

Birmingham Business

FREE

March/April 2024

INCLUDES:
**Access
to finance
SPECIAL
REPORT**

A CAREERS WOMAN

Carmen Watson's
rise to the top
of billion-pound
company

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In this article, our Birmingham-based regional director reflects on his teams' business journey, pride in moving into new premises, and plans to support more local SME's.

Our relocation in March 2024 to larger offices in the city centre marks a significant milestone in our evolution as a leading financier.

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Birmingham Business

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Bringing you highlights from the first big awards event of the year



By HENRY CARPENTER
Editor

Doug Wright and Paul Faulkner have their work cut out.

The McDonald's franchisee (Wright) and former Aston Villa, Nottingham Forest and chamber head honcho (Faulkner) are two of the most respected and prominent business figures in the West Midlands.

They also have complementary skills sets, enviable contacts lists and a similar sense of responsibility to give back.

Perhaps most importantly – and probably on the back of their own personal experiences – they are fiercely determined to succeed in their quest: to spearhead a £5 million fundraising drive to get the fledgling Kids' Village charity up, running and flourishing.

As you'll see from Jon Griffin's excellent write-up, it's a super charity which will be such a boon to unwell children and their families. We wish Doug and Paul well. With the fiscal challenges we all know about it might not be easy out there right now, but you couldn't pick two better characters for the job. This story marks the start of a series looking at corporate Birmingham's connection with the charity sector – particularly the involvement of business leaders.

March is also the month of International Women's Day, the annual celebration of women's achievements, and our cover story for this edition is timed to coincide with IWD.

We could not have chosen a more inspirational and fascinating subject than Carmen Watson who has risen through the ranks of recruitment giant Pertemps to become its chair. If her achievements are impressive, they are matched by her attitude. A tireless advocate for diversity and inclusion, she is also a hard-working and highly enthusiastic deputy lieutenant, a magistrate and is involved with numerous programmes championing those who deserve a boost in life. I couldn't have enjoyed more the hour I spent with her at Meriden Hall, the Pertemps HQ.

We take a look at the spring budget with the help of various business leaders from across the region. Perhaps it was short of eyebrow-raising announcements on the day (aren't they always these days, with such comprehensive briefings beforehand?) but it's election year and a conservative chancellor was unlikely to court too much controversy.

Elsewhere in the magazine we meet Matt Jones, the founder of Oxbridge online college. What a niche he has found and his business is fast becoming one of the region's real success stories.

We also have pages devoted to news, insight, commentary and some of the great events which have been taking place in the city.

We hope you enjoy it all, and please don't hesitate to get in touch if there's a topic you think we should be covering or something you would like to comment on yourself.



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SPRING BUDGET 2024

What does it mean to business?

It's general election year! And that means that the announcements made by the chancellor on March 6 must be set in that context rather than as economy-boosting measures which might gain multi-sector business approval but would probably lose a few votes along the way.

So it was perhaps inevitable that the reaction from business leaders across

the West Midlands was a little ho-hum.

It was far from blanket negativity but 'could have gone further' ... 'missed opportunity' ... 'yes, but' ... were the common messages coming through.

Perhaps it was more notable for what Jeremy Hunt didn't major on than what he did. For instance, there was a conspicuous lack of focus on the net-zero agenda.

Some of the announcements in the budget most relevant to the West Midlands included:

10% 8%

National insurance

contributions for employees are being cut from 10 per cent to 8 per cent from April, with savings for workers of up to £450 a year



Full expensing for businesses will apply to **leased assets** in future "when affordable".

VAT registration

threshold for businesses upped from £85,000 to £90,000



Self-employed NI rates will drop by two percentage points

The High Income **Child Benefit** Charge, which hits payments if one parent earns above £50,000 a year, is to move to a household-based system. The threshold will rise to £60,000 from April in the meantime. The top of the taper where it is withdrawn is raised to £80,000



£15m to the West Midlands Combined Authority towards cultural projects

Eligible film studios in England will secure 40 per cent relief on their **gross business rates** until 2034. Tax relief made permanent at 45 per cent for touring and orchestral productions and 40 per cent for non-touring productions.

Birmingham Business has been collating comments from the worlds of finance, tech, manufacturing, property, hospitality, retail and the public sector to gauge their reactions to the chancellor's last spring budget this side of the general election. Over to them ...

Andrew Bostock, KPMG

A promising start for job creation in the region.

The announcement of further support to develop skills for the manufacturing sector – a follow-up to the initial funding announced in the last autumn statement – has the potential to bring significant benefits to the Midlands region.

As a provider of local jobs, the Midlands' growing creative industry will also welcome the news that the chancellor will provide higher tax reliefs and a discount on business rates. With better access to funding, the West Midlands will be best placed to establish itself on the world stage as a leader in TV and film production.

While the announcements go some way in encouraging growth for some industries, businesses will be looking for more economic certainty over the course of the next year before they feel confident in making investments.



David Morris, PwC

The announcement to provide £15 million to the West Midlands Combined Authority to support culture, heritage and investment projects is welcome.

The region has benefited over the last two years from the financial incentives of the investment zones and freeports, resulting in the West Midlands ranking as the top region out of London for foreign direct investment in 2023.

Continued investment is needed to maintain the momentum in the region and achieve economic growth.

Additionally, further devolution deals, including in Warwickshire, will give powers to local authorities to make decisions that are best for regions.

The chancellor stated that two thirds of salaried jobs have now been created outside of London and the South East, highlighting the growth and economic potential in the regions.



Chris Romans, EY

The chancellor's budget announcements included 14 tax cuts and 16 rises, but the two stars of the show – the National Insurance cut and the replacement of the non-dom regime – had been heavily trailed in the days before.

Beyond these the chancellor chose to cut tax sparingly, with two other big measures introduced: the fuel duty freeze which was fully expected, and the reform of child benefit onto a household basis.

The remaining cuts were scattered broadly, including the just-above-inflation increase (ignoring the previous years

of freezes) in the VAT threshold; the four percentage point cut in the rate of Capital Gains Tax on private dwellings (which apparently actually raises money for the exchequer); additional relief for visual effects; and a brand new UK ISA.

After initial announcements during last year's spring budget, the chancellor failed to provide any further details about the proposed enterprise zones in the Midlands.

Businesses will be eagerly waiting for news about the zones, the expected investment and how the region will benefit as a whole.



Steve Walker, ART Business Loans

For the vast majority of businesses the budget this year would, in my opinion, be seen as a non-event.

There was very little aimed at the growth agenda and the small increase in the VAT starting level was below the lobbying trade bodies' expectations and will affect few.

I am sure that Birmingham-based businesses faced with rates increases and budget cuts will look on in awe at the success of Warwickshire County Council in receiving support. Will there be a flow of small businesses exiting the city for the green fields of Warwickshire? Time will tell.

On the positive side the extension of the Recovery Loan Scheme for two years was welcome news for businesses seeking a loan to achieve growth. For finance providers like ART Business Loans, it is an essential tool enabling an additional source of finance where banks are unable to assist in full. This was seen as essential for the CDFI sector and Responsible Finance – the trade body for CDFIs in the UK – will be hoping to build on the news and provide more help to businesses.

There perhaps though has to be shade of irony in the comments made by the chancellor that we need to see overall debt reduced when to this observer the major positive is the continuation of a government-supported loan scheme.





Ann Tonks, Chapter restaurant

What a lost opportunity! VAT should have been lowered for the hospitality and nighttime economy sectors, which are in the midst of an existential crisis.

With so many restaurants, pubs and bars closing daily due to massive cost increases, the chancellor should have heeded the calls from these sectors and a

large cohort of MPs for a VAT cut to help save businesses that will now go to the wall.

Am I surprised that our pleas have fallen on deaf ears? Unfortunately not, as the value of our sectors to communities and the economy is being ignored by this government.



Henrietta Brealey, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce

With a general election expected at some point this year, it's no surprise to see that the chancellor used the limited fiscal headroom at his disposal to prioritise tax cuts for households – however, many businesses will be left feeling a sense of regret that more wasn't delivered to unlock growth.

It was pleasing to see an extension of the parameters of the full expensing scheme in order to encourage firm level investment, greater use of AI to drive public-sector productivity gains and additional pension fund reforms in a bid to crowd in more investment.

From a local perspective, it was also reassuring to see money made available for the WMCA for culture projects – especially in the context of funding cuts we've seen announced by Birmingham City Council.

However, many businesses will feel the chancellor has missed a trick in truly turning the dial on the fundamental issues firms continue to grapple with.

Extending the terms of the loan recovery scheme will be welcomed by many businesses still grappling with debts racked up during the pandemic, however raising the VAT threshold will do little to stop the so-called bunching effect.

It was also disappointing to see that meaningful reform of the business rates system and the reintroduction of the tax-free shopping policy were completely ignored by Mr Hunt as both measures are more likely to offer a timely boost to the hospitality and retail sector than freezing alcohol duty.



John Webber, Colliers

As always, the devil is in the detail and the detail revealed that the chancellor has extended the period for which an occupier must occupy a property to gain empty rates relief from six weeks to 13 weeks.

This is a kick in the teeth for those retail or leisure landlords who are unable to find a tenant for their property and will end up paying considerably more in business rates for a property from which they are receiving no income.

This is likely to deter property investment and values in an already distressed market.

The chancellor's failure to 'right the wrongs' of the 2023 autumn statement and cancel the business rates increases planned for April was also massively disappointing.

Given the chancellor confirmed that the OBR has forecast inflation to be below 2 per cent in two months' time, it is outrageous that all but the smallest of UK businesses will be paying increased business rates tied to a multiplier that will increase from 51.2p to 54.6p in the pound in line with the 6.7 per cent inflation figures of last September.

This planned increase will impact 220,000 businesses who will pay an extra burden of £1.66 billion in tax from April 1, 2024.

Colliers has estimated that the businesses in the retail sector will pay over £360 million more in business rates, the offices sector around £400 million more and logistic/ industrial sector around £450 million more as a result of the increased multiplier.



Yiannis Maos MBE, TechWM

The UK is in a period of change that brings hugely exciting opportunities should we choose to invest wisely and substantially. For the UK – and by proxy, the West Midlands – to reap the rewards of prosperity, growth and innovation, and claim the title of a new Silicon Valley (as touted by Jeremy Hunt) there's work to be done on the sturdy foundations set.

The £15 million boost set aside for the West Midlands Combined Authority to fund cultural and heritage projects is a considerable amount in isolation, but it pales in comparison to the wider funding landscape. It's just one example of the government failing, once again, to take the West Midlands seriously as the historical force of innovation that it is. This precise attitude towards our region, one that has fantastic potential across all major sectors, summarises the lack of belief and confidence in a region that continues to offer so much in the face of adversity.

As the CEO of a not-for-profit agency designed to support the thriving start-up ecosystem in the West Midlands, the lack of clarity around how the government plans to power up the endless possibilities in the tech start-up sector is yet another disappointing oversight.

The allocation of funding towards life sciences, manufacturing, electric vehicles, and the public sector demonstrates that the government does indeed understand the importance of these areas but are reluctant to dive deeper into the investment opportunities offered by the tech industry specifically.

Melissa Snover, Rem3dy Health

I commend the chancellor's announcement of a significant investment package in the UK's life sciences and manufacturing sectors. This investment not only reflects the government's commitment to economic growth but also underscores the importance of innovation in improving health and overall economic resilience.

The allocation of funding towards companies and projects in key sectors such as life sciences and manufacturing is a positive step towards fostering an environment conducive to innovation and growth. At our business, we are certainly excited about the potential opportunities this funding could bring to advance our technology and expand our reach globally.

The government's support for the Advanced Manufacturing Plan demonstrates a long-term commitment to providing certainty for businesses to invest and grow in the UK.

I am particularly pleased to hear about

the funding opportunities for life sciences manufacturing, which align perfectly with our mission to leverage cutting-edge technology in personalised health solutions. At businesses such as Rem3dy Health, for example, this funding will not only enhance our ability to innovate but also contribute to building resilience against future health emergencies.

The announcement regarding the apprenticeship growth sector pilot is encouraging news. Investing in high-quality training in advanced manufacturing, engineering, and life sciences apprenticeships is crucial for nurturing talent and driving innovation.

The partnership between the government and industry showcases the transformative impact of constructive dialogue on driving progress. The thoughtfully crafted support plans resulting from these collaborative efforts underscore the tangible outcomes achievable through effective engagement between government and business.



Rebecca Durrant, Crowe

In possibly the most interesting budget for private clients in a while the chancellor shied away from an outright cut to income tax but announced a further two percentage point decrease to National Insurance, meaning from April this year the average worker will save £900 per year.

There was still no movement on the tax bands meaning that due to continued fiscal drag, Britain is still on course to hit a record level of tax take since the 1950s.

The 'tax cut' will be paid for by scrapping the preferential tax regime for non UK domiciled individuals. This is to be replaced with a more modern, residency-based regime to encourage those wealthy individuals to bring their assets to the UK in a two-year transitional period.

Whether this will be enough to ensure they stay in the UK remains to be seen.



Tony Elvin, Touchwood

Hugely disappointing to see the Government ignore pleas from both hospitality and retail in this year's budget.

No cut in VAT for hospitality and no tax-free shopping for overseas visitors. Two policies that would have helped retail and hospitality businesses deliver even more towards our economic recovery.

It is a short-sighted approach from a government that claim to be the party of business.

Regarding the failure to deliver a cut in VAT for hospitality businesses, we will now see a further rise in closures for businesses that have found themselves with an unsustainable cost base.

Businesses that, due to their failure, will no longer contribute towards business rates, VAT, corporation tax and employment.



Rowan Crozier, Brandauer

For a company that has invested more than £2 million in the last 18 months, we are in favour of any incentives that make those commercial decisions easier. Full expensing is definitely one of those and I'd love to see draft legislation on extending it to leased assets passed quickly.

I was a bit disappointed to see a complete lack of focus on supporting companies who export in the post-Brexit world. Thousands of us are defying more bureaucracy, complex tariffs, and unequal playing fields to fly the flag for UK manufacturing and bring GDP back into this country.

It would have been nice to see some additional support or financial incentive introduced to make international trade more accessible.



Rewarded for net-zero strategy

Edgbaston Stadium is celebrating after being repeatedly recognised for the steps it has been taking towards net-zero.

The club was named Team of the Year by judges at the British Association for Sustainable Sport Awards in recognition of its Go Green Game, which took place in September between England and New Zealand.

It was the first sustainable game of its kind in UK cricket and saw a focus on cutting emissions across all scopes of the stadium's footprint, which also led to the stadium being awarded the BSI ISO 20121 accreditation for its sustainable event management system.

Through a strategic partnership with National Express West Midlands, more spectators than ever before used public transport to reach Edgbaston for the game – and it resulted in Edgbaston also winning the BASIS award for Partnership of the Year.

Dom Jordan, general manager BASIS, said: "Our awards celebrate the vital sustainability work going on in the sports sector and recognises the organisations, teams and individuals who excel and drive sustainability change."

"We had a record number of nominations this year, the competition was stronger than ever, making it even more of an achievement for Edgbaston to walk away with two coveted awards."

"Given the location of Edgbaston Stadium away from major public transport networks, spectator travel has been the largest sustainability challenge."

"Other organisations might have despaired and declared the issue insurmountable due to infrastructure constraints – but Edgbaston initiated a series of projects and partnerships to meet the challenge."



The stadium presented with BS ISO 20121 accreditation by the British Standards Institute in recognition of its Sustainable Event Management System

Top: Pitch-side energy bikes in full swing

"As a result of the partnership with National Express West Midlands, spectators are moving to public transport in impressive numbers."

More than 3,600 fans arrived on a free shuttle bus service from New Street station – with around 2,400 on the return leg – while almost 1,000 fans travelled for free on other National Express West Midlands services.

Among the measures taken during the Go Green Game Edgbaston was powered exclusively by wind, hydro and solar energy, ground staff used electric mowers

and rollers, food packaging was made from compostable seaweed, no red meat was served in the stadium, and spectators played their part by signing up for stints on pitch-side energy bikes which, when pedalled, charged up Edgbaston's electric road sweeper.

The Go Green Game is another step towards Edgbaston's commitment to become a carbon Net Zero business by 2030 which is part of its Edgbaston 4 Sustainability pledge.

In addition, Edgbaston also won an International Silver Green Apple Environment Award in the Carbon Reduction category for its Edgbaston 4 Sustainability campaign at the prestigious awards ceremony held at the Houses of Parliament.

The award – run by the Green Organisation to promote environmental best practice around the world – also entitles Edgbaston to represent the UK in the Green World Environment Awards next year.

Sustainability manager at Edgbaston Stadium, Lydia Carrington said: "We're really pleased by how the day went and our final report has found the game emitted 33.7 per cent less carbon based on comparable Major Matches in 2022."

"We set ourselves a target of 25 per cent so to cut emissions by more than a third is really encouraging. This provides use with a great learning base that we can take forward and continue to implement more sustainable processes across everything we do."

"I am so proud of the team at Edgbaston for showcasing all the fantastic work we are doing and delighted this has been recognised by BASIS with these two awards, the British Standards institute and the Green Apple award."

Charities increase service

West Midlands law firm Sydney Mitchell has announced that two local charities will be able to increase their services in the community after donations from the practice.

Cheques totalling £8,000 were presented to Brandon Scott-Omenka, CEO of The Solihull Carers Trust, which provides support to carers in Solihull, and to Suzanne Alderson, founder of Parenting Mental Health, which gives support to parents whose children have significant mental health issues.

Sydney Mitchell held a 'meet and greet' the charities event to present the funds raised over the last 12 months to their chosen charities.

Pictured from left are Pauline Manby, Carers Trust Solihull, Brandon Scott-Omenka, CEO Carers Trust Solihull, Karen Moores, senior partner at Sydney Mitchell, Nikki Neale and Suzanne Alderson, Parenting Mental Health

Maximising your financial potential:

THE VALUE OF HAVING A WEALTH PLANNER

In today's complex financial landscape, managing wealth effectively is more critical than ever.

Whether you're a high-net-worth individual or someone just starting on the path to financial security, the assistance of a skilled wealth planner can make a significant difference in achieving your financial goals. The value of financial advice lies in benefits that are enjoyed through building a long-term relationship. This is where a wealth planner really gets to know you; it's all about understanding your unique situation along with your ambitions and aspirations for your life.

Wealth planners can offer a comprehensive range of services tailored to individual needs, providing invaluable guidance and support in navigating the intricacies of wealth management.

Here are some of the key benefits of utilising a wealth planner:

Holistic financial planning

Wealth planners take a holistic approach to financial planning, considering all aspects of your financial life. They analyse your current financial situation, understand your short and long-term goals, and develop personalised strategies to help you achieve them. This comprehensive approach ensures that all aspects of your financial well-being are addressed, from investment management to retirement planning, tax optimisation, estate planning, and more.



Customised investment strategies

One of the primary roles of a wealth planner is to ensure that your investment strategies are individually tailored to your unique risk tolerance, your financial objectives, and time horizon. They leverage their expertise and market insights with the aim of maximising returns while minimising risk.

Risk management

Effective risk management is essential for preserving and growing wealth. Wealth planners understand how everyday occurrences can pose potential threats to your financial security, such as market volatility, inflation, or unexpected life events. A wealth planner will work with you so that you have a financial plan that truly considers and reflects your current lifestyle, situation and future aspirations; this can be a powerful tool, and when used effectively could help provide financial peace of mind.

Tax optimisation

The complexities of the tax system may mean you're paying more than you should be, and this can significantly impact your investment returns and overall financial success. By reviewing your financial situation on an annual basis, a wealth planner may be able to identify strategies to help reduce your tax costs or boost your after-tax returns. Making sure that your tax liabilities are reflective of your specific circumstances and ensuring that available reliefs and exemptions have been utilised, may help to reduce your tax bill.

Estate planning

Planning for the transfer of wealth to future generations is a crucial aspect of comprehensive financial planning. A wealth planner will look at how to structure your assets and consider the most opportune time for a transfer of wealth to take place to ensure that you can sustain your standard of living and how to preserve and transfer

assets to heirs in the most tax-efficient manner. They can help you create a will, trusts (where appropriate), and other estate planning documents, ensuring that your wishes are carried out and your loved ones are provided for according to your intentions.

Financial education and empowerment

Beyond managing your wealth, wealth planners serve as trusted advisors, providing financial education and empowering you to make informed decisions about your finances.

Peace of mind

Perhaps the most significant benefit of using a wealth planner is the peace of mind that comes from knowing your financial affairs are in capable hands. By outsourcing the complexities of wealth management to experienced professionals, you free up valuable time to focus on what matters most to you—whether it's pursuing your passions, spending time with loved ones, or enjoying your well-deserved retirement.

Whether you're seeking to build wealth, preserve assets, or plan for the future, a skilled wealth planner can be an invaluable partner on your journey to financial success.

To see how Succession Wealth can help you, please get in touch



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People person

As the chair of a billion-pound recruitment company where she has spent almost her entire working life, Carmen Watson is a standard bearer for what is possible for women in the workplace, often against the odds. Add to that her drive for diversity and inclusion, and life-enhancing work in the wider community, and you have a bona fide asset to the region. HENRY CARPENTER reports.

With its parkland setting complete with pools and rolling lawns, Meriden Hall looks for all the world like a private stately home nestled on the edge of a West Midlands village.

It is actually the headquarters of Pertemps, probably the largest independent recruitment firm in the country which two years ago saw its turnover break through the billion-pound mark for the first time.

On a spiteful rain-lashed winter's morning, the reception area with a deep-pile carpet and comfortable seats is a warm haven from the elements outside. It has an opulent feel, one of a business done good.

A sculptured bust of the firm's founder, Constance Watts, is positioned against the wall, as though presiding over the room. Constance – or Connie as she was more usually known – was an indomitable figure and perhaps something of a rarity as a woman leading the way in what was a man's world when she founded the firm at the start of the 1960s.

Under her initial guidance and then the robust, dynamic and visionary leadership of her son Tim, Pertemps grew into one of the West Midlands' great success stories,

guiding hundreds of thousands of people into new careers.

So several decades after founding the business, you feel that Connie Watts would look at the business with pride, not just at the firm's extraordinary commercial success, but also at the culture.

Culture is ingrained in a business, and it comes from the top. No one exemplifies this better than the group's chair, Carmen Watson. In many ways Watson has defied the odds to rise through the ranks since joining Pertemps to become the figurehead she is now.

That she has achieved what she has as a woman, and a woman of colour, is testament to both her resolve and ability, and also the company's culture of an inclusive and diverse environment.

We talk about a whole range of subjects, including Covid, changing work trends, AI, and of course her career trajectory. But as March marks International Women's Day – the annual day celebrating women's achievements and their rights – it is perhaps most topical to ask what advice she would pass on to prospective female business leaders.

"All the time, I'm hearing about the work-

life balance," she says. "I work incredibly hard and I'm not embarrassed to say that.

"Aspiring business leaders are put off from top jobs because to them the work-life balance signifies working hard, not having a life and having no fun, and so why would they want that?

"I have never seen that. It doesn't have to be that way.

"Because you can look at your personal life and your work life not as separate boxes, but as intertwining threads. If you can then move between the two seamlessly you can have a much better experience, and I think that's what I've done.

"It's a juggling act but, you know, women are good at that – they have to be as mothers and carers, too."

Talk to those who work with Watson, as many have for several decades, and it is clear that she is viewed with both a great deal of affection and also the utmost respect.

"I genuinely don't believe you have to be bullish, arrogant or any of those things to be respected," she says.

"Perhaps I'm from that old-fashioned breed of thinking that respect is earned – it doesn't come with the title."

And earn it she surely has.

Wolverhampton born and bred – she still lives there now – the young Carmen didn't find school particularly easy. As she saw it, the sooner she left the better – so she did.

So after completing a secretarial course at the Queen's Business College she walked into a recruitment agency on the high street in Wolverhampton. There was only one such agency in the latter half of the 1970s – and it was called Pertemps.

"I had no aspirations to be on the board of a recruitment company and, ultimately, chair of a recruitment company. So I'll declare that straight up!" she says with a smile.

"Anyway, they found me four job vacancies – and after interviews I was offered a job by all of them.

"I decided to take the one that represented the greatest challenge. It was an industrial manufacturing firm with a 72-year-old Scottish chairman.

"When he interviewed me, he said he'd love to take me on because 'you're a proper ball of fire but I don't think I can because you won't fit in around here.'"

But she was determined to prove him wrong, and she was duly offered the job which she took.



Carmen Watson with the Ryder Cup in 1989



In 2000, Pertemps' new managing director

"Oh my goodness did I stand out!" she recalls. "This was an all-male, very much white environment where the average age was about 40.

"But I made it work, I won everybody around and some of my colleagues have remained friends to this day.

"After a spell there, however, I knew that secretarial work was not going to be for me."

Back to Pertemps she went in a bid to find work elsewhere . . . and hasn't left since. By complete coincidence, the agency itself had a vacancy in its newly formed technical division which placed people in engineering jobs.

That was in 1978, Connie Watts – "a great role model" – was very much still part of the business and Watson has watched the business mushroom to where it is now – 200 branches across the length of the country with up to 40,000 staff in total, 1,600 of which are direct, placing 12,000 people into permanent work a year.

That's some curve for a business which started in a tiny office in Temple Row in 1961 with a workforce of two.

What's changed in the 45 years Watson has been with the firm? With recruitment being an industry within industries, the answer reflects the changing nature of the region's – and indeed nation's –

"You can look at your personal life and your work life not as separate boxes, but as intertwining threads. If you can then move between the two seamlessly you can have a much better experience, and I think that's what I've done."



Watson at work in 1999

commercial landscape.

While several industries have largely been lost – such as steel, coal and, to a certain extent, manufacturing – others have taken their place, while the service market has remained a constant throughout.

"There is a whole sphere of recruitment that we would not have had 40-odd years ago," says Watson. "Medical is now a very big area for us. IT, too.

"Historically we might have provided people who do a bit of coding or data entry, whereas now it's so vast with the likes of AI, cyber, data analytics and the way people are using information much more to run businesses.

"We have to be fleet of foot with the ever-changing use of technology.

"Something else which I think has changed is workforce planning. Many years ago employers wouldn't even think about it if somebody was off for a week or a month or went up on maternity – they would just provide cover.

"These days I think businesses are much more strategic."

It also becomes apparent that Covid was a game changer. Not only was working Britain turned upside down during the pandemic, but there has been a seismic shift in the balance of power between employee and employer, with new working

patterns very much governed by the former.

Covid meant Pertemps "went big on medical, education and logistics", according to Watson.

"We were doing a lot of work on major Covid projects. People had to eat. Bread and supplies were needed in the stores. We had to get tests packaged and delivered out.

"We were getting orders of up to 1,700 people requirements a day which put us under quite a lot of pressure to fill these positions.

"When Covid came all bets were off – it was all hands to the pump. What we saw for the first time ever was people moving to support other areas of the business – workers in the finance department, say, stacking shelves.

"And yes, we definitely saw a shift in the balance of power towards the employee. If you set that against the backdrop that there aren't enough people for the jobs anyway, prospective employees can afford to be choosy.

"We saw real lifestyle changes for people being able to do their work at home. They feel that they are just as productive as having to sit on a motorway for two hours to get into work. So yes, their requirements changed.

“I can’t tell you how much fairness and equality means to me. I mean, it’s one of my real moral standpoints. I hate to see iniquity anywhere. If I see it and it’s not right or not fair, I’m going to call it out.”

“The word on the street from our branch operations is that there is still a key requirement for hybrid working. They want the choice. I think it’s too early to say how all this will play out and whether it will last.

“I’m not sure that you can grow a business from home working. I might be a bit old fashioned but young people agree with me when I say there is still a preference for that face-to-face contact. People buy from people. People learn from people.

“If you look at the demographics at the moment, we need to bring people into work. If you take on a youngster, letting them sit at home in their kitchen on a laptop, how do they learn?

“You try sitting at home on Zoom all day for seven hours. It’s horrible.”

What about the spectre of AI, quite possibly the biggest talking point of all right now?

She thinks it’s “going to be fantastic”, and it has already been proved to great effect in the Pertemps offices, saving a great deal of time for the consultants who can then spend more time with customers.

“I don’t ever want it to replace the human element – that would just be dire.

“I do think government needs to step up to the plate though to work with businesses to make sure that we’ve got robust policies in place so that people are on a level playing field.”

Unsurprisingly perhaps for a figure respected nationally in the world of recruitment, Watson could chat for hours

about anything and everything to do with the jobs market and all associated topics of today.

I’m not sure if there are other poster-girl figures in her industry but it’s hard to believe there are any who do more for the diversity and inclusion than Carmen Watson. And she’s been able to assess the shifting attitudes over the decades with the eye of someone very much in the under-represented category.

She is also in prime position to ensure that Pertemps follows the example of its chair.

“I think progress has been made in general, but I think we’ve got a lot of work still to do. For us as a company we do quite well. At Pertemps, 40 per cent of our board is female, which although rare is not deliberate – it’s very much a meritocracy.

“I wasn’t chosen for my role for any other reason than the fact that I’ve got a good track record. I had great relationships with clients, I made a lot of money for the business and I had the skills to do the role.

“I can’t tell you how much fairness and equality means to me. I mean, it’s one of my real moral standpoints. I hate to see iniquity anywhere. If I see it and it’s not right or not fair, I’m going to call it out.

“It is one of the reasons why I’ve stayed at Pertemps for as long as I have because even in those very early days there perhaps wasn’t all the D&I rhetoric that we have now, but there was a very, very strong philosophy of equality of opportunity.

“I think for people to thrive and for businesses to thrive it’s quite crucial.”

Watson has been a strong supporter of the national Women of the Year campaign to promote women for what they do. Pertemps, no doubt under her instruction, supports LadiesFirst, a West Midlands-based women’s professional development group.

These schemes put her in contact with remarkable women who are doing great things but are perhaps more comfortable hiding their lights under a bushel.

“I would like to see them shout about themselves a little more to give confidence to other women,” she says.

Then there are other extra-curricular commitments too, as well as her home life. She is a magistrate, a deputy lieutenant and an adoring mother and grandmother.

“They are both the apples of my eye; I can’t spend enough time with them.”

She describes all the components in her life her ‘communities’ – and how she juggles them is key to her fulfilment.

“I’ve got my work community, my social community, the community within the courts and the communities within the lieutenancy.

“My work communities have been formed over many, many years. I still deal with clients now that I dealt with 35 years ago.

“They know that I don’t take their orders anymore, but they still want me to know what they’re doing and that I’m keeping an eye on it. To me that’s just incredible.”

And it seems she can’t get enough of her work as a DL.

“I’ve probably invested in more tissues since I’ve been involved with the lieutenancy than than ever before because there are just so many stories about people doing fabulous things.

“I’ve seen what the work means to people who are the beneficiaries. We have King’s Award for volunteer service and the Young Achievers Awards. I absolutely love it.

“To me it’s all about the development of people and few things give me more pleasure than seeing people grow and maximise their potential.”

That’s Carmen Watson to a tee – at work, at home and in the wider world in general.

There can be few in the region who have touched as many lives for the better than this “proper ball of fire”, to quote her first employer.



Change to benefit all



JOANNA LEE-MILLS, partner and deputy head of the Birmingham office of law firm Shakespeare Martineau, issues a rallying cry calling for greater diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

This year’s theme for International Women’s Day is ‘inspiring inclusion’ – a powerful call for us to promote inclusive policies and practices in the workplace.

In the UK, we’ve made tangible progress, with policies like the Equality Act 2010, and achieving nearly 30% female representation on FTSE boards. But true gender equity across workplaces still remains unfinished business.

Giving this some context, despite parity in more entry-level roles, women still remain severely underrepresented at senior levels, in both public and private sectors. We hold just 30% of leadership roles in large UK companies – falling behind countries like the States, at 40%.

And sadly, there are even greater challenges faced by ethnic minority women. Being one myself, my particular cohort faces real ‘concrete ceilings’, barely registering over 3% in exec teams, or board directorships.

Refreshingly, the business case for improving leadership diversity is empirically backed by a steady stream of data, reflecting direct profitability gains for more inclusive firms. As Dame Inga Beale, who was the former CEO of Lloyd’s of London put it, “diverse groups make better decisions – and diverse markets are stronger markets”.

So, inclusion and diversity are terms we are all familiar with, but implementation in the workplace has some distance to go still.

True inclusion should mean creating working environments where women can thrive, advance, and lead. It’s proactively building a culture of belonging, where diverse perspectives are welcomed, and everyone feels valued for their authentic talents and contributions.

Now, inclusion goes hand-in-hand with equality and equity, which was last year’s theme for International Women’s Day.

Equality, as we know, means we all get access to the same opportunities. Equity on the other hand, recognises that we don’t all start from the same place, and that it takes deliberate steps to provide that personalised support each person needs to be successful.

So, how do we join up this year’s theme of inspiring inclusion, and last year’s theme of equality and equity?

The way I see it is, inclusion is the destination that want to get to, with equality and equity representing the road we need to build to get there. And the case for equity is clear.

Research shows that companies with higher female representation at exec and board level perform better financially. Equity allows businesses to draw from 100% of the talent pool, not just some of it. Companies can reap the benefits of diversity in ideas, perspectives and experiences that fuels innovation.

Workplaces that focus on inclusion and belonging, have higher employee engagement and satisfaction.

Our plight is very real. Discriminatory policies and practices, unconscious, or indeed conscious bias, as well as barriers outside the office like lack of access to childcare, all stack the odds against the advancement of women and minorities.

And then there’s the cost of exclusion, which bleeds into declining business performance metrics. There’s extensive research by McKinsey, Morgan Stanley and others which has shown that companies with sustained high gender diversity on their exec teams, deliver superior profitability and earnings margins over the long run.

Now, another inescapable part of the conversation relates to unconscious bias. I don’t believe we can fully embrace inclusion, so long as unconscious biases lingers in our professional and societal mindsets.

It adds unseen hurdles into the existing barriers women face in the workplace. For example, we sometimes see gendered language in job descriptions that influences who applies. Then you have unfair attribution of performance in the workplace, which is not uncommon but shapes promotion decisions.

And finally, I work in a male-dominated industry and so where we have male-heavy sectors and networks, this tilts the playing field further.

These biases, and I’ve seen this from personal experience, can trap women into a ‘prove it again’ mentality, where they work excessively hard to achieve above-average results – just to be deemed adequately competent. Whereas due to, say, affinity bias, men with similar

experience and skills win entry more easily. This is a clear case of burnout fuel, that ultimately holds women and organisations back from equal advancement.

So, what’s the best antidote to our challenges? Well, we need to be having more open conversations and continue to challenge and address. That’s why platforms like International Women’s Day are so important.

We need to peel back those unseen drivers that limit equality, and roadblock equity. It’s through awareness and working together, that we can reshape the narratives. And we’re such a long way off. Soberingly, the world economic forum predicts that at the current rate of progress, it will take a disheartening 132 years.

But we can of course, make strides in ensuring a new era awaits us – ultimately we’re looking for one where women can soar, based solely on skill and effort, unencumbered by stereotypes and barriers that are seen or unseen. We have the power to make this vision real through our actions, so long as we retain sight of what meaningful inclusion makes possible. We can collectively spearhead bias through purposeful policies and working practices and not just for gender equity, but for unlocking human potential – creating workplaces, economies, and societies that are better for it, with no place for marginalisation or missed potential.

We should hold a vision of a future world which we can build through inclusion close to our hearts. This is a world where young women can dream without limits – confident that their talents, and not their gender, will shape their opportunities. It’s a world where businesses can tap into the absolute best minds, and maximise innovation through diversity of thought.

The possibilities for meaningful inclusion are of course endless, not just for gender equity, but for unlocking human potential – creating workplaces, economies, and societies that are better for it. Every small step takes us forward, and when we stand together, anything is possible. After all, empowering women empowers humanity.

**This is an excerpt from a speech given by Joanna Lee-Miles at an International Women’s Day collaboration between Shakespeare Martineau, Phoenix Business Club and Midlands Women in Tech Awards.*



Annual dinner and awards

A Birmingham-based language technology business claimed a hat-trick of honours at Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce's annual dinner and awards.

Word360 – which is based in Edgbaston and provides translation and interpretation services in 350 languages and dialects – took home the overall Greater Birmingham Business of the Year crown, having also won the Excellence in Contribution to the Community and Excellence in Customer Service categories.

The award winners were announced in front of more than 1,000 people at the ICC in Birmingham city centre.

The event was hosted by broadcaster and comedienne Noreen Khan and supported by headline sponsors Birmingham City University and Elonex.

Co-founded in 2013 by husband-and-wife team Tiku Chauhan and Kavita Parmar, Word360 works with public, private and not-for-profit organisations to help them deliver access to services through its own tech platform Wordskii.

Its network of self-employed interpreters can help clients with translation services, either in-person or via video or telephone.

The service is used by multiple sectors, but the team has focused on health and social care and especially supporting local communities and people from disadvantaged and hard-to-reach backgrounds.

Kavita Parmar said: "Having grown from a grassroots business in Handsworth to one of the largest language service providers in the UK, it's an honour to be recognised both as a woman in tech and for our role in supporting communities in



Host Noreen Khan with Word360 co-founder Kavita Parmar and Johnathan Dudley from award sponsor Crowe



Dr Hany El-Banna, founder of Islamic Relief, receiving the President's Award from Nasir Awan

Main picture: GBCC CEO Henrietta Brealey addressing the audience

Birmingham and across the UK. Awards like this mean so much for reinforcing that diversity is not just a buzzword but a catalyst that drives innovation and success in this region.

"Our Wordskii technology, developed in-house, today enables the delivery of any language, at any time, at the point of care. This is redefining the patient experience for thousands using the NHS, as well as for FTSE 100 companies internationally."

Judges described Word360 as "an excellent company that exemplifies Birmingham – combining tech, innovation and entrepreneurialism with diversity and wellbeing for communities.

"It demonstrates a high level of flexibility and responsiveness to customer needs, using data and understanding of communities to target provision and find out about emerging needs.

"Their innovative technology solutions change the experience of both patients and healthcare providers.

"Word360 really understand what is needed to give the most diverse people access to health and care services and enable communications for all abilities."

The other winners on the evening included: Millennium Point (Excellence in Hospitality, Retail & Events), Birmingham Hippodrome (Excellence in Inclusive People Development), Ginho (Excellence in International Business), Evac+Chair International (Excellence in Manufacturing) and Forensic Pathways (Excellence in Technology & Innovation).

Dr Hany El-Banna, founder of Islamic Relief, was the recipient of the President's Award.



Jas Rohel, Steve Allen, Zoe Bennett and Suzy Verma



Aftab Chugthai, Anita Champaneri and Kavita Parmar



Yetunde Dania and Louise Teboul



Ben Leary and Deb Leary, centre, with the Forensic Pathways team



Andy Street



Grace Morgan, Demi Philbin, Henry Wilkinson, Leanne Grey and Jemima Rutherford



Steve Brittan, Cllr Tony Briggs and Dr Nasir Awan

Cllr Jayne Francis, Anita Bhala, Deborah Cadman, Craig Cooper and Henrietta Brealey

Curtain raiser

Guests from the region's corporate, sporting and political worlds gathered at Fazenda Birmingham to hear the plans for the Kids' Village charity which was set up to build the UK's first holiday village for children with critical illnesses. Speeches were given by the charity's founder Sam Fletcher-Goodwin and the mayor, Andy Street, while chairman Doug Wright and acting CEO Paul Faulkner discussed the plans to raise the £5 million that will be required to build the village on a 30-acre site outside Lichfield.



Far left: Nigel Waldron, Jas Sandhu and Kate Wright



Sam Fletcher-Goodwin and Galal Yafai



Anita Chumber, Dr Inez Brown, Galal Yafai and Ifraz Ahmed



Rai Singh and Amina Hussain



Craig McVoy, Mabs Ali and Matt Jones



Martin Hall and Tom Bower



Sam and Rachel Dalton-Thorpe



Anjna Mahey and Claire Fletcher (above)
Steve Allen and Katrina Cooke (top)



Paul Faulkner, Andy Street, Galal Yafai and Doug Wright MBE



Above from top: Richard McNeilly and Narinder Paul
Doug Wright MBE and Ninder Johal
Claire Fletcher and Richard Whitwell



Nicola Turner MBE and Henry Carpenter

Corporate cavalry

Kids' Village has the potential to transform the lives of critically ill children, and their families, for the better. The plans are in place, the will is there . . . all that's needed is a successful £5 million fundraising campaign. Who better to take on the challenge of achieving it than two of the region's most prominent charity-minded business leaders, Doug Wright and Paul Faulkner?

JON GRIFFIN meets them.

They are two of the highest profile business figures in the West Midlands with enviable CVs and hard-earned track records of consistent commercial achievement over many years.

Doug Wright and Paul Faulkner have been around the corporate block more than a few times, with a string of executive roles from McDonald's franchisee with nearly 3,000 on the payroll and deputy lieutenant (in Wright's case) to CEO roles at Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, Aston Villa and Nottingham Forest football clubs (in the case of Faulkner).

But stellar careers and boardroom success do not necessarily tell the whole story.

Wright and Faulkner, as chair and interim CEO respectively, are the executive faces of Kids' Village, a new national charity aiming to support critically ill children and their families by enabling them to escape the treadmill of their daily lives to the beauty of the Staffordshire countryside.

Both men have been familiar figures in the West Midlands charity sector for many years, with Wright – who was awarded an MBE for services to charity – recently completing a six-year term as chair of Ronald McDonald House Charities in Birmingham, helping raise more than £10 million, and Faulkner holding leading roles with Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital NHS Trust Charity, Cure Leukaemia, and Town Hall and Symphony Hall.

Now they are keen to share their hopes and ambitions for Kids' Village, the region's latest charitable venture with the potential to become a truly national organisation and home of the UK's first holiday location providing free breaks for critically ill children.

When we meet in Wright's offices in Sutton Coldfield, both men reflect on potentially life-altering personal traumas which helped forge their ambitions to help charities – and eventually crystallise their vision for A Kids Village.

Wright was just 20 years old when he was involved in a car accident which left him paralysed for months after breaking his neck. He had started work with McDonalds at the age of 16 in July 1981 as a part-time cleaner on 93p an hour, and by 20 had climbed the ladder to become the fast-food giant's youngest ever manager in Oxford. But his life was shattered by a car accident on Friday June 13, 1986.

"I was just 20 years old and broke my neck in a car crash," he recalls. "I was in Stoke Mandeville for a very long period of time."

"I think it was probably my lightbulb moment when I realised that if I ever did get better – I wasn't expected to walk again – I would certainly try to repay and do something to help others. The accident still haunts me but I have tried to use it as a reason to do charity work."

"You never know when you are going to need a charity. For me, it was a routine night out and you end up paralysed from the neck down. At Stoke Mandeville there was so much help. People gave up a wheelchair for me to use."

"My mum and dad wouldn't have been able to afford one and that allowed us to get out for the day and back home. It's not just the giving, it's the tangible difference you make to somebody's life."

"It was about three and a half months before I could walk again. I have still got no feeling in my left-hand side."

In Faulkner's case, the birth of his eldest son William in September 2013 would reinforce his already strong

lifelong commitment to helping those less fortunate.

"Within the first few days we were told he had cystic fibrosis. Suddenly myself and my wife Jane found ourselves in Birmingham Children's Hospital and being told the news."

"I thought that wasn't meant to be me. I am a trustee, I am meant to help other people who are going through these things. Suddenly it was that role reversal, in some ways echoing what Doug had gone through, and it heightened my lived experience about how important charity is."

"I leaned on the Cystic Fibrosis Trust and the Children's Hospital an awful lot. I was a customer now as well as a trustee."

"William, who is healthy, goes in four times a year for checks and we are in there using all their facilities, stuff I have helped to raise money for. It is funny how life turns out – it doesn't half humble you. It does fuel the fires and make you realise how important it is to help others."

With their commitment to charitable work reinforced by those kinds of experience, both businessmen are now bringing their considerable talents and expertise to Kids' Village, a project originally inspired by the example of Sam Fletcher-Goodwin, from Lichfield.

At the age of nine Sam was diagnosed with a form of cancer called Rhabdomyosarcoma which afflicts young children, causing tumours which can grow in any part of the body.

Sam and her family were able to help the youngster's recovery by flying over to Florida to visit the Give Kids the World Village Resort – a facility which would ultimately provide the inspiration for today's vision for Kids' Village.

As Faulkner relates: "Sam said the week she spent in the facility in the United States



Computer-generated image of one of the 10 four-bedroom lodges at Kids' Village

was transformational; she came out of the chemotherapy period and it gives you that confidence back.”

Wright and Faulkner believe the proposed complex just off the A38 at Wychnor near Lichfield will create a similar experience to its counterpart in Florida, comprising 10 four-bedroom lodges and a central facility known as the Hive.

Wright says: “I had finished Ronald McDonald’s House in the middle of last year and had quite a few offers of chair roles nationally but there was really nothing that I saw as the next step in my charitable work.

“Then the Kids’ Village landed in my inbox one day and I met the Fletchers and their story was so real. The introduction came in from Sir John Crabtree saying they had a dream and wanted a team of people to bring it to fruition. To have the opportunity to chair a national charity in our backyard felt incredibly special.

“I own and run a business which started with 33 employees and now has almost 3,000 employees and my guiding principle is that I have tried to use my own personal business success as a force for

good to help others – that has been at the heart of it but absolutely driven by my accident.

“It felt like when Kids’ Village came up that I had to do it, it just ticked every box. It was going to make a tangible difference to families, it was within the West Midlands community, and it felt like a good evolution for myself personally. Once I met the family, I knew I had to do it.

“Sam had facial cancer when she was nine and 21 years later for someone to have a vision and create something they had seen in America where you could create a respite holiday village for children with critical illnesses was incredibly enchanting, so I agreed to meet them and have a chat.”

Wright was quickly convinced of the Kids’ Village idea, a project which already had planning permission after land was donated to the charity by Staffordshire farming family the Mercers, who operate a range of enterprises including the Packington Free Range pork and poultry brand. Meanwhile Sam’s father, long-established businessman Gary, has ploughed in considerable investment for

fees and surveys to help get the scheme off the ground.

“Sometimes we have all gone through life and someone comes up with an idea and you think that is genius, it’s so simple, why didn’t I think of that?” says Faulkner.

“It’s a compelling idea and you think let’s make it happen. Yes, £5 million is a lot of money to raise but with land thanks to the Mercers and with planning permission we are a good way there.

“Doug and I have a good, deep friendship and he was telling me about this charity in May or June last year. I could see Doug’s enthusiasm and I thought this is doable and achievable.

“Knowing Doug, his energy and the way he drove Ronald McDonald House forward I thought this will be great.”

Both men are now preparing to help galvanise the £5 million fundraising effort to bring the Kids Village dream to fruition.

Faulkner continues: “We need to introduce Kids’ Village to people. It is not about launching it because it has been going for five years. But it has been under the radar while they have been sorting out planning permission, the land and the like.

“It is now in effect that rebirth moment and with my ability to hopefully leverage my network connections in conjunction with Doug and the reputations we have hopefully built up in the region over time, we thought let’s do it.”

Both men are keen to stress that Kids’ Village can be a genuine UK first – a charity with its roots in the West Midlands but potentially spreading its tentacles

much further afield.

As Wright says: “We will never get such an amazing opportunity to create impact and legacy. The first thing we have got to do is write the opening chapter, make as many friends and have as many advocates and ambassadors.

“Right now not too many people know about this charity but we have started to talk about it. This has legs and impact and is absolutely deliverable.”

Faulkner adds: “The corporate community really matters to us with our business links. We are going to start here in the West Midlands but this would apply to people all over the country, where businesses are looking for a charity of the year or they are doing a particular event and they want a charity partner. We want to be the charity on the night, to tap into that.”

The eventual ambition is for Kids’ Village to provide a first-of-its-kind UK facility which will bring respite and new experiences for over 4,000 under-18s a year and their families from the initial location in the heart of the Staffordshire countryside.

Says Wright: “We would anticipate fundraising taking between 18 and 24 months – that is our best and pragmatic timescale to get to £5 million. It is a 12-month build period and we would hope to be on site around Easter 2026.

“The site is almost Willy Wonka-esque. It’s beautiful, in the heart of the English countryside and it just feels like when your world is full of trouble, what better place to go and just relax?”

Both men are hopeful that Kids’ Village can ultimately spread its wings well beyond its Wychnor location. Faulkner says: “We



Paul Faulkner, left, discusses plans with business partner Doug Wright

will partner up with local attractions where we can take them off-site.

“Alton Towers is not too far away, Birmingham is 25 miles from the site where there are places like Cadbury World, St George’s Park is around the corner, and Ben Robinson, the owner of Burton Albion, has already reached out to us on the back of this.”

Wright expects demand to be “exceptionally high” for the facilities on offer at Kids’ Village with youngsters referred from the likes of Birmingham Children’s Hospital, Make A Wish UK and various national charities.

It may be early days for the charity and the £5 million fundraising campaign but both these pillars of the West Midlands business community are clearly determined to turn the dream of a UK charitable first into reality.

“It’s rare to say ‘created in the West Midlands’. To me that badge of honour saying it is made here and it’s scalable and can be replicated around the country . . . that’s why we are sitting here today,” concludes Wright.

■ For further information visit kidsvillage.org.uk



The village will have a central facility known as the Hive

“I think it was probably my lightbulb moment when I realised that if I ever did get better – I wasn’t expected to walk again – I would certainly try to repay and do something to help others. The accident still haunts me but I have tried to use it as a reason to do charity work.”

By CHRIS MEAH
Founder and CEO of School of Code



The AI invasion

Surrender your data, supercharge your life

The personal price of privacy

I hate social media. It's a time-sucking vortex of distraction. It's a soul-sucking hell of comparison to others. It creates echo chambers that stifle intellectual curiosity and nuance. I try not to hate it. I can (just about) stomach LinkedIn – professional, clear purpose, not 100% vacuous all of the time.

On the pile of unmet New Year's resolutions are promises I will post more, engage more, and commit to consistent effort in embracing the platforms... but my privacy gets the better of me each and every time.

That privacy comes at a cost. A version of me willing to post consistently, share enthusiastically, and be an open digital book – they would reap the benefits of a digital media which allows a huge, never-before accessible scale of reach to everyone.

That means new connections, new opportunities, and the flywheel of content turning on its own steam – your content be seen by people while you sleep. Even with a modest audience and reach, each post might be seen by 2,000 people – 10 posts a week means 20,000 views.

Social media influencers get it – it's more important to be seen, be in the conversation, be front of mind, than it is to be private.

I don't get it. The price for that is missed connections, missed opportunities, and more manual effort to achieve the same results as those social media butterflies.

I'm a social media luddite – I like the idea of being in the room with people. I still have options and choices. I could maybe even hire a room, fill the event with 100 people and tell them my message. A lot of work, but it's still in my power to try that. However, in order to compete with just that one week of social media posts I would have to plan, organise, and run that event 200 times. That would be a busy year,

never mind week!

As much as I resist, I can't deny the reality: in the age of the internet, privacy has a price. And as we've become accustomed to with our recent inflation experience, that price is going to shoot up!

The AI revolution: context is king

The trade-off for privacy in the social media world is reach and opportunity.

That's acceptable to some of us. We don't all need to be influencers, or all need to sell a product or message or brand.

But the trade-off for privacy with AI will be value creation – a much higher-stakes game. AI's transformative potential is dependent on access to personal data and context.

Although it's already incredibly powerful, interacting with AI still feels hollow after you get over the initial buzz of having a conversation with a machine.

These systems are reliant on huge amounts of data. ChatGPT was reportedly

trained on 570 GB of data, from web pages to books. That's huge but given that each day 2.5 quintillion bytes of data are produced by internet users, it's barely scratching the surface. But I'm not sure it's a lack of this world data that is stopping AI being useful. It's personal context.

The reason programming is so annoying is because you're having to tell a computer, essentially a rock, how to do something in the real world. A rock has no ability to understand the real world, it has no context, and so programmers have to painstakingly input this context into the computer through the frustrating process known as coding.

A similar pain can be felt when you use Large Language Models, or LLMs. If you ask the AI to perform a simple task, you'll often be underwhelmed with a generic, passable response. That's because the system has no context.

There are plenty of tips and tricks that help improve performance when writing prompts, but the biggest win by far is giving as much context as possible.

That's the job of prompt engineers; what programmers are to software, prompt engineers are to LLMs. They create prompts that are full of clear, well-defined, well-structured context so the AI knows what we want, why we want it, and how we want it. Creating these prompts is still a painful process, but I believe it's a temporary pain.

The Faustian bargain: data for superpowers

If context improves AI, and it can handle incredibly large data sets, then I can see only one outcome – you give AI access to your whole life. Everything.

It means that when you say "give me some recipes for a dinner with Sonia and Jason" it will already know what's in your fridge from analysing all your shopping habits and Amazon baskets. It will already know your allergies, preferences, current fad diet requirements, and will even have access to your conversation history with Sonia and Jason to piece together their

requirements too.

It will remember that the first time you all ate together was in Italy, so it would recommend some Italian dishes to bring nostalgia to the party. That results in the best possible recommendation for you rather than a completely generic set of recipes, for no extra effort or monetary cost – all that was required was you to share your life with AI.

That's just something trivial, like picking a meal to entertain whoever Sonia and Jason are. Think about the impact on life in general, financial advice, health recommendations, work decisions, productivity in general. AI will be able to know you better than you know yourself – and take actions on your behalf in a fraction of the time and probably with better outcomes.

The benefits of AI will create an irresistible incentive for people to trade privacy for performance.

But there are hurdles to get over. Yet like with me and my approach to social media, you might be feeling like it's not

quite for you. Despite seeing the benefits, you might wrestle with your privacy. In doing that, you'll no doubt be left behind at warp speed by everyone able to take full advantage of AI rather than having to painstakingly write complex prompts just to get something useful out of the system.

I think most people are going to move towards willingly inviting AI into their lives, in order to reap the benefits and not be left behind by the coming wave of value. That's really going to put a spotlight on how secret, safe, and secure your data is.

The path forward: federated data and privacy innovation

Innovations in data privacy and security will be critical to realising AI's potential while protecting individual rights. Rather than all our data going to live in a big cloud in the sky, we might be on the verge of federated data being the mainstream.

Sir Tim Berners-Lee is a champion of Solid, an open-source private data store for people. Apple is the £2 trillion behemoth who might be best placed to leap out of the AI shadows and take a lead on AI with federated data privacy – the data might live on your device alongside your local AI, you can be fully in control of who sees your data, and if it's sent anywhere it can be anonymised.

"Privacy is built into all of Apple's products and services from the ground up, from the moment users open their devices to every time they use an app. Apple products and features include innovative privacy technologies designed to minimise how much user data anyone can access."

As individuals, we will surely demand robust data protections as a prerequisite for sharing our lives with AI. Companies and developers must prioritise privacy and security at every stage of the AI pipeline. And policymakers must update regulations to keep pace with AI's rapid evolution, ensuring that our laws protect privacy without stifling innovation.

With AI, it's not a question of if, but when.

Will we rise to the challenge and build a future where the benefits of AI are available to all, while our most intimate data remains secure?

The choices we make now will determine the answer.



Carl Richardson with Lt Col Charlie Whitting

Businessman becomes honorary army colonel

Well-known Black Country businessman Carl Richardson has been appointed honorary colonel of 4 Mercian regiment.

The appointment will see Mr Richardson – who leads the Richardson family business alongside his two brothers Martyn and Lee – working closely with the regiment's reserve battalion, providing support to its leadership and fostering shared pride and unity within the battalion.

The Richardson family has a long history of supporting the UK armed forces, with Carl previously serving as honorary colonel of 35th Signals Regiment as well as an honorary captain in the Royal Navy Reserve. Seven family members have also been in uniform in living memory.

Mr Richardson said: "On behalf of my family I am honoured to take up this role.

"The role of reservists within our military is becoming ever more important, and we look forward to working closely with Lt Col Charlie Whitting and his team, offering support to the 4 Mercian family as best we can.

"The Army is a highly respected institution and we would like to think our business shares their high esteem for the values of integrity, resourcefulness and teamwork."

The Mercian Regiment is known as 'The Heart of England's Infantry' because its soldiers were historically recruited from the five counties that formed the ancient Kingdom of Mercia: Cheshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire, as well as the Black Country and the Wirral.

Entrepreneur named as charity ambassador

A prominent West Midlands entrepreneur has been named as the first charity ambassador for Birmingham Dogs Home.

PJ Ellis, a digital marketer and co-founder of the LoveBrum charity, was described by the dogs' home as "a proud Brummie and even prouder dog dad".

Mr Ellis adopted his Yorkshire Terrier Bo from Birmingham Dogs Home in 2020.

He has been enlisted to help support the charity's mission to rescue, reunite and rehome stray and abandoned dogs across the West Midlands and South Staffordshire area.

One of his first duties as an ambassador was representing the charity at Crufts on March 8.

He said: "I am so honoured to be an ambassador for Birmingham Dogs Home. I feel passionately about the work of this charity, especially after adopting a dog of

my own from them. Little Bo has changed our lives."

Fi Harrison, head of fundraising and communications at Birmingham Dogs Home, added: "We are so proud that PJ is going to be working with us."



PJ Ellis with Fi Harrison

Nominate someone who makes an impact

A call has gone out for nominations to honour volunteers who make an impact in their local community.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the West Midlands county and the West Midlands lieutenantancy, the 50forWM50 campaign has been launched to recognise and thank volunteers across the region who are making a difference in their local communities.

With nominations now open, the West Midlands Lieutenantancy, supported by United by 2022 – the official charity of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games – are inviting members of the public to take part and share the stories of inspirational volunteers.

For further information, and to submit a nomination, visit www.unitedby2022.com/50forwm50/

■ A Walsall wellbeing clinic is hoping to double its business following a second funding boost to support its expansion.

At Home Holistic Therapies received a £6,500 funding boost from Walsall Business Support to expand its services. This follows a £2,500 investment from the charity 12 months ago.

The clinic, which specialises in acupuncture and holistic wellbeing therapies, received a £6,500 grant to replace outdoor signage and construct two additional treatment rooms which will allow the business to double the number of customers it can treat from 45 to 90 per week.

■ Insurance specialist Evolution Claims Management has partnered with an HR expert to further boost engagement for its growing workforce.

It has joined forces with Ambition HR, led by people strategy and development specialist Liz Cullis.

Ambition HR has carried out a review with recommendations for enhancing the culture at the Oldbury-based firm, which deals with national and international customers.

The importance of transformations during economic uncertainty

In this pre-election period and with inflation rates still above the government's 2% target, business uncertainty can still be felt.

Coupled with geopolitical tensions and UK GDP growth predictions for 2024 estimated at just 0.7%, we now find the country in a technical recession.

Despite the unpredictable year ahead, smart businesses face adversity with an opportunistic mindset, and many industries are instigating change programmes to add value in the medium to long term. This renewed interest is key in order to meet the fast evolution of digital technologies, address staff retention, improve customer service and stay ahead of competition.

During challenging economic times, it may feel counterintuitive to spend on capital or change projects, particularly if income streams or budgets are under intense scrutiny. However, a shift in market conditions often leads to business having to respond and adapt to new conditions, such as changes in customer behaviour or competitive landscape. Operational improvements and better working practices for employees that are borne out of investing in change will ultimately help to reduce longer-term costs and keep leaders ahead of the curve. Adaptability in difficult circumstances is pivotal, so it's necessary for companies to understand why implementing robust change programmes will facilitate growth and how to manage their spending.

As the meteoric advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics continues, it is essential for companies to stay up to speed with the latest software and equipment to alleviate pressures on individuals and quicken responses for improved services. Therefore, investments into technology and digital transformations are often a great way to boost growth quickly during uncertain economic time. Research has even shown the impacts which investing in intangible



By EMAN AL-HILLAWI

assets can have on performance, such as improving a company's market position, financial position and its value in the stock market.

Fast-tracking technological advancements such as automating processes could help to cut business costs and the price paid by consumers as a result. In an inflationary economy, when hiring and retaining staff can be difficult, digital transformations can help to reduce attrition. Developing remote collaboration facilities to decrease worker travel costs is one such example.

Unsurprisingly, such investments require companies to manage their spending effectively. Business transformations should be utilised to resolve a problem, boost a company's efficiency or create new services which didn't exist before. When faced with a difficult financial climate, rather than stopping transformation journeys



Picture: Layla Bird

completely – which could ultimately result in higher costs once the transformation resumes – it's important for businesses to prioritise the areas which need improvement most and allocate funding accordingly.

Be sure to take employees through the change and equip them with the understanding and motivation to adjust. During the pandemic, many organisations utilised the quieter period to retrain or upskill their workforces. Investing in people development during unstable times is a way to future-proof the workforce, ensuring that employees possess the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital environment. This will enable them to adjust to new ways of working, improve loyalty, and position themselves in a healthy state for the return to growth.

Organisations should be strategic and proactive in their business planning to always ensure programmes will help them to respond to the constantly changing demands of consumers. Businesses should endeavour to be forward-thinking and progressive – acknowledging and acting upon the opportunities which transformations can provide is often half the battle.

Flexibility and agility are equally essential when it comes to planning for change within or ahead of economic hardship. Companies should avoid fixation on the 'perfect implementation' and instead foster an iterative approach to change. Doing so will not only help them to successfully manage their transformation journeys and spending but provide space for them to focus on optimising communications, engagement and stakeholder management. Achieving this and taking opportunities to view any changes from different perspectives to prioritise the developments needed will give transformations the best chance of success.

To find out more about Entec Si's work, visit entecsi.com or email info@entecsi.com



Eman Al-Hillawi is CEO of Birmingham-based business change consultancy, Entec Si. Entec Si is a business change consultancy, specialising in business strategy, technology and digital transformation. Operating across a range of industry sectors, the firm has significant experience of leading business transformation, projects and programme delivery and people change.

Access to finance

SPECIAL REPORT



Options available to help small businesses

A £400 million fund has been launched by the British Business Bank in a bid to help smaller businesses in the West Midlands prosper.

Midlands Engine Investment Fund II is intended to drive sustainable economic growth by supporting new and growing businesses across the whole of the Midlands through investment strategies that best meet the needs of these firms.

It includes a range of finance options with loans from £25,000 to £2 million and equity investments up to £5 million to help small and medium-sized businesses start up, scale up or stay ahead.

The Midlands Engine Investment Fund II aims to build on the success of the inaugural Midlands Engine Investment Fund, a £300 million fund which to date has supported 440 businesses in the West Midlands since its launch in 2017.

British Business Bank said the new fund will help hundreds more businesses to achieve their potential and further increase the supply and diversity of early-stage finance by providing options to firms that might otherwise be unable to secure investment. Funding is designed to help smaller businesses with activities including expansion, product or service innovation, new processes, skills development, and capital equipment.

Three fund managers have been appointed to manage the fund in the West Midlands. BCRS Business Loans will manage the smaller loans part of the fund (£25,000 to £100,000), Frontier Development Capital will be responsible for larger loans (£100,000 to £2 million) and Mercia Ventures will manage equity deals (up to £5 million).

Louis Taylor, chief executive officer of British Business Bank said: "Small businesses are at the heart of The Midlands' economy. Since launching in 2017, the first Midlands Engine Investment Fund has so far created more than 4,000 jobs across the region by backing 739 smaller businesses.

"The first Midlands Engine Investment Fund provided a blueprint for how we can support entrepreneurs and founders, whoever they are and wherever they are in the region, to access the funds and support they need. This new fund will allow us to continue supporting business owners across the Midlands, whether they're at the start of their journey or are already running an established firm.

"Promoting growth by ensuring entrepreneurs can access the finance they need regardless of where and who they are is one of the Bank's strategic objectives, and vital to unlocking the full potential of the UK's smaller businesses."

Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Gareth Davies MP said: "Small businesses are the engine of the economy, which is why having access to funding like this is vital to help them thrive and grow, creating jobs and spreading opportunity everywhere.

"As the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, the Midlands propelled the UK into a new era of technological and economic growth and now the next generation of entrepreneurs will have the support they need to continue this success."

Second Home Studios, an animation and production house based in Birmingham, received significant investment from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund in January 2023. The funding enabled the team to renovate its Digbeth premises, obtain new equipment and generate 16 additional jobs at Second Home Studios Ltd, further boosting the local economy.

Co-founder and creative director Chris Randall said: "The support we received from the Midlands Engine Investment Fund allowed us to expand our premises in order to embark on a brand new stop-motion animated series for Channel 5. The 40 episodes of 'Tweedy & Fluff' is the first production of its kind to come from Birmingham. The studio conversion was expansive at a time when both materials and energy costs were skyrocketing.

"No other funding existed to enable us to take such risks, so the MEIF was the only option. There typically isn't much support out there for growth on this scale for creative studios, so securing this funding meant an awful lot to our business. As a result we've been able to set up a brand new studio facility in the heart of Digbeth, which means that we can now embark on exciting new projects with new collaborators that otherwise may not have been possible."

Following the launch, the British Business Bank will be holding a series of information roadshows aimed at people working with smaller businesses including enterprise agencies, advisors, accountants, law firms and more.



The MEIF II fund managers

Gaining an insight

By STEVE WALKER

Co-founder and CEO of ART Business Loans



A group of young people aged between 16 and 25 were given an insight into the world of banking and financial services in a collaboration between Unity Trust Bank and the Prince's Trust.

The Prince's Trust 'World of Workday' event, hosted at Unity's offices in Brindleyplace, invited the young attendees to take part in a series of engaging and educational group activities, with the chance to learn more about career opportunities in the financial sector.

The programme included interactive sessions on Unity's brand and propositions, climate sustainability and financial crime departments, offering insights into the day-to-day operations and roles within the organisation.

Key sessions explored the attendees' knowledge of ethical banking and how responsible finance can make a positive social, economic and environmental impact.

The attendees also took part in an HR session which provided interview hints, tips and insights into what recruiters are looking for, and the group were also given an exclusive tour of Unity's on-site call centre.

A highlight of the event was a series of talks by speakers from Unity, who shared their personal stories and career journeys, providing motivation and encouragement to the attendees. The overarching goal of the event was to help instil confidence and skills in the young individuals to help equip

them to face the challenges of the modern job market.

The event also supported Unity's commitment to diversity and inclusion. As an organisation celebrating its 40th birthday this year, the bank aims to provide inclusive work environments, ensuring that every individual, regardless of their background or personal challenges, has the support they need to succeed.

Nina Chaidemenaki, insights and partnership manager at Unity said: "Engaging with the young participants was a truly enriching and informative experience.

"The initiative not only provided valuable insights for our attendees, but also served as a learning opportunity for the Unity colleagues taking part. We are excited about the positive impact this partnership continues to have and we look forward to building on this success in the future."

Emma Grier, corporate partnerships manager at the Prince's Trust, added: "Unity led a fantastic 'World of Workday' for a group of young people from our TEAM programme.

"They learnt about a broad range of roles available within the organisation and sector, and it was great to see staff across the organisation taking the time to engage the young people in learning about their departments and roles."

The Prince's Trust charity was founded in 1976 by King Charles III to help young people across the UK build confidence, learn new skills and start a career.

Unity has partnered with the Prince's Trust since October 2022 with employees taking part in a variety of engagement and sponsorship activities.



Unity Trust Bank welcomes new CEO

A Birmingham-based ethical bank has welcomed a new leader after its previous chief executive officer stepped down at the end of last year.

Unity Trust Bank, a commercial bank which serves SMEs and other organisations, has appointed Colin Fyfe as its CEO.

Mr Fyfe joins Unity with more than 40 years' experience in the banking sector including 10 years as CEO at two building societies.

With a deep understanding of commercial business and the wider regulatory banking environment, Colin brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the role.

Mr Fyfe said: "Unity's very strong track record, its social purpose and driving ambition are compelling.



Colin Fyfe

"Personal service and relationship banking combined with community good is a great proposition for all SMEs and socially conscious organisations."

Alan Hughes, chairman of Unity Trust Bank, said: "I'm very pleased to announce Colin's appointment. Unity has grown four-fold since it became independent in 2015 and Colin will be a driving force for the next stage of Unity's progress.

"He joins Unity with a strong record of innovation, transformation and growth."

Colin succeeds Deborah Hazell who stepped down from her position as CEO at year end.

Mr Hughes continued: "On behalf of the board, I would like to thank Debbie for her commitment and wide contribution to Unity.

"Most notably she has improved our approach to impact, delivered the new digital banking platform for our customers and raised Unity's profile externally. We are grateful to her."

Borrowing in a post-Covid world

When looking at finance for businesses, the post-Covid period has remained a challenging time for the vast majority of businesses, but especially small ones.

Following the banking crisis in 2008, new sources of alternative and additional finance entered the market and over the years there was an expectation that all businesses with a viable request would find the funds needed from one source or another.

The big issue which has always remained is not just whether the businesses know about all the sources, but also how to access them. The word 'discouraged' still features heavily as businesses don't believe they will succeed in applying for financial support and therefore do without.

This is surprising and disappointing as there have been large numbers of initiatives and projects that have been designed to ease that problem.

Whatever they are called and wherever they are based, the initiatives have increased over the years under the wider banner of business support provided by the public and private sector and academia: accelerators, growth hubs, innovation centres, local authorities, chambers of commerce and universities in addition to targeted local community-based programmes.

There have been so many changes in the sources of finance and types of finance available including local grant schemes, angel funding, debt, and equity. I am far from certain that the wider support network is fully aware of what is available now and where to go for help. This creates an ongoing problem in a fragmented referral network.

After the avalanche of government support and funding to help SMEs to

survive and recover, it is not at all surprising that access to appropriate finance now re-emerges as an issue with tough economic conditions and increased interest rates.

Some businesses prospered in Covid, and some small businesses even used the helpful terms of the Bounce Back Loan Scheme as a method of retaining funds for the inevitable rainy day or to build a war chest to take opportunities for growth. Many though were in survival mode and positive news appeared from the March 24 budget that the British Business Bank Recovery Loan Scheme is to be extended to March 2026, rebranded as the Growth Guarantee Scheme.

Businesses still do need funds to survive, and many have used their reserves both from the business and personally are finding life in searching for funds more difficult. As usual when the economy tightens, the banks have reduced their appetite at lower debt levels, especially below £250,000.

Many businesses are unable to meet lenders' initial requirements for financial information, both past and future. Covid lending, especially the Bounce Back Loans, has distorted the market. It is no longer as simple as putting in a self-certification and seeing funds in the bank account in one day.

Those that borrowed simply to survive lockdown today face a sterner challenge as lenders will be looking at businesses which have recently struggled to produce profits and have borrowed more to survive. The lenders will be looking to forecasts rather than making decisions on past performance. It does seem from our own experiences that smaller businesses are struggling to produce these promptly, and those that have borrowed heavily to survive need to seek help in looking at the alternatives including restructuring of existing debt.

Businesses, according to recent surveys, look for a very speedy response in seeking funding support. This is usually found online but there are dangers. The emergence of algorithm-based decision making has, in my view, led to decisions to lend not being based upon the business proposition but more on the asset base of the individuals concerned. We are seeing far too many businesses that do not spend enough time looking at the terms of the loans that they are offered including the period of repayment and too many that do not firstly take any advice on the sources available and serviceability of the loans. Our experience reveals businesses have been offered loans over far too shorter term and in some cases at eye watering interest rates. Examples of Wonga-type lending is appearing in the business sector at 35%-45%

So where does a small, ambitious business go for help and guidance in seeking both support and funding?

The starting point is the website of the British Business Bank which has details of support programmes, grants, and details of types of finance and the actual funders throughout the UK. For smaller loans of up to £150,000, community development finance institutions might not only provide the answer but could be the gateway to other help.

Accountants, corporate finance teams and commercial finance brokers should also be explored as a major part of the jigsaw.

The good news is that there are funds available for borrowers who meet the most important criteria of all that of showing the ability to repay.

Their total needs now might be met by a number of providers working together.

Help for businesses who want to grow

Not-for-profit co-operative BCRS Business Loans is to invest in businesses looking to grow and boost employment opportunities in the West Midlands and Wales through a fund backed by a mainstream lender.

Lloyds Bank has become the first major banking group back the new £62 million Community Investment Enterprise Fund which aims to invest in 800 small businesses nationally and support 10,500 jobs.

BCRS will offer CIEF investment to SMEs across the West Midlands and Wales who are unable to access finance from traditional sources by providing loans between £10,000 and £150,000 to support growth and recovery plans.

The new fund for small businesses operating in economically disadvantaged areas, which follows a successful first phase of CIEF funding, will be managed by Social Investment Scotland which has been investing in the social sector since 2001.

Stephen Deakin, chief executive of BCRS Business Loans said: "The backing of Lloyds Bank is a game changer for business funding in the West Midlands and Wales, offering new opportunities to kickstart



Stephen Deakin, left, with Andrew Hustwit

economic growth through the CIEF.

"BCRS Business Loans is delighted to support the delivery of the new CIEF, building on the impact we made by supporting a diverse range of businesses to grow and increase employment during the first phase.

"With the support of Lloyds Bank, the investment scheme will help ensure we continue to provide much-needed finance to small businesses across our region while stimulating local communities, creating jobs and driving economic growth.

"We look forward to building on our new relationship with Lloyds Bank to support

business success for companies in some of the most economically challenged areas in the country to bring further positive social impact."

BCRS customers benefitting from CIEF funding in the first phase included the owners of Beacon Barkers, in Stoney Bridge, Stourbridge, who secured £100,000 to support the acquisition of the kennels business and safeguarded seven jobs in the process.

Four new jobs have been created since Carrena and Darron Burness bought the company. Daycare and dog walking services have been launched as Carrena and Darron realise their ambition of running a kennel business, living on-site with their two sons.

Mr Burness said: "Through the CIEF support we have been able to turn around a local kennels business while not just supporting ourselves but also staff and the local community.

"We have increased capacity to get more dogs in, we have taken on an apprentice and provided work experience for dozens of young people by partnering with Halesowen College."

Appointment announced



Gary Ward, centre, with co-founders David Neate, left, and Justin Sparks

A Birmingham-based corporate finance firm has welcomed an experienced professional to its team.

Evolve Corporate Finance has appointed Gary Ward as partner where

he will be responsible for leading the firm's business development strategy and building client relationships.

Mr Ward brings more than 30 years of experience as a dealmaker, private equity investor and business growth expert.

He was a partner at Gresham Private Equity, held senior business development positions at both LDC and PwC, and in recent years ran his own private equity consultancy, advising and investing in businesses across the UK, Europe, and South Africa.

David Neate, partner and co-founder of Evolve, said: "This is an exciting appointment for our firm and we are delighted Gary is joining us to continue our development following a strong first 18 months since we launched Evolve.

"Gary's background, experience and expertise in leading business development in private equity and deal origination will help us to further accelerate our growth plans.

"He joins at an exciting time as we continue to build a national, partner-led practice advising owner-managers, founders, and institutions on acquisitions, disposals, and raising finance."



Investment readiness

In late 2023, Business Growth West Midlands launched a major new funding programme to provide small and medium sized businesses in the West Midlands with help and support to reach their growth potential. The Investment Readiness Programme's first cohorts of intensive, expert support to help SMEs gain external investment is underway.

C&W Business Solutions (part of the Coventry & Warwickshire Growth Hub Group) and Oxford Innovation Advice are delivering Investment Readiness – a new

UK Shared Prosperity Fund programme, on behalf of Business Growth West Midlands.

The scheme, which will run until March 31 2025, is aimed at improving the opportunities of securing private sector finance for start-ups and high-growth businesses in their early years, and to help SMEs scale-up.

The first phase of the Investment Readiness Programme is designed to help business leaders identify funding routes, and covers topics like debt and asset finance, grants, equity, crowdfunding,



and angel investment. Businesses joining Stage 1 will be invited to attend an expert-led workshop to help them gain a thorough understanding of the funding landscape and identify support for their business.

Lash Saranna, CEO & Co-Founder of Electric Zoo said of the last workshop "I felt the Investment Readiness Event was probably the most engaging event I have attended. This is the kind of support Start Ups have required."

Eligible businesses accessing Stage 2 of the programme receive up to 24 hours of expert 1:1 support, focused workshops, specialist online tools, and expert mentoring, to help their business become investment ready.

The first cohort of businesses to receive Stage 2 support is currently underway, and feedback from the programme participants so far has been excellent. Seb Mills, Managing Director of BoxRaw said "I found the workshop truly insightful; it was great to hear from individuals who have actually founded and successfully raised funds for their own businesses. I highly recommend the workshop for those about to embark on their fundraising journey or even those in the early stages of the process."

Expressions of interest are now being taken for the programme's next cohorts. Businesses can find out more and contact the programme providers at www.businessgrowthwestmidlands.org.uk/investment.



Recognition for great leadership

One of the country's largest recruitment specialists has been given an award for its innovation and leadership in removing barriers to employment and boosting social mobility.

Pertemps Network Group has been named a Purpose Coalition Champion by the organisation, headed by former Education Secretary Justine Greening, in its annual awards.

The Purpose Coalition said West Midlands-based Pertemps had demonstrated exceptional leadership on the levelling-up agenda and its "desire to use its convening power as a force for good".

The Breaking Down Barriers award came as Pertemps and the Purpose Coalition launched their new Workforce of the Future report in Westminster, following a series of meetings with industry leaders, setting out recommendations about how to better support those who are furthest from the job market.

Carmen Watson, chair of Pertemps Network Group, said: "We are incredibly proud to have been recognised with this



Tracy Evans, Pertemps Group HR and quality director, left, with Carmen Watson, Pertemps Group chair

award for our work on social mobility.

"The work we have been doing with the Purpose Coalition over the last couple of years is incredibly important. It started

with us looking at our own organisation to identify good practices in helping hard-to-reach groups into work and how best to share that we others, as recorded in our impact report.

"Following on from this, we convened a series of roundtables with industry and public-sector organisations, to discuss our shared challenges and how best to address them.

"We are now looking to the next steps – putting tangible programmes into place with our partners, to help remove barriers to employment and support the levelling-up agenda."

Rt Hon Justine Greening said: "These awards are testament to the creativity and determination of those who have put social mobility at the top of their agendas.

"Pertemps is leading the way and I want to congratulate them personally for the commitment they have shown to spreading equality of opportunity. I hope their achievements will inspire others to look at their own organisations and communities to see where they could also make a difference."



Dan Pugh, Sam Allen-Ralph and Josie Hart



Mubasher Ahmed and Will Crawford



Alexios Zachariades-Layland, Daniel Evans and Davies Okeowo



Jamie Rymer and Naomi Nash

Anniversary celebration

More than 100 business leaders and entrepreneurs gathered at Tricorn Cafe at Tricorn House to celebrate the fifth anniversary of BEC (formerly Birmingham Enterprise Community). The event was opened by board member Debbie Assinder before chief executive Daniel Evans spoke about the organisation's impact over the last five years which has included seeing alumni raise over £70 million in collective investment. Guests were treated to a nacho bar and range of drinks, as well as live music by classical guitarist and local entrepreneur Will Crawford.



Pam Waddell, Martin Ward and Fiona Latter



Dan Bridgewater, Mark O'Sullivan, Dave Evans and Daniel Evans



Andy Morrin and John Sewell

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Could you banish a traitor from your boardroom?

BY CARL JONES

We've been glued to our screens in recent weeks watching the deliciously twisted hit TV show *The Traitors*.

But aside from it being top-class entertainment with more cliffhangers than a Sylvester Stallone climbing adventure, it can also teach us some valuable lessons for succeeding in the world of business.

Could you spot a traitor in your midst, a troublemaker in your boardroom, or a duplicitous dealer who will say one thing to your face, then try to metaphorically knife you in the back?

The best working relationships are all about trust, and when that's broken it can be difficult to repair. So being able to read a person's body language is crucial.

HR experts say the biggest key to building and maintaining trust with your own colleagues is to be you. You shouldn't need any cloaks, hoods or immunity shields to hide behind.

On the TV show, traitors who triumph have perfected their rock-solid 'poker face'. Is it the same in business?

For a faithful, it can be hard to spot a traitor unless you're aware of their

'tells'. Everyone has something . . . however brief, however subtle.

On the back of the show's success, the team at casino.co.uk put a guide together on how to read a poker face.

They say: "Poker faces are something we see very often, but might not have any idea. In situations like job interviews, business meetings or at any casino table there are poker faces everywhere, it's knowing how to suss them out that is the challenge.

"There is however one way to see straight through a poker face and that is to look out for micro-expressions, which happen subconsciously.

"Micro-expressions cannot be deliberately hidden or suppressed and are difficult to spot, as they don't last for long. However, with some practice, you can learn how to spot them.

"It's important to focus as quick-fire facial movements like micro-expressions will last only half a second, this is why it's important to concentrate and try to focus on every little change in expression.

What to look out for...

SURPRISE

If someone is surprised, their eyebrows are likely to be raised and curved, and you may notice horizontal wrinkles across the forehead. Without staring, notice if their eyelids are open, with the white of the eye showing above and below the pupil. Their jaw may be slightly open, too, but there will be no tension or stretching of the mouth.

FEAR

When a person is trying to hide fear or anxiety, their eyebrows will be raised and drawn together, usually in a straight line. They may also show wrinkles in the centre of the forehead just between the eyebrows – but not across. Their eyes may have the upper white showing, but not the lower white.

DISGUST

Hiding disgust is difficult, however there are some subconscious facial movements to look out for. The eyes may be narrow, and the nose may be slightly wrinkled. Look out for a quick flash of the upper teeth, too.

ANGER

If you're having a heated conversation, or have perhaps said something out of line in the workplace, there are easy ways to spot if someone is angry at you. Look at the person's eyebrows, and notice if they are lowered and drawn together, with vertical lines between them. Their lips may also become tense, with corners down, or in a square shape. Another good way to know for sure, is if their nostrils dilate.

HAPPINESS

This is the most difficult emotion to fake, and it's easy to spot a fake smile if you know the trick. Notice if they have crow's feet near the outside of the eyes, if they don't, and their lips are open in a smile, chances are they aren't conveying genuine happiness.

SADNESS

Sad micro-expressions are not very large or noticeable and can be difficult to detect. However, they usually last slightly longer than the other micro-expressions. But look to see if the inner corners of the eyebrows are drawn in and then up, and the corners of the lips are drawn down. The lower lip may also very slightly pout out.

CONTEMPT

If you think someone dislikes you, or disagrees with your opinion, there is one thing to look out for. If one side of their mouth slightly raises, chances are you're right. This is the only asymmetrical micro-expression and it's one of the easiest to spot.

Building better connections through the power of sport at Edgbaston

As we all know, business is done with people. Establishing strong relationships with clients, partners and employees remains pivotal in creating long-term success. Exploring new ways to network and connect continues to be at the top of the agenda and provides a powerful business tool.

So, how better to develop meaningful connections than sharing a memorable experience, absorbing an electric atmosphere, and witnessing the action from some of the best sporting events the UK has to offer?

Sport naturally brings diversity and fans from a range of backgrounds. This is no different with hospitality. Bringing together a varied selection of key individuals from different companies, job roles and industries can create a lively, free-flowing space for proactive networking.

While traditional business meetings and events will always have a place, a more relaxed, natural environment can strengthen client relationships and provide a platform to connect with new contacts



on a more personal level. With space outside the conventions of formal business surroundings, conversations can spark and bonds can be built through common interests.

Sports hospitality has a way of creating unique and unforgettable memories that connect us. When considering employee incentives, team building events or staff socials, the enjoyment of watching live sport can deliver a great boost to morale. Transforming workplace culture and motivating a team is not easy; creating a sense of belonging, camaraderie and engagement through shared, lasting experiences is an excellent step in the right

direction and demonstrates a commitment to strong employee-led values.

Whether it's through the hospitality experience you choose, the level of service or the interactions with your guest, your company values will be recognised. The positive memories created can not only make a lasting impression but deliver loyalty in business through stronger relationships that have been forged.

If you are looking for that all-important face-to-face time with clients or employees, Edgbaston Stadium are gearing up for another jam-packed year of cricketing action and are proud to provide unforgettable experience from the best seats in the house with award-winning catering.

Whether it is experiencing the fast-paced, thrilling action of the Birmingham Bears in the Vitality Blast or enjoying The Hundred like never before, you are guaranteed a great day out at Edgbaston this summer.

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School wins first place in choir competition

Pupils from Dickens Heath Community Primary School were recently awarded first place at the 2023 Touchwood School Christmas Choir Competition.

The competition, hosted by Touchwood Solihull, takes place every year and has become a tradition for local residents and visitors over the 16 years since its launch.

Celebrating the diversity of talent within the Solihull community, the competition welcomes schools across the borough into the shopping centre, giving them the opportunity to perform to a local crowd and get in the festive spirit.

Receiving 877 votes, Dickens Heath Community Primary School came in top position out of a total of 20 schools who entered the competition.

Touchwood presented the school with a prize of £1,000, which will be invested in their music department to support learning and development in the arts.

Kineton Green and Tidbury Green primary schools took home the silver and bronze positions respectively, with 128 votes separating the first and second placed choirs.

Lucy Burnett, marketing manager at Touchwood, said: "The School Christmas Choir Competition is a long-standing tradition at Touchwood, and one that we are passionate about continuing. It is a pleasure to host the competition each year and showcase our young local talent to shoppers and visitors.

"The Dickens Heath choir performance stood out as a clear winner, and we congratulate the pupils on their success! We look forward to supporting the development of the Dickens Heath music



department and seeing the stars of our local community emerge."

Kate Maddock, Music Co-ordinator, Dickens Heath Community Primary School, added: "We are delighted to have won the Touchwood Christmas Choir Competition. Our choir members always love the opportunity to sing at Touchwood and it has become a significant part of our Christmas preparations. The generous prize of £1,000 is very welcome when budgets are so tight and will be reinvested into musical activities in school."

Rail training academy opens

A new rail training academy – designed to support hundreds of new training and employment opportunities for local people in the sector – has been officially opened by Andy Street, mayor of the West Midlands.

The Transport, Rail and Infrastructure Academy, which has been developed by the City of Wolverhampton College and National Infrastructure Solutions, will give individuals entry and advanced skills required to gain sustainable jobs, whilst also meeting the demand for skilled operatives to work in the construction and maintenance of train lines, tram routes and stations.


The launch took place at TRIA's new site at the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre in Dudley, where the mayor also cut the ribbon on a new Signalling Academy.

To support residents into good jobs in rail, the WMCA is investing £1.1 million to create 432 training places at the Dudley site.

Mr Street said: "Hundreds of millions of pounds are being invested right now into the region's train and tram network, with new rail lines and stations being built and new metro routes under construction.


"That's great news for the travelling public but we also need to make sure this unprecedented investment benefits local people in terms of new jobs and careers.

"I can't wait to see local people land good quality jobs in the rail industry as a direct result of this latest investment, further cementing the role of the West Midlands as the training hub of the UK."




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Raising standards

Matt Jones has combined his vision for effective education with an inherent entrepreneurial flare to create one of the UK's most successful online learning colleges. JON GRIFFIN meets the genial founder of Oxbridge.



Matt Jones – founder of Birmingham's biggest online college with a 100,000-plus student intake over the last eight years – sits in his comfortable canalside office reflecting on frustrating days at a comprehensive school in Walsall.

"I remember times when I put my hand up in a lesson saying I really don't understand what you have just shown us there. Specifically, I remember sitting A-Level maths, looking at the stuff on the board and it was just gibberish.

"Shut up and get on with it, I was told. I had a great upbringing, a two-parent family, I had everything. But actually if you are not naughty or not exceptional in mainstream schools, you kind of get ignored.

"If you were like me, middle of the road, didn't really cause any fuss or drama and just got on with it, you were pretty much ignored in that environment. Looking back, you think that was really bad teaching."

Jones never forgot those distant schoolday lessons – and around a quarter of a century later cites his classroom experiences as part motivation for his Oxbridge online college enterprise which has brought new meaning and satisfaction to the lives of tens of thousands of learners at home and abroad.

"Yes, that was a little bit of a motivation for our college. I thought wouldn't it be fantastic if you could go into one of our classrooms and you have got all the resources you could possibly want."

Today, Oxbridge – based in 21st-century offices at Aston Cross Business Village, a few hundred yards from the former homes of Brummie icons such as HP Sauce and BRMB – is testament to the educational vision of this genial Brummie who was once given such short shrift by his maths teacher.

The online college, founded by Jones back in 2015, today offers a vast range of courses from accounting and bookkeeping to animal care, childcare, criminology, diet and nutrition, and psychology with 45 staff and 120 tutors and teachers providing learning opportunities for around 10,000 students a year.

Jones, now 42, says Oxbridge offers the ultimate in 'ultra-personalised' learning, a one-stop educational shop which provides bespoke tuition for students whose ages range from nine to 94. It's all a far cry from being shouted



Innovator of the Year at the 2023 Innovation Awards

down by stressed teachers trying to control a classroom of dozens of comprehensive school teenagers.

The Oxbridge founder – who hails from 'multiple generations of Brummies' – partly attributes his latter-day business success to the example of his parents who ran a luxury goods manufacturing business in the Jewellery Quarter for 30 years.

"They were two really strong role models. They used to supply people like Harrods and Marks & Spencer. It was all traditional items like leather goods, gold-plated stuff, coin-holders, wallets. I was the only kid at school with gold-plated marbles – everyone else had steelies.

"I think I was always expected to do something by myself, either as a founder or get involved in business somehow. The majority of my family run their own businesses. I come from a family tree of entrepreneurs and founders."

Jones, an only child, was soaking up business practices from an early age, helping his parents prepare employee wage packets.

"I learned all about money by counting everyone's wages for Mum and Dad's business. Unbeknown to the staff, I would have counted the wages for them. They were always perfect – I was only six or seven."

Jones had clearly inherited good business genes and enjoyed a varied career in entertainment industry lighting,

web design, sales and running a correspondence course company before taking the plunge with Oxbridge eight years ago.

Pre-Oxbridge, he says a spell with Vodafone had instilled in him the importance of a sales background for any successful entrepreneur. "It taught me some really good skills and I think any founder or any business owner should have an ability to sell, whether it is selling themselves, the products or services.

"That served me really well but it was never enough for me. Hitting targets was really motivating but I always wanted more."

That desire to use his sales skills to greater purpose in a learning environment led to him co-founding a traditional correspondence course business.

"You would enrol with me and I then send out a load of books. You would study those books and post back assignments. It was apt for the time back then but you couldn't really deliver much to them digitally.

"We built a really thriving business and it grew fantastically. We reached 2015 and it went through an MBO. I was made an offer that I couldn't refuse. I got the sale of the business under my belt and that was obviously a really nice feeling. By the time I left, we had a couple of hundred courses."

Jones, an early enthusiast and advocate of digital technology, was keen to embrace the new opportunities provided by the internet era – and Oxbridge was born, one man's vision for an online learning operation which would mushroom over the years into a multi-million-pound turnover operation and become one of the top three businesses of its kind in the UK.

"When I started developing the concept of Oxbridge, it was all about digital-first. It was about how do we give people an experience they normally wouldn't get. My vision here is that everyone deserves a higher standard of education and as a society we improve if we are better educated. All of our courses at Oxbridge were designed to be online.

"We coined this concept of ultra-personalised learning. That's just a fancy way of saying that the course runs at a speed to suit you. In that classroom you have got all the materials you want, you have a library next door you can access, and there is unlimited tutor support.

"You are sitting in your classroom and you have got a teacher standing at the front saying 'do you want any help?' That is a real departure from mine and a lot of my cohorts' experience at school."

Jones says the Oxbridge example is ideal for students of all ages who might not fit naturally into the traditional college experience.

"We have quite an eclectic mix of students here and that is kind of by design. We have a lot of single parents, single mums who can study while the kids are asleep or have gone to nursery, and they can fit in their little 20-minute blocks of learning."

"It's all online – you can log into our portal at any time of day or night and get

access to your materials. You can start studying, you can ask questions."

Jones describes Oxbridge as a go-to college for non-mainstream people. "We deal with a lot of people with special educational needs because they don't fit into that nine-to-five college experience," he says.

The mix of students has helped boost the Oxbridge intake to around 10,000 a year. "Size-wise we are bigger than most of the colleges in this region but no one here knows about us – we are the best-kept secret of colleges in the area."

Jones passionately believes the Oxbridge learning model offers good value for money. "We sell courses for on average anywhere between £400 and

£2,000 for an entire course, which lasts somewhere between six months and two years. We are very cost-effective."

Whilst the Oxbridge founder has seen his online operation flourish over the last eight years to challenge the more traditional environments of schools and colleges, he is acutely aware that technology remains key to its future growth, including the brave new – if highly controversial – world of artificial intelligence.

Intriguingly, for an individual who was an early convert to technology when his father bought him a computer at the age of 10, Jones recognises the potential pitfalls of pushing new generations into a bewildering digital maze whilst in the same



Above and left, Matt Jones with the Oxbridge team



Trekking across the Sahara to raise money for Acorns Children's Hospice

breath highlighting the future benefits of AI.

"This organisation was kind of founded on this pursuit of 'we can do things better with technology'. I was exposed to technology really early on. Technology is rapidly changing and I feel sorry for generations who are getting caught up in this."

"We are forcing a lot of people to do things they are not cut out to do. Take my dad for example. Although he can email and can browse the internet, he doesn't want to. He wants to go into the bank and talk to someone. Stripping that away from his generation is completely unacceptable. I am a big fan of technology being there to help us – if you don't want to use it, you shouldn't have to."

"The technology we use here is as supplemental as we can possibly make it. We still have certain cohort students we send books out to. Everyone here

has access to our digital platform but we want to be as accessible as possible to everyone. There are about 20 per cent of our students who still want to study with books and I get that."

Notwithstanding such a balanced perspective on the pros and cons of the seemingly unstoppable march of 21st-century digital technology, the Jones future vision for Oxbridge envisages a threefold expansion of the business over the next three years – with a significant increase in international students who currently comprise around 13 per cent of the post-Covid intake.

Meanwhile, the man who recognises the dangers for older generations of an all-conquering digital world is eager to embrace the myriad possibilities of AI and its implications for Birmingham's fastest-growing online learning experience.

"We use AI here to supplement personalised learning. The holy grail for

"When I started developing the concept of Oxbridge, it was all about digital-first. It was about how do we give people an experience they normally wouldn't get. My vision here is that everyone deserves a higher standard of education and as a society we improve if we are better educated."

me is to have a system that adapts and builds a course around an individual. We are working on having materials that almost write themselves and present themselves to students based on individual wants and needs."

"Our AI has all the time in the world. It has read our course materials and exam papers, we can produce in-the-moment feedback to students. On average in our industry it takes 14 days to mark an assignment – we can do it within a few minutes. But we have absolutely no plans now or ever to remove jobs because of AI."

Jones, a highly committed 15-hours-a-day entrepreneur who also runs a Jewellery Quarter based telecoms business (when his schedule at the online college allows), may be a passionate advocate of the benefits of technology – but you sense the software is an essential but secondary tool to the ultimate goal of providing lifelong learning for Oxbridge students.

"At the moment we are a best-kept secret. I take a lot of personal pride in what I do. I am not in it for a quick buck, I am in it for the long term. There are no exit plans with this organisation."

"I get a real kick from seeing people do well. We have had tens of thousands of students pass courses. It is really nice to sit back and think about all these people we have actually helped."



Joining forces to transfer knowledge

A Birmingham business which produces commercial furniture has joined forces with Aston University in a knowledge transfer partnership to help boost efficiencies.

JDD Furniture designs and makes banquettes, easy chairs and roofed 'sofa dens' in various fabrics and finishes.

The business is keen to implement a cutting-edge production system, amidst rapid expansion driven by the post-Covid return to workplaces.

This system will help with the tracking of individual furniture production times and the ability to identify inefficiencies.

The company is seeking a digital production data capture system that can focus on this as well as real-time visibility into production stages, machine utilisation and addressing production time and efficiency issues.

The company is working with various members of Aston's academic staff and researcher Balint Turcsanyi, the associate who has degrees in electronics and artificial intelligence, as well as a background in industrial manufacturing.

James Mercy, director of JDD Furniture, said: "Taking this route will lead to two outcomes. Firstly, a business-focused way of tracking production and reducing inefficiencies, developed just for us, and secondly, genuinely new and creative innovations.

"This production-focused KTP is giving us access to a very qualified and very

capable individual that otherwise wouldn't necessarily be drawn to a company of our size.

"We're expecting real impact will come from this work, which is essential for us as we continue our growth plans."

Ben Clegg, professor of operations and information management at Aston University, said: "In addition to technical skills it is important to bring general systems thinking skills into the analysis, design and implementation of any socio-technical system such as a production system.

"Aston University has developed a unique approach, known as ProOH modelling, to address such a challenge.

"I am confident that JDD will be another successful application of ProOH modelling giving practical benefits and useful research insights into the application of new technologies."

Balint Turcsanyi, KTP associate, said: "I'm enjoying being the bridge between the company and the university and coming up with ideas that we can develop.

"This is the ideal role for me; a job in automation research uses my experience and skills, as well as my manufacturing experience. I'm hoping that once we have all the data systemised, machine learning will be the next step in AI decision-making for this project."

The KTP started in May 2023 and is expected to be completed in November 2025.



■ An Aston University degree apprenticeship student is celebrating after winning a national apprenticeship competition.

Billy Gamov (pictured), who is studying engineering and is due to graduate this year, has been named as the Alstom Apprentice of the Year 2024.

Alongside his studies he works full-time for the transport company as an engineering product delivery apprentice in York.

Billy said: "Firstly, I would like to thank my team and my line manager for nominating me for such a fantastic award.

"I am very grateful to have been recognised for my efforts, as it highlights the importance of alternative opportunities to help young professionals develop into their long-term careers."

"I also want to be supportive to other apprentices as my career progresses, in repayment of the overwhelming support I have received throughout my apprenticeship journey."

Dr Ahmad Baroutaji, interim head of the university's Aston Professional Engineering Centre, said: "It is wonderful to hear about Billy's success at Alstom and how he has demonstrated how degree apprenticeships can be an excellent route towards a fulfilling and successful career.

"It is one of the University's priorities to prepare our students for work and life through contemporary learning experiences enriched with professional practice across all disciplines and courses."

officially opened in September 2024.

Professor Aleks Subic, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of Aston University, said: "We are delighted that Sir Peter has agreed to be the inaugural honorary chair of the Digital Futures Institute at Aston University.

"We share many common goals, including a determination to accelerate digital innovation and digital inclusion to benefit business and society. Sir Peter's support, advocacy and insight will be a great asset to the new institute."

Aston University has announced the appointment of one of the UK's most successful business leaders, Sir Peter Rigby, as honorary chair of its new Digital Futures Institute.

Sir Peter founded SCC – the largest privately owned IT group in Europe – some 50 years ago in 1975. SCC is the core business focus of the Rigby Group which ranks highly in the UK's top privately owned businesses.

The Institute will be based on the main Aston University campus and will be



Pictured from left are Professor Aleks Subic, Sir Peter Rigby and Professor Abdul Sadka

Veteran business leader named honorary chair

Birmingham joins design network

Birmingham has become the latest city to join a global network of design and digital consultancies set up to solve real-world challenges through effective problem solving.

Design Factory Birmingham will be based at Aston University, one of just two hubs in the UK outside of London.

The city officially joined the Design Factory Global Network in February and as a result Aston University will open the doors to its state-of-the-art facilities to other organisations.

Shared understanding and common ways of working enable Design Factories in the network to collaborate efficiently across cultures, time zones and organisational boundaries fostering radical innovations.

Businesses, industry partners, entrepreneurs, staff and students will be able to collaborate on projects that will involve technologies such as 3D printers and design software.

The university will be sharing its expertise in artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing, data science and web, app and graphic design.

Professor Aleks Subic, the vice-chancellor and chief executive of Aston University, said: "The Design Factory Birmingham is another key milestone in our ambition to be a leader in science, technology, and innovation, driving socio-economic transformation in our city and region.

"It is important to the Midlands because it will make a direct contribution to

innovation led growth in partnership with industry and businesses.

"However, this is not only a local launch but also a global launch as Design Factory Birmingham is a global innovation hub, and an integral part of the Design Factory Global Network involving 39 innovation hubs around the world."

The Design Factory will include a space named after the late Dame Margaret Weston, former director of the Science Museum.

Dame Margaret had studied electrical engineering at one of Aston University's predecessor institutions and went on to become the first woman appointed to lead a national museum.



Pictured from left are Felipe Garate, Professor Aleks Subic and Professor Stephen Garrett

Recruitment company funding scholarships

One of the UK's largest independent recruitment agencies is supporting students from low-income families at Aston University by funding a number of undergraduate scholarships.

The donation from Pertemps will provide scholarships for 10 students with household incomes below £25,000.

The company has long been a supporter of Aston University, having previously donated towards Aston Medical School and supporting the university's careers and placements team with employment opportunities for students.

Carmen Watson, chair of Pertemps, met with Aston University scholarship ambassadors at Aston Students' Union to discuss her career experiences and offer advice on securing placements and entering the workforce.

She said: "We are thrilled to be supporting people from disadvantaged backgrounds with a chance to pursue their educational aspirations without the burden of financial constraints.

"Education is fundamental in the steps to employment and Pertemps are proud to be supporting and contributing towards the next generation workforce."



Carmen Watson, chair of Pertemps, with Aston University students

Signature Awards

celebration

Property auction house Bond Wolfe was crowned Business of the Year at the Signature Awards held in February. More than 500 people from the region's business community gathered at the Vox Conference Centre for the first big awards event of the year to celebrate business achievements across the region. Guests also enjoyed enthusiastic networking and speeches from organiser Ninder Johal DL, West Midlands mayor Andy Street and Alfie Best, aka The Gypsy Billionaire. Some £20,000 was raised on the evening for Acorns Children's Hospice.



Bav Tamber and Dheeram Vadgama



Ninder Johal and Robert Spittle



Ken Brown and Paul Brown



Neil Lloyd, Laura Bruce



Raaj Shamji, Jude Pearson and Safaraz Ali

Right: Monica Ghai, Amina Hussain and Arti Punn



Sheily Bharj and Jaspal Bharj



Paul Faulkner, Peter Higgs and Andrew Wilkinson



Trevor Johnson, Bobby Waris and Jamil Shabir



Matt Jones and Paul Cadman



Rebekah Taitt and Tru Powell



Aaron James, Trace Voss and Prem Jolly

celebration

Chairman hands over the baton

Jonathan Devaney has been appointed chairman of the Midlands region of the Investment Property Forum, the individual membership organisation for property investment professionals.

He takes the baton from Richard Round, who was in the post for 18 months.

Mr Devaney is co-founder of Skylark Real Estate, a boutique commercial real estate investment and development firm. He has been on the board of the Midlands IPF for two years and is responsible for organising seminars and networking events.

The IPF Midlands branch was set up in March 2000 with just 25 members. It has now grown to more than 200 members from across the East and West Midlands. The organisation provides networking events – including an annual lunch and dinner – and a seminar programme.

Richard Round, a relationship director in Lloyds Bank's commercial real estate team, handed over the reins on March 1. He will remain on the board.

He said: "It has been a privilege to helm the IPF Midlands and I wish Jonathan all the best as he takes on the chair."

During his two-year term, Mr

Devaney plans to build the membership and increase its diversity, ensuring it continues to reflect the Midlands property community.

He said: "Richard has been a dedicated and hugely popular chairman and I am proud to be following in his footsteps."

"As well as ensuring the IPF Midlands continues to offer topical events, my focus will be on boosting the membership and ensuring we remain relevant and engaging to the wide range of individuals working in the real estate investment sector across the Midlands."



Richard Round, left, and Jonathan Devaney

KWB names new director

Birmingham-based property consultancy KWB has appointed Gareth Marchment as managing director of its property management division.

He was a director at Orbit Property Management where he oversaw a nationwide portfolio of clients and was instrumental in generating significant company growth during his 15-year tenure. Before that he held posts at Granite Property Partners and Bruton Knowles.

His new responsibility is to accelerate KWB's growth across the Midlands and nationwide.

The division specialises in the management of new and existing office, retail, industrial and residential buildings and developments on behalf of developers and landlords, as well as maximising value through asset management.

A chartered member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, Gareth is taking over the reins from Mark Lenton, who was head of the division and will continue to work in the team.

John Bryce, founder and director at KWB, said: "We are excited to work with Gareth to grow our property management portfolios in the Midlands region and beyond. He has a wealth of knowledge and contacts and is a great fit for the KWB group."

■ Residential property firm Centrick Invest has been instructed to market the first phase of a development of apartments being delivered as part of the billion-pound regeneration of Longbridge.

St. Modwen Homes has secured planning consent to build 205 apartments in three blocks at Dalmuir Road on the historic MG Rover site. They will include 100 one-bedroom and 105 two-bedroom apartments.

Centrick Invest has been exclusively instructed on behalf of St. Modwen to market the first phase of apartments, which will be known as Cooper Gate.

Construction has begun on site and is underway with a build timeline of approximately 12 months.

The Centrick Invest team, from left, John Treacy, James Ackrill, Andy Butts and Sion Bennett



Impact of Body Shop closure

Landlords impacted by the collapse of The Body Shop need to seek urgent advice about the options available to them under their leases.

This is the message from leading property litigation lawyer Nicola Seager, of law firm Clarke Willmott LLP.

Established in 1976 by the late Dame Anita Roddick, The Body Shop went into administration in February in what was the most high-profile retail failure since Wilko last year.

The Body Shop was acquired recently by private equity firm Aurelius – the third time the business has changed hands since 2006. It currently has more than 200 shops across the UK and around 3,000 globally, employing around 10,000 staff, plus another 12,000 via franchises.

Nicola Seager, who specialises in real estate management and property insolvency, said landlords of existing Body Shop premises will be affected in different ways.

"It is being reported that up to 100 stores could close, so this will have a big impact

on landlords and the High Street generally," she said.

"When a large entity like this goes into administration, some landlords will see an opportunity to get a property back and others will be worried about whether rent will be paid. Landlords need to ask themselves what they want to achieve."

"The moratorium process which comes into play following the appointment of an administrator means pausing any legal action against the company including forfeiture of leases, providing breathing space for administrators to sell the business or realise assets in the best way they can."

"This means a landlord can not automatically seek to enforce the terms of the lease on a tenant – their lease may say they can do so, but the law actually prevents it unless additional steps are taken."

"Either way, the overriding message to landlords is to quickly seek advice about the options available under their lease. This gives them the best chance of obtaining a better outcome."

Development could create more than 150 skilled jobs

Plans have been submitted by Allsee Technologies to build an 80,000 sq ft landmark office headquarters and digital technology centre at St. Modwen's Longbridge Business Park.

After a £20 million investment, the new building will support the creation of more than 150 skilled jobs.

Allsee Technologies is a major player in digital advertising display manufacturing with offices in the UK, Europe, China, the

US and Africa. The move will bring another industry-leading manufacturer to the region, across 2.3 acres on Longbridge Business Park.

The firm will join other companies there including the recently completed IVC Evidensia veterinary hospital, Blaise Referrals and Waters Corporation's precision manufacturing centre.

Subject to planning permission being granted, construction work is due to start in summer 2024 with an opening scheduled for late 2025.

Baoli Zhao, managing director at Allsee, said: "We are proud and excited to contribute to Longbridge Business Park's growth story, and are pleased to be part of its reputation as a hub for science, technology, precision engineering and R&D."

"We look forward to fostering growth, collaboration, and creating more job opportunities in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands area."



■ Workplace operator Runway East has taken on 20,000 sq ft of new workspace at Arca in Birmingham city centre in a 20-year joint venture with Oval Real Estate.

The distinctive building in Temple Row – formerly a shopping centre – will be reinvented as home to a community of start-ups and scale-ups, with customisable office spaces, a large roof terrace, thousands of square feet of breakout space and several meeting rooms and phone booths on site.

"We have been waiting to move into Birmingham, and now we are here," said Natasha Guerra, CEO of Runway East.

"The Big City Plan is changing the face of the city, with Birmingham playing a pivotal role in the green revolution. Runway East started out as a tech collective, so we are excited to be entering a city with such a thriving tech community."

"It is full circle for us as this year marks 10 years of bringing what we call 'team bliss' to start-ups, scale-ups and SMEs so that they can concentrate on what is most important in their day to day."

Runway East is a B-Corp certified flexible workspace provider, which has been operational since 2014. It has now grown to 10 spaces across London, Birmingham, Brighton and Bristol.

Businesses using their space include Deliveroo, Matches Fashion and Grind.



Ross Fittall, commercial director at Paradise Birmingham developer MEPC, with Richard McNeilly, CEO of Dains

Final office space is let

Accountancy firm Dains has taken the final office space at Two Chamberlain Square at Paradise Birmingham.

The firm will occupy the remaining 12,147 sq ft of space on the third floor of the prominent commercial building.

The second building to complete at Paradise, Two Chamberlain Square has a range of occupiers including DLA Piper, Atkins Realis, Mazars, Cazenove Capital, Cubo and Knights.

Designed by Birmingham-based architects Howells, it is one of the most recognisable parts of the Paradise estate.

Dains has trebled in size over the past two years and now employs more than 650 people across the group.

CEO Richard McNeilly said: "This is a significant move for Dains because it underlines our commitment to our people and provides them with the very best work environment in terms of location, connectivity and sustainability.

"It also demonstrates our investment in Birmingham and the work we carry out here."



Firm expands into Midlands

Engineering consultancy JPG Group has expanded its geographical operation with a new Midlands base.

The practice, whose headquarters are in Leeds, has secured space within the Cornwall Buildings in Birmingham city centre to help expansion in the region as well as support growth in the south.

Established in 1988, JPG provides civil and structural engineering consultancy services for clients throughout the UK. It currently employs 45 people at its Leeds headquarters and new team members will join the Midlands office under the leadership of board director, David Allwood.

Mr Allwood said: "We are delighted to cement our presence in the Midlands with

a permanent office right in the heart of Birmingham city centre. We continue to have a strong pipeline of projects in the region across a range of development sectors.

"We see fantastic opportunities in the Midlands, particularly in the feasibility support on strategic sites identified for much needed new residential conurbations as highlighted in the Birmingham Development Plan.

"Whilst we have an established project portfolio across the whole of the UK, having a more permanent base in the Midlands will allow us to expand our regional project pipeline with a team that can also more readily deliver projects in the south."

Aqua Consultants signs lease on Birmingham office

Infrastructure advisers Aqua Consultants has expanded into a prominent Birmingham office building as part of its growth and investment strategy.

The firm has signed a long-term lease on a 2,755 sq ft office in One Colmore Row to



add to offices in Leeds, Bradford, Exeter and Newcastle.

Managing director Ben Shearer (pictured) said: "This vibrant location represents investment into the future of Aqua Consultants for the good of our customers and colleagues. We want the team members to be proud of our company and enjoy working there."

Aqua Consultants has recently become part of the Adler and Allan Group providing environmental services across utilities, energy, and industrial infrastructure to reduce risk to the environment, people, and organisations, and prepare for a net-zero future.

■ Birmingham property agency Siddall Jones has expanded and will fully refurbish its Jewellery Quarter offices in the wake of its new acquisition.

Siddall Jones recently announced its purchase of Bromsgrove-based 4D Property Management, a move which will increase staff numbers.

As a result, Siddall Jones has now

doubled its office space at The Mint in Icknield Street from 1,100 sq ft to 2,200 sq ft and has commissioned SH Projects to carry out a new interior fit-out.

Managing director Ed Siddall-Jones said: "These are exciting times for us as we are busy accommodating our new staff after the purchase of 4D Property Management."



New team makes first acquisition

Sterling Property Ventures has acquired the Birmingham headquarters of Mitchells & Butlers in a £46 million deal.

Sterling, the developer behind the city's flagship 103 Colmore Row office scheme, bought the asset – at 27 Fleet Street and 65 Lionel Street – from LGIM.

M&B, one of the largest operators of restaurants, pubs and bars in the UK, has a circa 20-year lease on 95,000 sq ft of purpose-built office space at the asset, which was built in 2003. The building also boasts a 120-bed/54,000 sq ft Ibis hotel, operated by Accor Group on behalf of M&B, and 325 underground car parking spaces.

It is one of the largest office-led investment deals in Birmingham in the last 12 months, and is also the first acquisition for Sterling's new asset management and investment arm. The firm brought Adam Crickmore and Neil Ridley on to its board last year to develop this.

James Howarth, Sterling's managing director, said: "We are looking to build a portfolio of properties and have raised capital to support this strategy.

"Being sector agnostic in our approach and seeking to complement our development expertise, we believe there is real market opportunity to grow a mixed portfolio of assets and use our skills to add significant value in the short to medium term."

Gearing up to deliver on expansion

A Birmingham property developer has made significant additions to its senior management team to spearhead its ambitious life science expansion plans.

Woodbourne Group has created the team as it gears up to deliver Curzon Wharf – the firm's vision for a £360 million Birmingham waterfront ecosystem.

A key part of the development is a 130,000 sq ft biocentre. Construction work is expected to start on site in early 2025.

The new appointments are Tes Adamou,



head of life sciences, and David Lupson as non executive. Ian Lynch also joins as construction director.

Tani Dulay, chief executive of Woodbourne Group, said: "We have assembled a first-class team to deliver on our promise of Curzon Wharf.

"We now also have the international standard of expertise of the life science market which will enable us to move forward with our plans to be the class leader in the sector."

Property consultancy appoints client accountant



Heather Hill, left, with MK2 team leader Marcello Della Croce

Heather Hill has joined property consultancy MK2 Real Estate as client accountant in the firm's property management team.

She has more than 20 years' experience handling finances for commercial property clients, having worked in the role at Cushman & Wakefield, Orbit Property Management and latterly Pennycuik Collins.

Heather's appointment brings MK's growing property management team to 33. The firm has 5.25 million sq ft of commercial property under management and a rent roll in excess of £35 million.

Verve Lounge launch

social



A VIP party was held to celebrate the launch of the Verve Lounge in the site of the former canal-side club Bobby Brown's. Guests were entertained by fire breathers and disco ball dancers as they enjoyed a selection of signature cocktails and canapés, and the evening continued with a DJ set by Glens Horsborough.



Abby Goldie and Laura McEwan

General manager Reece Chauhan, Lauren Dobson, Beth Hutchinson, Molly Thompson and Jerome Silcock



Anjola Ajao and Solomon Ofoaiye



Rachael Lewis and Joe Turrell



Alex Tross and Naomi Aly



Katie Coates and Regan Francis



Emma Howden, Tam Kaur and Anita Champaneri



Playing key role in property firm's growth

Property specialist Centrick has appointed Charles Lucas as group business development director.

He has 37 years' experience in the property sector, having worked on some of the UK's largest new-build developments and managed schemes with clients including Argent, Berkeley, Barratt, Persimmon and Taylor Wimpey.

An RICS fellow since 2011, Charles brings significant experience across commercial, residential and mixed-use property. He joined Mainstay in 2001 as new business development manager and became technical director in 2005. On acquisition by FirstPort in September 2020, he became business development director.

Phil Johns, group managing director of Centrick, said: "Charles has enormous experience across the property sector and, as our group business development director, he will play a key role in our strategic growth with a keen focus on our recognised specialisms."



Pictured from left are Veenam Gohil, Tom Nock, Will Ventham, Mark Smith and Annie Stanford.

Promotion for four senior surveyors

Real estate giant CBRE has promoted four senior surveyors to the position of associate director at its office in Birmingham.

Veenam Gohil, Olivia Newport, Tom Nock and Annie Stanford have all made the step up, while Mark Smith has been promoted to senior surveyor in the project management team.

Veenam joined CBRE as a graduate in 2015. After qualifying as a chartered building surveyor in 2018, she joined the building consultancy division.

Tom joined CBRE in 2019. He qualified as a chartered surveyor in 2021 and today works in the investment properties team.

Annie joined CBRE as a surveyor in

2021. As an associate director at CBRE, Annie specialises in the valuation of residential assets including build to rent, suburban single-family housing, development schemes and development land.

Olivia is a member of CBRE's industrial and logistics team. She started her career in real estate in 2018, joining the firm as a graduate and qualifying as a chartered surveyor in 2020.

Will Ventham, head of CBRE's Birmingham office, said: "It is particularly pleasing to see that three of the four newly promoted associate directors joined CBRE as graduates, demonstrating our high talent retention rates."

Returning partner takes on head of funding role

Law firm Anthony Collins has welcomed a returning partner to take on the position of a new head of funding.

Jon Coane – whose background encompasses a wide range of services in funding and finance – brings more than 25 years of experience as a social impact finance lawyer.

He has advised housing associations on all areas of funding, including financing joint ventures, and has considerable experience supporting local authorities, regeneration projects and housing delivery projects.

He will be working closely with clients across the firm's sectors, including affordable housing, local government and health and social care. Jon will also play an integral role in encouraging further expansion in the housing sector.

Peter Hubbard, managing partner at AC, said: "It is great to welcome Jon back to AC, especially as our new head of funding."

"His invaluable wealth of experience will benefit both the team and our clients, offering advice and executing funding options that will bring positive impacts for their social businesses."



appointments



Promotion to partner for project management specialist

Property consultancy Vail Williams has promoted building surveyor and project management specialist Craig Fillingham to partner.

Covering the Birmingham and Leeds areas, Craig has been with the firm since September 2019 when Vail Williams acquired Trilogie CRE.

He becomes one of four partners in the West Midlands and north region, joining regional managing partner Carole Taylor, head of business rates Adam Barnfield and head of valuation Stephen Hobbs.

Craig has more than 20 years' experience leading and managing multi-disciplinary project teams in the office, industrial and insurance claims

management sectors.

He has designed, procured and managed the delivery of a variety of commercial new-build and fit-out schemes including offices, factories, warehouses, research facilities and education accommodation.

Carole Taylor said: "Craig is an extremely experienced building surveyor who covers our patches in both Birmingham and the north of the country. He has gone from strength to strength since joining us.

"This promotion is richly deserved. He is a good team player and provides an excellent service for clients who think of him highly, judging by the many testimonials he receives."



Role created for former apprentice

National land promoter Richborough has welcomed Faith Byrne as a management accountant at its Birmingham headquarters.

Faith was previously the accounts executive at Wealth Club, an investment firm specialising in tax-efficient investments for high-net-worth individuals. She started at the firm as an apprentice after finishing sixth form and worked her way up the ranks.

She has recently become a chartered accountant after passing her final Association of Chartered Certified Accountants exam.

Financial controller Tom Ball said: "This newly created management accountant role brings depth to the finance function, allowing the team to support Richborough in a much more effective way and help its recent and planned growth.

"Although young in her career, Faith brings a wealth of experience across a broad range of finance functions.

"Her experience in systems implementation is already proving invaluable – having led the role-out of our new expenses management system.

"We have also started planning for the implementation of a new finance system and Faith's expertise will be crucial to the success of this project."

Partner joining Birmingham office

FRP Corporate Finance has announced the appointment of a new partner in the Midlands.

Dan Salt joins the firm's Birmingham office having spent the last four years within the Midlands M&A team at EY where he provided strategic advice to business owners and management teams on a wide range of transactions.

His recent deal experience includes successfully advising clients such as automotive specialists SYNETIQ and Fastlane Paint & Body, and affiliate marketing services company Skycon Limited, on various acquisition and sale processes. He previously spent time at Clearwater International and also worked

in leveraged finance at Royal Bank of Scotland.

In his new role, Dan will spearhead growth in FRP's Midlands team and help expand the business's footprint in the region.

He said: "The Midlands is home to a vibrant corporate finance community and, despite a cautious 12 months for M&A, the drivers for management teams to invest in, grow or sell their businesses haven't gone away.

"What I am now looking forward to most is getting out there and building new relationships with ambitious local businesses that play to the region's strengths."

New head of immigration at law firm

Law firm Fieldfisher has announced the appointment of Rhona Azir as its new head of immigration.

Rhona joins the Birmingham office from Magrath Sheldrick in London, having previously worked as an immigration specialist for a number of UK law firms and a Big Four accountancy practice.

Before becoming a lawyer, she had a career in journalism, having worked as a news reporter and multimedia editor for the then Birmingham Post and Mail newspaper group.

Rhona's specialism is helping businesses attract key talent and ensuring they are compliant with all legal and regulatory obligations.

She also has experience in dealing with complex immigration applications for private clients including high-net-worth and ultra-high-net-worth individuals.

Birmingham office leader Ranjit Dhindsa said: "We are delighted that Rhona is joining the firm to take over our immigration practice.

"Being based in the Birmingham office she will be perfectly placed to manage a team that is also spread across London, Manchester and Belfast, and which regularly works closely with our international offices in 12 countries.

"Immigration advice is essential to much of the firm's work assisting large corporate clients on major deals and reorganisations as well as resourcing."



Evelyn Partners announces new member of Birmingham office

Financial services group Evelyn Partners has announced the appointment of Declan Kirby as a chartered financial planner in its Birmingham office.

Before joining Evelyn Partners, Declan worked for Henwood Court Financial Planning, providing wealth management advice to his clients. He focuses on working with senior executives, business owners and professionals, and is a fellow of the Personal Finance Society.

He will be based at Evelyn Partners' Birmingham office at 103 Colmore Row. The group supports clients with both their

personal financial affairs and their business interests.

Managing partner Niraj Vyas said: "Declan is a high-calibre addition to an already quality team. He is passionately client-focused and is motivated by being a trusted counsel and life business partner to his clients.

"I am looking forward to working with him as we continue our expansion across the region to make the most of the many opportunities we have. I have no doubt Declan will play a critical and pivotal part in this."



Marketing apprentice joins team at events venue

Events venue Conference Aston has appointed a new apprentice who joins the team as a marketing administrator.

Nyna-Marie Kelsey will be supporting Conference Aston's online and offline marketing initiatives, collaborating with internal and external communications activities and design teams to help boost the venue's marketing.

Having studied media for three years

at UCFB and accumulated four years' experience in video production at Ark Media Productions, Nyna decided on a new professional journey in marketing, leading her to undertake an apprenticeship.

Samantha Brown, head of Conference Aston, said: "Apprenticeships have been a valuable initiative for a number of years here.

"As we embark on our first marketing

apprenticeship at the hotel, we look forward to the innovative and creative contributions Nyna will make in enhancing our brand presence and communication strategies.

"We are confident that her skills and enthusiasm will contribute to the ongoing success and growth of Conference Aston in the coming months, helping us promote the venue across the Midlands and beyond."

Five minutes with...

Guy Mills

Managing director, Gallagher



In one sentence, what does your role involve?

I am responsible for ensuring our teams meet the needs of their clients and developing insurance and risk management propositions that can support businesses to withstand the challenges they face.

How long have you been in your current job?

I have been with Gallagher, which was also previously Giles Insurance, for nearly 20 years.

Give a brief summary of your professional career to date.

In 2006 I started my career as an account executive for Giles Insurance where I managed a portfolio of commercial clients. I was later promoted to assistant branch manager, responsible for a team of 16 account handlers and executives. During this time, Giles Insurance became Gallagher after it was acquired in 2013. My role then developed as we continued to acquire businesses which have helped our Birmingham team to grow to more than 80 people. Many of the original Giles team are still here.

Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?

I left school with A-Levels and after a brief spell at university, I decided to go into the workplace. Having completed some professional qualifications 'on the job' early on, I subsequently invested a lot of time in developing my leadership skills through my career. The insurance industry is a great place to study and earn qualifications as you work, meaning it can help young people kick-start their careers.

Has the fallout from the pandemic presented any opportunities?

The pandemic created an undoubtable shift in the way most businesses work. At Gallagher we adopted a hybrid working model and provide colleagues with the flexibility to work remotely. Having a more flexible approach means we have access to a wider talent pool, given geographical location is less of a barrier, and we can attract a more diverse workforce overall.

Can online meetings successfully take the place of face-to-face contact?

Online meetings offer a convenient way for our colleagues to communicate with each other when they aren't in the office. Whether or not they can totally replace face-to-face meetings depends largely on the type of business, how many people

it has and the industry it works in. Video calls certainly serve a purpose, but nothing beats the opportunity to meet in person.

How do you get the best out of your staff?

I think it's extremely important to keep staff engaged by giving them a motivational goal to work towards, communicate a lot and treat them all with fairness and respect.

How many emails do you tend to get in a day, and how much time do you have to read them?

On an average day I receive over 100 emails – there is never enough time to read them! However, I ensure to prioritise the critical ones so that they are dealt with and often delegate them to relevant members of the team.

How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

I would like to think that my team find me honest, approachable and supportive.

Highlights of your career so far?

A highlight has definitely been the establishment of a cyber risk management practice in Birmingham – it has come along in leaps and bounds. It's gone from one person to a team of 25 in four years and now works globally.

Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

Plenty! One that always springs to mind was early in my client management career when I took my largest client out for lunch

at an Italian restaurant. Fresh off the back of a successful meeting I thought I would celebrate with a lobster linguini. It came with half a lobster shell on the plate which still appeared to have some meat in it. I tried to dig it out and eat it, not wanting to waste it. Only after did I discover that it was just a decoration. The meat was in the sauce. The client was polite enough not to mention it.

Pet hates?

I don't appreciate rudeness. We are all busy people, a little bit of courtesy doesn't cost anything and goes a long way. Another is overly long emails, unless there is a need, I find it best to get to the point quickly.

If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Be more confident and don't worry about making mistakes. Just learn from them.

How do you relax away from work?

I love to be outside. I have two dogs which get me out often – taking adventures with them and my family in our camper van is my favourite way to relax.

What do you believe is special about the Birmingham business community?

Birmingham's local economy is made up of a broad spectrum of industries, with its manufacturing and construction communities being considerably large. There is a pride based on centuries of commercial activity, and the diverse backgrounds that it includes brings vibrancy to the business community.

Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

I speak Spanish to a reasonable level, but I don't get to use it as often as I'd like.

You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

The book would need to be a useful one, so something about bush skills and survival. I have always loved the cult film Withnail and I – I could watch that over and over. The CD would be Queen, Sheer Heart Attack.

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Super tricky – it needs to be a fun party as well as people I admire and would want to know better: Robin Williams, Dave Grohl, Michelle Obama, Chris Bonnington and Jacinda Ardern.

What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

A dirty fry up – all the trimmings (with a pint of Guinness!)



Increased funding available to SMEs

ART Business Loans (ART), a leading local CDFI, based in Birmingham, has supported a wide range of businesses over 26 years and now is able to lend throughout the West Midlands Region and adjoining counties. It is accredited to provide the BBB Recovery Loan Scheme.

ART has obtained additional funds to lend through a pioneering impact investment from

Global technology company Block inc. and ethical lender Unity Trust Bank and seeks to support those SMEs with a viable proposition that are unable to find their full requirements from other sources.

Loans are from £10000 to £150000 and can be used for most purposes.

To apply for a loan, or make an enquiry see www.artbusinessloans.co.uk



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