

On the boulevard...

Living on St Kilda Road ...Russell Mortimer

As an engineer and CEO of QA Software, St Kilda Road resident Russell Mortimer is in good company, as the boulevard is now home to several companies in related fields, including Abi Group and Australand.

For a man who created his own software company with global reach – QA Software, one of the leading suppliers of software solutions to the construction and engineering industries – access to computers was for Russell Mortimer once a distant reality.

While still a mechanical engineering student in 1970s Sri Lanka, Russell took on a computer programming course; but where nowadays computer access is largely taken for granted, during this time, Russell's experience of computers was entirely abstract.

"They had two computers in Sri Lanka then – one of them was in a bank, and the other at the engineers' institution. Computers used to be locked away in climate-controlled rooms, people would remove their shoes before entering so as not to bring in dirt. As students, we would write a program, which would then be posted off so it could be run and tested. It would come back marked up 'bug here, bug here', and we would have to correct the code and post it off again," said Russell.

Russell has witnessed closely the shift in focus from hardware to software over the years, and speaks of evidence of another shift shaping the way many software companies are doing business.

The phrase 'necessity is the mother of all invention' conjures images of devising a tool for survival in harsh terrain, or solutions to solve complex and seemingly insurmountable problems: entirely appropriate when considering the creation of QA Software, a leading provider of Software as a Service solutions (SaaS) to the construction and

engineering industries.

The brainchild of Russell and Steven Joustra – now the company's CEO and General Manager of International Operations respectively – QA Software was designed to address gaps in the market.

An engineer with 20 years' industry experience, Russell found himself time and again reinventing the wheel on complicated engineering and construction problems.

"At the time there was a dearth of software solutions for engineering and construction companies. On almost every project we worked, each time we had to invent some makeshift software combined with manual methods to achieve our aims.

"We realised there would be real business in doing this properly by setting up some well thought-through and tailored generic solutions that could be implemented within minutes. It was a joint idea between Steven and myself, neither one could have gone it alone," said Russell.

With minimal start-up costs, armed with decades of engineering experience, market research and a desire to implement solutions for future engineering projects, QA Software took off on its 1994 launch.

"It was an instant hit – several projects in Melbourne adopted the solutions almost immediately," said Russell.

Within 12 months, QA Software's first clients were some of the biggest names in engineering and construction – namely Grocon, Transfield, Baulderstone, Hornibrook and Clough Engineering – and the company provided workable software solutions to some of Victoria's largest construction undertakings, including Crown Casino, Etihad Stadium and Melbourne CityLink.

Russell reveals that the only real challenge to the viability of the



company in the early days was predicated on its popularity and customers' desire for development into wider application, not on a lack of take up.

"The challenge was to service clients effectively, while not indulging in taking up new clients that were knocking on our door who found out about our service through word of mouth. We decided to put our energy into what we had, then expand if we had the time and resources. It was a considered beginning," said Russell.

Within two years, QA Software was an international company, though Russell points out, "We didn't so much expand globally as have other companies from all over the world find us on the internet, download our products, trial and purchase them."

What sets Russell apart from others providing a similar service is demonstrable industry experience:

document control is only a small part of what QA Software has to offer. When Russell speaks of 'our industry', he is referring to engineering, construction and software together.

"Our difference is that we came from the industry that we're servicing – we're not coming from a purely software background," said Russell. "We understand exactly what is required of them, we have worked in that industry for 20 years, we lived through their pains. That has always been our edge over the competition, both in developing the software and in talking to the client subsequently."

Along with business partner Steven, Russell today manages an organisation of 75 staff with offices in London, Colombo, Dallas and Melbourne.