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- Uniguest - Brave New Era at Truist Park
- Whitwam AV Integration - Westminster Abbey, Coronation of King Charles III

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MAGAZINE

August/September 2023 www.avinteractive.com

FERRARI WORLD GETS INTO TOP GEAR

Cutting-edge AV equipment drives
Abu Dhabi's newest roller coaster

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PHOTOS: FERRARI WORLD ABU DHABI

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PHOTOS: FERRARI WORLD ABU DHABI

Setting the bar

As the Covid-19 pandemic rolled around the world disrupting lives and business plans, there were many critical decisions made by Biamp's CEO, Rashid Skaf. **Phil Ward** pays witness to an assured handling of a crisis – any crisis.

Everyone's been back in Biamp's offices for two years, and the disruption caused by the pandemic effectively rippled for only one quarter of one year. Rumours of the end of the world had been greatly exaggerated. Furthermore, the subsequent supply chain crisis has barely affected Biamp at all, thanks to judicious planning and determined leadership. It looks like if you want to ride out the really big waves, you need people like president, CEO and co-chairman Rashid Skaf and his team at the helm.

As if to hammer fresh nails into the 'Business as Usual' sign on the front door, in April Biamp received two Red Dot Design Awards – a global competition with around 20,000 submissions from 60 countries – for the Parlé Video & Audio Conferencing Bars and the Voltera line of power amplifiers. The Parlé VBC 2500 features Biamp Audio Intelligence (and Biamp Video Intelligence), which is both an AI hook and a neat summation of how things are done around here.

Launch pad

When *AV Magazine* last spoke to Biamp five years ago, Skaf and his business partner, Joe Andrusis – now executive vice-president of corporate development – had just bought the company. No one could have predicted what came next.

"As we went through the pandemic, I would say we handled it a little differently," recounts Skaf.

"Essentially, we never stopped working. Joe and I were flying from Dallas to Portland on a weekly basis, and I have photos of the two of us flying alone on an American Airlines plane – we were the last passengers heading home in March 2020. Quite frankly, we didn't know what was going to happen. We talked about a Plan B if the airlines shut down. Could we get a car, would there be gas stations open? Motels? It was an interesting time...

"We decided early on that we would take pause, like the whole world did. We didn't know what was going to happen, how long it was going to be... we had to try to understand these new surroundings. However, we never once shut down our factory. It remained in operation throughout the whole period. We were able to look at it like any other crisis. You have a downturn, but then you have an upswing. This enabled us, as a management team, to avoid letting a single person go. We did not

terminate a single employee's job."

Skaf and his management team wasted no time betting on whether the market would come back to normal – only on the timing of when it would come back to normal. Leadership with this kind of experience has been through other crises in the past and has learned how to navigate them. "Of course, not everyone approached it that way," continues Skaf. "People held back, they terminated employment, they shut down transport and infrastructure. They also closed factories that made chips, mines that produced materials... and yet people are surprised that, as we came out of it, there's a supply chain issue. Furthermore, there's a manpower issue because so many people got fired and don't want to return. None of this should be a surprise to anyone, yet somehow as an industry – as a world – it's come as a shock."

Immune system

It's an 'ill wind', and all that. Arguably, AV and broadcast organisations enjoy a certain protection from this kind of crisis by being among the few resources deemed essential, almost on a par with energy and water. Even so, the moment needed careful handling.

"We knew we would slingshot out of it," says Skaf. "People always need to connect, whether in conference rooms, classrooms or courtrooms, and while those rooms were almost empty, they needed to connect remotely. Sound quality

“We were the last passengers heading home in March 2020. Quite frankly, we didn't know what was going to happen.”
Rashid Skaf



became even more important, and in conferencing we found that people would come into an office and then spread out around the building, needing more connectivity. And when it was over, we know that people would want to connect in person more than ever, creating a new demand in restaurants, bars, stadiums, arenas, houses of worship. All these trends gave us confidence not only to avoid stripping back, but to lead into a new surge and make sure we were ready for it."

There were some dips. But if they were noticeable, they were manageable. "We bought several businesses over the past five years," explains Skaf, "and one of them was a sound-masking business in building infrastructure - regulating the noise floor to make things comfortable. Of course, when you don't have a full office, the need for that reduces. I was shocked by how little it reduced, but that was the only part of our business that took negative growth during the pandemic.

"There were other facilities, such as educational establishments and houses of worship, that were also leaning into this by saying why don't we take this opportunity to upgrade our systems while there's nobody in here - we don't need to kick people out while we're doing it. Even in the facilities at the lowest ebb there was only a single-digit percentage dip. Everything else just kept going."

Risk assessment

With some good fortune, Biamp had a supportive group of investors who agreed to ride it out, even for two or three years. Indeed, factory resources were doubled, and spending increased on personnel, on the purchase of components and on distribution centres. The assumption was, even without knowing quite when, the recovery would come.

"It depends on the investment group," says Skaf. "There are always winners and losers during any crisis, and it doesn't matter what type of crisis it is. Those that made the right decisions are viewed as courageous now. Maybe if the pandemic had continued for another five years we would be regarded as foolhardy. It's always a bet that you make - that things will happen in the timeframe you predict.

"This one didn't feel overly risky, to be honest. Humans need to interact with each other - it's going to happen, whatever happens. I never understood the concern that, somehow, we would all curl up in our caves somewhere and disappear. It was a matter of timing - a matter of when, not if."

Keeping a large workforce motivated is another art best learned in uncertain times. As soon as

"Most of the companies who struggled - and who continue to struggle through the continuation of it, which is the supply chain crisis - are wishy-washy about their decisions."

Rashid Skaf

Skaf was obliged to stop travelling between company premises - mostly because the airlines insisted, rather than it being his decision - he held weekly calls that all the employees around the world could dial into.

"They had a chance to ask me any question about the situation and I was brutally honest about where we were - what we knew and what we didn't know," reports Skaf. "I was able to tell them what we were going to do about it, and it wasn't rousing, over-optimistic razzamatazz. It was very matter of fact.

"Here's what's good - here's what's bad. Here's what it means for you. We made the timeframe clear. We made the commitment to the workforce, and we re-evaluated everything after ninety days and after the first year. There was a constant need for flow of information. I would say that the employees felt at ease with that strategy. We were back in full swing after the first ninety days. That was the only period of real uncertainty. After that it was, hey, let's get on with life. Let's put the gas pedal down and go for it."

Fly united

Under these circumstances, you might ask a CEO: were there any formative moments that changed you? Were there any new business lessons you learned from it? But it seems almost as if the predictions were so right, and the crisis mercifully over so soon, that the whole thing was just another day in the office - at least, for an office so well prepared.

"By the end of that ninety-day assessment - which we typically do anyway, by the way, when we buy a company - it was familiar territory," says Skaf. "You have to take a limited time, take a step back and check out the lay of the land. What I learned most from the process was probably not

from this crisis but from 2001 and 2008 when we had other, financial, crises. And that is for the team to be very united in the decision making - even if it's the wrong decision. We need to make a decision and stick with it, all of us. That's probably the most valuable lesson to take from one of these periods.

"Most of the companies who struggled - and who continue to struggle through the continuation of it, which is the supply chain crisis - are wishy-washy about their decisions. They don't make it clear what their intentions and strategies are, and perhaps that's because there is no decision. You should make a decision and stick to it... until you make a different decision. Not making a decision is making a decision to falter."

Skaf believes that this decisiveness saw Biamp through the pandemic and continues to steer the company through its aftermath in the chain of supplies. "We ended up buying tens of millions of dollars' worth of components and other resources prior to the market shutting off, in anticipation that there would be a comeback," he reiterates.

With the changes wrought by Covid in mind, you might expect radically diverse developments in AV technology over the next year or two. Not so, in the well-prepared, well-balanced world of Biamp.

"Perhaps the most relevant point is how little has changed," he states. "When we spoke five years ago, everything mentioned then is still 'on point' now, and still relates to our mission to connect people through extraordinary audio experiences." But if you had to pick the single most important technology investment that companies could be making this year, what would you choose?

"Again, I mentioned AI five years ago and it's still the key to making things simpler. We have to continue to look at how to incorporate it to make things more efficient and to make us better at designing, installing, commissioning and using these technologies.

"We've now released Biamp Launch, the feature that brings our ability to auto-configure conference systems, and while we have over four thousand products and I love all my children equally, Launch is my prodigal son. I love its ability to do the work that was very complicated, and remember, we've lost a bunch of really great people during the crisis that were the guys that knew how to do that commissioning and tuning of a system," he says.

"The next generation of intakes will know how to do that, but they're not at the same level of experience yet. The ability to help people 'get in, get out, get paid', as I like to say... that's really the mission of our company. It should be the mission of our industry." ■

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TECHNOLOGY

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- KSCAPE by K-array - *RAIL Architectural light with integrated professional audio*
- Meyer Sound - *PANTHER Large-Format Linear Line Array Loudspeaker*
- Mixhalo - *Mixhalo App (iOS 6.10 | Android 2.14)*
- NOUS Digital - *NOUS Sonic at National Library of Wales*
- Nureva - *HDL410 audio conferencing system featuring Microphone Mist technology*
- Shure - *AD600 Axient Digital Spectrum Manager*

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- Jalinga - *Augmented Reality broadcast quality communication tool*
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- HARMAN - *AMX Varia Series*
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- Optimal Audio - *Zone controller and onboard WebApp*
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- Clevertouch - *CleverLive*
- DENEVA - *DSXP - Digital Signage Experience Platform*
- Matrox Video - *LUMA Series Graphics Cards*
- Realmotion - *New Markerless Tracking Technology for Moment Vault Installation at Orlando International Airport*
- ScreenCloud - *ScreenCloud Digital Signage Solution*
- Uniguest - *MS800 Series*

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- Mixhalo - *Mixhalo App (iOS 6.10 | Android 2.14)*
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- NAOSTAGE - *K SYSTEM fully automated and beaconless tracking*
- punQtum - *punQtum live event digital intercom system*

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