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NEWS&VIEWS

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Stratophase Doubles Capacity at New Premises

Following substantially increased interest in its SpectroSens optical microchip platform technology, Stratophase - a specialist in real-time chemical and biochemical measurement and detection - has doubled its sensor chip manufacturing capability and moved to a larger site. Three times larger than the old building, Stratophase's new facility has been fitted with offices, meeting rooms and high tech laboratory space, and has the capacity to expand further with minimal disruption.

Bringing together proven science from the telecoms, optics and biotech industries, the SpectroSens technology is being developed for a number of applications in industrial process measurement and biodetection. The new facility means that Stratophase can more easily respond to different application requirements, by expanding the facilities for implementing and testing new optical measurement techniques on its sensor chips, as well as the systems required to use these chips. New high-tech lab space includes a dedicated Category 2 Biological Containment Laboratory and a Customer Applications Laboratory. The new labs allow Stratophase to functionalise immunoassays on sensor chips for biodetection applications, as well as test monitoring systems for industrial processing applications such as biorefining and the production of biofuels, pharmaceuticals and fine chemicals.

"Over the last few years, Stratophase has been successfully applying its platform sensing technology in a range of markets" said Dr Richard Williams, Stratophase's CEO. "Our new facilities give us the infrastructure required to develop core IP, as well as space for the application and product development activities required to service nearer-term customer requirements. Hand-in-hand with the new facilities, we are undertaking a significant recruitment drive to support and manage this growth."

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Industry reports

Growing performance gap in the UK Scientific & Laboratory Equipment industry

There is a real mixed bag of company performance in the UK Scientific & Laboratory Equipment industry at the moment. New research from market analysts Plimsoll indicates that with 80 companies in trouble, 377 others powering ahead and a further 102 set to be taken over, the market has never been more fragmented.

David Pattison, author of the new Plimsoll Analysis - Scientific & Laboratory Equipment explains, "Having rated 80 struggling companies as Danger and given 377 others a Strong rating, I am surprised at the gulf in performance in the market. Despite all other factors, success still comes down to how well a company is run"

When pressed on what the consequences of this polarisation in the market will be, Pattison's response is emphatic, "Acquisitions. The market, in the current economic climate cannot support this many companies. There has to be further, more radical consolidation in the market. Strong companies will be buying up distressed competitors in the next 12 months".

Plimsoll analysed the top 683 companies in the market and the following is a regional breakdown of how many have been rated as Strong, Danger and/or exposed to takeover by region, in the new Plimsoll Analysis:

East Midlands	40	5	24	3
Essex	86	8	60	9
North East	18	4	6	4
North West / North Wales	84	10	49	11
Northern Home Counties	74	9	36	14
Northern Ireland	8	0	4	1
Preston Conurbation	4	0	3	0
Scotland	28	4	17	5
South East	31	3	17	6
South East Midlands	41	4	20	5
South Wales	5	1	2	1
South West	38	7	22	9
Southern Home Counties	91	11	50	15
Thames Valley	76	8	41	9
West Midlands	25	3	14	3
Yorkshire	34	3	12	7

It gives an instant performance rating on 683 companies and highlights those ripe for acquisition. Each company is assessed using the Plimsoll Model - A graphical and written analysis that lays bare the facts and gives you instant opinion.

Readers of International Labmate/ Labmate UK & Ireland are entitled to a £50 discount of this new special edition of the Plimsoll Industry Analysis – Scientific & Laboratory Equipment. Call 01642 626400 for further details and quote reference PR/PC40.

The Forum of Private Business has voiced opposition at plans to abolish the default retirement age following the Governments' announcement that it intended to press ahead with the previous administration's plans to remove an employer's option to retire staff at the age of 65.

If the proposal goes ahead, businesses could be forced to start keeping on staff indefinitely in little over a year's time which could prove highly damaging to thousands of small firms, the The Forum believes. Currently, there is nothing to stop an employee working on past 65, providing his or her employer agrees to it.

Many businesses are well aware of the skills and experience older workers provide and are happy to maintain their employment. However, if the default retirement age is scrapped, business owners will be forced to keep on workers past the age of 65, whether they want to or not. This, the FPB believes, will prove a huge problem for thousands of small firms, hampering their abilities to plan for the future. The move could also open the door to costly and painful employment tribunals, as an employers' only means of ending employment will be through a 'capability dismissal' based on the declining competence of the worker.

In recent survey, just 4% of Forum members felt removing the default retirement age was justifiable.

FPB spokesman Chris Gorman said: "We are by no means disputing the valuable skills and experience older people bring to the workplace. Many small businesses are happy to keep on members of staff well into their late 60s and 70s – indeed, many Forum members themselves are well over 65.

"However, removal of the default retirement age will cripple some small businesses by removing the tools that help them to plan for the future. Most employees are certainly competent enough to work beyond the age of 65 without a significant deterioration in their abilities. However, for those employees not willing to leave voluntarily, there will eventually come a time when the needs of the business will have to be considered.

In the absence of a default retirement age, the only viable option available to an employer is a capability dismissal based on the declining competence of the worker. We believe this would be an undignified and humiliating end to a career for most staff."

Forum member Stuart Mitchell, of Derbyshire-based Machine Building Systems Ltd, agrees.

"What this proposal will do is to force employers into a situation where they have to spend huge amounts of time taking older employees through a disciplinary process in order to end their employment. Many an employer has allowed someone a dignified retirement because although they were not really up to the job any more, it was only a matter of waiting a few months or a year, and the problem would resolve itself happily.

"Once this rule comes in, that will be pointless and they might as well start the unpleasant and costly disciplinary process straight away as it will be inevitable at some stage. What effect will huge numbers of these disciplinary proceedings have on the morale of the other employees? Never mind that of the boss who does not enjoy the process any more than anyone else. Employers are people too, and their morale is of vital importance. To deliberately and knowingly set up avoidable conflicts, is a stupid way to govern," he added.

The Forum set out its views on the issue in response to a Government consultation in February, emphasising the need for small firms to be able to plan ahead, especially during times of economic uncertainty. The Forum also pointed out that just last year, the Government defended the default retirement age in the High Court, arguing that it brings numerous social benefits.

There has also been criticism voiced over reports that a controversial tax on private parking spaces is set to be extended. It is thought that councils across the UK plan to introduce a workplace parking levy (WPL) scheme, which will see businesses being taxed on parking provisions they provide for staff.

The Forum of Private Business is deeply opposed to the scheme and believes it will provoke fury among business owners, who could be forced to pay tens of thousands of pounds each year simply for providing their employees with somewhere to park their cars.

Spokesman Chris Gorman said: "When the Nottingham WPL scheme was given the go-ahead last year, we said at the time that it would only be a matter of time before it spread to other towns and cities. Sadly, it appears those fears will soon be realised.

"In our view, and in the view of our members, it's simply a stealth tax which will have a disproportionate impact on small businesses. It's the equivalent of charging homeowners to park on their own driveways and will increase parking problems in town centres and cities.Businesses already contribute enormous amounts to public services through existing taxes such as business rates. Whatever its supposed justifications, the danger is that the WPL could open the floodgates to a raft of new taxes and charges being levied onto companies to pay for things which were previously paid for through general taxation. And while councils' finances are under pressure, this is a very short-sighted idea as companies are likely to avoid areas with a WPL scheme in operation, meaning jobs, investment and therefore tax revenue will end up elsewhere."

Mr Gorman added: "This proposal comes as small businesses are battling with economic uncertainty, public spending cuts and worrying levels of inflation. We would urge any businesses whose local authorities are considering implementing a WPL scheme to oppose it in every way they can."

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