



**From Reggio Emilia Valley to the conquer of the world.
Interview with Enrico Grassi, President of Elettric80 & BEMA**



President Grassi, you established Elettric80 back in 1980, before you turned 22. This is how your commendable career started. Do you remember how it all began?

“My dream was to establish an enterprising company: my meeting with Vittorio Cavirani, a great technician and currently our General Manager who soon became a good friend, enabled me to turn my dream into reality. We started off 38 years ago in Viano, a hamlet placed in a valley at the foot of the Reggio Emilia Apennines, where we founded Elettric80. At that time there were only five of us - we were all in our early 20s - and our company mainly worked under contract. Later, in the 90s, we took our first leap when we decided to bet on mechatronics and designed a new branded product: the first automatic laser guided vehicles (*Laser Guided Vehicles*). A few years later, we established BEMA, the second company based in Viano, of which I am President, specialising in the manufacture of products that perfectly complete the Elettric80 value chain. The two companies have continued to progress ever since and they have become two of the world’s leaders in the engineering and manufacture of systems and solutions that integrate processes from production through warehousing to the market, especially in the field of fast-moving *food, beverage and tissue* consumer goods. If I think back to the beginning of this journey, I must admit I could not possibly imagine we would come this far. Of course, I had a vision I believed in right from the beginning. Over the years I was fortunate to meet many valuable people who have shared and supported this vision with me.



And the market did the rest, giving us the confirmations we needed”.

Starting from software development, Elettric80 has now become a world leader in industrial automation for the integration of production processes. A passion for robotics that rewarded you...

“When I was a child, I always thought I would be an explorer or an

inventor. I can still remember that, when I was 14, I disassembled my family’s TV set to see how it worked. I was charmed by the mechanisms fitted in that box. When I put all the pieces back together, under my father’s incredulous eyes, the TV would switch on and off perfectly. I was destined to establish an electrotechnical company and, after my encounter with Vittorio Cavirani, it was converted into a mechatronic and software business. This vision is still rewarding us today. When we started off in this industry, competitors were not able to understand our visionary and revolutionary technology: it was our fortune! We could move on to create something unprecedented that would later transform - step by step and mixing technology and competences - the integrated logistics system inside factories that produce fast-moving consumer goods”.

You have walked a long way - from the first handling systems with integrated laser guided forklifts operating 24/24 to the modern palletization robots. What does Elettric80 offer its clients today?

“We do not offer our clients a single product, but rather *tailor made*, scalable, modular and efficient solutions. Our aim is to provide clients with an over-time service that can quickly respond to their needs and the market



changes. It is essential to dominate technology now, more than ever before.

To this end, we engineer increasingly evolved systems based on the application requirements of our clients: palletization robots, laser guided vehicles, high speed shrink-wrapper robots, depalletizers, pallet control systems, automated labelling machines, flexible and intensive warehouses depending on the need, and picking and repacking systems. All these products have one, and one only core: the software platform designed and manufactured by Elettric80, SM.I.LE80 (*Smart Integrated Logistics*), which create a direct “connection”, like an orchestra director, between production processes and our products until the market, ensuring real-time traceability from raw material receiving up to finished product shipment”.

What makes you different from the other companies?

“Our aim is to grow together with our clients, to integrate technologies and competences, but above all objectives and visions. Our solutions cover the entire value chain because they enhance the reliability and safety of the entire plant as well as of the entire business life cycle by significantly reducing spaces, as is the case with the *green field*. This is why we introduced a new concept in both companies: total integration of products and services, which causes a shift in focus from “line efficiency” to “factory efficiency” using and exploiting the warehouse in a dynamic manner at its full saturation, thus offering the market quality and prompt deliveries. This has really made a difference. The companies that have understood this concept have selected us as their partners. At present, Elettric80 and BEMA have a unique know-how, which is exclusive both software- and hardware-wise. We offer service and support to our clients remotely (24/7) and locally, thus maximising the efficiency of the plant life cycle”.

Research and development are two segments requiring constant investments: this is something you have always paid attention to ...

“We listened to the market needs carefully and this enabled us to be pioneers in what is on everyone’s lips today: *Industry 4.0*. We implemented the first fully integrated factory in 1992 in Caldonazzo (Trento) at Costerplast (Coster Group), a company manufacturing high precision plastic caps/lids for the pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries. In the next few years our technology was adopted in all the other factories of the Group.

How did we make it? We dared to continue investing in research and development. And we did that not only to promote technological innovations: we gave value to people and their skills by establishing collaborations with schools, universities and research centres, both nationally and internationally. In other words, **we never stopped having confidence in young people**. Many engineers and researchers work in our R&D departments where they create new products and services to increase our competitiveness.

Research and development mean the following to our companies: to make every-day investments to go beyond what is obvious and to figure out what is still to be invented. I always say that **future is paced by the passing of time and the amount of valuable ideas that we manage to implement: it is far better to handle the imperfection of success than to suffer the success of others. It is a constant search for significant and uncommon solutions to punctually amaze the market”**.

Your ideas have contributed to converting the Viano valley into the city of mechatronics, giving locals a chance and a job in a hilly area which may have otherwise suffered depopulation. You have almost seven hundred employees and many of them are young people. Where and how do you scout talents to hire for your company?

“The territory is a remarkable leverage. It is an inner force that stimulates growth. This conviction helped us move forward, being aware of the value we have for the people who live in this territory. We have pursued significant achievements starting from here, a few metres away from the place where I was born. We have always been committed to the enhancement and requalification of our territory - more than that of the world -, offering a job and a growth opportunity to many people who live in this valley and in nearby areas. As proof of our local commitment, we have established relationships with schools, collaborations with the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the University of Parma, and we give support to many social and sports events. It is no coincidence that the company is a dream to many young people, a source of inspiration for their professional career and life as well: their future, in other words. Many people have moved here with their families from nearby villages and other parts of Italy and foreign countries. We are painting a frameless drawing which everybody can contribute to”.



Your unstoppable expansion suggests that you will hire new staff soon. Which are the professional profiles you are mostly interested in?

“We are aware that technology is not enough to grow: a vision, passion and the spirit of innovation are also essential. This is what we are looking for: smart young people who can work methodically. Newly graduated engineers, but also technicians, who are willing to travel and to learn, are flexible and strongly motivated. For instance, in Krakow, Poland, we have been collaborating with the local university for ten years now and we have created a large technical-engineering hub which grows day after day and supports our initiatives worldwide. We are doing the same in Monterey, Mexico, where we have established synergies with the universities to train young qualified people. Talent is everywhere! You just need to find it, recognise it and help it to grow. The concept of *brain circulation* everybody is talking about is something we have been supporting for years now: our two companies employ almost 700 people who have different nationalities and different skills. In our company, a person has the opportunity to come across excellence, as nowhere

else found, to be part of an important team and to compete at international level”.

There is a video interview on the company website in which you address young people and your employees to teach them about the “abolition” rule. What is this rule about?

“The rule requires that people abolish the following three feelings: envy, hypocrisy and indifference, and open their hearts to love ... love for their job”. Love is, indeed, the lifeblood of other essential values: love entails commitment, respect, responsibility, confidence, sharing objectives and results, team work and openness to change Change is far more successful when based on love rather than affliction”.

You have many subsidiaries abroad. What is the share of exports in your global sales and which are the most receptive countries for your technologies?

“In addition to its headquarters in Viano, Elettric80 has opened subsidiaries in Australia, Brazil, Chile, the United Arab Emirates, France, the UK, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Sweden and the USA. We export our technology all over the world in collaboration with BEMA. We started exporting in 1994 and the first country was the United States. I thought that making it in the country of the masters of the world would enable us to take a huge leap. I was right!



We now have over 75 employees in Chicago with total sales equalling 50% of the company turnover. Step by step, we opened up other subsidiaries based on careful examination of the market trends and with the ultimate goal of being close to our customers. In 2007 we started a collaboration with Tetra Pak worldwide. Talking about figures: so far, we have installed over 1700 robot systems and 4300 *Laser Guided Vehicles*, working with multinational corporations in all continents. It is no surprise that most of our turnover - almost 90% - is generated by exports, notably in the countries belonging to the NAFTA area. We are about to open a subsidiary in Asia this year”.

2017 has just finished: can you give us some updates in figures?

“2017 has been a very significant year because we have received many confirmations: in Germany, for instance, by both existing and new clients who visited the two international exhibitions we attended - Interpack and Drinktec. At the end of October we also attended the *Gulfood Manufacturing* exhibition in Dubai where we won the *Gulfood Manufacturing Industry Excellence Awards* as best company in the *Greenfield Facility* category. This was a worldwide recognition of our ability to innovate in the field of production process integration. The year that has just come to an end was highly challenging, but rich with great success stories, as witnessed by the figures we have achieved. From 2016 to 2017 the turnover of the two companies together went from 150 million to over 240 million Euro. A significant internal growth, supported by remarkable investments primarily made on people - in less than one year our staff rose from 600 to 700 units”.

What are your future projects?

“The year 2018 has started at full speed: we have already won a portfolio of orders totalling over 250 million Euro. Our business plan until 2021 is to hit a target turnover exceeding 350 million Euro and to hire a total of 100 new employees for all our subsidiaries. To achieve this goal, we have to be brave and continue investing in order to amaze the market with our technology. The year that has just began will be a turning point: besides the total turnover generated by our clients in the past year, which has more than doubled with respect to 2016, we will have to work out a new internal organisation so as to provide the quality level that has always distinguished our company. **We can no longer change the past, we can do little with the present, but our impact on the future can be great: this is why we have to grow strong, quick and flexible, always thinking that we still have much work to do ahead”.**

Two final considerations. What is your answer to people who blame new technologies to be the cause of job loss by many workers?

“My answer is facts: enterprises that have believed in innovation and have invested in the development of new competences and on competitive products, of any type whatsoever, always need people, maybe with different profiles, but they do need people. In companies, manual operations are progressively disappearing - I am talking about repetitive operations which are sometimes hazardous and people do not do with passion. At present, any large fast-moving consumer goods producer should automate all repetitive operations and generate pervasive innovation, affecting machinery and people, otherwise it will lose competitiveness. In other words, automation by its nature does not reduce jobs, but it is progressively changing the way we work and the way we think and design our future, emphasising people’s skills more than ever before. Digital skills, communication and relationship-building skills, creative and analysis skills will make a difference. We are faced with the fourth industrial revolution, an epoch-making transformation where knowledge is tied to being able to do things. Businesses that have understood this are investing on other types of competences and they are betting on jobs where past experience and future vision are combined and shared”.

Your story is really astonishing and continues to be an example for many young people whose dream is to build an entrepreneurial future. Any suggestions you would like to give them?

“First of all, believe in your dreams, invest on yourselves, listen to your heart, but do so always keeping an eye on market evolution. This is the lesson I have learnt: you have to be there and you have to be able to

select partners whose ideas are so strong to surprise you, partners to share a path and a project with. This requires getting involved and exposed on a daily basis, enhancing your competences, travelling, observing the world around us, and communicating with people from different cultures because - this is something we have to keep in mind - we are primarily citizens of the world. **Anyone willing to do business has to be a visionary, a passionate, humble, brave and imagination-inspired person. Do not waste your time with other people' defects if you are not able to understand their virtues: this does make the difference if you want to build a successful business".**