INTO THE DEEP

The demand for ROVs has been steady throughout the uncertain markets of recent years. Omaira Gill reports on a company in the Gulf of Mexico that has continued to meet its targets and is innovating solutions to be a one-stop shop for ROVs – C-Innovation.

It’s a fact that where there are oil rigs, there are remotely operated underwater vehicles (ROVs). C-Innovation is one company that offers solutions for all aspects of ROV chartering, from construction to maintenance and repair.

The company is a member of the Edison Chouest Offshore group of companies (ECO) and was founded in 2007 to meet the growing demand for advanced ROV operations in the Gulf of Mexico. “It started when ECO wanted to add value to its existing fleet of vessels by installing ROVs on them. That was the initial goal and then we’ve expanded from there,” explained Mr Steven Thrasher, Technical Director at C-Innovation.

In early 2009, the company – with a few ROVs installed on Eco vessels – expanded into other markets, winning a major contract with Heerema Marine Contractors (HMC) of the Netherlands and effectively doubling its fleet overnight.

New multi-function construction and intervention vessel, Island Venture, being built for delivery early 2016.
Integrated ROV Solutions
The company’s main focus is ROV operation and support. “We’re trying to expand to offer more integrated services and increased tooling capabilities,” said Mr Thrasher. “We started off as more generic ROV support for Inspection Maintenance Repair (IMR) and anchor handling but have expanded into more drill support and construction over the last few years. We have always been focused on ROVs but we have found additional opportunities that connected to them, plus our clients are starting to expect additional offerings.”

This strategic growth has been achieved by making timely moves with the market, combined with C-Innovation’s staff of highly trained and experienced personnel, which includes 99 onshore personnel and around 463 offshore operators. The quality of its personnel has played a large role in C-Innovation’s success so far. Each member of staff is given thorough training in all aspects of their role that surpasses the industry standards, creating a workforce that is second to none.

“What we do very well is invest in our personnel with regards to ongoing training and it shows. Our operators tend to be top notch. I do believe that we have some of the best operators in the field.”

A Growing Fleet
In its seven years of existence, the company’s growth has been steady and its ROV count now numbers around 60. “We started out pretty slow with just a handful of ROVs. Then we had this hockey stick trajectory of growth where we doubled the fleet overnight,” said Mr Thrasher.

Despite launching one year before the global financial crisis truly set in, the company has come through relatively unscathed. That’s not to say there were not problems to be faced, including the Macondo incident. “That kind of stifled us,” explained...
Mr Thrasher. “We diversified somewhat with one of our contracts that took us outside the Gulf of Mexico – that kept us going. Since then, we’ve grown steadily, adding roughly ten ROVs per year.”

**Adaptation and Expansion**

Diversification has been a key factor in the continued success of C-Innovation and it offers ROVs that cover almost any need. “We have ROVs that are on charter specifically for IMR work, we have them on drill support, we have those that are involved with construction and installation, and we have intervention vessels that respond to issues as well.

“One of the areas in which we want to really expand our capabilities is quick response augmentation and custom tools. Everything that’s planned typically has a tool for it. It’s when things happen that aren’t supposed to, we want to increase our capabilities to be able to respond to those, quickly and reliably.”

Business has been helped by the fact that ECO is the parent company, meaning that existing relationships could be leveraged to get the word out about C-Innovation.

“We rely a lot on relationships and reputation in the market. That’s probably what’s helped us the most. Our parent company has been around for some time. It has port facilities, shipyards and a large fleet of vessels. All with great reputation. There was already an established market presence via our parent company so we can continue making contacts via those existing relationships as we venture subsea,” explained Mr Thrasher.

**Customers Count, not Shareholders**

Along with the high quality of staff, the structure with C-Innovation’s parent company also lends a strong competitive edge to the company. It is privately owned, meaning there are no shareholders to answer to, so when a situation arises, it can be responded to very quickly. “That adds a lot of value as a competitive advantage.”

With the company’s sights set on continuing its steady growth, it continuously seeks ways to make its ROVs more efficient; reducing downtime, increasing capabilities and integrating more services. “Besides just doing ROV work, we want to be able to develop technical solutions; we want to, overall, just be more efficient and capable,” affirmed Mr Thrasher.
Careful consideration is also given to the environment on each project. “A lot of major systems in the ROVs operate from oil, so we have to make sure that everything is environmentally friendly. We have an active training and maintenance programme to avoid spills etc. We aim to comply or exceed all local regulatory requirements.”

A Global Fleet
The company’s primary presence is in the Gulf of Mexico, with a significant portion of its fleet in Brazil. It also operates in the North Sea and has nine ROVs engaged with HMC which go where the company needs them to. This has given the company a presence in South East Asia, West Africa and Australia.

“I find, ultimately, you need to have coverage wherever you’re going to be working,” said Mr Thrasher. “For the fleet that we have in the Gulf of Mexico, our corporate location is an advantage. We have facilities in the North Sea and we have facilities in Brazil.”

Some disadvantages do still exist. When far-flung projects beckon, logistics become harder where facilities don’t already exist and more planning is needed. “That being said, we’ve done pretty well. We invest up front and go in prepared,” stated Mr Thrasher.

Managing through the Crisis
Mr Thrasher pointed out that the industry has come through the financial crisis relatively well as the ROV industry generally catches the tail end of a financial downturn.

“It takes a lot of planning in the way that subsea work is executed, so sometimes we don’t experience it when everybody else does.”

The plan for the future is to invest more in engineering and development, and building on existing relationships. “In the past, we relied heavily on our vendors and were pushing them for new technology and new solutions. We partnered with a few of them that do some things really well. We also want to develop more turnkey solutions.”

With this goal in the company’s sight, it is already well on its way, thanks to having recently won a contract with BP to install ROVs on Thunderhorse, entering a joint venture with FMC called FMC Technologies Offshore (FTO) as well as multiple intervention vessels coming out in 2015.