

Meet the Aussie drone entrepreneurs

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Matthew Sweeny is developing the technology to launch a commercial drone delivery service. *Photo: Supplied*

If Australia's nascent drone economy has a Steve Jobs figure, it's Matthew Sweeny, owner of Flirtey.

Sydneysider Sweeny is based at the University of Reno in Nevada, further developing the technology to launch a commercial drone delivery service that he hopes to start testing in UAV-friendly New Zealand in the coming months. UAV stands for unmanned aerial vehicle.

"Flirtey is targeting four industries: online retail, fast food, logistics and humanitarian (sic)," Sweeny says.



Robin Lowe is developing a drone that could deliver a flotation device to stricken swimmers. *Photo: Supplied*

"UAVs are at the same point on the technology curve personal computers were in the early 1980s. In the coming years, there will be a lot of successful companies – hardware companies, software companies, data companies and service companies – emerge and Flirtey intends to be one of them, disrupting global logistics and becoming the leading drone delivery service."

Sweeny argues the technology is rapidly emerging to allow the widespread use of commercial drones, which could improve and save many lives should it be embraced by the general public and regulators.

"Concerns about privacy and safety are entirely valid and Flirtey, like others in the industry, is seeking to attract community support through working closely with regulators and having very strict policies around safety and things such as responsible data collection and storage," Sweeny notes. "I'd argue, like its counterpart across the Tasman, CASA should now be proactive and introduce forward-thinking regulation that spurs Aussie innovation

and creates jobs."

Sweeny is far from the only local drone entrepreneur. Industries as diverse as media, real estate, mining and agriculture are making use of drones, creating a growing demand for people to both operate and design them.

"To fly a commercially operated drone you need an RPAS [Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems] certificate," explains Matthew Herbert, director of the Ballarat-based drone pilot school Victorian UAS Training.

"You can [get] one of those by completing a five-day, \$2500 course we run. After graduating, our students can earn \$150 an hour doing the cheaper jobs such as real estate photography and potentially thousands of dollars an hour with certain mining jobs.

"Seventy per cent of our students aim to start their own business and there's certainly plenty of work for them around."

"Standard rates are between \$100 [and] \$600 an hour," notes Nick Smith, the owner of Drones For Hire, Australia's largest directory of professional drone operators.

"Keep in mind you have to pay for the drone, any extra equipment required and for training to get CASA-certified to fly it, as well as a good public liability insurance policy. But, yes, it's a growth industry; there are currently around 200 certified drone operators in this country and that will increase to 300 by the middle of the year.

"The industry is made up of lots of owner-operators who specialise in one or two areas, some mid-sized operators with five to 10 staff and a few bigger national operators that have a range of drones doing different jobs."

Smith, who set up his own business in December 2013, notes: "Drones are new to society and the number of commercial applications has grown so quickly that members of the general public don't comprehend how widely they're already being used, from farmers flying them over their properties to check water troughs, to miners using them to safely calculate the volume of huge piles of coal. Plus, you can use them for inspecting roofs, pipelines and other industrial assets or to do 3D mapping [of natural or built environments]. The possibilities are almost endless."

That's a sentiment shared by Robin Lowe, Victorian paramedic and aspiring drone entrepreneur.

"I've been involved in helicopter rescues and have a pilot licence so when drones came on the scene, I started thinking about how they could be used in my line of work," the owner of LoweFlight says. "Unfortunately, I've been in situations where I've been a member of a rescue crew that's been left sitting on top of a cliff, waiting for a helicopter to arrive while a swimmer drowns in huge surf below."

In mid-2013, Lowe, with the assistance of a tech-savvy friend, began developing a drone that could deliver a flotation device to someone caught in treacherous waters.

"I've now got a working prototype and I'm currently in discussions with a company that has the capital to manufacture it. I'm hoping I've developed some patentable intellectual property around the targeting system for the drone and the mechanism by which you deploy the flotation device," Lowe says.

"Should the technology and regulatory environment progress, I'm hoping my drones might end up in surf lifesaving clubs, on boats and other places where even unlicensed members of the general public can launch them in case of an emergency."

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