

## BIGGEST GROWTH

## BTL Group, trading as Surpass Assessment



**W**hen Bob Gomersall first saw the potential of on-screen assessment it was an idea ahead of its time. But now decades later its time has arrived.

Today the company built by Mr Gomersall is a hugely successful technology provider with clients all over the world. BTL Group, trading as Surpass Assessment, is an international leader in the provision of computer-based testing technology for secure and high-stakes assessments. So far it has delivered more than 37 million tests.

The Saltaire-based company has won a series of local, national and international awards including the Queen's Award for Enterprise (Excellence in International Trade).

In 2021 it employed 169 people and had a turnover of £33 million – an 88 per cent increase on the previous year's figure of £17.7 million. It's a far cry from when physics teacher Bob Gomersall first came up with his fledgling idea.

"I started playing with on-screen assessments in 1978 – that was just about when desktop computers first appeared," he said. "So I immediately thought it was a good opportunity."

"I thought it would all happen very quickly but it didn't," he said. "I started with a thing called the Commodore PET which was one of the very first desktop computers."

He set up his company in 1985 but found he couldn't get a toe-hold on the market – so he started making audiometers for doctors.

"To begin with my father did the assembly and my mother did a lot of the packing and administration," he said.

He stayed in his teaching job until he had built the company up so that it was trading well and employing about 20 to 30 people. He finally gave up teaching in 1997.

As the company prospered it began to get international customers, and in 2015 it set up an American subsidiary in Philadelphia. Surpass was launched in around 2013/2014 – bringing Mr Gomersall's early idea to fruition.

"It came back to the original idea really," he said. "I had originally talked to a few awarding bodies but it was too early really, far too early. In a way it's still only just getting going. Most exams are on paper but the number doing them on-screen is growing quite rapidly now."

Mr Gomersall, who is Chair of the company, described the challenge he had faced at the very beginning.

"The main problem was getting people to understand what I was



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talking about really. I set up a company called Virtual College alongside – and it was the same with that.

"It's not easy. Now people have heard of e-learning – that's what it was – but at the time they found it quite hard to see what we were doing."

The services offered by Surpass came into their own during the Covid pandemic – and they were particularly important for some people, such as doctors, who needed to get their qualifications in order to start work.

"Nobody could do tests in test centres during Covid. So we had actually introduced what the Americans call remote proctoring – we call it online invigilation – which is basically where people do the exam either at the office or at home. You're set up with a camera and it's invigilated – there are various different ways of doing it," he said.

Mr Gomersall has no doubt about the reasons behind his company's success. He said: "We've just got some great people really, very good colleagues, very talented. We've been able to hire some people who are technically very talented and we do focus on providing a friendly, helpful service."

Now the company is focused on expanding and it plans to adopt AI – "a big challenge and a big opportunity" – in a responsible way.

"There are a lot of areas in education which are going to be – we think

– transformed by AI. We are just launching our first AI product at the moment. You've got to be moving fast in that area really," Mr Gomersall said. "It's going to be involved in what we call question generation. Helping to generate not the actual questions but accompaniments to the questions to begin with. We don't want to make it too risky too early."

As many experts speak out about the potential risks of AI Mr Gomersall agrees there are serious potential dangers.

"In my view it's likely to make the fake news thing a lot worse. It'll be able to fake all sorts of things and so people will have to learn what they can trust and what they can't trust. It's going to be very difficult to do. I do think that the national politicians are way, way, way behind the curve on this. As usual they are not getting ahead of it, which they should be doing."

"The next stage is more general artificial intelligence which is potentially very dangerous unless we have clear guidelines for what you can and can't do. At the moment we are just charging ahead really, so I think it is really important that they get their act together."

"I think Europeans and Americans are further down the line, but we seem to be way behind the curve on this. It really needs a worldwide approach so I hope that that's what's going to happen."

