

Extracting success from plastic recycling

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MBA Polymers masters a complex process to repurpose diverse sources of waste



Mike Biddle, founder of MBA Polymers

To management education aficionados, MBA Polymers may sound like an elective at a top business school. In fact, it is a global plastic recycling group, and the acronym stands for Mike Biddle & Associates, rather than the business degree.

“It’s not necessarily a bad affiliation,” says Mr Biddle, the founder of the company, who graduated from Stanford Graduate School of Business in 1991 as a Sloan Fellow — the degree is now known as the MSx programme. Driven by the need to understand how business works, he embarked on the course to learn how to turn his idea of repurposing plastic waste from a pipe dream into a viable enterprise.

The idea

With a background in chemical engineering, Mr Biddle spotted a gap in the market in an industry that has been around for years but is not particularly innovative. He wanted to launch the first company that automated plastic recycling on a large scale from highly complex waste, containing a variety of materials such as metals, glass and various types of plastic.

The process of extracting plastic from this mixture is extremely complicated because plastic is also usually mixed with other materials.

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As a result, most plastics end up in landfill sites or are incinerated. This meant there was a huge potential market for a company that could crack the technical challenges. On graduation, determined to launch his venture, he decided to take a risky move and leave behind a successful career with Dow Chemical.

The company

MBA Polymers was launched in 1994, but the road to success was not easy with many “dark days”, he confesses. There were long hours and he earned his spurs as an entrepreneur by carrying out early research in his garage.

Mr Biddle eventually assembled a team of chemical, mechanical, electrical and mining engineers, and together they invented a way to extract plastics from complex mixtures of waste.

He is keeping mum about the separation method, which is covered by a mix of different patents and trade secrets, but he says this process provides an energy-efficient and cost-effective way of making plastic compared with creating new plastic from oil.

MBA Polymers produces 100 per cent recycled plastic pellets that are sold to manufacturers to make new items. The pellets are used in components in Nespresso coffee machines and Electrolux vacuum cleaners. Other clients include large electronics, automobile and domestic appliance companies.

The company processes about 136,000 tonnes of waste every year, and with recycling plants in the UK, China and Austria, Mr Biddle believes the company is still relatively novel. This is because the sector largely focuses on one particular product, such as bottles or televisions — what is known as “mono-streams” — and is also local in nature.

Business school support

Mr Biddle credits his Sloan Fellowship for giving him some of the tools and the confidence to pursue his start-up dream. While at Stanford, he was able to work on the business plan for MBA Polymers. He hands out plaudits to both his classmates and professors for the support they gave him. One academic, strategy professor John Rick Berthold, even became a board member.

Giving back

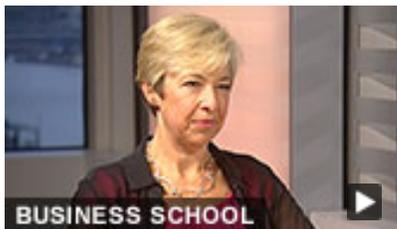
After about 20 years at the helm, Mr Biddle stepped down as president of MBA Polymers in 2014.

His entrepreneurial spirit kicked in again and he founded another venture in 2015, Material Solutions, an organisation to help other clean-tech entrepreneurs develop their businesses on a faster scale by passing on his 20 years' experience of developing a company from a garage start-up to a multinational leader.

He remains a non-executive director of MBA Polymers, and describes stepping down as president as one of the hardest decisions he ever had to make. "I still care deeply about the company."

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