

# Transformers

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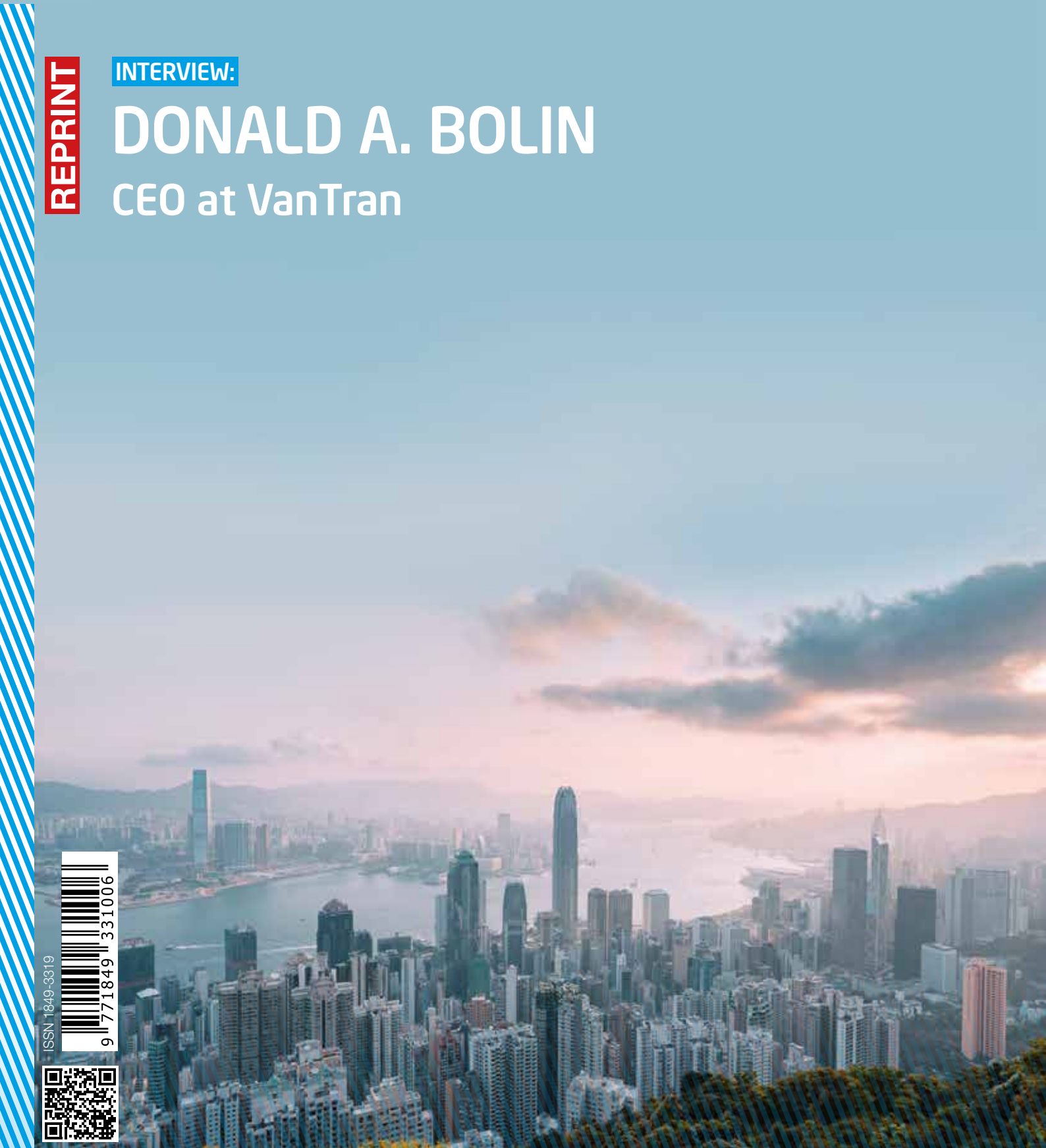
INTERVIEW:

## DONALD A. BOLIN

CEO at VanTran



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# DONALD A. BOLIN

## CEO at VanTran

**V**anTran is a privately held manufacturer of liquid filled distribution transformers ranging in size from 5 kVA to 10 MVA. The company has gained a reputation for providing high quality transformers for demanding environments and applications and delivering product on time. It was founded in 1963 by my father, Al Bolin, and a group of other transformer veterans in Vandalia, Illinois. Al was an electrical engineer and transformer designer and had worked for several large transformer companies. In the early sixties, he and few of his colleagues became frustrated with the mentality of the industry, so they went out and started their own transformer manufacturing business. Their modus operandi was not to cheapen the design but to have exceptional quality and longevity of the product; they wanted to give the customers what they needed. My father died in April of 2016. He worked up until the day before he died at the age of 89. He never stopped making transformers - it was his passion. I think that he really passed this passion on to me because there is nothing that excites me more than to talk about transformers.

When my dad passed away, I stepped in as the CEO. I knew the industry and had experience selling the product. I

knew that we had a great foundation and quality product with tremendous opportunity. But at that time, we needed a structural rebuild as far as organization and production were concerned, and that is when I brought in J.P. Davis as President. J.P. had been in the transformer industry for over 30 years and worked for a lot of larger companies such as ABB, GE, CG (now WEG), Honeywell and Alstom. He came, looked at our products and operations, got very excited and said: "Don, there is nobody in the industry that is doing what you are doing and this is an ocean of opportunity." It meant a lot to me to hear someone from within the industry saying that VanTran has great quality, great customer service, great engineering support and great on time delivery. So, we put together a business plan, to grow the business strategically and to ramp up our branding and marketing efforts.

After I took over, I realized that we were the best kept secret in the transformer industry and have a very loyal customer base who come back without fail. We want the market to know there are other options available, especially for custom and one-off transformers. We are maintaining a customer-centric focus as we grow our business and customer base. Our

size allows us to be nimble and flexible which puts us in a favorable position relative to our competitors who are typically large, multinational companies. Our place in the industry is well defined, so it makes the rest of our business philosophy fall easily into place.

I grew up in the industry, spending my whole life around transformers. I was always taught that you don't take quality out, and that what's inside of the transformer is just as important as what it is on the outside - things like the quality of the welding and all sorts of things - the craftsmanship.

Through the years VanTran evolved into a custom, specialty, and industrial manufacturer, more so than utility manufacturer. The utility business is a high volume business. There are companies that have scale and they compete on that, while we

**Donald A. Bolin** has been involved in the transformer and electrical industry his entire career, spanning more than three decades. Don founded and ran a successful electrical sales agency in Houston, Texas, while remaining active in his family's privately held business, VanTran Industries, Inc., located in Waco, Texas. He held the position of CFO at VanTran from 2011 - 2016 and served on the Board of Directors for many years before becoming CEO in 2016. Don holds a BBA in Finance and Marketing from the University of Texas at Austin.

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want the part of the market that is a more customized, smaller volume, the one-off units. This has been the key to our longevity along with not compromising on quality as others have done to compete solely on price. The customer suffers as product quality and life expectancy dwindles leading to higher life cycle costs. VanTran, however, delivers a value proposition of high-quality transformers, delivered on time with years of maintenance free service. This value proposition has served us well throughout the years, especially in the industrial market. We can also deliver this to the utility market which we have been as blanket

contract manufacturers struggle to deliver customized and low volume designs as their business model is high volume engineering and production. We engineer the transformer for each and every order. As an example, we have a utility in the U.S. that buys a 10 MVA padmount design from us. Their blanket contract manufacturer supplies up to 5 MVA, so they asked if we could supply them.

Our core and coil assembly is the same, whether it is going into a substation or a padmount, so we could easily accommodate this rating as a padmount transformer.

**Can-do attitude**

The atmosphere at VanTran is one of a can-do attitude. Our employees exude a sense of confidence no matter how challenging the task. Our engineering team is trained to design a transformer from top to bottom. When you build so many custom products, anything you change can impact a lot of other things. It is important to know how things on the electrical design are going to impact the mechanical and vice versa; and understanding how it impacts the ability to manufacture the transformer once it goes into production. It's a great philosophy and gives our engineers a broader perspective from start to finish on the whole project, not just one small piece in the process. We have hired engineers from other manufacturers who are excited for the opportunity to learn and experience more than what they were allowed previously.



The DNA of VanTran really is to be a solution provider. We don't build the same things over and over again. We are not a corporate entity that is looking for volume - that is not who we are. We look at each customer, and each customer's unique requirements and what we need to do to satisfy them. Our people are innovators. When we come to work we do not know what is going to be there waiting for us that day, and everybody is very excited about that, from the engineering staff all the way to the factory floor. Our staff, I call them craftsmen and artisans, they put out a beautiful product. Sometimes I've said it looks like it belongs in a museum.

### Complete line of products under one roof

One thing that gives us an advantage is being able to offer a complete line of single phase and three phase transformers in a wide variety of styles

all manufactured under one roof. If the kVA is between 5 and 10,000 and the voltage is 46 kV or less, we can most likely build it. Our product line includes padmounts, polemounts, substations, submersibles, multi tap rentals and autotransformers. Customers can come here and if they are looking for a very specialized product, they will receive the best attention and service. Other companies do not do this. Customers will not get personalized engineering or sales attention from big manufacturers because they are built around high volume and standard product. What separates us is the individual, personalized service for our customers, which makes us truly different from everybody else. We do not use the phrase "We can't do that" around here. If it is in our range of kVA we will find a way to do it.

Our flexibility also makes us very adept at designing retro-fit transformers to serve as exact replacements for

competitors' products. We can match existing dimensions, bushing heights, footprints, etc. to make the change quickly and cost effective. Another area in which we excel is hazardous duty transformers. We have extensive experience designing and building transformers for use in hazardous areas such as refineries, chemical plants and offshore oil and gas platforms.

When it comes to polemounts, they are not as common in our plant as larger padmounts and substations but we can and do build them. They are often specialized such as 100 Hertz or 25 Hertz. We do a lot of these for the transit industry.

One of our signature and most successful products is the VanTran Multi-tap transformer used in the generator and load bank rental industries. For over 20 years we have been providing this specially



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designed transformer which has become a standard for the fleets of dealers in North America as well as internationally. The flexibility and ease of changing voltages is unparalleled in the transformer industry. With protective cage and forklift pockets built into the transformer, it is well suited for the demands and rigors of being moved on and off job sites on a continuous basis.

The multi-tap is used by temporary power and load bank rental dealers around the country. They buy it and put it into their fleet, so when someone needs to rent a generator and needs a specific voltage to go with it, they rent them a package of generator and transformer. The transformer has dual voltage, delta and wye ratings and five or more taps that can deliver a wide range of voltages from 2400 delta up to 14400 wye and all the common voltages in between: 4160, 7200, 12470, all the common distribution voltages. With this product they do not have to inventory multiple transformers; they can have one transformer with multiple voltages. Since we know their transformers go on and off job sites, we designed it to be geared specifically for the temporary power industry. Most transformers are installed at a jobsite, the taps are set one time and then they close the doors and never look at it again. They might take an oil sample or something. These multi-taps are on the job site for two weeks, three weeks, maybe up to six months at a time and then they get picked up and dropped off again somewhere else, reconnected, reset the taps, etc. They are very rugged and very well built to be able to sustain that type of treatment. The ironic thing is we do not do anything special as far as making them more rugged than our other transformers. VanTran has a very robust design that allows our transformers to be moved around and subjected to a lot of abuse that many other transformers would not withstand. We know these are not your typical put it down and never look at it

again type of products. If you ask any dealer of rental generators and load banks in the North American market place, they know about VanTran. We have a very good presence there. This is a consistent and important product line for us. We don't have a 'standard' product, but if we do have something close to a standard product it would be the VanTran Multi-tap. We build thousands of them typically rated from 2500 kVA up to 7000 kVA. The 2500 kVA matches up with a 2 MW containerized diesel genset, a typical size for the industry.

The types of transformers going through our plant can vary year to year depending upon our customers' needs. We probably build more substations for industrial applications than anything else, but I am often surprised when walking through the plant to see what is coming through. Some of the transformers I see are so unique that I ask myself "If I needed this transformer and wasn't buying from VanTran, where would I go?" I honestly don't know. A lot of times customers have to settle for a standard product and make it work, as opposed to knowing that there is a company that can build exactly what they are looking for. VanTran is that company.

### Global presence

Regarding international sales, we have supplied transformers to many places around the globe in our 56 years. These include gas fields in Qatar, processing plants in Equatorial Guinea, commercial projects in the Philippines, offshore platforms in Sakhalin Island and off the coast of Egypt and installations in many Caribbean and Latin American countries.

Our international presence is increasing with our marketing efforts. Our brand will become more known as far as our specialty side is concerned. I do

not see us doing the standard product, because of the cost involved. It is not cost effective to ship them all over. But the highly customized units, we can see that continuing to expand. A lot of our customers that have international operations like oil and gas companies will recommend VanTran to their other plants internationally. Knowing us, they will tell their colleagues in other parts of the world that we are very good at what we do, and that they need to be using our products. We get a lot of referrals by that means. It's the same way with the engineering firms. They do work with VanTran in the US and then find a way to include us on their international projects. We have had very strong growth internationally in the last two years and we expect it to continue.

### Contagious experience

What we are doing at VanTran is our passion. Everyone in our company, from top to bottom, respects the product and treats it like it is a part of their own identity. When we invite potential customers who may be unfamiliar with us to see our operations, by the time they leave, they want to do business with us. It is contagious. They love what they see and want to be part of it. That is what motivates me to share our great story. When people hear it, they buy in, and we make sure to support it with our great quality and on time delivery. We often hear from our customers that they just cannot count on other manufacturers to deliver on time. That is something we definitely control. Customers have come to appreciate working with us knowing their transformer will arrive on schedule – one less worry on their project critical path.

VanTran is a unique story. A small company that was started by a handful of transformer veterans in 1963 who wanted to do things differently. They dedicated themselves and their company to providing solutions to customers' requirements that were not being met by the larger companies. Fifty-six years later we are still going at it, filling the gap between what customers desire and what the bigger companies are willing to provide.

Need  
transformers  
that meet  
your unique  
requirements?  
**OR NEED THEM  
QUICKLY?**

## **VANTRAN IS YOUR TRANSFORMER OEM SOLUTION**

When your transformer needs move beyond the ordinary or your timeline is compressed, VanTran is the call you should make. The world's largest corporations rely on VanTran to meet their demanding transformer requirements. How can we help you?

**VanTran**  
TRANSFORMERS

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