Innovationawards

DELIBERATIONS Judges McDermott, Scudamore, Morgan and Ashworth.

Tomorrow's people

This year's Merseyside Innovation Awards prove that the city region is abuzz with cutting-edge designs and world-changing ideas. **Lisa Miles** reports from this year's final

Remarkable doors, clever cues, life-saving devices and nanoparticles battled it out in July in the final of the 11th annual Merseyside Innovation Awards, organised by Brian McCann of Liverpool accountancy and business advisory Vanguard.

The awards final, which was held at the Crowne Plaza, Liverpool, saw four innovative businesses compete for a cash prize of £10,000 plus £4,000 worth of free advice. Each had to present their innovation to the audience and a judging panel. Projects had to be at or near the stage of becoming a commercial reality and have the potential to make a positive impact on the region as a whole.

The judges were: Redrow founder Steve Morgan of the Bridgemere Group of Companies; Jeremy Scudamore, chairman of the North West Science Council; and Janet Ashworth, head of the technology sector group at The Royal Bank of Scotland/Natwest.

They faced a difficult choice but in the end MerseyBio company Iota Nano-Solutions, emerged as winner. Iota's nanodispersion innovation exploits a technology originating from the Liverpool University chemistry department and has a wide range of potential application. It beat off stiff competition from Netherton-based Burley Doors, The Gravity Cue Company of Walton and Medical Device Innovations.

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"Where do you start with such great finalists," asked Morgan as he announced the judge's decision.

"If we'd had four different sets of criteria we could have picked four winners. But our criteria were about innovation and for pure innovation we have chosen the winner."

The award sponsors were: *Insider*, website and business systems developer Amatica, BBC Radio Merseyside (presenter Linda McDermott compèred the event), Brabners Chaffe Street, Business Link for Greater Merseyside, JAB Design, Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool Ventures, Merseyside ACME, Merseyside Special Investment Fund, NatWest, technology transfer company RTC North, University of Liverpool Business Gateway and patent and intellectual property law firm WP Thompson.

KNOCKING ON AN OPEN DOOR

Asked to do something innovative with doors and your average person would be hard pressed to offer any ideas. But Helen Williams of Burley Doors in Netherton has designed what she describes as "the world's most technologically advanced door".

The company is a sister company of Burley Windows, which installs windows and doors to social housing. "Following demand from clients, we developed our own door," said Burley Doors operations director Williams. After 18 months of research and development Burley Doors was formed in 2005.

"We invested over £1m in a door manufacturing facility, a 10,000 sq ft facility on a 40,000 sq ft site in Netherton. We mainly employ people from Knowsley and Sefton and have an NVQ programme and an apprenticeship scheme," said Williams.

It's the only door made of thermoset materials, a type of plastic that remains rigid when set and is unaffected by extremes of temperature and moisture, whereas timber or plastic doors can be difficult to open when it's hot or wet. "We guarantee our doors for 25 years while the maximum guarantee on others is ten years," said Williams. "It looks and feels like a high-grade hardwood, using

GRAND FINAL Colin Ling of Business Link and McDermott

real oak patterns, but there is no timber."

Redrow founder Steve Morgan, one of the awards judges, said: "Coming from the housebuilding industry, I can see applications for this product, particularly in the social housing industry. In Redrow one of our biggest problems was to do with doors twisting or expanding. Had Burley Doors been available then we would have had a serious talk with them."

ON CUE FOR SUCCESS

The pool and snooker cue remained virtually unchanged for 200 years, then along came Neil Johnson with a simple idea that transforms the game forever.

The Gravity Cue, which has already been endorsed by snooker legend Steve Davis, developed from Johnson's interest in training aids for use at his Liverpool Academy of Snooker Excellence in Aintree.

TOP TIP Peter Leather of Liverpool Ventures, Johnson and Maria Toolan, Royal Bank of Scotland

A former professional snooker player, Johnson developed the new cue when looking for ways to stop players twisting their wrists. It works like the hull and keel of a ship are used to prevent it from tipping over. Johnson was helped by the Engineering Development Centre at Liverpool John Moore's University.

Gravity Cue has filed for an international patent and a worldwide launch takes place this autumn. Orders are already being taken but the design of the cue has only just been finalised. It took 31 prototypes to get it right.

"This cue gives you the edge," said Johnson. "If you can stop the cue turning, you stop the wrist turning and you solve the problem. It works for every level of player. *CueSport* magazine have called it the 'wonder stick'."

Johnson's wife and brother are also involved in the running of the company and the cue is being manufactured by Liverpool-based Peradon.

Awards judge Steve Morgan said: "All the best innovations are simple ones. Merseyside should be proud to have this product on its doorstep and it would not surprise us if this cue were to become the industry standard."

Winner

SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

At first glance Iota NanoSolutions was an unlikely winner, if only because it was the only finalist without a product that it could put into your hands.

Co-founded in June 2005 by Dr Dave Duncalf, Dr Alison Foster, Prof Steve Rannard and Prof Andy Cooper, Iota is funded by Unilever Ventures and is exploiting a technology originating from the Liverpool University chemistry department and further developed at Unilever research and development laboratory at Port Sunlight. The company was spun out of Unilever in 2005 to allow further development of the technology, which is protected by seven patent filings.

Iota, which has a purpose-built laboratory and offices in the MerseyBio Incubator in Liverpool, has developed novel technologies that allow the formulation of poorly soluble materials into more liquid forms that can be used to make products. It then functions as if it were dissolved, but actually the particles are just very, very small.

The technology has wide applicability across a range of sectors, from pharmaceuticals and consumer/household goods to agrochemicals and inks. Iota is seeking key customers to apply its technology to industry problems and long-term partners to develop the business and technology into the future.

HANDS ON Rannard with Peter Lunt of NatWest

"We have contacts with about 15 multinational companies, many with operations in Merseyside, looking at developing different products for different sectors," said Rannard. "We are still building the customer base but towards the end of the year we hope to attract other money and build the company."

Iota is collaborating with the world-famous Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine to work on key anti-malarial actives, which don't dissolve.

Awards judge Steve Morgan was impressed by the huge range of potential applications for Iota's technology. "Iota don't have a product to show, but if you think about their technology's applications they are mind-blowing," he said.

DESIGN OF LIFE

Based at the Daresbury Innovation Centre, Medical Device Innovations (MDI) was set up in 2002 to develop medical concepts and plug the gap between those with innovative ideas in academic institutions and the NHS and the medical device companies on the lookout for near-to-market opportunities.

"If a surgeon has a great idea, for him to take that to market is very difficult," said MDI chief executive David Cottier. "He won't get venture capital funding and if he takes it to a large company he's likely to be turned away because it's at a too early stage."

The device the company entered for the Merseyside Innovation Awards, ThoraQuik, enables life-saving treatment to be given quickly in emergency situations. Pneumothorax is a life-threatening condition that can occur in road traffic accidents where there is a chest wound. While devices already exist, these need assembling before use and can prove difficult in emergency situations.

LIFE SAVING Jonathan Butters of JAB Design, Peter Lunt of NatWest and Cottier

ThoraQuik does not require any pre-assembly and can save valuable time when it really counts. It can stay in place once the patient is in hospital and has numerous applications both in accident situations and in, for example, cardiac surgery units.

Emergencies can be dealt with quickly and there are fewer risks of further complications than with traditional techniques, which ultimately saves money.

"This is another very simple product but very clever and how many lives is that going to save?" said awards judge Steve Morgan. "There will be thousands of people walking around in the future thanking this product for their being alive." ◗