

"Traditional business models are having to adapt, and we are seeing whole industries being turned on their heads.

"Take the automotive industry. New entrants, with no traditional automotive design experience, are challenging industry norms,

bringing technology and product to market much faster. In this fast-changing business environment, how do traditional companies compete? Massive technological change is coming, from autonomous vehicles to the demise of the combustion engine and the rise of electric vehicles, so we can play an important role in providing a bridge between industry and government and help in the re-alignment of policy to better address the needs of industry.”

IP retention

The UK has a good track record when it comes to creating IP but with the advent of AI, robotics and machine learning the UK needs to be better at retaining that IP, according to Banks.

“I want IP created in the UK to stay in the UK, owned by UK companies and consortia. We need to ensure that the UK retains its reputation for R&D, especially at a time of upheaval.”

Banks believes TechWorks should look to build on its programme of events and to engage more with the bodies that have sprung up in recent years to support and promote technology and industry in the UK.

“Through that engagement we can put TechWorks front and centre and attract new members in the process.”

Of the four streams TechWorks supports, IoT Security has established a strong international reputation, which Banks wants to see replicated.

“But we also need to introduce new streams. For example, with regards to robotics and machine learning there is extensive cross over between different sectors that we can use to build communities and co-operation.”

His appointment comes at a time when TechWorks, like many other organisations, has been struggling to get its voice heard.

“We have been crowded out by events,” he suggests. “Because of Brexit we can’t get to the people we need to and as a result we’ve



struggled to get the full engagement we’d been promised, and had hoped for, with the launch of the Industrial Strategy back in 2017.”

He makes the point that without that engagement and some degree of funding it’s hard to get the traction needed.

“A lack of dialogue is hampering our efforts.”

Banks concedes that his appointment comes at a difficult time.

“No matter. TechWorks is a great idea and the collaborative vision is a vitally important one.

“Working as a collective we can generate and do more and I believe that whatever happens in the coming months, TechWorks can develop a powerful voice for change and engagement in the UK.”

Alan Banks

Alan Banks was recently appointed CEO at TechWorks, the UK’s industry association for deep tech connected communities. With a wealth of leadership, business and industry experience in automotive electronics, IT and telecommunications Banks has chaired

AESIN since its inception in 2012. He spent 17 years at automotive supplier Visteon, where he was engineering director. Prior to this, he developed telecommunications and product development systems for Ford.