

On the upswing

Saving Aussie company was no child's play

HELEN CARTER

FRED Haig bought a business that was bankrupt and in just eight years, has turned it into a thriving playground equipment company that designs, makes and installs playgrounds nationwide.

Omnitech Playgrounds, based in Melbourne, uses Australian products and supports domestic businesses when creating play spaces, which include all-access spaces enabling wheelchair access, for council parks, schools and kindergartens.

"One reason for our success is that we employ young industrial designers who are in their 20s and haven't forgotten what it's like to be kids," Mr Haig said.

"Another factor in turning the business around and giving it an edge over competitors is our investment in research and development. We spent a lot of money researching what people wanted and building products."

Before buying the business, Mr Haig worked in the playground industry for 30 years as a manufacturer and supplier in powder coating including supplying Ausplay.

American company Rubber Made bought Ausplay but found the Australian market too difficult, so shut it down and left Omnitech Services to run its interests in Australia.

Mr Haig bought Omnitech Services out of bankruptcy and created Omnitech Playgrounds.

His original powder-coating business, Plastic Protection, was a one-man show. Today he employs 33 people based at a West Heidelberg factory where play spaces are designed and equipment is made.

The workforce also includes welders and installation/maintenance teams that travel Australia, and as far as to Vietnam, to install and provide maintenance for the equipment, which has 20-year warranties.

It's hard work, and not child's play to create the playgrounds.

But despite this, his employees have fun with their creations, especially because they know the joy they bring to thousands of children.



The million-dollar Ringwood Lake playground, which opened this year, was a complex job.



Fred Haig

"We love our business," Mr Haig said.

The business specialises in custom-made equipment and designs, and the trend toward customised play spaces is helping it thrive.

"We've just created a massive playground for the City of Maroondah at Ringwood Lake, featuring a lot of climbing, ropes, stainless steel slides and nature activities," Mr Haig said. "Nature play with trees, rocks and stones is another trend, as are music chimes, and touch-and-feel panels.

THE DIARY

BOOKING SYSTEM

The TAC needs an online medical examination booking system.

Closes Friday

DEBT RECOVERY

South East Water Corporation requires debt recovery legal services. Closes October 16

BILLBOARD ADS

VicRoads needs development and management of outdoor advertising billboards on the Calder and Hume freeways. Closes October 17

FIREFIGHTING HOODS

The CFA requires supply of structural firefighting hoods. Closes October 17

CLINICAL SEATING

Northern Health requires supply and delivery of clinical seating. Closes October 19

"We still do a lot of 'pocket parks' for councils where a swing and slide are needed for a small space, and these are our day-in, day-out jobs."

At the other extreme were big-budget projects such as the Ringwood Lake playground. It cost more than \$1 million including landscaping, Mr Haig said. "For

customised projects like these we do everything from the ground up. The project was a huge challenge, a one-off design with special requirements such as building in between trees without upsetting them, so it was very technical, and we put in a massive amount of work and hours," he said.

"We only import components that cannot be sourced in Australia, but everything is assembled or manufactured here.

"Our plastics are manufactured in Mildura using our own tooling, we source metals and tubes from Albury-Wodonga, engineering from Ballarat and rubber from Queensland, and our ropes are assembled in our factory."

Designing and making everything in-house means equipment can be customised and include names and logos of benefactors and donors — something that Mr Haig says helps the business stay ahead of competitors including those who make equipment in China.

The equipment and installation teams also comply with Australian standards.

Parks Victoria requires construction of the Olinda Precinct Playspace and dog off-lead area. Tender closes Friday