

# Climbing the ladder of automation

When you think of staircase construction, the first things that come to mind are traditional trades, such as carpentry and metalwork – but one forward-thinking manufacturing business that has been crafting staircases since 1971 has taken innovative steps to futurise its business with the use of sophisticated technology.

Starting out as an apprentice, second-generation owner of Sydney-based Genneral Staircase, Glen Genner is now making waves in the industry both locally and globally by automating the 47-year-old business and injecting the industry with smart new thinking.

In a recent interview with Westpac Wire, Genner said he never imagined he'd employ a department of software engineers in his staircase manufacturing business to work alongside his team of carpenters, metalworkers, and production managers. However, in a highly competitive sector, Genner recognises technology is key to sustaining and growing a profitable business.

“We've already pushed the boundaries by developing software for the industry,” says Genner. “A staircase design and quoting program developed over two decades is now being used globally. Now, we're looking at automation and robotics – with the use of smart modelling to speed up the drawing process, and machines to do simple processes and cataloguing standardised components.”

Adding global financial expertise is Glen's wife Nancy Genner, who joined the business four years ago – bringing a wealth of knowledge to the business gained from her global career in senior finance roles with companies like Proctor & Gamble. Genner says his wife's experience has certainly lifted the company in this area and the ability to leverage both of their strengths is proving very valuable.

From humble beginnings, this traditional carpentry business is making global firsts and proving just how far the Australian Manufacturing Industry has come.

According to Ai Group's Australian Performance of Manufacturing Index, the sector had grown for 24 consecutive months to November 2018 – the largest expansion since 2005 – on the back of encouraging growth in production, domestic sales and new orders.

Jobs reacted in turn, surging by 86,000 to 978,000 in the year to August 2018, or around 7.7 per cent of the total workforce, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics data, taking the sector back to employment levels last seen in 2011.

In a recent move to help future-proof the sector, the Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre (AMGC) partnered with The University of New South Wales (UNSW) and St. George Bank, in an initiative to give businesses greater access to advanced manufacturing facilities, technologies and researchers. The unique partnership will help Australia unlock its competitive edge in manufacturing by bringing together three different streams of the Australian economy – research, industry and banking.

**“This partnership will enable St. George customers and AMGC members to leverage technologies developed at UNSW and take advantage of the university's skills and expertise in the engineering field.”**

**Professor Gangadhara Prusty**

Director of UNSW-based ARC Centre for Automated Manufacture of Advanced Composites



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**Glen Genner**  
Owner, General Staircase

“Using advanced manufacturing automation and innovative material solutions, we can assist potential partners in solving their real-world engineering challenges. We are excited to collaborate with new industry partners to ensure Australian manufacturing remains competitive in the global market,” said Professor Gangadhara Prusty, Director of UNSW-based ARC Centre for Automated Manufacture of Advanced Composites.

Matthew Kelly, St. George Bank’s head of manufacturing and wholesale, says the bank backed the partnership because of the clear potential of the re-emerging manufacturing sector in Australia.

“Our customers are forward-thinking and want to tap into research to differentiate their businesses and make their processes more efficient. This partnership enables us to connect them with some of the nation’s most advanced manufacturing facilities to find solutions to their real-world engineering challenges,” he says.

To kick things off, around 200 manufacturers, including Glen Genner, were invited to UNSW to see first-hand the university’s capabilities and help them think more laterally about using the latest technology to scale their businesses.

For Genner, who took over the running of his business in 1996 alongside his father, the initial session gave him confidence his high-tech vision could be brought to life, ahead of further meetings with experts at his Wetherill Park site.

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**Glen Genner**  
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He already has a 'proof of concept' from customers going online, punching in staircase dimensions, and viewing the setout and live pricing. His ambition, however, is grander – Genner wants to see the data sent directly to a robot to cut the staircase components, weld them and place them on the powder coat paint line.

With the support from industry experts and a dedicated banking partner such as St.George – which has proved to be truly embedded in the Australian manufacturing industry by consistently backing the underdog to compete in highly competitive global markets – Genner will not only see his business but the industry and Australian economy benefit from the investment in automation and robotics.

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Looking at the number of patents that are applied for each month, manufacturing is by far the most innovative sector in Australia.

Despite being exposed to the current cooling housing market, Genner is no stranger to evolving his business and responding to industry slumps.

Having started as a timber staircase specialist, Genner introduced new materials, such as metal and glass, to meet the latest trends and changing customer demands. Expanding from small residential staircases into hotels and 50-storey high-rise office towers, he has grown staff numbers from four in 1996 to 130 in 2018.

He says his business, which follows the residential housing market, has been through three building booms, the most recent one being the biggest by far.

“If it tanks I certainly take a hit, but a lot of the innovation that I’ve implemented is to lessen the blow,” he says. “There will be a dip, but automation opens up doors that I’ve never walked through before.”

Fortune favours the brave and supporting our local industry with experts and vision will foster growth and sustainability.

### **General Staircase**

[www.genstairs.com.au](http://www.genstairs.com.au)



### **St.George Bank**

[www.stgeorge.com.au/manufacturing](http://www.stgeorge.com.au/manufacturing)