

Bonfiglioli SA: 30 years of commitment to local industry

Bonfiglioli South Africa is celebrating its 30th anniversary as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Italian Bonfiglioli Group. *MechChem Africa* talks to founding members Tony dos Santos, operations director, and retired CEO, Robert Rohman, about the company's history and journey to success.



Bonfiglioli South Africa opened for business on April 1, 1991. Shown here at that time are, **from left:** Luciano Marisaldi, Group CFO; Robert Rohman, the first MD; Clementino Bonfiglioli, global president; Tony dos Santos, the first sales manager for South Africa; Vittorio Bertaglia, global sales director.

Bonfiglioli South Africa opened for business on April 1, 1991, 14 months after Nelson Mandela was released and three years before he became the first democratically elected president of South Africa. "These were uncertain, exciting but very turbulent times, so establishing a new industrial gearbox company back then was a very bold move," recalls Robert Rohman, the company's first managing director.

"I was approached by Fausto Carboni, now CEO of the Global Group, to establish the company. At the time, I was general manager of the then distributor for Bonfiglioli, Stone Stamcor, and Fausto was our Italian contact. I was therefore able to put together an experienced team with in-depth knowledge of the product and the business model necessary for delivery and support," he adds.

A key factor that differentiated Bonfiglioli from other Italian manufacturers was Clementino Bonfiglioli's belief that customers were best served through Bonfiglioli's own local operation. "This led to the development of a wholly-owned worldwide distribution network and we, as Bonfiglioli South Africa, were extremely proud to be one of the first. We were highly motivated youngsters and, over the years, became one of Bonfiglioli's most successful subsidiaries, measured by relative market share, profitability, reach and scope," says Rohman.

The starting point of this success, he believes, was the vision and inspiration of Clementino. Although he had built up a full

range of gearboxes, he was able to identify gaps in the market that enabled him to attract a significant market share from the then dominant British and German manufacturers. Most notable developments were his versatile MVF worm drive range of gearboxes for light industrial use; and the 300 Series planetary Trasmital gearbox range for heavy-duty low-speed high-torque applications.

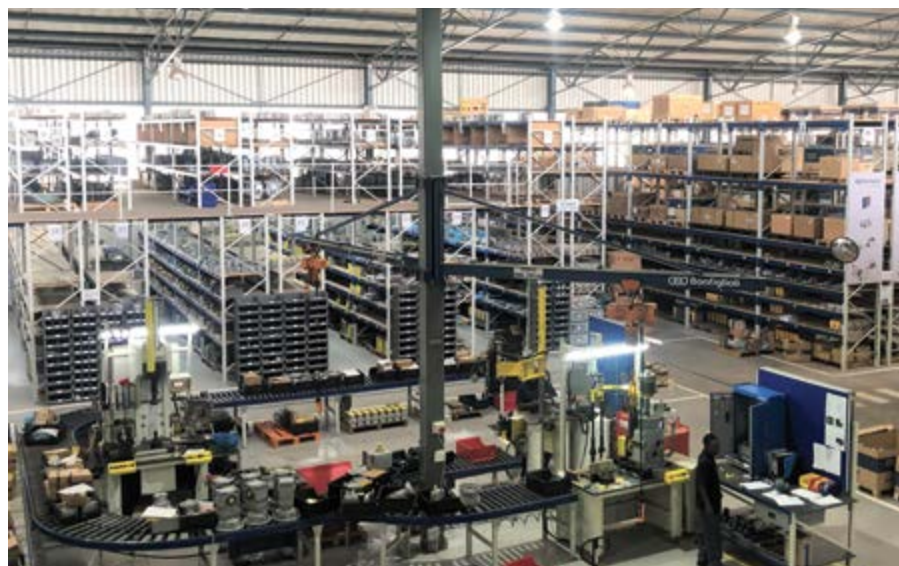
Today, Bonfiglioli remains one of the world's largest manufacturers of worm drive geared motors and is the leading supplier of planetary gearbox solutions to the mobile and wind power generation industries

One of Clementino Bonfiglioli's key

philosophies was that 'substance is greater than form', which manifested itself in his passion for investing in the most sophisticated machine tool equipment and technologies. This enabled him to build a large component mass production facility in his home town of Bologna in Northern Italy that allowed him to actively lower manufacturing costs through economies of scale while raising levels of production quality.

A further advantage in the early days was that Bonfiglioli opted to use standard electric motors adapted to the gearbox ranges with mating IEC flanges. Not only did this provide customers with more flexible motor options but it meant that a failed motor could easily be removed from a machine via the dry coupling with only four bolts. In addition to simplifying maintenance procedures, this also reduces the cost of holding spares, because readily available standard motors can be used as opposed to brand specific gearmotor units.

Describing early successes, operations director Tony dos Santos continues: "Initially, we began to seek opportunities where light industrial worm drives could be used instead of costlier helical geared motors. We found a host of suitable lighter industrial applications, such as fruit processing, packaging, the baking and food industries and general conveying in a broad cross section of distri-



A view of Bonfiglioli South Africa's expanded warehouse and one of the assembly stations at its considerably enlarged state-of-art assembly facility in Linbro Park, Sandton.

bution centres," says Dos Santos

On the other end of the power/torque spectrum, Bonfiglioli's planetary drives became the industry standard for heavy duty use on apron feeders and thickeners on mines; for clarifiers for water treatment; and for crystal-lisers in the sugar industry.

Rohman continues: "Clementino was adamant about local assembly. This enabled us to offer products from the broader global offering. Stocking every range, size and available variant was impractical, but by assembling to order, we were able to rationalise the total stock holding while still offering a complete range on an ex-stock basis.

"The engineering from Italy was ingenious, too, because common sub-assemblies could be used in multiple different units. Instead of assembling from components, we imported sub-assemblies. This meant that all of the critical bearings and gear fitments were done in the high-tech Italian factories using very sophisticated equipment and automated lines. The process enables us to considerably reduce lead times while configuring units to specific speed ratios and torques at the highest quality level," Rohman says.

"To best meet the local assembly, service and customisation requirements, we believed we needed a locally owned, tailor-made facility. Although initially reluctant, Clementino Bonfiglioli again demonstrated his commitment and belief in our success by insisting on purchasing both adjacent stands, which paved the way for our continual expansion through the years," continues Dos Santos

In the mid-2000s, Clementino began to hand over the reins to his daughter, Sonia Bonfiglioli, who was, by then, a mechanical engineer steeped in the company's traditions and values. "Sonia took over the oversight role for Bonfiglioli SA, and immediately demonstrated the same levels of support to our operation," Rohman recalls.

On the death of her father, she stepped into his role as Group leader and continued to advance the company legacy. "While Clementino was a mechanical man, Sonia began to expand the company in the area of mechatronics, automation and modern digital drive technologies such as inverters, variable speed drives (VSDs), servo drives and advanced motion control," he says.

In 2008, Sonia Bonfiglioli was instrumental in another "game changer" when she came to South Africa to announce that Bonfiglioli SA was to be the first subsidiary company in the Bonfiglioli Group to be accredited by its global parent to assemble the newly designed Bonfiglioli heavy duty (HD) helical and bevel helical gearbox range.

"Globally, Sonia's vision recently resulted in Bonfiglioli opening its EVO plant in Bologna, the company's 1st Industry 4.0 manufactur-

ing facility, which further demonstrates her commitment to continuous investment in global operations for decades to come," adds Dos Santos. "Today, Bonfiglioli South Africa has a state-of-art facility with a considerably enlarged heavy duty helical, bevel helical and planetary assembly area equipped with up to date assembly and testing machinery. Our local design and engineering offices along with our well-developed service and repair centres are testament to the continual investment over the years. In line with the Bonfiglioli Group requirement we are proud to be accredited with the ISO 9001 certification," he tells *MechChem Africa*.

Following the retirement in 2018 of Robert Rohman as the MD of the South African subsidiary, Henco du Plooy was appointed to take over. "Henco has accumulated considerable experience in the growth and development of global Blue chip businesses across Africa. This experience is of considerable interest to our Italian shareholders, particularly

with respect to growing our African export market," notes Dos Santos. "His skill set, which embraces financial management in an equipment company servicing industry across South and Southern Africa, is ideal for our future needs," he adds.

Key to Bonfiglioli SA's ongoing growth and success, Dos Santos adds, is the retention of key staff. "Since our inception in 1991, we have managed to retain the skills of significant percentages of our highly trained staff. Out of a staff complement of over 80, more than 15 of our people have in excess of 20 years' service with Bonfiglioli South Africa, which has given us a stable and knowledgeable team and made the transfer of skills to newcomers so much easier.

"After 30 years of committed service, we are proud to be a respected name across South African industry. We have a very supportive global parent in Italy, a committed, skilled and experienced staff and a significant number of longstanding loyal clients," he concludes. □



Bonfiglioli's Industry 4.0 EVO Plant, with a production capacity of 800 000 units per year, is designed to be a zero net energy facility by generating more energy than needed from its 3.0 MWp photovoltaic plant.



Bonfiglioli South Africa has expanded its HD assembly area to cater for larger helical, bevel helical and planetary gearboxes.