

Reducing accidents by making the blind visible

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An innovative new illuminated cane could help reduce accidents by making blind and partially sighted people easier to see by road users and other pedestrians. The folding polycarbonate cane has been patented by a UK company and will be made in Hungary, in a co-development deal brokered by the IRC network.

Even the serious business of reducing accidents can have its funny moments. The deal to make VizCane® – a new product from UK-based Somerwood Ltd, was sealed in Hungary to the strains of Bach from a 1952 Wurlitzer organ.

Graham Hunter, Somerwood's managing director, remembers it as a somewhat 'surreal' experience. "I was toasting the deal with Hungarian spirit, and my IRC representative was playing this fantastic old cinema organ."

For János Gál, director of Ferrit-Elektro, the production of VizCane® represents both an opportunity and a challenge. "We had been looking for an innovative product with good marketing potential for a long time.

"VizCane® is a product that requires our development experience in both electronic and in mechanical engineering. Considering the number of blind and visually impaired people all over the world, and the marketing experience of Somerwood, the investment in development and in the enlargement of our production capacity seems to have a sound foundation," he adds.

Hard negotiations

It all came after some hard negotiations. Andrew Goldsbrough, from IRC East of England, accompanied Somerwood to the meeting at Ferrit-Elektro in Budapest, while IRC Hungary provided interpretation in addition to assisting their client.

Goldsbrough says he went along to provide moral and business support. He discovered that Gál was a fellow music-lover and an avid collector of antique instruments, with the Wurlitzer taking pride of place in his office. "I just could not resist it when Mr Gál asked if anyone could play," he recalls.

Graham and Leah Hunter came across the idea for VizCane® while visiting friends in Denmark. When an early prototype featuring lights on the handle was shown to them, they were so impressed with the idea that they invested their own money from the proceeds of a house sale to further the project's development.

"We immediately spotted the potential of this idea to change lives," says Leah Hunter. "Since beginning the development I have been given the chance to work with many blind and partially sighted people who have guided the project and given us helpful feedback. Really it has been built by these individuals, and we know that it will make a huge difference to the whole blind community."



VizCane: lighting the way to a safer future.

User-testing

This rigorous user-testing in association with a number of leading European organisations representing the blind and partially sighted has resulted in the current version of VizCane® - a

Success Story

polycarbonate folding stick with a rechargeable battery and a light source running its length.

From Ferrit-Elektro's point of view, the product represents a significant change of gear. Up to now they have made a broad range of electronic and mechanical engineering equipment. Their biggest customer is the Hungarian Ministry of Defence, but they also supply banks, filling stations telecommunication companies and canning factories.

Gál says that manufacturing VizCane® brings a number of completely new technologies to the company. "Working with high purity polycarbonate, high precision tube extrusions, and combining mechanical manufacturing with highly sensitive electronics has been the biggest challenge in the history of the company.

"VizCane® opens a new and promising market for Ferrit-Elektro. It is the base of a product family for the future," he adds.

IRC contribution

Gál pays tribute to the contribution of the IRC network. "They participated in the start of cooperation, helped the partners to understand each other and helped overcome several critical points during the preparation and signing of the contract."

During the development period two part-time jobs were created at Ferrit-Elektro, and they expect this to rise to between five and ten full-time posts once full production gets under way.

"According to our strategy, VizCane® and the product family will be the leading product of Ferrit-Elektro for a long time," says Gál.

Graham Hunter says the potential for the product is huge. "There are up to 10 million blind and partially-sighted people in Europe alone, and a similar number in North America.

"Thanks to Ferrit-Elektro's efforts we are well on the way to getting CE approval, which will allow the cane to be sold throughout Europe, and we are planning to start production within a matter of months," he adds.

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