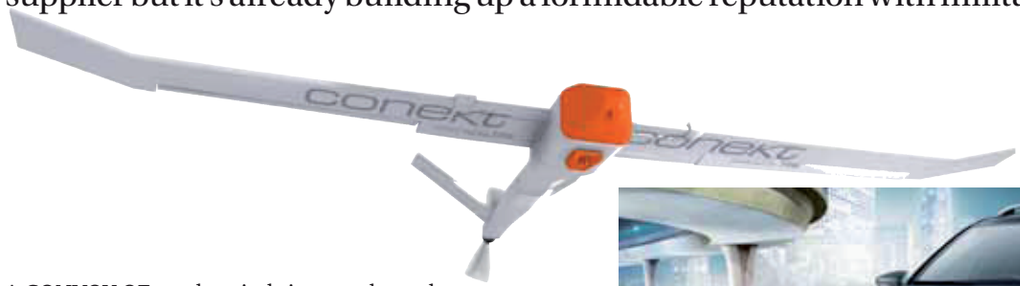
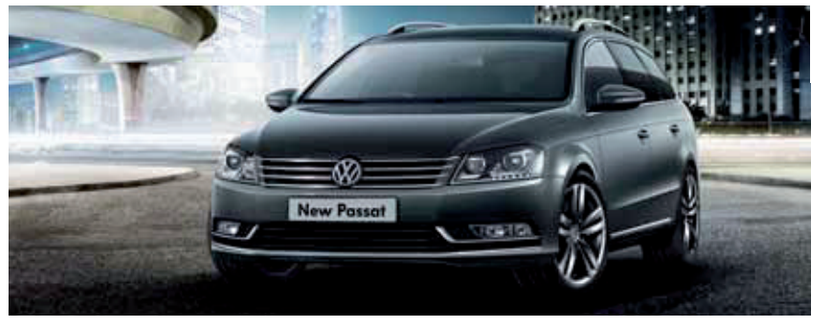
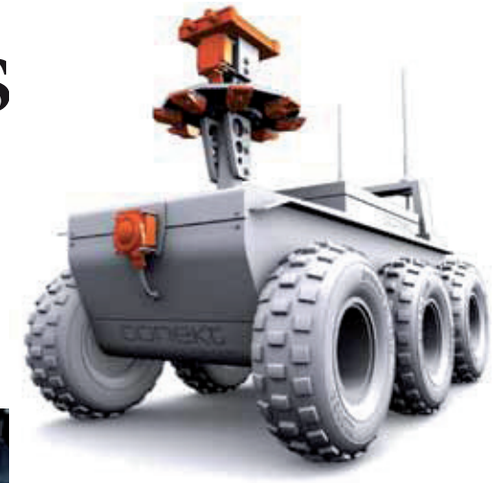
Conekt in the fast lane to success

Automotive engineering company Conekt may be new on the radar as a defence systems supplier but it's already building up a formidable reputation with military precision





Transfer market: motor industry technology can be readily applied to military equipment



A CONVOY OF trucks winds its way through a sandstorm. The area is full of insurgents, so speed is of the essence, but a driver makes an error and rear-ends the truck in front. The convoy comes to a halt and now lives are at risk.

Moving convoys at speed through dangerous areas is a big problem for the army in many areas of operations, but technology developed to help drivers on Britain's roads could provide some solutions more quickly and cost-effectively, according to Alan Jacobs-Cook, manager, electronic systems, at TRW Conekt in Solihull.

Conekt's advanced driver assistance systems include vision technology currently used in lane departure warning systems which alert a driver if they move out of their intended lane – an award winning TRW Automotive system fitted to the current Lancia Delta.

Military procurement has been trying to use more commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) systems for many years, with mixed results. Now firms such as Conekt are spearheading a move in the opposite direction, trying to find military applications for their commercial products.

Conekt has a long and distinguished history in automotive engineering, having its roots as the Lucas Research Centre. Recently, Conekt moved into the military market and joined Team Stellar to compete in the MOD Grand Challenge to demonstrate autonomous vehicle technologies in urban environments. Team Stellar won the challenge and with it, the coveted RJ Mitchell Trophy for Innovation.

Conekt's success got it noticed despite the company's lack of history as a military supplier. "It was a very strategic entry point into the defence market for us, because it rapidly raised our profile," says Jacobs-Cook. "We were also coming in with new technology at the research end, where market opportunities are more open to new entrants, rather than trying to compete with mature technology with established supply routes."

The automotive industry has moved on dramatically in the last 20 to 30 years, with high performance, robust and reliable systems the norm. Nowadays cars are expected to operate without failure for years – and this reliability could be transferred to military equipment at a relatively lower cost. Advanced driver assistance systems could even enable control of the vehicle, so high reliability is paramount when adapting it for military use.

The technologies put Conekt in the vanguard of the thrust to develop detection systems for roadside bombs and other threats, and the eventual aim is to deploy autonomous vehicles that can support IED search and location, reducing the very high risks for human soldiers. The company's vehicle situational awareness technologies may even take to the air – interest has been shown in a number of applications, Jacobs-Cook noted.

The next step is to become an established supplier to the MOD. Once that is achieved, export markets could also open up, he adds. "Our products have export potential but our starting point is the UK. Getting MOD approval is the best endorsement you can get when selling abroad."

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