

Solar as a full energy solution

We welcome two new faces from Solis Inverters in this issue of PES. Sean Collier is the company's new Country Manager for the UK & Ireland, and Matt McCrimmond has joined as a Product Solutions Specialist, with rather a special brief. We were intrigued to find out more.

PES: Welcome to you both. We have previously featured Solis Inverters in our Ask the Experts section and many of our readers will be familiar with the company, but could you give a brief overview for anyone new to the brand?

Sean Collier: Solis is the primary brand of Ginlong Technologies, which is one of the world's largest and most experienced producers of PV inverters. We use string inverter technology to deliver a first-class level of reliability that has been validated under stringent international certifications.

Our product offer is unique in that it ranges from 600W right up to 350kW. This presents a Solis solution for every situation, from small balcony systems and new build residential properties, commercial properties up to utility-scale solar projects. As a 17-year veteran of the solar industry, it's exciting to be joining Solis Inverters as the new UK & Ireland Country Manager.

PES: The continuing rise in energy prices and instability must still be affecting business since we last spoke? With Solis, what are the major impacts you've noticed since you joined?

SC: Across the industry, the very high energy prices caused by a number of factors have pushed more people to consider solar on all levels, residential and commercial. There was an element of the industry that was unprepared for the speed of take up and change. Increased demand has put the supply chain under enormous pressure, including suppliers, installers and pretty much everybody in between.

Over the past four or five years, we've seen



Sean Collier

positive, sustainable growth, but over the past 18 months this has been unsustainable. This has inevitably had an impact on the industry's ability to keep pace in terms of people available to support installers. The skills shortage is a big factor universally, not just in the solar sector. As a relatively new industry, there is a lack of qualified workers and a general lack of awareness among job seekers.

PES: While it's hugely encouraging news that more people and businesses are moving towards solar energy; this must present challenges. What difficult tasks are you seeing in the solar industry as a whole, and at Solis in particular?

Matt McCrimmond: Joining Solis from a distributor background at CCL Components,



Matt McCrimmond

I've seen first-hand the challenges that logistical and supply problems had onsite, especially as demand has gone through the roof. Since lockdowns have lifted, the major supply chain issues have largely eased. What we now see is a backlog on service rather than products.

It seems that every installation is becoming a full energy solution. As people become more used to solar energy, they want to do more. They're looking beyond just installing solar panels and an inverter and are adding extra elements, like battery storage and are thinking of exporting energy.

The availability of real-time monitoring means that people and businesses are looking at their energy generation and usage constantly.



When people have a bit of knowledge, they have questions. The problem is knowing where to direct these questions and having sufficient skills within the supply chain to answer them.

SC: It's not an unusual problem in a high growth industry. Even now, people with solar panels on their residential or commercial properties are still pretty much 'early adopters'. They have installed solar power because they are interested in it and, naturally, are curious about what it can give them. I'm not sure the industry is quite geared up to deal with this explosion in consumer interest and questions.

PES: That's an interesting problem to have, and understandable in a high-growth, relatively new industry like solar, what solutions are available or are you working on an entirely new approach?

MM: The challenge for the industry as I see it lies in keeping the UK market alive with good quality products and good service, and that ranges from installation to customer support, i.e., answering customer questions. Sometimes these can be a bit off the wall, especially when they come about from someone looking at their smart monitor! Sometimes they are a bit outside the remit of the supplier's service desk.

At Solis we are proactively working on ways to educate distributors and installers to head off some of these questions which can cause bottlenecks in service desks and impact the customer experience. We have a lab in Liverpool where distributors and installers can get hands-on experience of our products and see the battery systems. We're looking at training days where installers and distributors can send their teams and they can get answers to the types of questions they might be asked. Some areas of the UK, like the south east, have an especially acute staffing challenge; which industry bodies such as SEUK and the MCS are addressing with initiatives like Solar Skills London.

SC: The industry saw a similar boom when the feed-in tariff scheme was introduced. As an industry, I'd say solar and renewable energy in general has proved to be incredibly agile and resilient. There are always going to be challenges and innovative ways of addressing them. That's why, when we see a challenge like a shortage of skilled service engineers to meet the waves of support requests from customers, we have to look for new ways to address it. Solis is very much prioritising the highest-level of support for customers of our products and services with innovative solutions.

PES: You're suggesting more training, not just for installers and distributors, but also to educate consumers?

SC: Yes, we'd certainly like there to be more awareness among consumers of what solar is and can do for them. But in the longer term, I think these questions will go away as solar power becomes just an accepted part of everyone's lives, not just the early adopters. Until then, Solis as a brand and company is actively trying to solve issues by being as proactive as possible with some exciting initiatives, like our hands-on lab and hiring highly skilled knowledgeable people in our technical support teams.

MM: At some point, having solar power will be a bit like having a car. While you have a general idea how it works, when it breaks down you call in the right people to fix it. You don't call your garage and ask how you can make it brake more smoothly or the optimal temperature for the aircon.

That said, it's completely understandable to be more interested in how your household uses energy when you're producing it yourself. Personally, I'd like to see more education around solar by looking at your own lifestyle; taking advantage of your own energy generation to run your washing machine, for example. One of the biggest attractions for me is that, in our industry, we are able to pioneer this.



PES: What about government intervention, would that help?

SC: As I mentioned, the solar industry has proved itself to be very resilient when it comes to overcoming barriers. The businesses involved obviously have a vested interest in fixing problems. The skills shortage is fixable, especially as the sector and people's awareness

of solar matures. There's existing regulation for electrical wiring installation in the 18th Edition. Having lived through feed-in tariff intervention, I'd personally like to see the industry self-regulate in a transparent way while it matures.

PES: Finally, if you were granted one wish to overcome barriers to achieving net zero, what would you wish for?

SC: While we don't want the cost of energy to increase because of the social impact this is having, it is helping accelerate energy decarbonisation. I think we have to unlock the barriers around grid access, not so much at a residential level but in commercial and utility-scale generation. Approvals for getting grid access from ground-mounted, large-scale and commercial rooftop solar plants take a very long time and are slowing down the transition. The solution for this won't come from one corner of the industry. It's something that is going to take collaboration across multiple parts of the energy sector. But I believe it will happen. Potentially creating another wave, which of course the solar industry will weather - we're used to this sort of thing.

Solis has been very successful over recent years, especially in the UK, and we are looking at more ways to increase our voice and deliver excellent customer service. Key to this is our relationship with the installers of our products. With Matt on board and Ken Jones, our Service Team Manager for Solis EMEA, we are looking to improve our services through proactive initiatives and hiring more technical support engineers to bolster our support teams.

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