

News

SUPPLIERS: How Maestro is navigating through the COVID crisis



A panel organized by Maestro Digital Mine at this year's PDAC was moderated by TVO journalist Steve Paiken (middle, back row). Credit: Maestro Digital Mine

When the COVID-19 crisis started to ramp up globally in March, Michael Gibbons, cofounder of Lively, Ont.-based Maestro Digital Mine, spent hours each day trying to learn as much as possible about the novel coronavirus and get a sense of its big picture implications.

“The safety of the miners both nationally and globally is of utter critical importance to us, it’s really our key purpose,” said Gribbons, who’s also the company’s vice-president of marketing and sales. “So we have to remain open, there’s no other way.”

Maestro makes environmental sensors, as well as easy-to-install hardware that allows digital communications at the mine face. Its products are aimed at improving both safety and productivity in underground mines. As an Ontario-based supplier to the mining sector, the company operates as an essential service and has been exempted from province-mandated closures of non-essential businesses that started Mar. 24.

At the start of the crisis, the company put a leadership team and plan in place to ensure that first, the team and their family members stayed healthy, and second, the company remained financially healthy. (With David Ballantyne, Maestro’s cofounder and vice-president of development and technology, having a spouse and two daughters working in the health care system, the fight against COVID-19 is personal.)

It also secured a supply of electronic sub-components for a complete year’s worth of manufacturing.

Of critical importance, the company reached out to their clients and partners around the world early on and has remained in contact with them as the crisis has developed. That’s increased confidence that the company is able to continue supporting clients.

Fortunately, business hasn’t suffered much for the Sudbury-area company so far, although that could change if more mines are ordered into extended shutdowns.

“We are still getting the same amount of business as we were last year believe it or not, so our growth rate is not extremely big, but we’ve maintained at least the same revenue stream that we did last year,” Gribbons says.

That said, the company has had to make adjustments. “The first thing was taking all of our non-production based members and getting them working from home,” Gribbons said.

Several key members of the management team, including Gribbons, already worked remotely routinely, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch to extend remote access through VPNs and VOIP technology to the rest of the staff. The transition was completed in about three days, and it’s helped the company adhere to its motto “leave no one stranded” through a challenging time.

“Thankfully, a lot of this stuff had already been installed,” says Maestro’s marketing director, Shannon Katary. “You’re dealing with businesses around the world, different time lines, different time zones, so you have to be as flexible as possible. So it’s just taking those tools and utilizing them for the COVID-19 situation.”

With only about 30% of its staff (which is about 25 strong) going into the office to maintain production of Maestro products, such as its Vigilante Air Quality Station and its Plexus PowerNet communications hardware, Gribbons says it hasn’t been difficult to meet physical distancing requirements.

“We’ve also taken parts of our engineering team and put them into production, and the reason for that was improving critical deliveries to mines,” he says.

Exposing the engineering team to the production line has yielded unexpected benefits.

“They’ve had ideas on how to improve and automate parts of production,” Gribbons says. “So now we will be able to increase production rates.”

A practice that predated COVID-19 and that has continued is a “daily huddle” – a 15-minute meeting where each team member shares what they committed to completing yesterday and what they’re committed to completing that day. Intended to give immediate accountability and visibility to what everyone is doing, and to foster a team mindset, the meetings now provide an added opportunity to communicate about COVID-19.

Now, the management team also shares information about the local COVID-19 situation, reinforces distancing and hygiene practices, and also takes the opportunity to acknowledge when employees put in extra effort – something that Katary and Gribbons say is happening a lot because of the strong company culture at Maestro.

“People started stepping up to do jobs that weren’t necessarily their traditional roles and taking on new ways of adapting to their workload. It was extraordinary – you didn’t have to ask them to do it,” Katary said.

While keeping up with the fast-changing situation of the pandemic can be tiring, Katary says that for her personally, taking care of the important people in her life like her 79-year-old father and his friends through simple things like helping out with grocery runs, has energized her.

“Those acts of kindness are definitely rippled in my life and I take that energy into what I do in my job and it keeps me good, it keeps me grounded.”

The benefits of disruption

In addition to disruption, crises can bring positive, long-lasting changes, and Katary says this one is underlining the importance of the mining sector’s ongoing implementation of digital technologies.

“This crisis has forced companies to realize how important it is to make sure that they can get their data in real time – there is no room for delay now,” Katary says.

With the crisis propelling the digital enabling technology that Maestro and other tech companies provide, miners can clearly see the value they provide – and how that technology fits into their plan for the future.

“Crisis brings opportunity and if you’re willing to see that, when things return back to some form of normalcy... you could see companies that have done the right planning launch into the next level.”

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