



Prototype, Leap® Automotive Seat System

“Have you heard the one about the garage door opener and the car seat?”

By Dana Lowell
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It's a casual thing. Pull into the driveway, hit a button, the garage door opens and you drive in. You get out of the car, step into your home and hit another button. The garage door closes—seamlessly.

More often than not, the technology behind this “press of a button” is invisible. Like magic, you probably don't thoroughly understand how it works—it just does. And because it does, you take it for granted. Yet, if you stop to think about it, the little contraption that opens your garage door is really an amazing piece of machinery. And there's a lot more to it than meets the eye. Its creation relied heavily on a business strategy called “alliance and technology licensing”—i.e., legal agreements among companies that enable them to share technology in a way that benefits everyone.

Leveraging technology through alliances and agreements is one of the fastest growing business strategies around today, because it solves for urgent needs that many companies face: bring innovation to market faster and increase profits.

Case in point: Johnson Controls (JCI) is a leader in automotive innovation, and a portion of our success has been fueled by effective strategies in the areas of partnering and alliances. In fact, we've been able to maintain double-digit growth in sales and profits by maintaining a focus on innovation and new business development, often working with other companies to make it happen.

An Uplifting Development

Remember that garage door opener? The technology used in that project, HomeLink® Wireless Control System, has been integrated in one of Johnson Control's most successful “alliance and technology licensing” products. In fact, this same technology also allows for wireless remote control of additional home devices, including security and home lighting systems—all from the convenience and safety of your vehicle. And, unknown to most car owners, the transmitter is neatly designed as part of your visor, overhead console or rearview mirror.

New product development is the lifeblood of all successful companies. In fact, now more than ever before, developing an effective and streamlined approach to new business development is critical to maintaining an organization's profitability. It certainly isn't easy, however. Things can become especially complicated when the product requires working with multiple users, other companies and a variety of industries.

For example, one early challenge JCI faced when developing the HomeLink® Wireless Control System was developing the ability for ongoing compatibility between the transmitter in the vehicle and the home-installed automation device. This was not a trivial task, as it was necessary for developers to manage compatibility across several competitors. Plus, there was a huge installed base that spanned several industries.

By leveraging JCI's industry market scale and volume potential, we were able to establish a value chain that provided market opportunities for all HomeLink®—compatible participants. In other words, working together was good for our businesses.

And we helped make life a whole lot easier for a whole lot of people like you. After all, who can argue that the push of a button sure beats getting out of your car on a cold winter day and lifting a two-stall garage door?



Technology that transcends:

Leap technology is expanding to make seating a more comfortable experience for people in cars.



Have you heard the one, continued

JCI and Steelcase: Taking a Leap Together

Another example of sharing technical requirements across industries is the JCI alliance with Steelcase Inc.

JCI is all about providing a positive experience for consumers. With that in mind, we recently began to intently focus on solving one of the top problems facing automotive consumers today—uncomfortable seats and inadequate back support (as documented by J. D. Power and other industry sources).

Poor back support is cited as the #1 automotive seat issue, and it's the #5 top issue that the automotive industry faces overall. After all, more people are spending more hours in their cars each day, conducting a variety of tasks while getting from Point A to Point B. Whether it's talking on the phone or with passengers, negotiating destinations or just plain thinking, planning or daydreaming—the more time you spend in your car, the more important your comfort becomes.

As the leading automotive seat manufacturer, it was obvious to us that we needed some new approaches to seat back comfort. We knew what we wanted to accomplish, but the unanswered question was, how? What would be the best way to innovate quickly and be the first to raise the bar for our industry?

The first step was to conduct an exhaustive global benchmarking of

existing “comfort technologies,” and we contracted with leading consultants and universities to help get this done.

We evaluated several different approaches. The thought that an office chair might have relevance was not an obvious conclusion when we started, but it's where we ultimately landed.

We selected the Leap® office chair from Steelcase as the best example of proven comfort technology.

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This technology licensing agreement has come to fruition in the product known as the LEAP® Automotive Seat System. JCI developed a technology transfer license on the Leap office chair based on the robustness of its extensive comfort science and body of research. Despite the perceived incompatibility between office and vehicle environments, we were confident that the validity of the Leap comfort science could readily translate across industries.

The agreement we reached with Steelcase allowed Johnson Controls

to shortcut the time and investment required to develop an all-new comfort science for automotive seating. Also, because of the success Leap has earned in the office furniture industry, we were able to provide proof to our customers that this seating technology had been field-tested and validated by independent experts and users—a marketing advantage.

The relationship between Steelcase and Johnson Controls is based on technology licensing and transfer. The final products share no common part, but they're based on common principles of bio-mechanical design. We've leveraged the intellectual capital of Steelcase continuously in the development process. From concept to production, we're working together closely. This kind of collaboration makes the process stimulating and enjoyable, as well as ultimately more beneficial for both companies as we learn from each other.

We're confident that the robustness of the comfort science in Leap will allow for a successful consumer experience and business development across the global automotive industry. Sitting is believing.