

# Birmingham Business

FREE

October 2024

A photograph of four people standing in an office hallway. From left to right: a man with a beard wearing a black t-shirt with 'nbs2024' on it, a woman with glasses wearing a black blazer, a man with a beard and glasses wearing a dark blue button-down shirt, and a man with grey hair wearing a light grey zip-up sweater. They are all smiling. In the background, there are shelves with various items and a blue logo on the wall.

## Blazing a trail

The meteoric rise of city IT firm

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**BUMPER TECH SPECIAL REPORT**

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2025

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# Edgbaston Stadium hospitality experiences in high demand for 2025

With excitement building for one of the most eagerly awaited fixtures in international cricket, all Executive and RES Wyatt Boxes for the 2025 Men's Test between England and India at Edgbaston Stadium have sold out just one month after going on sale – but other boxes are still available.

India will make their highly anticipated return to Edgbaston on Wednesday 2 July 2025, for the second Rothsay Men's Test of a five-match series against England.

This iconic clash, renowned for delivering high drama and unforgettable moments, has generated extraordinary demand for premium matchday experiences, leading to a record-breaking sell-out of two of Edgbaston's most sought-after venues.

To elevate the matchday experience, Edgbaston offers a variety of hospitality packages, catering to businesses looking to impress clients, reward employees, or simply enjoy world-class cricket in a premier setting.

While some packages have already sold out, premium options remain for those seeking a first-class experience. The Aylesford Boxes, which accommodate up to 16 guests, are still available, offering a sophisticated atmosphere enhanced by montages of some of the biggest names to have played at the iconic Birmingham stadium.

Beyond private boxes, Edgbaston also offers a diverse selection of experiences. These range from modern, interactive packages in the Experience Club—ideal for those seeking a more informal atmosphere—to luxurious fine dining with exclusive access to the Warwickshire Suite.

In partnership with its Official Hospitality Provider, Keith Prowse, all hospitality packages include gourmet dining, an open bar, and access to some of the best seats in the house, ensuring an unforgettable day of cricket.

With demand at an all-time high, it's recommended to act swiftly to secure a place at what promises to be an epic encounter between England and India next summer.

Plus, the major match cricket doesn't end there. With England Men hosting the West Indies in a One Day International, England Women taking on India and Vitality Blast Finals Day returning for the thirteenth year in a row, there is no better way to enjoy Major Match cricket at Edgbaston in 2025.



For more information or to book your hospitality experience, visit [edgbaston.com/hospitality](https://edgbaston.com/hospitality)





# Birmingham Business

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In association with Ladders

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By HENRY CARPENTER  
Editor

The thought occurs that if it wasn't for Yiannis Maos, the tech scene in Birmingham and wider region would look very different.

For starters, would there have been an equivalent of Birmingham Tech Week? This five-day tech festival is the largest of its kind in the UK – and its reputation has grown in line with the event itself.

If there wasn't this annual focus, which for those in the industry really merits highlighting in the calendar, would the various tech-associated companies and individuals – ranging from start-ups and small-but-beautiful SMEs to larger corporates and all those professional firms servicing them all – just run in parallel rather than come together to gain insight and share knowledge in one forum?

As far as I'm concerned Mr Maos and the team at TechWM deserve every accolade going.

One of the businesses which has come to the fore over the last few years – seemingly irresistibly – is IT firm Intercity. It is headed by the popular and hugely respected Charlie Blakemore, and my colleague Carl Jones thoroughly enjoyed interviewing the football-loving CEO.

This, as well as a focus on some of the exciting tech entrepreneurs, and a look at digital transformation firm Entec Si, sit alongside insightful commentary and the latest tech news to help comprise our now-annual bumper special report.

It seems that the nation has yet to settle on a standard working pattern, and opinions differ to the effectiveness of flexible working and the possibility of the four-day week becoming a mandatory offer for some employers to their staff. We enjoy a healthy debate on the issue in the following pages.

Elsewhere, as Jon Griffin reports, three of Birmingham's more high-profile business figures have started new roles.

Henriette Breukelaar, former LEP chief executive, is now heading the regional team for the Canal & River Trust, the charity which does so much to keep these much-loved waterways up to scratch for the varied use of the public. Meanwhile Paul Faulkner – former boss of the GBCC and Aston Villa, and much more besides – has teamed up with Mark Taylor, who headed the Birmingham office of RSM, to create a new advisory consultancy. Now there's a formidable partnership.

What's clear is that there is so much to be positive about in Birmingham. It is certainly a relief that the dust has settled after both national and local elections (and the exhausting period leading up to them) and the summer holidays are now just a memory.

There's a sense that everyone is relieved to be able to crack on with the job in hand after many a distraction over the last year.

We're good at that.



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# State of flux

Each week we hear reports of measures which the Government might impose on employers to create a new model for workers. HENRY CARPENTER speaks to three business leaders – a consultant, the boss of a recruitment agency and the office head of an international corporate – to hear their thoughts on one of the key measures in particular, a mandatory offer of a four-day week for certain businesses to their employees.



**Rebecca Simkiss**  
SimkissGuy



**Andy Dawson**  
Curium Solutions



**Sara Fardon**  
Willis Towers Watson

That the working landscape has changed dramatically over the last few years is not open to question.

Largely precipitated by lockdown and enforced new habits – helped by the use of technology such as online conferencing – hybrid or remote working became commonplace through many industries.

What is very much a subject for debate, however, is how successful these new models are.

The arguments for both sides are well known. Do the supposed benefits of a happier and healthier workforce, which

is able to spend more time with the family and less time commuting, trump the potential collaborative, creative advantages of working in the office?

In its pre-election manifesto the Labour Party majored on a promised focus of workers' rights – and almost by the day in early autumn we have been hearing a series of reports of proposed measures to back up their pledges.

One of these is to make it mandatory for businesses to offer workers a four-day week, by which five days of working hours are compressed to four.

As someone who runs their own recruitment company, Rebecca Simkiss is well placed to see the situation from all angles.

Does Simkiss – who runs SimkissGuy in Birmingham – agree with these potential new proposals?

"Generally speaking I think that anything that gives workers greater flexibility is a good thing," she says.

"Where you find some difficulty is when you have half a workforce doing one thing and the half doing another. From an operational, business management



perspective, that's very difficult to control, and businesses will be very conscious of not being able to support their clients to the best of their ability.

"I don't think you can have a blanket approach to say that it's going to work for everybody, because everyone's business is so nuanced and working on such fine margins.

"It is also important to understand that many organisations don't actually appreciate the hours that their team members do work.

"Often, when a contract states, say, 9am to 5.30pm hours, workers are frequently doing an hour either side of that. They might have events to go to, for instance.

"I think it's really dangerous – the compressed hours might not be any different from what people are already doing. It might well be more beneficial for them to stick to their contracted hours.

"So I don't know whether it will work."

It seems that the balance of power has shifted since the pandemic, with the whip hand now held by employees.

"Employers don't like that suggestion," says Simkiss. "They still think the balance of power has remained with them – but it really hasn't. There are so many opportunities out there. If your business isn't the one offering the flexibility or the better benefits package, there will be another company out there who will – and that'll secure the talent."

"Old habits die very hard for some businesses. We try to educate all organisations and companies that they need to be a lot more fast moving, adaptable and flexible if they really want to capture those people who are right for their business."

Let's hear the views of an employer. Sara Fardon is the head of the Birmingham office of Willis Towers Watson, the global risk management and insurance firm which has some 45,000 employees worldwide.

She picks up on the point about how, in practice, working compressed hours will actually be difficult for employees.

"A four-day week means fitting five days of work into four, with the company being closed on one particular day, with no loss of pay. It sounds so attractive," she says.

"However, it makes for long days for employees."

And what would it mean for WTW as an employer?

"We are a global business and we

**"There are so many opportunities out there. If your business isn't the one offering the flexibility or the better benefits package, there will be another company out there who will – and that'll secure the talent."**

engage with our clients around risk. Clients need to know we are available to help and support them," she says.

"They need us and we need to be here to respond. So, while WTW doesn't support compressed hours, we do support flexible and hybrid working which we think balances our ability to be available to clients, with the choices employees wish to make around work-life balance."

Andy Dawson is the co-founder of Curium Solutions, a Birmingham-based consultancy which focuses on the benefits – for everyone, employers and employees alike – of empowering people.

The idea of flexible working is old hat to Dawson, as it is a system Curium have used since launch over 16 years ago. He is an ardent supporter of it. Indeed Curium has since set up a firm in Canada called Work Time Reduction, which supports all those businesses transitioning to a four-day week.

Dawson does admit though, when it comes to compressed hours it is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, he says, the additional benefits can broaden the employment pool, allow greater scope for parents, allow for greater inclusivity – and being paid for working five days obviously has its attractions.

On the minus side though, he agrees with Sara Fardon in querying the effectiveness of longer working hours.

"Research suggests that there are diminishing returns of working past the seven-and-a-half, eight-hour mark," he says. "Beyond, people won't be as fresh and productive."

"There is the risk of employers not getting a win-win outcome with compressed hours – that of a double benefit of a more rested and productive team not losing anything in terms of profit, revenue, productivity or customer satisfaction."

Dawson namechecks the likes of Cooper Parry, Atom Bank and South Cambridgeshire District Council as organisations in the UK which have started to pilot reduced working hours.

He says the pilot research suggests that if you work less you can be equally productive, better rested, with improved wellbeing and with less burnout.

Dawson also feels that the four-day week is probably already operated by many businesses.

He says: "It's just buried under the

rubble of time spent on poorly run meetings which overrun, constant distraction and interruption, the poor use of technology, and outdated and inefficient processes."

He does admit that for some industries, the four-day week is not an option.

"We are talking about limited sectors, but in my view that should never mean that people who work in those sectors shouldn't be able to enjoy the benefits of a more flexible approach to work."

"At Curium we noticed that people changed. They started to volunteer where they saw inefficiencies, work out how to do things differently, and take ownership of solving the problems of customers' revenue and productivity."

All three business leaders agree that when it comes to both trends and policies, it is an ever-shifting landscape.

But given a crystal ball, how do they see future trends taking shape?

Dawson and Simkiss observe that currently some companies are in the process of pulling people back into the office.

Dawson builds on Simkiss's comment about old habits dying hard, pointing out that many CEOs and top managers are, in his words "over the hill – male, pale and stale".

"They are probably over 50 with a very traditional 'this is how we used to do things around here – and it worked well for me,' attitude".

"I think that's very outdated because in the UK we still have a load of accidental managers in the workplace."

"The answer is to train and enable leaders in a hybrid working environment. I do think the potential is there, it's about will and belief."

Simkiss agrees. She says: "My concern is that businesses are going to start creeping back towards wanting to have everyone in the office even more, prompting a more combative relationship between employees and the employers."

"There needs to be that middle ground where ultimately people want to go to work and enjoy their job, while employers are satisfied that they have a dependable workforce which meet their business needs."

Whatever proposals are adopted by the Government over the coming weeks and months, the debates will rumble on.



# Levelling up the playing field

Deputy leader of Birmingham City Council, Councillor SHARON THOMPSON, explains why she is making skills and jobs in the city a priority



As someone who has lived my whole life in Birmingham, I know that this is a city of contrasts.

It's a fantastic place of enormous potential, with a young and diverse population. But it is also a city of significant long-standing challenges.

Unemployment is double the national average.

There is a 10-year gap in life expectancy between the poorest and most affluent areas in the city.

And, most shocking of all, over 40% of Birmingham's children grow up in relative poverty.

These stubborn inequalities continue to hold far too many people back – which is frustrating when you consider the high levels of investment into our city in recent years.

That's why I am delighted to now have responsibility for jobs and skills in Birmingham, because I know from personal experience that focussing on education, training and volunteering can open so many doors that might otherwise slam shut in your face.

Birmingham is creating exciting opportunities in sectors like media, advanced manufacturing, and life sciences. Now, we must ensure that people from every community, growing up in neighbourhoods right across the city can navigate a pathway through to those careers. People from every background must be encouraged to see the opportunities we're creating as their opportunities.

At the moment, that isn't always the case and young people growing up in some neighbourhoods and communities feel that certain jobs and careers are created for

people who went to the right schools, or have the right accent or background.

Of course, we must also bridge the skills gap, with research consistently finding that the West Midlands suffers disproportionately from a national skills shortage, with one in four vacancies now classed as 'hard to fill'.

As everyone knows, skills are essential to economic growth and my job is to work with the West Midlands Combined Authority, with our schools and colleges, and with employers and investors to ensure that doors are opened for Birmingham citizens.

That's why I will work closely with new West Midlands mayor, Richard Parker, as he strives to create 20,000 learning and work opportunities. And it's why I welcome the new Labour Government's Back to Work Plan that will help drive economic growth in cities like Birmingham. The ambitious plan, which aims to tackle economic inactivity, will see the launch of a new national jobs and career service and a youth guarantee that will mean more opportunities for training, an apprenticeship or help to find work for all young people aged 18-21 years old.

Work and pensions secretary Liz Kendall has made it clear that regional mayors and local areas will be in the driving seat of change, so the challenge now for Birmingham and the wider West Midlands is to seize this opportunity and ensure Birmingham is a city that works for all of its citizens, where success stretches far beyond the centre.

Because, in addition to bridging the gaps in skills and aspiration, there are also geographical barriers that continue to hold people back. As City Council leader Cllr John Cotton frequently reminds people, the Birmingham story is a Tale of Two Cities: a booming city centre, in stark contrast to

painfully disadvantaged neighbourhoods – areas like Aston, Nechells, Bordesley, and Newtown – with high levels of poverty and unemployment.

The city centre will always be the powerhouse for this city and the wider region, but the opportunities we create must be open to people in every neighbourhood.

Take Birmingham Health Innovation Campus, for example. This amazing new facility is set to become a world-leading life sciences campus that will create up to 10,000 high quality jobs. Located near the University of Birmingham, University Hospitals QEH Campus, Biohub Birmingham and Birmingham Women's and Children's NHS Foundation Trust, the campus is ideally situated to become a major hub for science and innovation – a place that could develop cancer treatments and a vaccine for the next pandemic.

Those 10,000 jobs represent a huge opportunity to boost our city economy, to tackle the stubborn inequalities I mentioned earlier, but it's no use if we simply accept that people from outside the city will move here to take all the jobs.

Don't get me wrong, Birmingham should be a city of choice. People should choose to invest, live, work and want to be educated here. We must attract talent and retain graduates.

But, as we work with partners and stakeholders across the city, to ensure that Birmingham continues to attract investment and create opportunities, we must also equip Brummies to grab those opportunities.

That's what drives me every day, and I will not rest until we can truly say that success for Birmingham means success and opportunity for our citizens.



# Concerns for local economy

A rise in companies with late payments on their books – as well as a steep fall in the number of new businesses being set up in the region – is indicating further concerns for the local economy.

This is according to the Midlands branch of national insolvency and restructuring trade body R3 and is based on an analysis of data from business intelligence provider Creditsafe.

R3's figures show that the number of West Midlands companies with invoices overdue for payment increased from a sizeable 44,778 at the start of the year to 47,617 in August.

Over the same period, the number of invoices which had gone past their payment date in the region shot up from 575,231 to 753,509.

The tightening up of the local economy is also indicated by a dampening of entrepreneurial spirit, with the number of West Midlands start-ups falling by 30.35% from 7,074 in January to 4,927 in August.

R3 Midlands chairman Stephen Rome, a partner at Penningtons Manches Cooper in Birmingham, said: "There will be very few companies in our region finding the current trading conditions favourable, and these latest research figures back this up."

"While we have seen some economic improvements in recent months, driven mainly by a successful summer of sport and increased political stability following the General Election, doing business remains tough."



Richard Bartlett, left, of Consult Energy, and Matt Collingwood, managing director of VIQU

## Bringing two brands together

A Birmingham IT recruitment agency has announced its recent investment in another recruitment company from the city, Consult Energy.

The UK arm of Consult Energy – which specialises in staffing for companies across energy, renewables and water – will now sit under the VIQU group but will continue trading under the same name.

VIQU has focused solely on supporting the IT sector for the last decade, but recent government announcements regarding significant future investment in the UK energy sector meant that the prospect of investing in Consult Energy complemented VIQU's strategic growth plans.

Matt Collingwood, managing director at VIQU, said: "I have known of Consult Energy since I launched VIQU in 2014 and have always held the brand and their team in high regard."

"I am excited about the opportunity to bring the two brands together, share knowledge and resources, which will positively impact the respective sectors and ultimately grow both businesses."

As part of the investment, the Consult Energy team will relocate to VIQU's recently redeveloped offices in Edgbaston.



Richard Port

## Law society president sworn in

Birmingham Law Society has officially installed Richard Port MBE, partner at George Green LLP, as its president for 2024-25.

Sworn in at the society's AGM in September, Mr Port has succeeded Alice Kinder.

A dedicated advocate for victims of domestic abuse, his presidential campaign, themed 'Voices', focuses on helping those often unheard, both within the community and also among Law Society members.

During his tenure, he aims to promote inclusivity, expand the society's outreach, and highlight the work of members and organisations who may otherwise remain under the radar.

He is committed to supporting a diverse range of communities, particularly through partnerships with domestic abuse charities such as She Beasts and Mankind Initiative.

"My overall goal is to unite everyone in so many ways," he said.

"I am looking to expand our membership bringing in organisations, firms and individuals from all over the West Midlands."

"The important thing for me this year is knowing that everyone has a voice in their law society."

"I know it's not an easy take and many have probably tried before me, but it is vital that our legal community comes together, from CEOs to students. We all play a major role in shaping our justice system."

# Speedy expansion for Midlands nutrition brand



Melissa Snover

Nutrition brand Nourished has accelerated its rapid international expansion by moving into four new European countries.

Birmingham-based company has partnered with French pharmaceutical giant UPSA to launch a co-branded range of gummies in more than 10,000 pharmacies across Greece, Spain, Belgium and Switzerland.

The products in the collection of nutritional gummies include Collagen, Beauty, Detox Slim, Sleep, Herbal Sleep, Super Sleep, Energy and Immunity. They are produced on high-speed manufacturing lines, which Nourished's parent company Rem3dy Health developed in-house.

Nourished products are already available in the UK, Japan and the US, and in France and Italy with UPSA. More than 53 million units have been sold.

Rem3dy Health CEO and founder Melissa Snover said: "This is the latest exciting chapter in Rem3dy's recent growth story."

"Our success is a testament to our cutting-edge innovation, skilled and determined team and agile ability to react to the latest scientific research, wellness trends and consumer data."

"It is also an honour to be working with a prestigious company like UPSA in Europe, with 85 years of unparalleled know-how in family medication, first-rate local marketing experience and an established distribution network."

As well as its retail ranges, Nourished produces personalised nutritional gummies, whereby customers take a short online quiz to get a unique stack recommendation, precisely tailored to their goals, needs and lifestyle. The stacks are then freshly made using patented 3D-printing technology, and are vegan and sugar free.

## Positive activity set to continue



Paul Bassi

Real Estate Investors plc reported property sales totalling £13.4 million in H1 this year.

The sales to private investors and special purchasers saw an aggregate uplift of 3.5% on 2023 year-end book values, with a strong pipeline of further sales in process, it said.

The Birmingham-based business has also continued its dividend policy, with a fully covered quarterly dividend of 0.5p per share to be paid for the second quarter of the year.

Figures released for the half year to June 30 2024 showed that REI's sales include completed disposals of £6.7 million and contracted disposals of £1.6 million, with a further £5.1 million of sales since the half year end.

The company has used the sales proceeds to pay down £6.4 million of debt in the first half of 2024, plus a further £3.6 million paid off since the end of June.

This has reduced total drawn down debt to £44.4 million, compared to the £67.9 million of debt at June 30, 2023.

Paul Bassi, chief executive of REI, said: "This has been a satisfactory period of activity, despite overall negative market sentiment with activity 40% below the five-year average."

"We are likely to now be at or near the bottom of this cyclical property decline and look forward to a period of positive activity."



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A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, focusing on the eye. The eye is looking directly at the viewer. A bright, blue and white digital light effect, resembling a stylized '0' or a data point, is superimposed over the eye. The background is dark and out of focus, with some blurred light spots in shades of purple and blue.

# TECH *in the* WM

## SPECIAL REPORT

The technology landscape in the West Midlands has become ever more fertile, with Birmingham Tech Week crystallising much of what is so great about the sector in the region.

Delegates from across the UK will be descending on Birmingham to share knowledge, meet like minds and gain insight during the five-day programme at various venues across the city.

In this bumper special report we chat to some of the key players driving the region's tech sector forward, catch up on news, and provide commentary relating to tech in the West Midlands.

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# THE UNITED KINGDOM

## A tech powerhouse with untapped regional potential

YIANNIS MAOS, CEO of TechWM and founder of Birmingham Tech Week, assesses the state of health of tech in the UK and the West Midlands' potential as an emerging hub



The United Kingdom has entered a critical phase in its technological journey. From the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution, the UK has led global change, with a history marked by transformative inventions that have shaped economies, societies, and industries.

Today, the nation's tech landscape is flourishing, having evolved into a dynamic ecosystem that powers key sectors such as finance, healthcare, manufacturing, and the creative industries. The digital age has profoundly reshaped economies

worldwide, and the UK is no exception.

In recent years, the growth of artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and the rise of the digital startup scene have all contributed to a rapidly evolving tech sector. The UK's technology industry is valued at over £900 billion and continues to attract talent, investment, and innovation from across the globe. Major cities like London have become international technology hubs, housing some of the world's leading companies and startups.

However, the speed at which the digital economy is evolving places the

UK's position as a global tech leader under increasing pressure. To maintain its competitive edge, the country must make strategic investments, implement bold policy decisions, and ensure that the future of UK technology is as groundbreaking as its past.

While much of the focus has traditionally been on London, the capital is just one of many innovation centres contributing to the UK's technological advancement. The regions play an equally vital role, and overlooking their contributions risks hampering the country's overall progress.

### The West Midlands: an emerging tech hub

While London is often seen as the epicentre of UK tech innovation, this view neglects the potential of other regions, particularly the West Midlands. The West Midlands, historically renowned for its contributions to industry, manufacturing, and engineering, has transformed into one of the UK's most significant tech hubs.

This reflects the West Midlands' increasing prominence in shaping the future of UK technology, especially as it capitalises on its industrial heritage and positions itself at the forefront of the nation's technological evolution. With the number of start-ups in the West Midlands reaching a record high this year, there is a consistent influx of new ideas and innovation in the region.

The region's tech scene is thriving, with start-ups and scale-ups growing rapidly. Recent statistics show a record number of startups established in the West Midlands, driven by a collaborative spirit between local governments, universities and businesses.

Incubators, accelerators, and tech communities have emerged across the region, including notable initiatives such as Innovation Birmingham and Birmingham Tech Week, delivered by TechWM, a not-for-profit economic development agency, which highlight the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit bubbling within the area.

These initiatives provide platforms for collaboration, mentorship, and networking, helping to sustain the flow of new ideas, innovation, and economic growth.

In particular, advanced manufacturing and engineering represent standout features of the West Midlands' tech sector. With iconic automotive companies such as Jaguar Land Rover and Aston Martin headquartered in the region, the West Midlands has long been synonymous with high-end automotive engineering.

Today, these companies are integrating digital technologies like AI, robotics, and smart manufacturing into their operations. The region is also making strides in areas like autonomous vehicle development and green technology, positioning itself as a leader in the automotive industry's digital transformation.

### A hotbed for start-ups and innovation

The West Midlands' start-up scene is one of the fastest growing in the UK, attracting entrepreneurs and innovators from diverse industries. Recent data highlights the vibrant entrepreneurial activity across the region, with startups representing sectors such as AI, cybersecurity, health technology, fintech and more. Coventry, Birmingham and Wolverhampton are emerging as key startup cities, housing a range of technology companies, from early-stage startups to scaling ventures.

Innovation hubs like STEAMhouse in Birmingham bring together entrepreneurs, researchers, and creatives to collaborate on transformative projects, leveraging cutting-edge technologies such as 3D printing, AI and blockchain. Spaces like STEAMhouse

emphasise the fusion of the arts, science, and technology, facilitating a cross-disciplinary approach to problem-solving and innovation. This forward-thinking environment, combined with support from universities, accelerators, and funding initiatives, is accelerating the region's reputation as a startup hotspot.

The West Midlands Growth Company, in collaboration with the Department for International Trade, has played an instrumental role in nurturing the tech ecosystem. Their collective efforts have helped attract international investment, providing entrepreneurs with the capital and resources they need to scale their ventures.

Birmingham Tech Week, created by TechWM, is one of the region's flagship events, and has also become a crucial platform for promoting the region's startup culture, connecting local entrepreneurs with global investors, and showcasing the diverse talent that exists within the West Midlands tech sector.

Nevertheless, start-ups in the region face unique challenges, including access to capital and mentorship compared to their London counterparts. While there is no shortage of innovative ideas, the investment landscape remains skewed towards the capital, creating difficulties for regional founders seeking seed funding or growth-stage investment.

Efforts are being made to address these disparities, but more needs to be done to ensure startups outside of London have the financial backing and infrastructure they need to thrive.

### The rise of AI, data science, and the West Midlands' technological renaissance

Artificial intelligence and data science are among the fastest-growing sectors within the West Midlands' tech ecosystem.

Universities such as the University of Birmingham and the University of Warwick have positioned themselves as national leaders in AI research, with strong partnerships between academia and industry fuelling advancements in sectors like healthcare, manufacturing, and transportation.

These universities, along with Aston University and Birmingham City University, not only drive innovation but also contribute significantly to developing the talent pipeline that the region's tech sector relies upon.

AI has become a transformative force

in the region's healthcare sector, with pioneering research in areas such as medical diagnostics, patient care, and biotechnology.

The West Midlands has also been instrumental in the application of AI to improve public services, including projects focused on predictive policing, transportation efficiency, and smart city development. Programmes such as the AI adoption accelerator program supported by TechWM and delivered by AND Digital to help equip manufacturing industries with AI readiness. This strategic alignment of AI with key industries positions the West Midlands as a hub for AI-driven innovation.

Similarly, data science has emerged as a crucial enabler of the region's broader digital transformation.

Companies in sectors such as logistics, manufacturing, and finance are increasingly using data-driven insights to optimise

operations, reduce costs, and enhance customer experiences. The creation of data analytics firms, as well as data science programmes at local universities, has fuelled demand for data professionals in the region, solidifying the West Midlands' position as a leader in this domain.

### Challenges facing the West Midlands tech sector

Despite its success, the West Midlands' tech sector faces several significant challenges that could hinder its continued growth. One of the most pressing is the widening digital skills gap.

Although the region is home to world-class universities and research institutions, a shortage of skilled workers in areas like software development, cybersecurity, and data analytics threatens to limit the sector's growth.

The nation is currently predicted to show a national digital skills shortfall of five million workers by 2030, with the West Midlands expected to see an increased demand for technical skills across a range of sectors, including tech.

In addition, regional disparities in terms of investment and infrastructure development are another issue. London has long dominated the UK's tech scene, attracting a significant share of venture capital and government funding.

This concentration of resources in the capital has created an uneven playing field, leaving regions like the West Midlands competing for the attention of investors and policymakers. As a result, many startups in the West Midlands struggle to secure the funding they need to scale their operations, limiting the region's ability to fully capitalise on its tech potential.

The growing 'digital divide' between London and other UK regions underscores the need for a more balanced distribution of investment. By fostering a more equitable distribution of tech resources across the country, the UK can ensure that regions like the West Midlands have the infrastructure, talent, and support they need to become key players in the national and global tech economy.



Martin Ward of TechWM and Yiannis Maos on the closing night of the 2023 Birmingham Tech Week



## The path forward: investing in skills and diversity

Looking ahead, addressing the digital skills gap must be a top priority if the West Midlands' tech sector is to continue growing. Initiatives such as the WMCA's Digital Retraining Fund and local apprenticeship programmes are positive steps towards equipping the region's workforce with the skills required by an evolving tech industry.

However, more needs to be done. Businesses, universities, and government entities must work together to develop training programmes that are aligned with industry needs. Promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education at all levels will also be critical to ensuring that the West Midlands has a diverse and skilled tech workforce.

Diversity and inclusion are equally important in shaping the future of the region's tech ecosystem. Studies show that diverse teams are more innovative and perform better, and there is growing recognition that fostering diversity in tech leadership is essential for driving long-term success. By intentionally supporting underrepresented groups through mentorship programmes, funding initiatives, and educational opportunities, the West Midlands can create a tech industry that is more inclusive, dynamic, and capable of tackling the challenges of tomorrow.

## A bright future for the West Midlands

The West Midlands is playing an increasingly pivotal role in the UK's tech ecosystem, and its potential to shape the future of technology in the country

is immense, with a worth of £15.3 billion and 144,000 people working in tech roles across 2,400 businesses, the region is a key contributor to the tech landscape across the UK. As the UK strives to maintain its position as a global leader in technology, the West Midlands stands out as a region poised for continued growth and innovation.

However, realising this potential will require ongoing investment in education, diversity, and infrastructure.

By closing the digital skills gap, promoting diversity of thought and identity, and ensuring equitable access to resources, the West Midlands can demonstrate its value to the UK's tech sector—and to the world. If the region continues to invest in itself as well as foster innovation across all segments of society, it is well-positioned to play a central role in the UK's technological renaissance and emerge as a global tech leader.



Delegates gather at last year's tech week

By CHRIS MEAH  
Founder and CEO of School of Code



# Tech: a question of trust

Imagine you're at a medical appointment with a choice of doctor: a human doctor, or an AI-powered machine. Which would you choose?

Obviously, not just any human. An above average, nice enough, passed all their studies, decent hygiene, had a good night's sleep and back from a light lunch human.

And obviously, not just any machine. A robot dedicated to all medical knowledge, trained on your personal medical history, and complete with a non-creepy robot smile.

How you feel about these two options reflects two common psychological traits: algorithm aversion and automation bias.

Algorithm aversion is when we don't trust machines, even when they outperform humans. Some people will prefer just having a human behind the wheel, even if a self-driving car will be statistically safer.

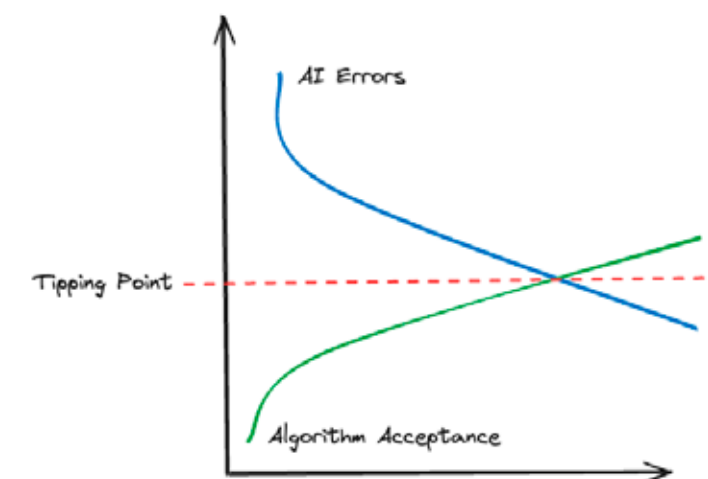
We're less accepting of machine mistakes. Perhaps one reason for this is we don't expect them to learn and improve, so a mistake is seen as an eternal and irredeemable one? If AI can learn and self-improve, this aspect may disappear altogether.

Automation bias, on the other hand, is when humans tend to favour suggestions from automated decision-making systems. People see technology as less prone to error, or more objective than humans.

This isn't a right or a wrong, these are just traits. But both of these may have pitfalls or even be a new fault line for polarisation in future.

To a certain extent, we have been conditioned to expect correctness from machines. Given a massive multiplication (say  $81924 \times 17738293$  for example), most would choose a calculator over a mathematician – well, probably the calculator on their mobile phone . . . when was the last time you saw a standalone calculator!?

In fact, even if a mathematician gave you an answer, you'd probably want to check their work with a calculator anyway. Just to be sure. In this way, everyone has a little automation bias for narrow expertise.



But, when a machine gives an incorrect answer, it tends to really rattle our cages (no "AI will enslave us all" pun intended). If a calculator ever gave you the wrong answer, you'd throw it out (as long as it wasn't your iPhone). Maybe this is why some are so dismissive of Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT – they break the social-digital contract of trusting machines to give us correct information.

LLMs don't try to be correct (although they aren't opposed to it). They try to be plausible. They attempt to say "what is the best thing I could say here that sounds correct". Notice "sounds" and "is" are two different things. Hallucinations are the term given to when LLMs just completely make things up, like sounding confident giving you a link to a scientific article that doesn't exist. They are statistically choosing what would be most plausible for you, and using it – somewhat untethered by reality.

Sometimes, you could describe this as creativity. An AI's hypothetical cure for a disease, though citing non-existent papers, could inspire real scientific inquiry. Some teams are even developing AI scientists capable of generating and testing these hallucinated hypotheses.

LLMs currently break our previous expectations of computers. We expect more database lookups than creative expression from our machines. Will that change?

Microsoft and GitHub's Co-pilots are perfectly named to set the scene for their use. LLMs cannot be trusted, but they can

help. A pilot always has the responsibility for the plane, whether the auto-pilot is engaged or not. When working with AI, you are the pilot. You have to take responsibility for the work. You can't blame the AI.

Many people using LLMs habitually - becoming accustomed to their power and their inaccuracies. Will this exposure over time change our behaviour, guiding AI through hallucinations rather than thinking it's broken? Will the 79% of teenagers who use generative AI tools like ChatGPT just see it as normal to patiently guide, encourage, and explain to a machine.

And as the population may grow to expect and embrace inaccurate machine responses, and it may become more natural to converse and iron out those creases as they arise, so too will machines become more accurate. Errors will be engineered out gradually, trending towards zero.

There's a natural tipping point: as humans become more accepting of machine errors, and engineering means AI error rates trend to zero, there's a point which AI potentially accepted as standard in most situations.

At that point, the gate adoption of AI in many domains is likely to be wide open! If the error rate is 0, then that's a given. If people accept large error rates, the same.

But the trends seem to indicate that even if those two extremes don't occur, we will see a societal change in attitudes towards computers and AI, and what that means will be interesting to see.



# Tech stars of tomorrow

interview

It could be argued that technology is no longer a sector in itself as it has become a vital ingredient in all successful industries. It is what sound economies will be based on, and the opportunities for what it can achieve are almost limitless. What is particularly exciting is the vast and varied array of entrepreneurial initiatives created by young, talented individuals. With the help of TechWM, we have chosen a handful of the region's most exciting talents for the future to profile. Who knows what they might be able to achieve?



## OYIN ADEBAYO, NIYO Group

Oyin Adebayo is a serial tech entrepreneur and angel investor who has scaled her businesses from bootstrap to seven figures. She is the founder and CEO of Niyo, a multi-award-winning company behind NIYO Fest, dedicated to economically empowering Black women through technology.

Niyo operates two brands: Niyo Hair and Beauty, which offers an AR and AI mobile platform for trying on hairstyles before booking salon appointments, and Niyo Bootcamps, an innovative ed-tech platform aimed at upskilling one million black women globally through technical and professional training. In addition to her entrepreneurial endeavours, Oyin is an active angel investor with a focus on supporting black female founders.

Once an investor with Ada Ventures, she focuses on backing Black female founders in economic empowerment and healthcare. She has received numerous awards - including Great British Fashion & Beauty Entrepreneur of the Year, MBCC Entrepreneur of the Year, and Female Innovator of the Year - and has spoken at major events such as Women In Tech Festival, Vodafone UK and Africa Tech Week.

Her dedication to empowering black women through technology and investment has established her as a leading voice in the tech and beauty industry.



## ELENA BOOS, Visionary Farms

The co-founder and CEO of Visionary Farms is an innovator in indoor agriculture. Visionary Farms develops cutting-edge technology for vertical farming and smart greenhouses, with their full-stack product line including all of the key hardware and software components needed to build and operate controlled-environment facilities.

Their systems power farms that have produced 2,500 tonnes of fresh produce using their patent-protected technologies. Initially launched in Russia, Visionary Farms successfully transitioned to the UK, navigating complex geopolitical challenges.

Currently, Visionary Farms is working on an exciting new consumer product - Ignis - smart grow lighting that transforms even the darkest corners of the home into lush indoor gardens. Ignis is designed to integrate seamlessly into the home and educate consumers about indoor farming, driving wider adoption of the technology. To reach early adopters, Visionary Farms is collaborating with the UK's leading kitchen retailers, with plans to expand to mainstream retailers in 2026.

At just 25, Elena has raised over £200,000 in equity investment and secured £1.6 million in grants. With more than five years of leadership experience in vertical farming, she holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Warwick and a masters in finance and management from the University of York. Elena is also a passionate mentor for aspiring female entrepreneurs and a strong advocate for ethical business practices. Her dissertation on greenwashing in the vertical farming sector underscores her commitment to sustainability and integrity.



## ILISHA MASAUN, Econominds

Ilisha is an accomplished entrepreneur, recognised for her innovative approach to education and technology. As the founder of Econominds, she has built a cutting-edge platform that uses AI to create personalized learning resources for A-Level economics students, helping to make the subject more accessible and engaging.

With a background in economics and a successful corporate finance career, Ilisha identified a gap in the market for tailored revision materials and transformed her tutoring business into an EdTech company. Econominds has since tutored over 280 students, achieving a 100% A\*-B success rate, and is expanding to a new AI-driven platform in November.

Passionate about neurodiversity, Ilisha has shaped Econominds based on her own experience with dyslexia, creating resources that cater to various learning styles. Her goal is to provide an end-to-end service that not only helps students excel academically but also connects them to opportunities in finance and tech through apprenticeships and job placements.

Ilisha has received numerous awards, including multiple Midlands Women in Tech Awards, for her pioneering work in education and technology.



## MANDEEP SOOR, Bendi

Mandeep is the co-founder and CEO of Bendi, a company committed to ensuring responsibility in global supply chains with expertise spanning across fashion and retail, financial services and sustainability policy.

As a visionary leader dedicated to transforming global supply chains to protect human rights and the environment, she helps organisations navigate the complexities of their supply chains to reduce the risks related to labour exploitation and environmental harm.

Mandeep's passion for this work is rooted in personal experience—witnessing her mother, an immigrant seamstress, endure exploitation in the UK. This inspired her to leave a successful career in strategy consulting and startup operations to launch Bendi in 2020.

The company quickly gained traction, securing government innovation grants and providing businesses with the tools to meet new regulations such as the Forced Labor Prevention Act and the Modern Slavery Act.

A champion of resilience, Mandeep overcame personal challenges, including being driven away from her family after coming out as gay at 18. She now channels this strength into her mission to build ethical, sustainable supply chains that positively impact both people and the planet.



## Junior Makame, Social Pro

At just 18, Junior Makame is reshaping the tech landscape, and is already recognised as a trailblazer in the AI and social media space. Starting his entrepreneurial journey at 14 with a record label, Junior since founded SocialPro, an AI-powered tool that acts as a personal TikTok strategist for content creators.

This innovative solution, aimed at simplifying content creation, has attracted attention worldwide - with 10,000 sign ups and a waitlist of over 12,000 users - and fuelling Junior's rise as a key player in the startup scene.

He leads a dedicated team of seven and has earned recognition from the BBC and been accepted into leading accelerators, including Colorintech. Facing early financial challenges, Junior leveraged TikTok, building a 30,000-strong following and gaining over 1.5 million views.

Junior's leadership is shaped by hands-on mentorship from top industry figures, including Apple's head of marketing, and his focus on solving real-world pain points faced by creators. He actively participates in the startup ecosystem as a speaker at major events and as a member of the Black Valley Accelerator cohort.

interview





## Shortlisted for Business Tech Awards

A tech-led energy business has been shortlisted for three categories in the UK Business Tech Awards 2024.

The Student Energy Group, which is based in Birmingham, is hoping to scoop top award in the Property Tech Company of the Year, Most Impressive Growth and Tech Company of the Year – Medium Business.

The UK Business Tech Awards

celebrate tech firms and rewards the innovative application of technology that transforms and grows businesses.

One of the co-founders of TSEG, Alex Back, said: "We are honoured to be named as finalists across three such significant categories.

"This recognition highlights the hard work and dedication across our team. It's an exciting time for us."

# Four new patrons join TechWM

TechWM – the not-for-profit organisation driving growth of the West Midlands tech sector – has strengthened its cross-city partnerships with the appointment of four new patrons.

Rigby Group, SCC, Haatch, and Midven have been welcomed on board, with ambitions to help make the West Midlands a global tech superpower by 2030.

Each patron will offer wider support to the ecosystem by transforming investment, amplifying innovation and connecting start-ups with industry leaders in the region.

As the biggest employers in the area, Rigby Group and its cornerstone IT services business SCC, are seeking to support the tech sector to achieve new heights of innovation and bridge the skills gap.

Their patronage will allow for the 144,000 people working in tech in the region to have greater opportunities to develop and evolve in this ever-growing sector.

Haatch and Midven (part of Future Planet Capital) join as patrons with the aim to boost the West Midlands investment space,

improving the viability of start-ups. With the tech sector in the West Midlands being valued at £15.3 billion, this patronage will ensure that rapid growth and investment continues, particularly for start-ups aiming to scale.

Yiannis Maos MBE, founder and CEO at TechWM, said: "These partnerships will be transformational for both TechWM as an organisation and the West Midlands as a region, allowing us to turbo-charge the support we can offer our tech start-ups and scale-ups.

"We know that the West Midlands is one of the best places to start a tech business – the 2,797 new tech companies founded in the last year alone makes that abundantly clear.

"However, we want to ensure that it is also the best place to scale a tech business; in turn bolstering the regional economy, creating new job opportunities, and cementing the region's reputation as a global tech superpower.

"By being able to tap into the expertise

## Celebrating recognition

Multi-service provider Wavenet has been recognised as one of the 2024 UK's Best Workplaces in Tech.

The company, which has headquarters in Solihull and offices across the UK, said it commits to supporting employee wellbeing and a healthy culture that helps its 900-strong workforce to thrive.

CEO of Wavenet, Philip Grannum, said: "This award is special as it directly showcases the environment that we aim to achieve at Wavenet.

"Our employees thrive when they are happy and feel supported to do their jobs, with this award acting as a testament to the culture that has been cultivated by each and every person in the team."

of our patrons – all of whom have themselves grown massively in the West Midlands – TechWM hopes that the businesses in our ecosystem can scale even more quickly and sustainably than before."

As part of their patron partnerships, Rigby Group, SCC, Haatch, and Midven (part of Future Planet Capital), are leading the One to Win competition alongside TechWM. Launched during London Tech Week, it aims to supercharge the next generation of tech business in the West Midlands, with £1 million up for grabs.

## City is second most AI-ready in the UK

Birmingham has emerged as the second most AI-ready city in the UK, new research has shown.

It beat Leeds, Bristol, Oxford and Cambridge in the SAS AI Cities Index 2024, which annually reveals the cities most likely to benefit from the growing appetite for artificial intelligence.

The research is compiled using seven criteria including AI-related jobs being advertised, the number of AI companies in the city, search demand for generative AI, education opportunities and the value of Innovate UK funding granted in each area.

Manchester took top spot but Birmingham came second due to the large number of hackathons that take place in the city, being home to the most amount of AI-related courses at its universities, and the volume of relevant

jobs within a five-mile radius.

For the first time, the study also took into account the rising demand for tools like ChatGPT, using insights to reveal the cities which have had the biggest growth in searches for generative AI.

Glyn Townsend, senior director of education services at SAS for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, said: "AI-ready cities will lead the way in being more resilient, while also meeting new urban living standards, such as sustainability targets, and making services more accessible to people living with disabilities.

"With 80% of UK organisations struggling to recruit applicants with suitable skills, if they do not have adequate tech talent, businesses face the challenge of how to remain competitive in an increasingly tech-

driven world.

"If they then cluster in regions and cities with talent, it could risk deeper regional inequalities. All cities need to be prepared to play their part addressing digital and data literacy gaps, securing support to apply for investment and ultimately helping drive the future economy.

"With the announcement from the prime minister that metro mayors and devolved government will be tasked with creating 10-year growth plans – with an emphasis on economic growth including localised actions for skills creation – it is critical that consideration is given to what skills should be prioritised to ensure maximum return on investment and alignment to rapid anticipated economic growth, current talent needs and future innovation."



Pictured from left are Yiannis Maos, TechWM, Fred Soneya of Haatch, TechWM's Kim Leary, Steve Rigby of The Rigby Group, Rupert Lyle, Midven, and Scott Weavers-Wright, Haatch



# Leading the IT crowd

Pictured from left are Lakhan Gharu, Sarah Griffiths, Charlie Blakemore and Laura Hunt

**Intercity has become one of the UK's most successful independent tech firms, supplying businesses and organisations of all types and sizes with the support to enable them to maximise their capabilities. HENRY CARPENTER meets the man who has spearheaded its growth.**

It started, as these things so often do, by chance.

Charlie Blakemore, a leader in the aerospace sector who had spent the previous 30 years working at BAE Systems, hosted a networking group of CEOs.

One of the guests was Andrew Jackson, the owner and group CEO of Intercity, the firm which his father had founded in the mid-1980s to serve the burgeoning mobile phone industry.

"We got chatting, and he called me up a month or so after that to tell me he was diversifying Intercity," says the genial Blakemore from the company HQ in Holloway Head.

"He wondered if I would be interested in taking on a non-executive directorship role as he was looking to bring broader experience and operational capabilities to the team."

Blakemore is as modest as he is popular in Birmingham business circles – which is to say, very – so let's allow the facts do the talking. Having progressed through the ranks at BAE over three decades with the aerospace giant, he ended up in charge of a £1.2 billion subsidiary – its global land arm – with 10,000 staff members across several countries. That requires experience, know-how, and operational talent.

This is what Jackson saw in him . . . but what did Blakemore see in Intercity which led him to eventually leaving BAE, having accepted Jackson's interim offer of a stint as a NED at the Birmingham IT firm?

"First of all I really enjoyed the culture," says Blakemore in response. "I could also see huge potential in the business. The firm's foundations were very strong and the market demand was there."

"Also, if I had remained at BAE, it would have involved a lot more travel at a time when I had just turned 50 and wanted to work closer to home. My daughters were rapidly growing up and I was keen to spend much more time with my family."

"Andrew Jackson knew this and asked me to join Intercity full time."

"From that first meeting, I bonded with Andrew. We complement each other so well."

"We are a great team and Andrew helped create a brilliant platform for me to build upon. It was a big decision for me to leave a 34-year career at BAE Systems to join Intercity and seven years on, I am enjoying every day in our business."

"I feel very fortunate to have worked for two fantastic businesses and with such great people."

So it was in 2018 that Blakemore joined Intercity as chief operating officer. Before we discover what his remit was, it's worth finding out a little bit more about Intercity's history, and what sort of operation Blakemore was joining.

The business was founded in 1985 as Intercity Mobile Communications, three years after Andrew Jackson's father, Alan, met Martin Cooper, the inventor of the first

hand-held mobile phone at the Motorola in Chicago.

Spotting the possibilities of this new form of tech, Alan Jackson launched Intercity Mobile Communications in 1985 as an independent service provider for the mobile industry with six colleagues. The firm grew and grew, and by 1998 there were 250 members of staff – the expansion of which coincided with the internet explosion.

Indeed in 2010 it rebranded as Intercity Technology from Intercity Telecom, reflecting the shift from a mobile-focused business to a unified communications provider.

It is now an award-winning managed services provider, recently named a WIRED Trailblazer – which the tech magazine ran in partnership with HSBC – in recognition for its expertise in managed IT, cloud, cyber security and communications. Intercity



Blakemore is proud of the culture at Intercity



helps companies and organisations across the UK transform their business performance through technology, enabling them to 'do more'. Companies rely on their IT systems; when they go down, the user is paralysed. That's how important healthy systems which maximise capabilities and offer an impregnable defence against risk are these days . . . and that is what Intercity seeks to provide.

That the firm's curve is now on the up and up, currently serving more the 1,300 customers nationwide, owes more than a little to the direction Blakemore has taken it over the last few years.

"When I joined my brief was to build on acquisitions and develop the business," he says. "I set about putting the foundations in place for better delivery, with focus firmly on the customers.

"We brought in new systems and apprenticeship schemes, and set up the business with really good, solid foundations for scaling.

"IT was a new sector for me, although I had been involved in tech for years, but it was about building a fantastic team and culture, and bringing a more professional service to our customers, along with good governance.

"We have seen the net promoter score – the customer service metric – rise from 12 to plus 93, and we have worked really hard to continue to drive the right culture."

In 2020 Blakemore "took on the whole shebang" when he was made CEO. With the emergence of Covid it was, as he euphemistically puts it, "an interesting time".

It was however to prove an extremely valuable period in many ways. The new Intercity boss immersed himself in meticulously studying the market and

researching the sector, so he had a clear idea of how he wanted to grow the business.

"I felt we needed to be on the front foot," he continues. "We thought there would be pent-up demand for IT providers after lockdown, and so we put a business plan together and invested in new technology, skills in cyber, and skills in managed IT.

"We knew lots of businesses wanted a trusted partner. We built a really good strategy which is still in place today, following the maxim to be the best tech partner to work for and with."

There were three key areas identified by Blakemore and the team to provide the foundations for further growth: communications, managed IT services, and cloud and security.

This, he believed, along with a stronger focus on the new culture he helped to install at Intercity, would see the business stand tall in the very difficult and congested IT sector.

And he's not afraid to admit that it has not all been plain sailing.

"We have certainly had some tough months, and during Covid we did all our market intelligence but still didn't know what the new norm would be," he admits.

"We had 12 to 18 months where our EBITDA was below expectations, and in the years 2014 to 2020 it's fair to say that the business experienced a steady decline. We simply had to invest and turn that around.

"But we've worked hard, re-branded, and re-focused on looking after our customers. The consequence was an organic rise in growth, from £28 million to over £42 million.

"The business has grown and hit new records. The expectation is to see year-on-year growth over the next three years,

achieving record sales and continuing to build solid foundations."

Emphasis, too, is placed on attracting, nurturing and retaining talent – all of which is made considerably easier if Intercity is a proven 'good place to work for'. So it would have been a useful vindication of the way the company operates and its environment when it was awarded a gold-rated Investors in People award, and the prestigious Best Companies three-star rating.

And with tech ever evolving, so does the concentration on new developments in the sector. For instance, Blakemore points to the dizzying rise of AI and growing risks to cyber as areas where his experts have been focusing on.

Mention is made time and again on the importance of nurturing and retaining talent, and Blakemore is proud of what he calls "a fantastic and young team who are setting us up for an exciting future".

When it comes to scaling the business, the focus has very much been on strong organic growth. This in turn provides the cash to accelerate growth with targeted acquisitions.

Back in 2015 Intercity bought Gage Networks, the cloud communication specialists, and another case in point occurred earlier this year when Intercity bought the Bedfordshire-based firm Centrality, one of the UK's most accredited Microsoft service partners which boasts more than 25 years of experience with the digital giant.

Centrality CEO David Keeling joined Intercity's board as managing director of a new division focused on leveraging Centrality's expertise in Microsoft's suite of products and solutions. Centrality's 100-strong team has continued to work from the Bedfordshire office, taking the combined workforce to more than 325.

"We have just completed the first major phase of business integration following the acquisition of Centrality," says Blakemore.

"Centrality offers first-class Microsoft capabilities, including its own internal security operations centre. These have been integrated into our existing divisions, with David Keeling now leading our rapidly growing cloud and security division.

"We are delighted with this acquisition. We have shared values and we are already seeing a surge in sales pipeline with the new Microsoft capabilities that we can now offer our existing and new customers.

"The new capability expanded Intercity's Microsoft offering, complimenting existing partnerships with vendors such as Vodafone, Virgin Media O2, EE, Juniper, Fortinet and Check Point.

"Centrality filled a gap for us, and we are now seeing a £60 million turnover as a result of the acquisition.

"I am a firm believer that it's not what you do, it's how you do it, and we have got great people, very ambitious growth plans, and a detailed three-year business plan."



Team Intercity

Does he have any numbers in mind? "By the year 2030 we are aiming to achieve a turnover of £100 million with a staff count of over 500," he says.

You wouldn't bet against the firm reaching these levels. It currently partners with some 1,300 customers spread across organisations ranging from large public-sector bodies – such as hospitals, city councils, British Transport Police and the Environment Agency – and large, high-profile brands, through to lesser-known SMEs.

This portfolio has enabled the firm to extend its capabilities, and it is working with some of the strongest brands in the industry, helped of course by the acquisition of Centrality with its Microsoft connection.

While Intercity is very much a nationwide firm whose headquarters happen to be in Birmingham, it has certainly become an increasingly prominent force in its home city over the last few years. It is surely no accident that this coincides with Blakemore's stewardship, and as a proud West Midlander you get the sense that he revels in some of the projects and organisations in the region which have been served by Intercity.

"We won the contract for the 2022 Commonwealth Games, which was brilliant," he says. "In 2023 we were taken on by Warwickshire County Cricket Club at Edgbaston to provide IT support, and we

**"It's important that we enjoy this journey. I know how hard everyone works, and sometimes we are very stretched. But we can't afford to stand still."**

are doing some exciting work with colleges in the region.

"We have got some brilliant customers, and at the heart of it we are working really hard to look after them all as well as we possibly can.

"While we are enjoying a period of real success, and posting record results year on year, I say to all the team that we have to remain humble. There are bound to be some bumps in the road.

"But it has been a really exciting journey, and Birmingham is the right place for us to be. It is fair to say that the tech sector here is one of the fastest growing in Europe, there are some fantastic universities in the region who are carrying out some really important research.

"It's important that we enjoy this journey. I know how hard everyone works, and sometimes we are very stretched. But we can't afford to stand still."

We are coming towards the end of our chat but there is one more aspect of Intercity which Blakemore is keen to touch on – the steps the firm makes to give back to the community.

He cites the fact that some 1,500 schoolchildren from the Birmingham

area have benefited in some way from assistance given to them by the Intercity team, often through work experience, advice on writing CVs or being interviewed. That's in addition to the support and involvement in local digital poverty programmes.

Then there are the charities which the firm has supported – the likes of St Basils, Acorns Children's Hospice and Birmingham Children's Hospital spring to mind – not just with financial assistance, but also through time given. Several members of the team, for instance, were only too happy to help out in the Acorns garden.

The firm has committed ESG objectives too, and this is backed up by a platinum EcoVadis accreditation.

My colleague Carl Jones has written far more about Blakemore the man in the following pages (and it's a great read), but he is widely known throughout Birmingham's corporate firmament as being enormously engaged, trusted and respected.

Engaged, trusted, respected . . . three adjectives which sum up the very business he spearheads.



Intercity holds a 3-star Best Companies accreditation





# Man of many talents

**He's run some of the country's biggest businesses, performed giant-killing heroics in the FA Cup, and been awarded for his commitment to the region's business community. Charlie Blakemore reflects on his fascinating career with CARL JONES**

Charlie Blakemore is a difficult man to pigeonhole – both professionally and geographically!

He's held senior positions in the worlds of engineering, defence, aerospace, shipbuilding, IT and cyber security during a remarkably successful 40-plus year career which has taken him all over the world.

And that's not to mention managing a non-league football team that performed some of the most incredible giant-killing heroics in the long and proud history of the FA Cup.

"Yep, I am bit of a hybrid," he says. "Born in Wolverhampton, raised in Staffordshire and Shropshire, but also very involved in the business community in Birmingham too. I've got deep roots and great friends in all of these places, and am proud of them all."

He's currently CEO of Intercity Technology, the fast-growing Birmingham business with a proud track record of operating services such as cloud computing, security and hosting.

The world of IT is a far cry from his first job as an apprentice at GKN Defence in Telford, which saw him progress swiftly through the ranks to lead the £1.2 billion turnover global land business at BAE Systems, where he was responsible for over 10,000 staff, 17 sites and operations in four countries.

This was followed by other senior board-level positions in the maritime and air sector divisions of BAE Systems, including the historic shipyards on the Clyde in Scotland.

It involved successfully leading business transformation and delivering large complex projects including Type 45 Frigates and the largest ships ever commissioned by the Royal Navy, the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers.

"The time when I was chief operating officer of the Maritime Naval Ships Business leading the transformation of the UK shipyards up in Glasgow was probably the toughest job I've done," he says.

"We were building two aircraft carriers at the same time as modernising the business and the ways of working. It also coincided with the Scottish Referendum. I was away from my family during the week for three years. It was hard."

During this time Blakemore was also flying all over the world attending business think-tanks, seminars, conferences and presentations, and rubbing shoulders with everyone from prime ministers to presidents, international sports stars, and even one of the first men on the moon, Buzz Aldrin.

His next job at BAE systems was operations and transformation director

in the Air Sector based in Lancashire, producing exciting products such as Typhoon, F35 and Hawk Jets.

Six years ago, Blakemore was enticed back to his West Midlands roots for a full-time role at Intercity Technology after spending nearly three years on their board as a non-executive director.

He is now immersed in the world of communications, managed IT services, cloud and security products, working from the company's headquarters in the city, at Holloway Head.

He is loving this latest chapter of his career which he says gives him a challenging and high-powered job, more time with the family, and an opportunity to give back to the local business community too.

"I've always been the sort of person who will give 150% to a task, and go at pace," he says. "If it's sport, I want to win the league. If it's business, I want to create momentum, set ambitious targets and make sure we reach them."

"Good leadership, in my opinion, is all about clarity of purpose, having a clear strategy and plan, communicating that plan, and giving people belief, confidence and encouragement to be the best we can individually and collectively be."

So, let's talk about sport for a minute.



Alongside his high-powered business career, Blakemore made his name on the national football scene as manager of non-league minnows Chasetown FC.

With an average attendance of just 90, he famously took the BGB Southern Division One team to the third round of the FA Cup in 2007 after a 1-0 win over Port Vale, from League One. To this day, Chasetown remains the lowest ranked team to ever reach that stage of the competition.

“They were amazing times, and I’m incredibly proud of what we did,” says Blakemore, who himself had a long non-league playing career at various West Midlands football clubs.

He eventually stepped down as Chasetown manager in 2011 after eight years when he felt pressure of work was preventing him from dedicating enough time to the role. He had a football phone, and a work phone, and working hours were, in his words, ‘ridiculous’.

Any regrets? Could that job have been a stepping stone to other managerial posts further up the football pyramid? “There were a few conversations floating around,” he says. “But nothing quite came together, and anyway, with my career going so well at that point it would have taken a very big job offer.”

The manager’s role at his beloved Wolverhampton Wanderers FC perhaps? “Absolutely. I’ve been a fan since the age of seven, and if they’d offered me that, I’d have walked down to Molineux in my bare feet or crawled on my hands and knees to sign the contract – then my family would have killed me,” he smiles.

Blakemore believes there are so many parallels between running a multi-million-pound business and getting peak performance out of a football team at any level.

“It’s about people. Everything is about people. Lots of things have changed in business over the past 40 years, but that’s one factor which most certainly hasn’t.

“It’s been a common ingredient for me in every role I’ve had. Getting on well with people. Understanding people. Bringing



**Blakemore spent eight “amazing” years as manager of Chasetown FC**



**At a business round table event in Birmingham**

people together. Being authentic and being myself – all those things that my dad told me when I was 16.

“In sport or in business, it’s at challenging times when real leaders come out and give the team confidence and a platform to build on.

“I’ve had a great relationship with trade unions everywhere I’ve worked, despite in some cases having to make decisions about quite heavy job losses at a time when automation was starting to come in.

“It’s about doing things in the right way, as a human, and having that empathy. You’ll get a lot more respect for being honest and authentic, and making it clear you are prepared to listen to – and appreciate – other people’s views. Whatever you decide, you’ve got to be able to take people with you.

“Coming from the shop floor environment myself as an apprentice was the best grounding I could possibly have had for everything that’s followed. Universities can’t teach you the mentality, and appreciation of how people think; that only comes from experience in the workplace.”

Blakemore traces his ‘people person’ credentials back to his teenage years when his father ran a pub in Shropshire, where he would listen, learn, and store snippets of wisdom away

It set him in good stead, he believes, for that first job as a technical apprentice and mechanical engineer with GKN, where he was part of the launch team who paved the way for the production lines which built the Warrior armoured vehicle in Telford for the British Army.

“That was such an honour. We basically had a blank piece of paper to set up the production line. How good is that? I embraced it, loved it, learned a lot, made lots of mistakes, but had the craic as well, playing football with the lads.

“We recently had a charity event for a friend and ex-colleague who is bravely battling cancer. I met many of the people who helped shape me in my early years. They are salt of the earth.

“It was quite emotional, because I’ve

had so many incredible experiences and opportunities in my career, and travelled all over the world – but I was back on the learning ground where it all started for me. I’ve never forgotten those people, and that time.”

Giving back is high on Blakemore’s agenda these days, which is one of the reasons he’s been delighted to take a seat as a non-executive director of the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, where he engages with local and national government and promotes businesses in the West Midlands region.

“There are over 2,000 businesses in the network, and I love engaging with them, and learning from them. I love meeting new people, and really enjoy the opportunity to help others, imparting some of the experiences and mistakes I’ve made. I am always humbled by the fantastic talent that we have in our region.

“I have learned a lot in business, from things that have gone well and also from things that have not gone so well. Everyone will make some mistakes; it comes with the territory in very challenging roles.

“Football is the same, and it’s important you learn how to win and how to cope with losses. You reflect, and then try to put it right in the next game.”

The commitment to supporting and celebrating his roots hasn’t gone unnoticed. Blakemore received the lifetime achievement prize at the Innovation Awards 2022 for his contributions to the business industry and wider community.

He’s described by the team at Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce as ‘a genuine people-first leader’.

“Throughout his career, Charlie has built a track record of delivering growth through the development and delivery of a clear business strategy, engaging and leading teams to embrace new technologies and ways of working,” they say.

A fellow of the Institute of Directors and Association for Project Management, Blakemore is also deputy chairman on the board of Innovation West Midlands, board advisor on Cyber Security, and a

member of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce too.

“The last few years at Intercity have been incredible. In 2018, when I was a non-executive director, it was a successful mobile phone business which was developing and diversifying with acquisitions, led by chief executive and our owner Andrew Jackson.

“I could see the potential of this business, and brought in project management disciplines I’d used before from the likes of the Typhoon and Tornado, and tailored them to the needs of the business.”

In 2020, Blakemore took on the role of group managing director – just weeks

before the pandemic – but has seen the business grow in that time from a £28 million turnover business to £60 million, with 160 staff rising to 330.

“We have significantly widened our portfolio and have had impressive organic growth supplemented with targeted acquisitions to complement our capabilities and market demand”.

Last summer Intercity was announced as the official IT partner of Edgbaston Stadium and Warwickshire County Cricket Club – a key part of its vision to become a world-class tech-enabled stadium.

“We are delighted to become the official IT partner for Edgbaston Stadium,



**The successful partnership with Edgbaston could be the first of a number of high-profile sporting projects**



**Meeting man-on-the-moon Buzz Aldrin during a trip to the USA**

an iconic cricket venue that’s just a mile down the road from our headquarters in Birmingham,” he says.

“Intercity and Edgbaston share the same values and ambition to work together to provide a sustainable, world-class experience and add long-term value to our local community.”

It is hoped that the partnership will also help create and develop young local talent in the technology industry, which Edgbaston and Intercity can bring through together.

With progressive and high-profile partnerships such as this, and exciting discussions under way with other major sports clubs, Blakemore has his sights set on leading Intercity over the £100 million turnover mark, with a workforce swelling to more than 500.

“The IT sector is very different to anything I’ve worked in before, but I’m absolutely loving it. Recruitment is tough out there at the moment, but we’ve got a brilliant team, and are committed to bringing in apprentices, giving young people a chance and watching them flourish.

“I have to say though, that I couldn’t have done any of these things in my career without having such a supportive family around me. My wife Charlotte has been a rock, and I’m so proud of the people my two daughters have become.

“There will always be times when you have self-doubt and having people around you that give you the belief and confidence to overcome negative thoughts is really important.

“It’s not all been success in my life, or in my career. There have been times when I’ve felt I’m not enjoying it, shouldn’t be here, or am not the right person to be doing this job. That’s when your family, friends and mentors help to pick you back up.

“Leadership is about that – spotting when people need a lift, and reaching out a hand. Because we all go through it. If people want some advice, I’ll always have time for them, because I recognise how important it has been that people have always had time for me.”

At the age of 56, Blakemore is relishing the increased family time, the chance to spend a few more hours on the golf course, and continues to play five-a-side football with his mates.

“I’m still full-on – I think that’s just me. I’m not sure I’ll ever change from that point of view.”

And his advice to anyone taking up a leadership position for the first time? “Be yourself and have confidence in your own capabilities. Take the time to recognise other people’s strengths and qualities to get the best out of them.

“Be challenging, be fair, act with honesty, integrity, and humility – and whether it’s football or business, make sure you get your tactics right.”





# Partnership to deliver tech training courses

IT services and solutions provider SCC has announced a new partnership between its academy and digital skills training provider Netcom Training.

The partnership aims to provide cutting-edge training courses designed to meet the growing demand for skilled IT professionals among communities on the eastern side of Birmingham.

SCC Academy delivers learning to over 1,000 people a year, working in partnership with multiple agencies and community groups.

It offers a range of employer-led course levels designed to take participants from acquiring life-enhancing basic digital skills through to achieving the credible, industry-recognised qualifications required

to carry them into employment. Kevin Vashi, managing director at Netcom Training said: “We are excited to join forces with SCC. Their deep industry insights and hands-on experience will significantly enrich our training programmes, ensuring that those taking part receive the most relevant and up-to-date education in the IT field.”



# Funding secured

In-Comm Training and Birmingham City University have secured funding to embark on a knowledge transfer partnership that will use AI to transform the way apprenticeships and learner journeys are managed.

Funded by Innovate UK, the focus of the KTP will be on the implementation of an AI-powered learning management system that will provide real-time data on all aspects of operations at In-Comm Training’s technical academies in the Black Country and Telford.

This will cover and enhance learning for more than 2,500 people accessing upskilling courses, as well as engagement with over 700 SMEs and large employers across Birmingham, the Black Country and beyond.

“We are immensely proud to be moving forward with this exciting KTP and delighted to be recognised as In-Comm Training’s strategic technology partner,” said Professor Hanifa Shah of Birmingham City University.

“The partnership reflects our commitment to driving innovation in education and skills, as well as our dedication to supporting learners and employers through advanced technological solutions.

“The AI-powered LMS, built from scratch, is a testament to our collaborative efforts with Innovate UK and will help the business achieve its long-term goal of delivering employer-led skills support.”

Gareth Jones, managing director of In-Comm Training, said: “Through our collaboration with BCU, we will embed the AI-powered Learning Management System into the heart of our business.

“This will enhance the learning experience. Individuals will have access to digital material and there is now 360-degree transparency around progression data, employer involvement and communication.”



**Pictured from left are Natalie Lewis, BCU, Gareth Jones and Julie Cadman, both In-Comm Training, Professor Hanifa Shah, BCU, Mark Matchett, KTA at KTN, Dr Khalid Ismail, Dr AbdulRahman Alsewari and Shashank Hosahally, all BCU**



# The business of space

The ‘business of space’ offers major opportunities for the West Midlands – that was the message given by a panel of experts at an event hosted by investment group Richardson.

The Oldbury-based international investment and property business attracted a 100-strong audience to the discussion at the University of Birmingham’s Exchange building. Attendees included West Midlands mayor Richard Parker, shadow science minister and Meriden & Solihull MP Saqib Bhatti and former Dudley MP Lord Ian Austin.

Hosted by Carl Richardson and his brothers Martyn and Lee, a panel of industry experts highlighted the huge business potential, not from rockets but from the huge amount of data available from satellites and space technology.

Bogden Gogulan, CEO of NewSpace Capital, the world’s first private equity firm devoted to growth-stage space technology companies, said: “A big part of the UK economy is underpinned by space applications – 70% to 90%.

“It’s not just communications, satnavs and the weather. In agriculture the use of data from satellites can boost yields by 14% up to 40%. Around 80% of activity in space is commercial, it’s a \$600 billion industry that is only set to grow.”

Elizabeth Williams, head of law firm

Gowling’s aviation, aerospace and defence sector, said the UK led the way in framing regulations and licensing regimes to cover operations in space, attracting companies to base themselves in this country.

“We sponsor the Midland Aviation Alliance, which is the third most active space cluster in Europe. Their Pivot into Space programme has seen eight businesses receive government funding and three are being taken further by the European Space Agency. We need more programmes like that.”

Melissa Quinn runs Slingshot Aerospace, providing space data and analytics to its clients, but was previously founding director of the UK’s first spaceport, in Cornwall.

She spoke of its legacy of new skills and new space-based businesses, adding: “I want other young girls, other people from diverse backgrounds, to be able to join what is happening in space.

“Things are changing very quickly and we need different kinds of people to be at that table to decide what we’re doing out there. There is so much opportunity, we can’t just let the same old people make the same old decisions; they are doing that at the moment and it’s time that changed.”

Andrew Turner had a 37-year RAF career as a combat helicopter pilot and later Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff. He

**Pictured from left in the panel line-up is Bogden Gogulan, CEO NewSpace Capital, Andrew Turner, MD Space4Sight, Melissa Quinn, MD Slingshot Aerospace, the BBC’s Kathryn Stanczyszyn, Elizabeth Williams of Gowling, and host Carl Richardson.**

now heads Space4Sight, a space strategy consultancy. He called for greater capital investment to build the UK’s space industry.

“We need to set more ambitious targets, with space making up two per cent of GDP,” he said.

“When they think of space, most people think of astronauts and rockets but the vast majority of commercial space business is around data. And, from an investor’s point of view, there’s no risk in that. It’s where the pension funds should be distributing some of their £2.2 trillion of investments.”

Event MC Kathryn Stanczyszyn, the BBC presenter and journalist, oversaw questions from the audience that ranged from security in space to the practicalities and costs of launching your own satellite.

The event also received messages of support, including one from Astronomer Royal Lord Martin Rees, who said: “The space sector is strong and its future is surely bright.”



# Shifting foundations: resilience in an unpredictable world

Traditionally a CFO was seen as an organisation's goalkeeper, the final line of defence, keeping the business from material harm and getting teammates to defend more.

In today's tech-driven era, the role of the CFO is transitioning from goalkeeper to attacking midfielder, whilst still retaining goalkeeping instincts and remaining vigilant of disruptions.

The game has changed, and so have expectations and risks. Resilience is a critical necessity for survival and growth, therefore CFOs in technology businesses must embrace agility, be forward-thinking, and be adaptable to navigate the strategic frontiers successfully.

## Redefining resilience in the digital age

COVID-19 and other global disruptions have upended traditional assumptions and models of business and finance. Suddenly, the playing field shifted, revealing the vulnerabilities of rigid structures and strategies. Resilience emerged as the linchpin for businesses striving not only to weather the storm, but also to thrive. CFOs need to prepare for a wide range of events that could affect workforce availability, supply chains, and customer demand requiring a level of strategic thinking and scenario planning previously not commonly undertaken.

**Supply chain disruptions:** One of the big lessons from recent events such as the pandemic, war in Europe and the Middle East, and trade disputes between the USA and China, is the huge impact on our global supply chains. We are more connected than ever meaning we are more reliant on global stability. There is a general trend to start building resilience and latency in supply chains, which reduces short-term profits but minimises future shocks.

## ESG: A future-focused approach

We cannot talk about resilience and adaptability without mentioning ESG. By integrating ESG principles into our strategies and scenario planning, we not only mitigate risks but also unlock opportunities for sustainable growth.

If we consider the impact of our



By CHRIS BARLOW,  
Partner and  
manufacturing  
& engineering  
specialist at MHA

organisation's actions on society and the environment, we can mitigate the risks arising from future changes in legislation and societal reaction to the climate crisis. This, along with other future scenario planning matters will allow us to consider new opportunities and lead our businesses along the path of sustainable growth.

## Tech-driven adaptations in a dynamic environment

The impact of generative artificial intelligence, the billions being pumped into general intelligence, increasingly sophisticated supply chain automation, shifting regulations on financial recording and transacting through blockchain technologies, all mean CFOs need to keep abreast of a wide range of moving parts.

We need to see through the hype to what the real change to our business will be. We cannot do this alone, the topic is too vast, so we must collaborate with our peers and our advisors to understand the big picture and proactively adapt our strategies and operations to leverage new opportunities.

Tech companies have exemplified resilience by leveraging digital technologies, data analytics, cloud computing, and cybersecurity to enhance operational efficiency, customer experience, innovation, and risk management.

For example, companies like Amazon, Microsoft, Zoom, Figma and Slack to name but a few demonstrated how a dynamic business environment led to innovation and opportunity when a rapid technological change was needed.

However, the darker edge of all this is that as we live in an increasingly digitised world, unimagined threats emerge to our data integrity and security. Taking on the goalkeeper role, CFOs must invest time, energy and money into the protection of their data and IT systems.

## The strategic role of the CFO

As strategic leaders and partners, CFOs play a pivotal role in navigating uncertainty and complexity. Balancing financial risks with identifying growth opportunities requires a nuanced understanding of the business landscape. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and market fluctuations can affect investor confidence, consumer spending, and business performance. CFOs must monitor market trends, assess potential risks, and adjust financial strategies to navigate volatile market conditions and safeguard the financial health of their organisations. By building capabilities and fostering a culture of innovation within the finance function and the organisation as a whole, CFOs can steer their companies toward resilience and success.

## Frameworks for achieving resilience

Effective resilience strategies rely on robust frameworks and best practices. Scenario planning, stress testing, agile budgeting, dynamic forecasting, and contingency planning are indispensable tools in the CFO's arsenal. By embracing these methodologies, CFOs can anticipate challenges, seize opportunities, and pivot swiftly in response to changing circumstances.

**Regulatory changes:** Regulatory changes, including tax reforms, data privacy regulations, and industry-specific regulations, can significantly impact the financial operations and compliance requirements of technology businesses. The faster the pace of change in the environment, the faster the changes in regulation are going to occur; and the more likely they are to be reactive and contain unintended consequences. This presents a lot of challenges and threats (goalkeeper) but also opportunities.

CFOs will benefit from creating a culture of curiosity, experimentation, and collaboration across the organisation. Resilience can only be achieved by teams embracing innovative ideas, approaches, and perspectives, working together to take advantage of the opportunities that continuous change brings.

profile

# All-action woman



## Sarah Towers is the COO of consultancy Entec Si, which specialises in change management and digital transformation. Although its headquarters are in Birmingham, Sarah works on projects across the UK and, as we discover in this Q&A, her life outside work is every bit as dynamic as her job.

### What does your current role at Entec Si involve?

I'm responsible for overseeing everything on a day-to-day basis and ensuring we're running efficiently and effectively.

As we're an SME, or as we like to say 'boutique' consultancy, I pretty much get involved in managing everything from sales, marketing, recruitment and HR, through to delivery and finance.

The CEO sets the overall vision and strategy and then focusses on external factors such as delivering our growth, whereas it's my job to manage the internal operations, ensure the strategies are implemented, translate high-level strategic goals into actionable operational plans, monitor our progress whilst keeping an eye on risks that may impact our ability to deliver. I manage the budgets, control costs and ensure resources are allocated as efficiently as possible to our client commissions, without sacrificing quality or performance.

A big part of my role is supporting the growth and development of our team of amazing consultants, through coaching, mentoring and empowering. It's a very fulfilling part of my role.

I am also able to carve out time to work with our clients, ensuring we're delivering above their expectations, and in some cases even doing some hands-on delivery work myself. I love being able to share my experience and knowledge to help others.

### Can you name some of the projects you've been involved with?

Given my role, in the two and a half years I've been here, I've touched nearly every project and client we've been involved in. We have such a diverse mix of commissions, it's amazing how easily transferrable the skills and experience our consultants have across the different sectors and clients.

Some stand out projects we've delivered in this time would be the implementation of a surgical robot at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch to allow elective urological surgery for men with prostate cancer.

Others include a programme we delivered in a really tight timeframe to modernise the IT infrastructure of a large UK-wide charity and a current major piece of work we're doing supporting one of the UK's largest local authorities to deliver its future city's vision. We believe it's one of largest digital transformation programmes currently taking place in a council so it's exciting to be an integral part of this and people being put at the heart of this major change.



Sarah Towers works with consultants across all departments at Entec Si

Coming from a big corporate background I've really enjoyed engaging in the third sector, which is a new area for me, learning and adapting to a different working culture.

### What has been your most rewarding project?

Such a difficult question as there are so many!

I think the most rewarding for me are those where I've transformed teams or individuals, using my experience to guide people through the Kubler Ross stages of change, to see acceptance and ultimately growth. If you can successfully change the behavior, then delivering the business benefit is an easy by-product.

There are very few projects we deliver which don't impact on people in some way so for me change management has to come hand in hand with project management.

That was one of the main things which drew me to Entec Si and its approach to delivery. We put people at the heart of everything.

### Tell us a little about your professional career prior to joining Entec Si

I started out nearly 30 years ago as a graduate trainee in IT at the local British Steel site, where generations of my family had worked.

As was the trend in those days, the IT department was soon outsourced to a specialist IT services provider, Capgemini, with whom I spent nearly 10 years learning

my trade through mainframe programming, analysis, project and programme management and ultimately service delivery management. Through this time, I also gained an MBA, a husband and two small boys!

A call from a previous manager then led me to Capita in 2006 where I stayed for the next 15 years and had the opportunity to try my hand at pretty much every role in the business book: from running service desks across Europe and India, to designing Wide Area Network services for all of Scotland, managing top secret services for a nuclear submarine site, to heading up sales support.

Every role involved managing multi-million-pound budgets along with leading and driving some form of strategic change and transformation.

I loved and excelled in the big corporate environment, with the variety, the pressure (most of the time!) but did spend a lot of time away from home and living in hotels across the UK.

The changes Covid forced on us led me to reevaluate things a little, and in 2022 I made the transition to Entec Si. I hadn't realised how ready I'd been for the change and how different, but equally as exciting and challenging, the next phase of my journey would be.

### Is keeping up with advances in tech a key part of your job?

I think keeping up to date with advances

in tech is key in any job nowadays. We're living through the 4th industrial revolution, but yes definitely in all of our roles within Entec Si.

The pace of change has become so fast over the last few years it's difficult for many of our customers to 'keep up' so they look to us as consultants to bring that knowledge and experience to the table. It's part of our job to keep abreast with what's happening in the sector.

As I've moved more into the consulting space, I can clearly see the standout consultants are those who invest time in research, learning and education and don't just rely on experience.

I began my masters in digital transformation during lockdown, which I found was a fantastic way of bringing my knowledge up to date and engaging to learn with others in similar roles across a variety of different industries.

On a personal level, I've always been a bit of a tech geek so love keeping up to date with advances and how particular technology can really help us do things differently and make better use of our time. The introduction of my robot Hoover was revolutionary!

### Did your education set you up for your career?

No, not initially. I followed my heart after school and studied my favourite subject at university, which was geography. I finished my degree and didn't really know what to do next. I think this is the case for so many people.

I was then lucky enough to receive an ERC grant encouraging women into technology and completed a masters in information systems and technology, which

then opened the door to my career.

To be honest though, I don't think there is an education path into consultancy, or certainly into the style of consultancy Entec Si delivers. We have consultants from all different backgrounds; living our values and that of our customers is far more important to us. I'd still encourage the younger generation to go to university but choose to study what they enjoy not what they think we want to see. I don't think the subject of a degree holds anyone back in our space. **Tell us about the Marathon des Sables . . .** I have always been pretty adventurous and ticked off lots of different challenges. For example, I've climbed Kilimanjaro twice, been to Everest base camp and cycled the length of UK (Lands End to John o' Groats), Vietnam and Jordan but I think this one was a bit extreme, even for me!

The Marathon des Sables is something which has captivated me for many years. I've watched all the films and read all the books and looked on in awe.

It's known as the toughest footrace on earth, where you cover the equivalent of six marathons in six days across the Sahara Desert, carrying all your own food and kit – including a venom pump! The organisers provide just water and carpet with a tarp over the top as a shelter for you to sleep under each night.

So after a crazy rush of blood on my 50th birthday, I signed up. I invested so much in training and preparation: I had so many spreadsheets and even spent a fortnight at a university running in a heat chamber every day to prepare.

It was certainly the experience of a lifetime. We had to deal with extreme temperatures of 50 degrees plus, huge

sandstorms, the longest single day ever at 58 miles, horrendous blisters, but I'm really proud to say I was one of the 763 people who finished in 2023.

### Any more adventures lined up?

I've always an adventure or two on the horizon!

I am off to Greenland in October to run the Polar Circle Marathon where I'm expecting temperatures of minus 20 degrees plus, and then next year there's another biggie in the pipeline as I'm taking on the Cape Wrath Ultra, which is 250 miles over eight days through the highlands to the north western tip of Scotland. I've managed to convince one of my colleagues to join me on this one too!

### How do you relax away from work?

Mostly by being active and spending time in the outdoors. I enjoy cycling, hiking and I'm self-confessed parkrun obsessed! I've completed 375 runs in 136 different locations across 14 different countries, and I've also volunteered nearly 100 times too.

Over the last five years, I've found a love of long-distance trail and mountain running and over this time I've completed 29 runs of marathon or more distance, the longest (so far!) being 73 miles. It might sound odd, but I find it very relaxing, therapeutic and it really helps me switch off.

I'm also a fan of yoga for the mental and physical benefits. I've actually just started my yoga teacher training course so thinking about how that can be integrated into the Entec Si way.

If I do sit still, it's usually on a Saturday afternoon in a football stadium as I follow Middlesbrough around the UK, which makes for plenty of Monday morning banter in the Birmingham office!



Values are enormously important to Sarah



Taking on the toughest footrace on earth



## Health clinic welcomes first patients

A state-of-the-art wellbeing clinic in Rushall – which specialises in pain management – has opened its doors to patients after a funding boost.

A £17,000 investment from Walsall Business Support has allowed Integr8 Health Clinic to purchase a pulsed electromagnetic field machine and a low-level laser machine to provide specialist pain management and wellness treatment for patients.

The machines can help soothe aches, pains, enhance the body's natural recovery process and support the immune system. The clinic will be able to use the machines in the practice and out in the community, providing mobile therapy to patients who are unable to travel.

The clinic employs two members of staff and can treat 75 patients each week, with a view to employing an additional therapist and increase the range of treatments to include IV infusions and ozone treatments.

Owner and trained pharmacist Josh Sanghera has been operating his private practice at home since 2020. He decided to open Integr8 Health Clinic to provide patients who are struggling with long NHS waiting times with a drug-free, bespoke approach to supporting their wellbeing.

Formed by leading local business figures to distribute funds collected from the legacy of Walsall Chamber of Commerce, Walsall Business Support provides grants to applicants who want funding for projects to enhance business life in the borough.

"With long NHS waiting lists patients are



Back row from left, Walsall Business Support's Gill Durkin, Integr8 owner Josh Sanghera, Walsall Business Support's Adam Howell and Integr8 Health colleague Rekha Masson

looking for alternative treatment options," said Mr Sanghera.

"I want to be able to bridge the gap between pharmaceutical medicine and alternative therapies to improve outcomes for patients.

"I am delighted to receive funding from Walsall Business Support to buy the equipment. Very few clinics in the UK offer these kinds of therapies and I hope to be

able to grow the business to provide the Walsall community with a wide range of wellbeing treatments."

Walsall Business Support board member Adam Howell said: "Integr8 Health Clinic is a fantastic example of a Walsall business supporting the community, offering employment opportunities and a clear vision for future growth. We wish them every success."

## Warning from tax specialist

Tens of thousands of businesses could potentially miss out on vital research and development tax relief, according to a tax specialist at accountancy firm Azets.

Tax director Stuart Bentley (pictured) said that any newly formed innovative business wishing to make a claim for R&D tax relief has just six months from the end of its financial year to act.

"As we head towards the end of September, the six-month deadline is looming for any company with an April year-end that is wanting to make an R&D tax credit claim for the first time," he said.

The change to regulation from HM Revenue & Customs aims to clamp down on the abuse of the system, prevent

frivolous claims and halt the activities of unregulated R&D consultancies.

Mr Bentley added: "Businesses need to be very careful about getting the administration of any tax relief claims organised at an early stage or they could find themselves unable to access generous tax relief, sometimes worth more than 20% of the R&D spend."

The changes apply to companies who are claiming for the first time or who have not made a claim in more than three years. The total support claimed through the UK's two R&D schemes for the tax year 2021 to 2022 is estimated to be £7.6 billion – an increase of 11% on the previous year's total.



# Financial planning for business owners

Business owners no doubt spend a great deal of time thinking about their business finances – they probably know them inside out. But can the same be said about their personal finances? When you are responsible for everything that running a business involves, personal finances can end up being pushed down the agenda – or forgotten altogether. However, it is vital that you take responsibility for your financial future to ensure that you don't make decisions, either intentionally or by omission, that you later regret.

With limited time, you need to be confident that when you do seek advice you are working with a trusted and experienced financial professional; someone who not only provides holistic financial planning for your overall needs, but someone who understands your unique priorities.

Here at Succession Wealth, we prioritise the things that are important to you, and we deliver results that make a difference, giving you time to focus on what you do best – running your business.

A Succession Wealth Planner will help you gain a clear-sighted view of where you are now and where you are heading. They will apply joined up thinking and cutting-

edge financial planning techniques to produce a strategy that clearly fits with the aim of you achieving your financial goals.

### Holistic financial planning

At Succession Wealth we do not work on a 'one-size-fits-all' basis. The service you receive from us will be tailored to your specific requirements and goals.

That is because we know every person comes to financial planning with a unique set of concerns, needs and objectives. When we have a clear understanding of you and your goals, we'll provide comprehensive, independent advice on the options and opportunities available to you.

We will help you design a strategy to build, protect and preserve your wealth, so that you are positioned effectively to achieve the things you want in life.

Your plan will also be flexible enough to keep pace with any changes you might face.

### Selling your business

If you are looking to sell your business, we can work alongside your accountant, solicitor, or corporate adviser to provide a comprehensive approach.

Our clients tell us they feel a greater sense of security and peace of mind when their professional advisers work together, and our experience has taught us that working closely as a part of a highly skilled, multi-disciplinary team is the best way to achieve this.

With the help of cashflow modelling technology and holistic financial planning, we can help gain a clearer view of how a proposed sale fits in with your long-term financial and life goals, and whether it is likely to help you get closer to achieving your ambitions.

Whether you are thinking about your retirement or selling your business; thinking about ways to protect your family or your income; or whether you simply want clarity on your current financial situation, we can help.

Once we have a full understanding of your circumstances, we will work with you to align your plans with your values and your aspirations for the future.

### A trusted adviser

Many Succession Wealth clients view their Wealth Planner as more than a professional service provider; they view them as a trusted adviser and guide. We are here for the journey, throughout the life of your business and beyond, helping you identify and reach the goals in life that matter to you.

By working together, we can help you to grow, preserve and protect your wealth.

A Succession Wealth Planner will give you the clarity, confidence, and knowledge you need to make decisions that are right for you and your family, both now and in the future.

**If you would like to see how we may be able to help you, or if you want to discuss any aspect of financial advice with one of our Wealth Planners, please get in touch on**

**0800 0514659 or email**

**hello@successionwealth.co.uk and we'll arrange for someone to contact you.**



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# Protecting our waterways

**The Canal & River Trust is the country's largest canal charity – and one whose Midlands operation is particularly active, given the hundreds of miles of these once-vital transport routes it oversees. It requires a firm hand and wise head at the tiller, and in former LEP boss Henriette Breukelaar it might just have recruited the ideal director. JON GRIFFIN meets her.**

Henriette Breukelaar is sitting in her homely office just yards away from the waters of the city centre canal backing onto Birmingham's International Convention Centre – and is in full conversational flow.

To start off with, she insists the West Midlands is the beating heart of the canal system because the waterways coincided with the start of the Industrial Revolution.

"The canals were used to transport coal and products," she says. "Wedgwood used canals to transport his products because, as you can imagine, going by road caused far more breakages.

"What makes the canals unique is that 250 or 300 years later, they are still going strong and the engineering of the locks hasn't really changed in all those years. It is simple but it works.

"The canals are indisputably lovely places for narrowboats but there is so much more to them. I have fallen in love with the fact that this historic infrastructure can be just as relevant to today's society and I think that relevance lies far beyond the fact that a narrowboat on a canal is quintessentially English and beautiful."

To reinforce her argument, this former chief executive of the Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership and senior director at Advantage West Midlands, and now regional director of the Canal & River Trust, can reel off a string of remarkable statistics.

"There were 10.3 million visitors (nationally) to our waterways and towpaths in 2022 to 2023. We did some independent assessment of our impact and I found it staggering that there is a £4.6 billion effect on health because spending time on a bit of exercise outdoors in the vicinity of water and nature is proven to be so good for people.

"The tourism adds £1.5 billion per annum in the UK. Many people who travel on and hire a narrowboat could also afford to go abroad but they don't because they just love this experience.

"There is also a £42 billion impact in protecting people and assets from flooding – the embankments, the dams. If Edgbaston Reservoir broke its banks it would flood New Street Station; you really don't want that to happen."

The plethora of Canal & River Trust statistics tell their own impressive story of a national charity responsible for

assets and infrastructure which once helped provide transport for the Industrial Revolution, effectively delivering the goods and fuel which powered the nation's transformation from agriculture to industry in the 18th century.

Pre-dating the railways, the canals provided the necessary transport infrastructure which enabled Birmingham to become the workshop of the world, the urban centre where pioneers such as Watt, Boulton and Murdoch ushered in the age of manufacturing and mass production industry.



Grand Union Canal near Warwick. Photo: Drifters





Activity during the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham



Worcester & Birmingham Canal near Alvechurch. Photo: ABC Boat Hire



Working on a greener Birmingham

Today, 250 years or so later, Henriette Breukelaar is an unashamed convert to the canals, a latter-day champion of a transport network which changed the world and once made her adopted home of Birmingham the city of a thousand trades.

“When I joined I probably understood about maybe 10 to 20 per cent of the remit of the Canal & River Trust because I associated it with Brindleyplace, floating cafes, lovely boats and locks that needed repairing every now and then,” she says.

“Looking after the canals is important

– the towpaths of course are the places that attract millions of people who use them for jogging, walking, dog-walking, recreation, so they are really important. But I hadn’t appreciated the bio-diversity in the canals and how much wildlife there is including otters, water voles and bats – we have an ecology team here to look after that.

“I also hadn’t really appreciated that we have 70-odd reservoirs. Looking after those takes so much money because you want to keep the canals full of water, so the responsibility is a massive one.”

The canalside learning curve for Breukelaar, who took over as regional director of the Trust in the spring, has been steep – with a growing realisation that the network is prey to anti-social behaviours which threaten to spoil the enjoyment of millions and disturb the cherished natural ecosystem.

“What I also did not appreciate is that we pick up a lot of fallout from anti-social behaviour, a lot of fly-tipping. We just had a really big fire on the embankment at the Tame Valley Canal in Smethwick. People fly-tipping, a hot day, somebody has a barbecue, the next thing you know the whole place is ablaze. We pick up the costs of that.”

Potentially more deadly than the Smethwick blaze was the August chemical spill at Walsall, when around 879 gallons of sodium cyanide and other chemicals leaked into the canal, closing a 12-mile stretch of the waterway and killing thousands of fish.

Working a string of 16-hour days Breukelaar and her team launched a clean-up operation which made the waters much safer after more than £20,000 was raised to fund the work.

“We have got a fantastic team here but they have definitely got their hands full. There was a really good appeal in response to the Walsall incident which generated the money, and we were able to respond very quickly to do biological testing – everyone has been focused on human health.

“We needed the cyanide levels to go down to a point where they are no longer a human health risk – but what about the otters, fish and other wildlife. We are using that money to get a much better understanding.

“Naively, I thought once the cyanide had gone down we could restock the fish. But there is no point putting a whole load of fish in a dead bit of canal if there is nothing for them to feed on and there is no ecosystem for them.

“You need to rebuild that whole

ecosystem – that stretch of the canal through Walsall is actually one of the most environmentally rich parts of the canal we have got, so it is particularly important we bring that back.

“I have been blown away by people’s commitment. The night of the chemical spill there were people out making sure that nearby lock flights were padlocked, standing by the lock flights so they could explain to people why we had to do it. It’s a fantastic work ethic and commitment that is almost not around anymore.”

The occasional blaze and chemical spill apart, it is abundantly clear that this native of the Netherlands, with a string of high-powered executive posts at the Birmingham and Solihull LEP, the now defunct Advantage West Midlands and others, is relishing her role as the senior regional official in charge of the West Midlands waterways and by extension the natural ecosystem which relies on the canal network.

“When this position came up I thought why not? I am really committed to the region – I love it. I have taken a regional director job in a place that looks after so much green space and in some neighbourhoods where people haven’t got a back garden – indeed the canals are their back garden . . . it’s a place of nature, bio-diversity and of course tourism. That’s what appealed to me about this job, so here I am.”

A keen cyclist who has ditched a previous two to three hours a day car commute from Birmingham to Coventry in favour of a 20-minute canal towpath ride from home to office, Breukelaar has already forged a close affinity with her 170-strong Canal & River Trust staff, as well as the army of volunteers who make the charity with the third largest heritage estate in the UK tick.

“My staff are on the towpaths and by the canals, they are the people in the blue T-shirts that you see along the canals. We have a community engagement team that does kayaking sessions, and there is a

lot of work that we do with schoolchildren around water safety, nature and the canals.”

Breukelaar is full of praise for the vast ranks of volunteers who give up their time to ensure the waterways of the West Midlands and across the wider country are safe for the millions of users who regularly enjoy the canal network.

She says there are thousands of volunteers, often people who have been doing it for 30 years, who are “so loyal”.

“It is a beautiful thing in society to have that body of people who are so committed, but there is a real opportunity to bring in more young people,” she says.

Although she feels the UK’s canal heritage beloved by voluntary veterans may not be of similar appeal to younger generations, Breukelaar is determined to widen the profile of the trust and its treasure trove of natural beauty.

“I think younger people are probably much more bothered about what does this do for flood mediation, what does this do for bio-diversity, how can canals help us in our response to climate change.

“We do quite a bit with universities but I think there is a gap – which often comes down to funding – between what we do with primary schoolchildren and those in their late teens.

“We need to be out there. We are looking to get our profile raised as a charity, but also with partners who may work with us.”

Those assets are invaluable in an era of financial belt-tightening for many in the charitable sector, although as Breukelaar succinctly sums up: “We have a team that looks at fundraising because this charity has more to do than it has funding.

“Although it is a largeish charity its remit is growing and growing, not least because climate change and bad weather causes so much damage to the canals.”

Breukelaar estimates the trust’s annual income – thanks to a government grant, boating licence fees, funds from utility companies for cabling and fibre-optics,

investments and other sources – at around £225 million. But outgoings remain at the mercy of the elements, along with wanton fly-tipping or polluters.

“In the first three months of this year alone, we had storm after storm after storm which created £10 million of unplanned maintenance, repairs needed with trees uprooted and so on. That £10 million was not expected.

“And the money that needs to go into the maintenance of the reservoirs in particular has gone through the roof. If you have a big oil spill or people have dumped something in the canal you will never know who did it and we end up having to dredge or clean it up. Fly-tipping is really costly to us because if it happens on your land you have to deal with it.”

Nevertheless, this Dutch convert to UK canals is optimistic for the future of our waterways. “There are lots of exciting opportunities for the Canal and River Trust, including water transfer and climate resilience.

“Canals bring down the urban temperature by more than one and a half degrees during a heatwave, so if we are going to get heatwaves canals will play a really important role there, they are part of the solution to 21st-century problems.

“And the fact that they are such vital through routes for wildlife will increasingly become important. There will be an economic value to that because the whole bio-diversity net gain agenda will include canals and towpaths and everything that grows in and around it.”

From helping power the Industrial Revolution around 250 years ago to tackling climate change today while protecting fish, otters, voles and other wildlife, the canals of the West Midlands and beyond have proved an indispensable asset to the region which once led the industrial world.

Or as Henriette Breukelaar says: “It is a parallel universe, a whole community living away from the stresses of day-to-day society.”



**“We do quite a bit with universities but I think there is a gap – which often comes down to funding – between what we do with primary schoolchildren and those in their late teens.”**



# New cohort of students and graduates arrive at professional services firm



The new team members at Aon

Professional services firm Aon has welcomed its latest cohort of careers talent to the Birmingham office with the arrival of two placement year students and seven graduates.

The new team members will work across a range of functional areas, including investment consulting, data solutions, actuarial consulting and client management.

As part of Aon's Early Careers Programme they will gain meaningful work experience and benefit from opportunities to build professional skills through hands-on learning.

Associate partner Michelle Woodfield said: "Aon recognises the value in offering varied pathways for young professionals to gain experience in a professional working environment and develop key skills."

"Our new graduates and placement students have brought with them energy and eagerness which has been fantastic to see. They have fully embraced the opportunities to learn and acquire new skills and have our full support to grow their careers here."

# Businesses compete for top awards

Thirty businesses will be competing for glory at the Asian Business Chamber of Commerce awards on November 30.

The awards ceremony, which has eight categories and is being held at the ICC, with an after party at Malmaison.

It will recognise and celebrate businesses and charities with all winners from each category being nominated for the overall business of the year award, sponsored by Practice Plus Group Birmingham Hospital.

ABCC president Omar Rashid will also hand over a special award to a business that has gone above and beyond in championing Asian business during the

dinner. The headline sponsor this year is Doug Wright (T/A McDonalds).

The judging panel was chaired by Raj Kandola, director of external affairs at the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce.

Other panellists included Professor Martin Levermore, CEO of Medical Devices Technology International Ltd (MDTi), Dee Kundi, CEO and founder of Find Me A Solicitor, general manager of Malmaison Birmingham Emma Morgan, CCO and founder of Word360 Kavita Parmar, and Amer Awan, CEO of Awan Real Estate Ltd and Awan International.

Mr Kandola said: "The judging panel was

impressed by the exceptional calibre of applicants for this year's ABCC awards.

"The depth of talent, innovation, and dedication showcased made the task of selecting the shortlist incredibly challenging, as each business brought something unique and valuable to the table."

"Congratulations to all the shortlisted applicants, not only for excelling in their individual roles but also for their commitment to elevating our business community."

"Their efforts are instrumental in making our region a thriving, dynamic hub for entrepreneurship, growth and opportunity."



Award winners 2023

■ Orelle has won 'Best Restaurant in Birmingham' at the British Restaurant Awards 2024.

Listed in the Harden's Guide, Orelle is located on the 24th floor of 103 Colmore Row, while the awards are designed to highlight and recognise the brilliance of British culinary and restaurants.

Richard Chiswell, general manager at Orelle, said: "It is an honour to win this award, and it is a real boost for our incredible team that works so hard."

# Surveyors achieves approved supplier

West Midlands quantity surveying firm CQS Solutions has been approved as a supplier to Perfect Circle, one of the largest construction and infrastructure consultancies in the UK.

Perfect Circle works with public-sector organisations to provide integrated support for construction and utility projects from start to finish. It is supported by 500 approved consultants.

Perfect Circle is a joint venture between principal partners Pick Everard, Gleeds and AECOM to deliver a complete package of services for public sector and utility projects.

It gives its public sector clients access to an extensive team of experts working collaboratively to deliver each project with a focus on the economic, environmental and social impact.

Tim Lloyd, principal surveyor and company owner at CQS Solutions, said that it had been a challenging accreditation process to join the Perfect Circle framework after being nominated by one of the principal partners Pick Everard.

"It is very much worth it as it opens the doors to working with some of the most influential consultancies in the UK," said Mr Lloyd.

"We are delighted to have been accepted as an approved supplier to the principal partners."



Tim Lloyd of CQS Solutions



Unity employees who helped Moorcroft Wood Primary School prepare for reopening

# Grants available for eligible Unity Trust customers

Unity Trust Bank is inviting eligible customers to apply for a new Unity Impact Grant as part of its 40th birthday pledge to make £40,000 in charitable donations this year.

In a first for the commercial bank, the scheme will provide grants of £5,000 to three socially-minded organisations to support their own projects – a total of £15,000.

The initiative is part of the employee-led 'Unity & Me' programme, which was established to empower staff to deliver positive outcomes for employees, communities and the planet.

Catherine Tierney, credit risk manager at Unity Trust Bank, said: "Being part of a

bank with a social conscience means that our values are at the heart of everything we do."

"Our voluntary salary sacrifice scheme and fundraising activities form part of the fabric here at Unity as we work to give back to society."

"This year marks Unity's milestone 40th birthday, so we wanted to do something extra special to reflect the bank's commitment to deliver positive social impact in local communities."

"Unity has increased its charitable donation contribution to sit alongside funds raised by staff. This year, Unity aims to reach the £40,000 goal and the new Unity Impact Grants offer is a major part of this."

# Law firm advises on significant acquisition

Dealmakers at Midlands law firm Higgs LLP have advised a UK-based steel service centre on an acquisition that marks a significant step forward for the business. Higgs' team of corporate lawyers advised USP on its purchase of Dudley-based decoiler United Steels.

The deal, spearheaded by Higgs's head of corporate Richard Griffiths, came under the umbrella of parent company USPS Group.

The new combined company is now one of the largest mill partnered independent steel distributors and processors in the UK.

USP was founded in 2016 by Glyn Costigan, said the acquisition would help the business increase market share and presence nationwide.

"This marks a further significant step for USPS Group," he said. "United Steels' range of processing capabilities, including decoiling and slitting, will further support planned growth and increase the stability of our group structure."

As part of the transaction, United Steels managing director Mark Unitt will receive a stake in the business and continue his role as managing director.



# Legal services for business owners

In association with



Managing partner Paul Mourton



Legal services

## New chapter for Lodders

A Birmingham law firm is celebrating its move into the city centre after outgrowing its old premises in the Jewellery Quarter.

Lodders, a full-service law firm, is the latest tenant at 1 Newhall Street.

The 242-year-old firm, which also has offices in Stratford, Cheltenham, and Henley-in-Arden, is looking to continue its growth path while aligning with its ESG principles by moving into the prestigious office block just off Colmore Row.

Managing partner Paul Mourton said that the move will enable the firm to consolidate its position as one of the most highly regarded legal practices in the region.

He said: "Our core areas are private wealth, family law, real estate, business services, and corporate work, along with acting for several landed estates. We work with a lot of high-net-worth individuals, successful family businesses, privately owned property developers and corporates.

"Our strategic plan is to focus on what we're good at and to bolster our market presence and market position in those areas.

"We fully recognise that in Birmingham there are some enormous players, including international firms.

"We are just not going to compete with those, and that is why we have a focus

on working with private individuals and privately-owned businesses that value our team's exceptional legal clarity and very human and personable approach.

"The move to 1 Newhall Street gives us the platform to grow the business. Over the last six years, the business has grown from a turnover of about £7 million to £20 million, and we're still on that that growth path."

Lodders has evolved considerably since it started life in Henley towards the end of the 18th century.

The largest office is in Stratford, where a 125-strong team of staff serves Warwickshire and the northern parts of the Cotswolds. The firm opened an office in Cheltenham 10 years ago to serve the south side of the Cotswolds, and the Henley office has remained in place since the firm's inception.

For the last eight years in Birmingham, Lodders has been operating out of an office on St Paul's Square in the Jewellery Quarter, after it merged with a bespoke family law and divorce practice. Birmingham remains the home for the core of the firm's family law offering today.

However, after it became apparent that it was outgrowing the office, the search has been on for the last two years to find suitable new premises in the city centre

which will accommodate numbers of more than 50 and allow for further growth across all areas.

Mr Mourton, a real estate lawyer who works on commercial development and investment transactions, while fulfilling his role as managing partner, said the move for him personally was very exciting.

He added: "A lot of my clients are already in Birmingham and while the markets have been slow for the last couple of years as the funding for bigger deals largely disappeared, it is starting to come back now.

"Developers and investors are very clear with me that we have got to be in Birmingham city centre on or near Colmore Row in order to secure the bigger ticket deals."

As well as the location, and the fact that the 6,500 sq ft office is up to modern standards with state-of-the-art features, Mr Mourton said the building's ESG credentials were also an important factor in Lodders' decision to move there.

"It is a Category A building with a wide range of sustainability credentials," said Mr Mourton.

"ESG is extremely important to us and so it's a very nice fit going to a building which is at the forefront of the sustainability model in the city."



# Changes to the employment law landscape



By DAMIAN KELLY,  
partner and  
head of the  
employment  
team at  
Lodders

In recent months, the Labour government has announced a number of significant changes to workplace rights and responsibilities in the UK, as part of its plan to 'make work pay'. Enhanced workers' rights are central to the reforms which aim to address issues relating to job security and working conditions by providing new protections for employees. At the time of writing, some of the key changes for UK employers to be aware of include:

## Reform to employment law status

The government plans to move towards a single status of worker, incorporating all but the genuinely self-employed. If enacted, this is likely to lead to a significant extension of statutory employment rights to a larger proportion of the workforce.

## Day one rights

Currently, many statutory employment rights are only triggered once employees accrue certain minimum periods of qualifying service. Labour proposes to provide certain key rights from day one of employment, including the right to claim sick pay and parental leave. Most significantly, it will introduce day one unfair dismissal rights, albeit with employers still being able to dismiss fairly during probationary periods by satisfying certain criteria. Day one unfair dismissal rights will represent a big shift away from the current legal requirement for two years' service. On previous occasions when the qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims has been reduced (under Tony Blair's Labour government, for instance), the number of unfair dismissal claims has increased.

## Extended limitation periods

Employees currently have three months to initiate most claims to the employment tribunal. Labour proposes to increase this time limit for all relevant claims to six months, bringing them in line with the time limits for claims for statutory redundancy pay and equal pay.

## Collective consultation rights

Collective consultation obligations on redundancies will become dependent on the number of redundancies being

proposed across the whole business, rather than the current dependency on the number of proposed redundancies at each 'establishment'. This is likely to lead to collective redundancy consultation being a required feature of a greater number of redundancy exercises.

## Ending 'fire and rehire'

Labour intends to end the practice of so-called 'firing and rehiring'. This typically refers to employers dismissing employees and then re-engaging them immediately, upon the termination of their original contracts, but on different terms and conditions of employment. Labour has pledged to reform the law to provide effective remedies against abuse and bring in a strengthened code of practice. Whilst the UK's first Statutory Code of Practice on 'Dismissal and Re-engagement' came into force in July under the Conservatives, Labour's plans propose restricting fire and rehire to very limited circumstances.

## Flexible working from day one

It is expected that a day one right to flexible working will be introduced. This will mean flexible working is a 'default right' for employees except where this is not reasonably feasible. This contrasts with current law which provides only a right to request flexible working.

## Right to 'switch off'

Labour's plans include the introduction of the right for workers to 'switch off' (i.e. go offline) outside of working hours, following similar models in place in Ireland and Belgium. How this will work in practice remains to be seen. Some commentators are already referring to a right only for

employees to "discuss switching off" with their employers, rather than having an absolute right to it.

## Other changes of note include:

■ **Section 1 statements** - there will be a requirement for the section 1 statement issued to all new starters to inform staff of their right to join a trade union.

■ **Menopause in the workplace** - under Labour's plans, employers with more than 250 employees will be required to produce Menopause Action Plans.

■ **Zero hours contracts** - Labour plan to ban exploitative (but not all) zero hours contracts.

## Next steps

This is not an exhaustive list of all the changes the government has set out, and it may take some time before the scope and impact of such changes are properly understood. Nonetheless, there are significant reforms to workplace rights and responsibilities on the horizon that will require employers to make changes to their employment contracts, policies and procedures, and working practices. For advice on how these changes may affect you or your business, please do get in touch.

## Worker Protection Act

As we go to press, the EHRC has updated its guidance on the new duty for employers to prevent sexual harassment, which comes into force on 26 October 2024. Under the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023, employers will have an obligation to take reasonable steps to prevent (specifically) sexual harassment in the workplace. For further guidance, visit: [www.lodders.co.uk/new-legal-duty-to-prevent-sexual-harassment/](http://www.lodders.co.uk/new-legal-duty-to-prevent-sexual-harassment/)

[damian.kelly@lodders.co.uk](mailto:damian.kelly@lodders.co.uk)

# Key considerations for wealth preservation on business exit

Exiting your business is a significant step that requires careful, strategic planning to ensure preservation of wealth as well as business value. Whether you're looking to sell your business, transfer it to family, or explore other exit options, early planning – where possible – is crucial.

Exits can take many forms, including merging with another business, an acquisition, selling to a partner or investor, family succession, management and employee buyouts (MBOs), selling the business to its employees (EOT), initial public offering (IPO), and liquidation.

But before you even think about exiting, it's essential to get your business in optimal shape.

## Preparing your business

Business owners considering a sale should focus on enhancing operational efficiencies and streamlining processes, to ensure the business presents an attractive acquisition prospect to potential buyers. This may include, for example, establishing fixed-term agreements with customers and suppliers to ensure guaranteed long-term revenue.

It is also essential that all your business documents are in order, ideally in a well organised electronic form. In particular, you should check your HR and data policies are up-to-date and compliant with current regulations and that all key contracts and property documents are in good shape. Essentially, the business needs to be in the best place possible in readiness for the due diligence process that any buyer or investor will undertake.

If you plan to pass the business to the next generation or develop new leaders within the company, begin this process as early as possible. Identifying, nurturing, and training potential leaders so they can



By BRADLEY QUIN,  
partner in the business  
services group, and  
LOUISE IGOE, partner and  
head of the private client  
team at Lodders

step into key roles when the time comes can help to ensure a smooth transition and business stability. Developing a strong management team is probably the most vital factor for the ongoing success of the business and for the continuity of service for customers.

Another key consideration to make is putting a shareholders' agreement in place. Such agreements set out the rights and responsibilities of all shareholders within your company, providing a framework for the valuation, sale, and transfer of shares. Shareholder agreements are vital for all jointly held businesses - particularly so for owners who are looking to exit their businesses in the future - and can help to minimise the chance of disputes during a change of ownership.

## Succession planning

However you are intending to exit your business, it is important to consider tax and estate planning at the same time. For inheritance tax, valuable reliefs which may not be available after the exit can provide opportunities for succession planning to protect some of the family wealth for the next generation. This may involve share reorganisations prior to an exit or implementing vehicles such as trusts to protect future family wealth and also minimise your tax burden. These plans should dovetail with the shareholders' agreement mentioned above.

Lifetime planning can also impact on how you decide to leave your estate after your death. Ensuring your will is updated to reflect your wishes in relation to the business is a crucial part of the succession

planning process. A letter of wishes accompanying your will can be used to further outline your thoughts, such as who you would like to manage the business in the event of your death or if another exit route is taken. It provides guidance to executors and helps avoid potential conflicts.

As a business owner, you should also look to establish powers of attorney to prepare for any potential issues regarding loss of capacity during your lifetime to ensure that any decisions that need to be made on your behalf can continue in these circumstances and are made by someone you trust.

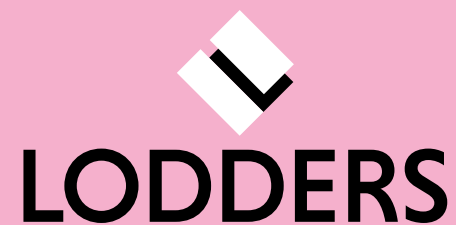
## Next steps

A great deal of planning is required to achieve a smooth business exit. Engaging with the right experts early in the process can help ensure optimal preservation of your wealth, regardless of the exit strategy you take. As well as speaking to lawyers specialising in both corporate law and estate planning, you should also consider taking advice from a corporate finance adviser, where an exit event of any description is a possibility. We can certainly recommend the right advisers that we can work alongside.

For family businesses, taking the first steps towards putting a plan together can help give peace of mind that your business will be left in good order, as well as satisfaction that the best has been done to support and protect the next generation. For help and advice, get in touch with Lodders today.

[bradley.quin@lodders.co.uk](mailto:bradley.quin@lodders.co.uk) | [louise.igoe@lodders.co.uk](mailto:louise.igoe@lodders.co.uk)





# HELLO LODDERS

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## How to make trends and influence people

In the 1970s and 1980s, identifying celebrities used to be quite straightforward: film stars, pop idols, TV personalities and sporting heroes. Everyone knew who these people were, and what brought them their fame. Consequently, celebrities were often courted by large brands to endorse their goods and services.

Fast forward to the 2020s and times have changed. You would need to have spent the last 10 years on a remote island with no internet connection to have missed the meteoric rise of the 'social media influencer'.

With TV and radio advertising revenues falling year on year and a significant change in buyer behaviour in younger generations, many companies are seeking to tap into influencer marketing.

### Influencer agreements

At Lodders, we are increasingly being asked to write contracts for clients who wish to align themselves with influencers for the purpose of marketing campaigns. Some of these contracts take the form of one-off endorsement deals, but often influencer agreements (or brand ambassadors agreements as they are also known) are quite often long-term deals, particularly where the person is to become the 'face' of a brand.

The essence of such agreements is that an influencer will agree to post promotional material about a company's goods or services, in return either for payment of fees, or payment in kind by way of products or services.

### Key considerations

When working with influencers, the following considerations should be made:

#### 1. Do your research (your 'due diligence') before entering into an agreement

History of behaviour from the brand ambassador that is inconsistent with your company's brand values could damage your company's reputation. Disputes could also arise where there is a conflict between your company's goals for the campaign and the influencer's own



By STUART PRICE, partner and head of commercial law at Lodders

expectations about their personal freedom to express themselves. It would be a sensible idea to confront these issues during the due diligence stage.

#### 2. Is the relationship exclusive or non-exclusive?

This works both ways. While a company might not want their brand ambassador to promote the products or services of competitors, equally, the brand ambassador may not want to be one of a number of people associated with your brand, particularly if part of their reasoning for doing this is to increase their own personal profile.

#### 3. How long should this relationship last?

Is it just to endorse one specific product for a period of time, or is the relationship one whereby the ambassador is called upon to promote the brand in numerous ways over longer periods of time?

#### 4. Should there be restrictions on the influencer working with other companies?

Even if the relationship is to be non-exclusive, this is important to consider. For example, a company that engages an influencer to promote sports or fitness products may not appreciate the same influencer extolling the virtues of a fast-food restaurant.

#### 5. Have you set out clear expectations?

The more precise the agreement is with regards to what is expected of the influencer, the easier it will be to measure their performance, so that any issues can be addressed before the relationship deteriorates.

#### 6. Who owns rights to content?

Your company may also want to use footage of the influencer's own video content where the endorsed products or services are mentioned. You should obtain assurances that you own the intellectual property rights in the footage and can use it without later interference.

### Terms of the agreement

Some examples of what an influencer agreement should contain might be as follows:

- A restriction on making any claims as to the properties, functionality or other qualities about the endorsed product or service which the company itself would not give.

- A restriction on the influencer making any disparaging or pejorative statements about the endorsed product or service or the company itself.

- An obligation to inform the company about any criminal convictions or other complaint raised against them, and of any actual or likely press speculation about them or their personal or business affairs.

Entering into commercial arrangements with influencers is now a key aspect of many brand owners' marketing strategies. However, as with any contractual relationship, there are many things to be considered and documented to ensure a successful working relationship. If you require bespoke advice in relation to your specific project, please get in touch.



[stuart.price@lodders.co.uk](mailto:stuart.price@lodders.co.uk)





## Accountancy firm welcomes record number of trainees

Accounting and advisory firm MHA has welcomed a record 214 new trainees this year with 186 new starters joining the firm earlier this month, of which 27 will now embark on their careers within the Midlands offices.

The class of 2024 was officially introduced to the firm – which is the UK and Ireland member of Baker Tilly International – by the chairman of MHA Rakesh Shaunak at an induction event at the Hilton Birmingham Metropole.

The figure represents an almost doubling of last year's intake of 130. The

new starters have training contracts at 21 MHA offices across the UK and Ireland, including its Birmingham base.

The trainees are a mix of apprentices and graduates and will work in audit, tax and advisory.

Mr Shaunak said: "It is a real privilege to welcome so many young apprentices and graduates. We are a people-first business, and our future expansion relies on a talent pipeline of engaged and enthusiastic teams who can seize the opportunities our firm offers from day one."

## Little Hearts Matter chosen as shopping centre's charity

Touchwood Solihull has announced Birmingham-based Little Hearts Matter as its 2024 Charity of the Year.

The retail and leisure destination said it will support LHM through a series of fundraising events over the next 12 months.

LHM provides support to families with children experiencing single ventricle heart condition, through sharing information and resources. The charity's mission is to reduce the isolation and fear that a family may feel when their child is diagnosed with half a working heart.

Tony Elvin, general manager at Touchwood, said: "Incurable health conditions in children can be detrimental to their development, preventing them from enjoying day-to-day activities and experiences, and can greatly impact their supporting family and friends."

"The support that Little Hearts Matter offers to children and young people diagnosed with single heart ventricle condition is vital in helping them to stay informed and creates a community where they can share their experiences with others."

■ Midlands Air Ambulance Charity has welcomed Sally Glarvey (pictured) – head of diversity, equity and inclusion at law firm Gowling WLG – as a business ambassador.

Bringing a wealth of experience of diversity and inclusion, wellbeing, and corporate social responsibility, Sally also has a strong connection with Midlands Air Ambulance Charity through her professional and personal experiences.

She said: "The charity holds a special place in my heart. In my previous role, we supported the charity for seven years after witnessing it save a colleague's life."

"Partnering with the charity and raising essential funds through various fundraising and community efforts was truly rewarding. It was inspiring to see how the money we raised contributed to life-saving missions, air ambulances, critical care cars, and supporting the dedicated individuals at the charity."

"I feel incredibly privileged to become a business ambassador, continuing to support this remarkable charity. I aim to leverage my knowledge of the charity and my local community network to further its mission."



# Historic pub re-opens

An iconic Jewellery Quarter pub dating back to 1820 has re-opened under the name Temper and Brown. Now under the new ownership of entrepreneur Roifield Brown, the former Pig & Tail pub on Albion Street relaunched with a party for media and local businesses who were able to sample the venue's food, drink and atmosphere.



Sam Cooke and Joe Greenfield



Rosa Pericu and Talitha Thomas



Grace Lowe and Katie Isles



Charlie Horner, Om Mortimer Hodge and Anita Champaneri



Warren Braacx and Lewis Warner



Laura McEwan



Roifield Brown and Noah Brown



# Double firepower



Although operating in largely different fields, the names of Paul Faulkner and Mark Taylor are long known in the region's business world and, it is fair to say, are synonymous with success at whatever they have turned their hands to. Now they have joined forces to create a consultancy with the intention of transforming the fortunes of other businesses for the better. JON GRIFFIN meets them.

It is Birmingham's newest business advisory boutique – with two of the city's best known corporate faces in the driving seat of an intriguing partnership.

Paul Faulkner and Mark Taylor boast more than 30 years' experience at the sharp end, heading organisations ranging from top-flight football clubs and the Chamber of Commerce to global finance advisers RSM in demanding executive roles.

Now the two have brought their hard-earned expertise and experience to launch Element45 – helping develop the next generation of leaders and raise the bar for organisations looking to up their game in an often

Cut-throat business environment.

Both Faulkner and Taylor have been familiar faces on the Birmingham business circuit for many years, with the former an ex chief executive of Aston Villa and Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, and the latter chalking up a 17-year stint as a partner at global accountancy and business advisers RSM, including eight years as regional managing partner in the Midlands.

Now – after years of standing at the helm in often all-consuming executive roles – both men have stepped a degree or two aside from the unrelenting corporate treadmill to launch their very own SME, providing bespoke advice on a range of business topics, including learning and development activities and one-to-one mentoring and coaching.

Faulkner has recently been working with a variety of West Midlands clients including the Richardson international investment business, furniture repair specialists Emmiera Group and the Kids' Village charity as interim CEO, and

will continue those client relationships with Element45. He was also recently appointed chair of Coventry-based hair and beauty wholesaler Ellisons following an MBO as part of his new venture's portfolio.

Meanwhile, Taylor boasts 23 years' experience in professional services, overseeing RSM's central region, comprising seven offices and more than 1,000 staff. His tenure at RSM saw the region double in size with the Birmingham office revenues increasing by 140 per cent, the partner group growing from 20

to 32 and the overall team expanding from under 200 to more than 400 employees.

Their corporate CVs speak for themselves, with years of exposure to the often unforgiving glare that illuminates the higher echelons of Birmingham's business sector. So why – mid-career – take the plunge with Element45 and the uncertainty associated with any new venture in a highly competitive business environment?

"The idea is that it gives us freedom and flexibility to do a number of different



Paul Faulkner, left, and Mark Taylor



**“It is easy to stay with people, stay within the tracks, carry on doing the conventional thing and carry on a path that is not going to change if you don’t do something about it – what might you regret through not having seized an opportunity that presents itself?”**

activities, different types of work, with different businesses,” says Faulkner.

“I have been in senior leadership positions for more of my career than I haven’t. I am very much a generalist, I am not a specialist.

“You hit your mid-40s. I have led, I have been a chief executive, performed senior roles. I think that’s part of what makes some of what we are offering a bit more unique. We are still at that mid-point in our careers but I have got all that experience, all the scars on my back from lessons learnt to bring to bear.”

Taylor says: “Responsibility early is a common theme. I did 17 years as a partner at RSM, a role I took on at 32. I felt I had given it a really good run.

“People don’t always move on from partnerships and change, they are very stable beasts. But I thought I had given enough of my life to that.

“It is easy to stay with people, stay within the tracks, carry on doing the conventional thing and carry on a path that is not going to change if you don’t do something about it – what might you regret through not having seized an opportunity that presents itself?”

That opportunity is business advisory boutique Element45, the name inspired by the chemical element rhodium, a precious metal known for its catalytic qualities which align with the firm’s

mission to be a “high-impact catalyst for positive change and performance improvement”.

The world of business advisory organisations – from global giants to smaller bespoke outfits – may constitute a crowded marketplace, but both Faulkner and Taylor are confident Element45 can find its own niche in the Midlands’ highly diverse business sector.

Taylor adds: “We chose this path because we feel it can be invigorating, creating new challenges with new learning experiences. Every day is a new learning experience when you form your own business. When you are trying to establish something, that is great, it is stimulating.”

Says Faulkner: “I suppose it is about backing yourself, and backing each other really. When you set something up there’s that bit of the unknown. Will anybody phone us, does anyone care, is anybody going to want to engage our services? Those voices are very real.”

Those unknowns notwithstanding, both Faulkner and Taylor say they are encouraged by the progress of Element45 in the few short months since they launched in April.

Faulkner adds: “Another thing we are learning is the balancing act. It has been really busy this year. I am not sure what I expected but the idea that I would be down at the Belfry swimming my lengths every morning and getting super fit, I have had to park that.

“I love it, it has been fun building, we will hit more of a rhythm as we get more established, and we will know where and what we are working with.”

If teamwork is one of the keys to corporate success, both Faulkner and Taylor can point to long-standing connections with the world of football, with the former an ex chief executive at Aston Villa and Nottingham Forest and the latter a lifelong diehard supporter of the Trentside club, growing up a few miles down the road in the north Nottinghamshire village of Skegby.

“We bonded over football, Paul having been chief executive of the first love of my life before I knew him. It obviously helped in that respect. We first met in 2016 and I guess in more recent times we thought about what we could do together,” says Taylor.

Faulkner adds: “I remember meeting Mark and he had this plan to refresh

the senior partnership team. He had to bring on quite a few new partners, young blood, and it wasn’t something he could do overnight, it had a multi-year plan and approach.

“We met for a drink and I remember saying I was really impressed how he had a plan, executed on it, and then delivered. Too often in life or business people think you make it up on the spur of the moment but I knew it wasn’t overnight success, it was actually the result of a lot of thought and careful planning. There was that mutual admiration – I thought that was a really smart way of doing it.”

Taylor says: “This was an opportune moment to take the liberation of running our own business. It was something we both fancied and this was kind of one of those sliding-doors moments when you think here is an opportunity to do something together. If we let it pass, will it ever come back? This was a great opportunity to take a blank canvas and create something of our own.

“We have both got young families, we have both got kids who are not at secondary school yet. That is naturally a factor in our timing – you hesitate to use the term lifestyle because people assume you don’t want to work, or you don’t want to work very much. We do.”

Faulkner adds: “We have both got a good work ethic – that is probably down to our upbringing – but we both work hard.”

Both men recognise that the advent of Element45 brings a different profile to their stellar CVs. “Fundamentally we want to work with good people doing interesting things and we get to decide, to explore opportunities and if it feels right then we can bring some of our leadership experience, our senior management experience, to the fore.

“Suddenly we get a bit more choice, do we want to do this, can we add value, is this going to work?”

Taylor adds: “We have great faith and belief in our experience. Yes, there are a lot of people operating in similar fields but I don’t think too many of them can point to the rich portfolio of combined experience that Paul and I have. That is where I think we can really make a difference.”

As Faulkner puts it: “It is lived experience, not theory. I was the youngest member of the FA Board spending eight or nine years around the Premier League table. It’s hard schools – you learn.”



## Survey results predict decline in UK’s attraction for business and investment



Carmen Watson

A significant majority of employers surveyed by the CBI and recruitment specialist Pertemps predict a decline in the UK as an attractive place to invest and do business over the next five years.

Notably, businesses are increasingly pessimistic with an upswing in those concerned that the UK is set to become ‘much less attractive’.

The latest annual CBI/Pertemps Employment Trends Survey outlines the challenges facing both the Government and business in getting the economy growing again.

Firms report that their unease arises from several factors, including a lack of detail about the Government’s plan to Make Work Pay proposals and the potential for unintended consequences.

However, the survey also points to how the Government and business working together can address the challenges identified, including firms reporting that quickly implementing the Growth and Skills levy, or making simple changes to the Apprenticeship Levy as an interim

step would make it easier for them to invest in workers’ skills.

Carmen Watson, chair of Pertemps, which has its headquarters in Meriden, said: “It is encouraging to note that hiring intentions remain positive, with nearly half of organisations expecting to have a higher headcount in the next 12 months. So it is hugely important that investment in skills training moves from its current slow position to one of a more proactive stance.

“To ensure businesses are supported in their hiring endeavours and staff retention, it is essential that Skills England, when reforming the current levy system, allows sufficient flexibility to support the development of both new and retained talent.

“While accepting that any skills funding must result in comprehensive and high-quality training to ensure successful outcomes, Skills England should note that one size does not fit all and a more modular approach and delivery would be appropriate.”

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# ACCESS to FINANCE

## SPECIAL REPORT

The need for funding right across the commercial spectrum is as great as it has ever been.

Despite it being a challenging period with investment, in the main, slowing down over the last few years, there are still opportunities for businesses of all shapes and sizes to access finance in the West Midlands.

In this commercially backed special report, we call on some of the most authoritative voices in this field to provide their insight, and also catch up on some of the deals and moves taking place in the region.





# Navigating a route to better borrowing:

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES



**Dr Steve Walker, CEO at Birmingham-based ART Business Loans, discusses why funding applications are increasing, and the key considerations small businesses should make when taking on debt – including the pitfalls to avoid.**

## Increased funding available to SMEs

ART Business Loans (ART), a leading local CDFI, based in Birmingham, has supported a wide range of businesses over 27 years and now is able to lend throughout the West Midlands Region and adjoining counties. It is accredited to provide loans using the BBB Growth Guarantee 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 a make an enquiry see [www.artbusinessloans.co.uk](http://www.artbusinessloans.co.uk)

For many SMEs, the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that they were forced to switch into survival mode. In terms of financing, that meant using up cash reserves and / or borrowing funds to simply stay afloat.

Businesses that had to borrow to survive lockdown may now be seeking funds to either accelerate future growth or to refinance their pandemic loans - perhaps having optimistically borrowed over a shorter period. Whether businesses borrowed or spent reserves to help navigate the pandemic, there are challenges to face when securing new borrowing.

Businesses might not be able to produce the level of figures and forecasts being demanded by lenders post pandemic, and smaller loan amounts are not as attractive to major funders.

Post-Covid, SMEs have been turning to alternative lenders who, for the first time, now account for over 50% of the loans made each year to SMEs in the UK. These include those that operate solely online. It's easy to see the rationale for this - decisions are quick and convenient online, and can provide fast access to finance.

### Proceed with caution

However, it's crucial for every small business owner to adopt a thorough and robust approach to taking on new debt - and have a clear understanding of the pitfalls to avoid.

When using some online lenders, depending on circumstances, interest rates can be very high, reaching well over 30%. Couple this with short payment terms, which in some cases can be as little as two years, and there can be a lot

of pressure on cashflow, with businesses struggling to make the repayments.

As a lender, ART is seeing a growing trend - with an upsurge in demand in the last quarter - of organisations coming to us for refinancing in addition to larger loans geared to growth. This may be because businesses can't meet the requirements of their original loan and are struggling to obtain funds from banks or other finance sources, even if seeking a new loan to support growth.

### Driving growth

Post-pandemic, it's concerning to see a growing trend of businesses falling prey to three key pitfalls in lending: taking too little advice, borrowing over too short a period, and committing to excessive rates of interest.

While online lenders can undoubtedly offer quick solutions and fast access to finance, lending should always be based on the viability of a business - with a clear understanding that owners can afford to take on and repay the debt.

Not every lending request can end in a 'yes'. But for those SMEs facing a financial dead-end, a relationship-based approach that is built on transparency and viability can provide an important route to long-term financial security - with no short-cuts. This is where Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs), like ART Business Loans, can help.

### An appropriate route to finance

CDFIs are prepared to lend in three key scenarios: 1. when other lenders say 'no'; 2. when other lenders have already lent

all they can; or 3. when they can lend as part of a package alongside other banks or finance sources. Crucially, CDFIs can say 'yes' because they take a people-centred and relationship-based approach when supporting businesses - with a deep understanding of the organisation, and the financial support it needs to thrive.

ART Business Loans is a leading CDFI, based in Birmingham and covering the West Midlands and adjoining counties. Our mission is to ensure viable businesses and social enterprises across the region can access appropriate loan finance that is tailored to the specific requirements of the business.

To meet the needs of customers that have been unable to obtain their full request from banks and other sources, ART can offer access to:

- Loans from £10,000 to £150,000, either alone or as part of a package with others
- Lending from six months to seven years, with no penalty for early repayment
- Referrals to other finance providers for additional funds or wider business support

ART is also accredited by British Business Bank to provide support using the Growth Guarantee Scheme which is designed to provide additional opportunities for viable businesses to access funds.

ART's personalised approach is driven by a small team of dedicated lending managers, who offer one-to-one support to every SME to fully understand the needs of the business. The lenders will review the viability of the business to offer an informed and tailor-made financial solution, including potential referrals to other sources of finance and assistance.



For more information visit [www.artbusinessloans.co.uk](http://www.artbusinessloans.co.uk)



A Birmingham automation specialist in robotics is preparing to create new jobs after receiving £200,000 in funding from business lender UKSE.

Mechatronic Production Systems Limited, based at Kings Norton Business Centre, will add seven new roles to its current staffing level of 35 after securing the funds to meet growing demand from manufacturers seeking to increase productivity by using automation.

Mechatronic supplies factory production and robotic process automation to some of the world's leading automotive, industrial, medical device and aerospace companies. The firm aims to expand its operation following the backing from social impact funder UKSE, which works with companies across the West Midlands unable to secure investment from mainstream banks.

Managing director Tony Parker-Watkins, who led a management buy-out in 2022, said: "We have a strong sales pipeline and want to focus on business growth with more personnel. With this investment we can grow as a business as we continue to serve our clients, many of whom are or supply leading blue chip companies.

"We have a strong, experienced and loyal team here at Mechatronic. We continue to look for and support engineers of the future by offering work experience placements, employing young apprentices and university placement students to develop their skills in automation which is an exciting industry.

"The team at UKSE have been great to work with. Knowledgeable about funding,



Pictured from left are Andy Moss of Ricosta Capital, Steve Grice of UKSE and Mechatronic MD Tony Parker-Watkins

they understand how our orders can fluctuate and recognise the opportunities ahead which we are trying to harness."

Providing strategic loan and equity packages of up to £1 million to generate growth, create jobs and bolster the economy, UKSE's team based in Cannock supports SMEs across Birmingham, the Black Country, Coventry, Staffordshire and Telford.

UKSE Midlands area manager Steve Grice said: "We are pleased to have taken

this opportunity to support Mechatronic in their next phase.

"With a strong track record in innovation and a pipeline of new business to realise, Tony and the team are the kind of business we aim to support to benefit the West Midlands economy.

"UKSE has a mission to enable businesses and the people behind them to create jobs, grow and prosper, so we look forward to seeing Mechatronic build further success."

■ Cattaneo Corporate Finance has appointed experienced dealmaker Richard Newman as a director in its team. He is a well-known figure in the Midlands corporate finance market where he has worked for 25 years in M&A advisory and debt structuring roles.

Having held senior roles at HSBC, the Royal Bank of Scotland, KBC Peel Hunt and more recently at specialist debt fund Thincats, he joins Cattaneo to provide advice on M&A transactions and debt and equity structuring.

Over the last two years as a senior director in Thincats' transaction management team, Richard funded in excess of £100 million to support deals across various sizes and sectors, including private equity and M&A transactions. Prior to this he spent 15 years in mainstream banking where he provided structured debt packages in support of growth finance and acquisition transactions.

## Law firm secures loan for student living upgrade

Law firm Shakespeare Martineau has successfully acted for British bank Santander UK in connection with a £33 million loan facility to a Birmingham-based student accommodation provider.

The loan was used to purchase and refinance an existing block of student accommodation – allowing the provider to offer improved living conditions for learners.

Shakespeare Martineau's role in the transaction was comprehensive, with the team providing legal advice on the loan agreement and security arrangements. The firm also conducted thorough property due diligence and co-ordinated with Jersey-based lawyers.

Naomi Tudor, partner and head of banking and financial services at Shakespeare Martineau, who led the

deal, said: "The ability to offer top-tier living conditions is crucial in attracting and retaining students, and we are proud to have played a role in this significant development.

"The loan enables the provider to expand and enhance their student accommodation, while the significant investment underscores Santander UK's confidence in the sector. The transaction is also a strong indicator of the robust and continued demand for quality housing options for students pursuing higher education in the West Midlands.

"The deal needed to be completed within a tight timeframe, so we mobilised a dedicated team spanning two office hubs to successfully meet the three-week deadline."

# Ethnic minority business funding:

## A FRESH PERSPECTIVE FOR BIRMINGHAM



By Professor MONDER RAM and  
Professor RICHARD ROBERTS  
Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority  
Entrepreneurship, Aston University



The economic landscape of Birmingham is evolving, with ethnic minority-led businesses (EMBs) playing an increasingly vital role. Our Time for Change report highlighted an enormous economic opportunity for the UK: EMBs have the potential to quadruple their contribution to the UK economy, from £25 billion to

£100 billion annually.

This growth could transform our local economy, creating jobs, fostering innovation, and enhancing Birmingham's position as a diverse and dynamic business hub.

EMBs are typically more growth-oriented, export-focused, and innovative

than their counterparts in the wider business community. These characteristics position them as key drivers of economic growth and international trade, particularly important in our post-Brexit economy. However, the 'finance problem' continues to be a significant barrier to realising their full potential.

### The reality of bank lending

It's important to acknowledge that banks don't lend money 'easily' to anyone, regardless of ethnic background. This caution is necessary, as banks are custodians of our savings and backed by taxpayer guarantees. The lending process is complex, involving risk assessments, regulatory compliance, and economic forecasts – factors that apply universally to all loan applicants.

While most ethnic minority entrepreneurs report positive relationships with finance providers, lingering perceptions of discrimination persist in some communities. These perceptions, whether based on past experiences or current misunderstandings, can significantly impact business decisions and growth trajectories. To move forward, we need a clearer understanding of the finance landscape for EMBs.

### What the data reveals

Recent research provides valuable insights:

1. Credit applications from EMBs to UK banks have similar success rates and loan sizes compared to the wider business community, on a like-for-like basis. This is a positive indicator of progress in fair lending practices.

2. Among people with viable business ideas who don't apply for credit, ethnic minority representation is four to six times larger than in the business stock as a whole. This disparity represents a significant untapped potential for our local economy.

3. About 30% of these 'discouraged borrowers' have an ethnic minority

background, highlighting a significant 'lost potential' issue. These are entrepreneurs with promising ideas who never reach the application stage.

### The trust challenge

These discouraged borrowers are often creditworthy and meet banks' criteria, but most never approach banks about credit due to fear of rejection. This fear stems from various factors, including historical experiences, cultural attitudes towards debt, and a lack of familiarity with the banking system.

The disconnect has been exacerbated by changes in banking practices over the past decade, which have often prioritised online and phone interactions over personal relationships. While these changes aim to increase efficiency, they can inadvertently create barriers for some communities.

### A Birmingham solution

To address this issue, we propose establishing a network of community finance hubs across the West Midlands. These hubs would serve as bridges between communities and financial institutions, providing a space where trust can be built and knowledge shared.

The hubs could be volunteer-led, based in neutral locations such as faith-based premises, libraries, or higher education environments, with support from the local finance community. They would offer services such as financial literacy workshops, one-on-one mentoring, and introductions to banking professionals, all tailored to the specific needs of EMBs.

By creating these local, community-

focused spaces, we aim to demystify the lending process, build confidence among potential borrowers, and create direct pathways to financial support. Their primary goal would be to encourage currently discouraged borrowers to pursue funding opportunities, thereby unlocking the latent potential in our diverse business community.

### Looking ahead

The potential economic impact of addressing the 'discouraged borrower' issue is substantial. We estimate that by converting even a fraction of these discouraged borrowers into active loan applicants, we could see a significant boost to local business creation and growth.

We've received numerous expressions of support for this initiative from local government, financial institutions, and community leaders. This collaborative approach is crucial, as it ensures that the hubs will be designed and implemented with input from all stakeholders.

Our ambition is for the West Midlands to host the UK's first such hub, setting a precedent for the rest of the country. Birmingham, with its rich history of innovation and diverse business community, is the perfect place to pioneer this approach.

By addressing these finance challenges, we can unlock significant economic potential and foster a more inclusive business landscape in Birmingham and beyond.

This isn't just about financial metrics – it's about creating a more equitable, dynamic, and prosperous city for all our residents.



# Grants available to support managerial development

Businesses in Walsall looking to support staff in developing managerial skills through formal training can secure financial grants from Walsall Business Support.

Companies can apply for support towards the training costs of an accredited Chartered Management Institute course intended to enhance a range of skills including communication, project management and resource management.

Formed by leading local business figures,



**Councillor John Murray**

Walsall Business Support provides grants to applicants who need funding for projects to boost employment and skills in the borough.

It has set aside funds to support up to 50 employees from firms who take on the 18-month CMI level 5 diploma for operational leaders and managers.

The CMI course is a higher technical qualification, an educational training route promoted by the Government to bridge the skills gap in technical industries by providing specialised knowledge and skills.

“Walsall Business Support is playing its part in helping businesses upskill staff with managerial responsibilities to ensure they can thrive and grow, benefitting the wider economy,” said the group’s chairman, Councillor John Murray.

“We recognise that funding training can be an obstacle for business owners, so by making these grants available firms can move forward with confidence.”

Bids for financial support can be made by using an online application form on the WBS website.

Recent beneficiaries include a Black Country-based charity for the deaf, Zebra Access, which is building on its employability support for local employers following a second funding boost.

It has received a £6,000 grant to continue working with employers to help deaf and hard of hearing people seek, gain and sustain employment, building upon the success of the initial grant of £6,500 last year.



■ Specialist residential development finance lender Atelier has announced the opening of a regional office in Birmingham. Based on Colmore Row it will be headed by lending director Rav Kudhail (pictured).

Finance deployed so far in Birmingham includes a £7.2 million loan to convert a Grade-II listed building to 32 apartments in the Jewellery Quarter and an £8.5 million loan on the conversion of a former office block into new residential and commercial units – adapting to the changing needs of Birmingham’s city centre.

Across the wider region it includes a £26.2 million loan on a 196-studio PBSA development near the University of Warwick and a £12.4 million loan on a 76-bed care home in Worcester.

Mr Kudhail said: “I have been based in Birmingham for the last three years and am proud of the relationships we have built up with developers, intermediaries and professional partners.

“The fact we have delivered £150 million of lending in the region so far, is evidence of our commitment to finance a range of asset classes across central England and the north.”



# Unlocking business growth through ethical lending



By ALEX RICE, chief commercial officer at ethical bank Unity Trust Bank

## Values-based business is on the rise

Evidence consistently suggests that UK consumers are more likely to purchase from a business that is known for ethical and green practices, with the Financial Conduct Authority reporting that 81% of adults in the UK would like the way their money is invested to do some good, as well as provide a financial return. Research by LinkedIn has found that more than two-thirds of professionals in Europe want to work for companies that share their values.

This has led to growing demand for more transparent and responsible decision making by business leaders.

Organisations delivering excellence in ethical practices recognised through accreditations such as Living Wage Employer status, Fair Tax Mark and Social Enterprise UK membership, indicate the variety of causes organisations can influence. The rise of movements like B Corp, of which there are now more than 2,000 in the UK, reflect how organisations are strengthening their efforts in balancing profit with purpose.

Banking with a values-driven finance provider is just one way that businesses can help to make a substantial difference to society.

This is due to the way the bank’s balance sheet works. Deposits are often made from organisations that feel an affinity to the mission of an ethical bank. They know that their money is converted into debt facilities for their lending clients.

This is how ethical banks invest in communities, help create jobs, get funding into deprived areas for essential services and work towards net zero together. It is this cycle that enables wider societal benefit from the bank’s activities.

## Making an impact

So, what exactly is an ethical bank? Put simply, an ethical bank will measure commercial success not only in financial terms, but on the positive impact on people and planet.

At Unity, we refer to our ‘double bottom line’, where both commercial success and profitability are important, but perhaps not for obvious reasons. We use our profits to generate capital which enables us to strengthen our business so we can improve and grow our services to customers.

The ‘double bottom line’ strategy is not marketing hyperbole. Success is measured not only by financial performance and commercial returns, but also by the impact created through our customers - from housing associations, care homes, pharmacists and dentists serving local communities, to businesses that are driving forward the green economy and organisations creating jobs and apprenticeship opportunities in areas lacking opportunities.

Other ethical banks may have different business models, but the concept of wider societal benefit is often a major driver. Ethical banks support organisations by helping to fund their immediate financial requirements and future growth ambitions, but also ensure their funds are reinvested to become a force for good elsewhere in society.

Ethical banks provide a wide range of products and services to organisations that help to deliver impact in their communities. Many ethical banks are not limited to charities or third sector organisations. Responsible lenders look at each opportunity to

determine whether the scale of the contribution to positive social, economic or environmental outcomes is sufficient to meet its investment criteria.

## Understanding where your money goes

What banks do with customer deposits will vary but, at Unity, every £1 invested – regardless of whether the client opens a term deposit, instant access or current account – makes a difference.

What is our investment criteria? Unity invests where there is alignment against one or more of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

We also know that our money can have different impacts in places across the UK. Using the UK’s Index of Multiple Deprivation, Unity measures where our lending supports communities in ‘deprived areas’ and can make a meaningful change to communities. Over 43% of our loans in 2023 went to these areas.

Additionally, our lending can support organisations serving social and environmental purposes. Our Housing Association Decarbonisation Initiative has committed £25 million to housing associations improving energy efficiency and reducing the carbon footprint of their homes. Ethical banks integrate decisions to actively support the positive impact our customers make.

Perhaps unusually, I don’t see other ethical banks as our competition. I like to think that we have a shared goal which will help drive up standards across the financial services sector and grow an economy aligned to delivering good.

In my mind, if all ethical banks are successful, then the whole of society wins.

# British Business Bank welcomes new director

The British Business Bank has appointed Vicky Mears as its new director of UK network for the Midlands and north of England.

Vicky brings more than two decades of banking experience in various roles including trade finance, relationship management within business banking, senior branch management in retail banking, and project management.

She has also spent five years working with smaller businesses to support their expansion into international markets, understanding the issues they face when scaling up, and accessing finance.

In her new role, Vicky will work closely with senior network managers across the

Midlands and the north to gain a deeper understanding of the small business landscape. She will also provide support to entrepreneurs looking to access the finance required to scale up and thrive.

She said: “Smaller businesses are critical to the UK economy, and I have seen first hand the impact access to finance can have not just for each business, but also the wider economy.

“It’s no secret that market conditions for smaller businesses have been challenging over the last few years, but entrepreneurs should feel confident knowing that there are plenty of finance options and support out there to help them grow.”



**Vicky Mears**



# Culture club

Through his property investment business Hanson Group, Han Liu is breathing new life into a variety of buildings in the city centre. HENRY CARPENTER meets the investor and developer who is bringing a slice of authentic China to the streets of Birmingham

Birmingham is truly a city of many parts, and one of the most colourful and dynamic is the Chinese Quarter on the southern fringes of the city centre.

It merges with the Gay Village where thoroughfares such as Hurst Street and Bromsgrove Street, festooned with restaurants, bars and clubs point to a thriving night-time economy.

Like pretty much anywhere you care to mention though, some of the buildings are on the tired side and in need of rejuvenation.

The perfect opportunity then for Han Liu, who through his business Hanson Group is quietly but methodically expanding his commercial property portfolio – and in so doing bringing a slice of authentic China to this most vibrant of areas.

Han's latest project is a multi-storey leisure emporium on Bromsgrove Street whose formal launch was due in October. Given the speed and efficiency of the predominantly Chinese workforce, the likelihood is that it is up and running by the time you read this.

Formerly a 1980s office and nightclub on the second and third floors, the bulk of the property has been vacant for several years – until Hanson Group bought the lease with a vision to renovate and repurpose it, and create a destination which is expected to attract thousands of patrons each year.

Han's Food Emporium is perhaps the centrepiece of the 15,000 sq ft building. The main hall is laid out with a dozen separate kitchens surrounding a relaxed central eating area. These, Han explains, have all been taken by oriental food operators ahead of opening.

Next door there are two more formal restaurants, one specialising in seafood and the other in spicy food, while upstairs is a riot of pastel neon lights, mirrors and endless vats of brightly coloured soft toys. This, I am told, is the gaming area. Next door there is a mirrored karaoke bar, while a beauty spa can be accessed through the dining emporium for those wishing to relax.

It's quite something. While there might not be anything like it in Birmingham – and very few, if any, elsewhere in the UK – this is a regular sight in Beijing, Shanghai or indeed any other Chinese town or city.

We are discussing the project in one of Han's restaurants on Hurst Street, Pepper Chef. We are joined by his right-hand man, Mark Hopkins, a veteran of the construction industry and someone who knows the complexities of the UK planning



Mark Hopkins and Han Liu in the gaming area of 143 Bromsgrove Street

**“What Han is doing is bringing authentic China to the streets of Birmingham and he has made such a positive impact to this part of the city in a relatively short space of time.”**

system inside out.

“What Han is doing is bringing authentic China to the streets of Birmingham and he has made such a positive impact to this part of the city in a relatively short space of time,” explains Mark.

“I think 143 will open a lot of people's eyes as to how the Chinese enjoy themselves in the evening, and how they boost the nighttime economy.”

Another observation is the speed of the renovation of 143 Bromsgrove Street.

When questioned if it would have taken longer if it was an English group of builders, there is no doubt in the minds of both Han and Hopkins that it would.

The builders – almost all of whom are Chinese – have been working at a pace which even Mark, in his many years overseeing building projects, hadn't come across until he started working with Han in 2021.

“It is remarkable how quick they are,” he says. “Not only that, but the standard is extremely high. They are not taking short

cuts, and the finishes are exceptional.

“This is how Han has been able to complete as many projects as he has over the last few years. Another point to make is that these building programmes provide a boost to the local economy – not only through the footfall once they are completed, but also in the actually building and the employment opportunities for local construction workers.”

I am interested to hear how Han, still only in his mid-40s despite the sizeable body of work already behind him, found himself in the position as one of the foremost developers in the China Town region who has completely rejuvenated a series of obsolete or tired buildings.

He graduated in 2000 at the age of 24, and his first job was as a translator at a Chinese herbal medicine shop in Glasgow.

“My mother was a herbal medicine doctor,” explains Han, an understated and gentlemanly character who shies away from the limelight. “I worked with her for a while but then quit when I started getting



into the restaurant trade.

"Our first restaurant in Birmingham was called Han Dynasty and it was in Station Street. It opened in 2007 and provided mainland Chinese food to our customers, though it was eventually sold to a Cantonese associate.

"My university room mate joined the business and helped me set up subsequent restaurants in cities such as Manchester, Bristol, Leicester and Sheffield.

"In 2015 however, we changed our way of running the business, mainly because it was very difficult to find good chefs – and many of the chefs went on to open their own restaurants.

"So we changed the restaurants to commercial units and leased them out, the first one being TinTin on the Masshouse estate."

There is another point to this way of operating, and it gives Han real pride . . . and that is, Hanson Group is providing young entrepreneurs with the opportunity to start their own business.

It is not only Chinese restaurants which comprise the Hanson Group portfolio. There are Korean restaurants too, one smack next door to Pepper Chef being a case in point.

Nor does his business solely concentrate on leasing to the restaurant trade. There is a Chinese supermarket on Bromsgrove Street, which opened in 2018, a coffee shop, a karaoke bar (which he opened in 2004 – the first of its type in the country), a renovated pub, and various other commercial units. There are several projects in the pipeline too, including a coffee shop which is a few doors away from the food hall on Bromsgrove Street, and a residential development which will face the concourse of the Curzon Street Station, a terminus for HS2.

Han himself lives in Edgbaston with his wife, Jing, who is very much part of the business and is taking the lead on the coffee shop which is due to open before



Han and Mark Hopkins discuss progress at the food hall

the end of the year.

"This will be another example of Han bringing something unique to the area," says Mark. "The term 'coffee shop' doesn't begin to cover it really. There will be art displays, barista lessons and plenty of other features – it is just a much more interactive experience for the customer,

and that is the Chinese way of doing things."

In, say, five years' time it will be interesting to see the further impact the Hanson Group has, not just on the look of this part of Birmingham, but also its feel.

The personal opinion is that it will be significant.



Authentic oriental cuisine will be served from different kitchens in the food hall



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# Rudells opening city centre showroom

Luxury jewellery and watch retailer Rudells is opening a showroom in Birmingham's Burlington Arcade to add to existing outlets in Harborne and Wolverhampton.

Rudells was founded in Wolverhampton in the 1930s and subsequently opened its Harborne showroom in the 1980s.

Home to iconic jewellery and watch brands including Patek Philippe, Rudells has been searching for new premises in Birmingham for several years.

Managing director Jon Weston said "I have been looking for the perfect premises in Birmingham for some time, but nowhere had the right feel to it – until now.

"I am delighted that we will be partnering with Patek Philippe and this is undoubtedly an exciting and luxurious addition to the city centre."

At 4,000 square feet over two floors, the new Rudells showroom will feature some of the world's most prestigious jewellery brands and will also be the exclusive home of Patek Philippe in the city.

Adrian Lurshay, managing director of Patek Philippe UK, said: "We feel honoured to be part of the Rudells expansion, being present now at the new Birmingham store.



The level of commitment and service to their clients is second to none and we are confident that the clients will enjoy a unique experience in the new Patek Philippe space".

Nina Meeks of Hortons' Estate Limited, which owns and manages the property, said: "Rudells is an historic local brand

and a welcome addition to the Burlington Arcade."

Work to transform the recently vacated premises will commence shortly and the new showroom is expected to open in November this year.

Hortons was represented by Simon Smith of Wright Silverwood.

## New restaurant set to open at Paradise

A new Italian restaurant from Big Mamma Group will arrive in Chamberlain Square at Paradise Birmingham later this year.

La Bellezza will occupy a 4,800 sq ft

site on the lower ground floor of Two Chamberlain Square directly facing onto the square itself.

It follows another new restaurant

announcement for Paradise, with steakhouse Cow & Sow opening later this year at One Chamberlain Square.

Big Mamma was founded in France in 2013 by Tigrane Seydoux and Victor Lugger to offer authentic and generous Italian food at affordable prices.

"Our main goal as restaurateurs is to bring to life the warmth and generosity of those little trattorias you find hidden throughout Italy. La Bellezza will be the epitome of this," they said.

"We are hugely excited to be coming to Birmingham, not only to be part of its incredibly vibrant restaurant community, but to bring superb Italian products, which we spent three years personally sourcing from small family-run artisans."





# Management team bolstered at MK2

MK2 Real Estate has bolstered its property management team with three new appointments.

Henry Gyselman and Gordon Davies have joined the Birmingham-based real estate consultancy as facilities managers, while Shreya Yadev joins as a newly qualified surveyor from Colliers.

Henry has 20 years' experience in facilities management. Prior to joining MK2 he worked for 14Forty, part of the Compass Group, as the embedded facilities manager for Heineken. He was also an FM for Lambert Smith Hampton in Birmingham for seven years, where he managed a portfolio of industrial, office and residential properties.

Gordon joins from developer St Modwen, where he worked as an FM for 11 years. He has more than 20 years' experience in the property industry.

MK2 Real Estate's property management team employs 18 people and currently has more than £1 billion of assets under management, with 210 properties and 1,300 tenants on its roster.

Director Marcello Della Croce said:

"We are continuing to grow the property management business, following a number of significant new instructions.

"As a result we needed to expand the team to service the new contracts and

bolster resource for future planned growth.

"Henry and Gordon are experienced facilities managers, and their industry knowledge and experience will be invaluable."



Pictured from left are Shreya Yadev, Marcello Della Croce, Gordon Davies and Henry Gyselman

## Principle celebrates contract win

A block management firm is celebrating after winning the contract to look after a development comprising two towers in the city centre.

Principle will be managing 581 one and two-bedroomed apartments in the estate which will be known as Brindley Drive (Edition) after a competitive tender by developer Court Collaboration.

The towers – which are 15 storeys and 45 storeys high – will be called Park Residence and Centenary Tower.

They will have a concierge and security service 24 hours a day, and facilities will include a 20-metre swimming pool with natural daylight, a spa with hydra pool, sauna and steam room and a skyline gym with terrace on the 44th floor.

Other features will be yoga and spin studios, a climbing wall, a podium terrace with cinema screen and barbecue area, inside and outside co-working study areas,



private dining on the 44th floor and a sky lounge on the 45th.

Joe Jobson, joint managing director at Principle, said: "This will be one of our largest single property contracts.

"We won it by demonstrating how we already successfully manage large schemes across the country.

"We will now work closely with Court Collaboration throughout their design and build process to help them deliver high quality levels of professional service."

The development is being funded by PGIM Real Estate, the real estate business of PGIM Inc, one of the largest investment firms in the world.

## Funding boost for food bank expansion

A food bank in Solihull is able to expand its services after securing a £3,000 donation from a national housebuilder.

Community Essentials received the funding boost from Persimmon Homes Central as part of the housebuilder's community champions initiative. The food bank is run five days a week and is dedicated to supporting individuals in the community.

Since its inception, it has become a vital resource by providing crucial support to many households. The initiative addresses food insecurity while fostering a sense of community and mutual support among participants.

Stephen Palmer at Community Essentials said: "We are incredibly grateful to Persimmon Homes for their generous donation of £3,000. This support comes at a crucial time for us, as we have recently been facing significant challenges in maintaining adequate food stock and securing necessary funds.

"This donation will make a substantial difference in our ability to provide food parcels to those in need in our community."



Stephen Palmer of Community Essentials, left, and Patrick Price, construction director designate at Persimmon Homes Central

## National Highways HQ relocates to Snowhill

National Highways – the organisation responsible for England's motorways and A roads – is taking 58,697 sq ft at Three Snowhill on a 10-year lease.

The government-owned company, formerly known as the Highways Agency, is relocating its current Midlands HQ from The Cube at the end of the year.

M&G Real Estate, which owns Three Snowhill, said it was the largest letting in Birmingham's central business district in 2024.

Completed in 2020, at 420,000 sq ft Three Snowhill is Birmingham's largest office building and was honoured with the British Council for Offices' Best Commercial

Workplace regional award in 2022.

BT – the building's anchor tenant – occupies 283,000 sq ft, sharing the four-acre Snowhill Estate with organisations including KPMG, BDO, Barclays and DWF.

Aaron Pope, from M&G Real Estate, said: "This significant letting to National Highways reflects the ongoing demand for high-quality, well-located office space.

"The positive trends we are seeing in the city's commercial real estate market, including robust transaction activity and significant infrastructure investments, continue to enhance its attractiveness as a prime business hub, which will help to drive returns for our clients."





# Law firm celebrates new office opening

social

More than 300 guests joined Mills & Reeve to celebrate the opening of the law firm's new office at One Centenary Way. Senior leaders from across the region along with other clients and guests were treated to signature canapes by BaxterStory, Thuy Diem Pham and Wild Street Kitchen, cocktails from Sip 'n' Swig and entertainment from Halo Strings, silhouettist Charles Burns and a photography exhibition from Sumaya Ali.

**Christina Kruzewsk, Declan Carroll, Chris Crossan, Paula Hanley-Smith and Sophie Paoloni**



**Jagdeep Singh, Amandip Dhillon and Henna Patel**



**Inderpal Singh, Dawn Brathwaite, Stuart Pemble and Richard Bogue**



**Harry Bourton, Ruth Bourton, Laura Smith and Uko Umotong**



**Joanna Birch and Michele Wilby**



**Orlando Beckett and Lucy Shaw**



**Susanne Dodd and Councillor John Cotton**



**Jayne Hussey and Charles Staveley**



**Aishling Seymour Pellew, Bec Houghton and Surjit Deuer**



**Marcus Hayes, Hannah Cox and Helen Dale**



**Calum Nisbet and Neil Meredith**



**Laura Smith, Bhavini Washington-Smith, Sarah Gale, Grace Endley and Carla Harris**

social





Fieldfisher corporate partner Tom Rush, left, with Andrew Lawton Smith, Birmingham head of corporate

## Law firm appoints corporate partner

European law firm Fieldfisher has announced the appointment of Tom Rush as a partner in its corporate practice in Birmingham. He joins from Gateley Legal, where he was Birmingham head of corporate.

Tom has over 15 years' experience in public company transactions, private equity investments, and mergers and acquisitions. He advises corporates, financial institutions and entrepreneurs, and has successfully acted on many high-profile IPOs, secondary fundraisings and complex M&A transactions across various sectors, including retail, engineering, and healthcare.

His notable work credentials include advising Gymshark and its management on the minority investment by General Atlantic, and advising Virgin Wines UK Plc on its vendor placing and admission to AIM with a market cap of £110 million.

Andrew Lawton Smith, Birmingham head of corporate at Fieldfisher, said: "I am very pleased to welcome Tom to the firm's Birmingham office.

"He is a respected leader and has worked on some transformational deals in the region. His arrival is particularly timely as we see increasing opportunities and renewed activity in the local market."

## Architectural technologist joins CPMG

Architectural practice CPMG has expanded its team in Birmingham with the appointment of Kebba Barrow.

The architectural technologist is looking to further his expertise after graduating from the University of Wolverhampton in 2022 with a degree in architectural technology.

The focus areas in Kebba's new role include the technical aspects of projects such as effective cohesion of individual specifications and ensuring compliance with building standards and codes.



## Recruitment at property firm

Property firm Lovell Partnerships has announced the appointment of a new refurbishment partnerships director who will be focusing on social housing and retrofit projects across the West Midlands.

With more than 20 years of experience in the housing and construction industry, Matt Hickman has worked in a number of senior management roles and brings a wealth of knowledge to Lovell.

He is committed to both helping provide safe, warm and energy-efficient homes, but also offering training, development and job opportunities for young people or those in long-term unemployment.

Matt said: "I am looking forward to getting stuck into building relationships with key housing providers and delivering retrofit projects at scale, as well as helping to raise the profile of the refurbishment side of the business.

"With more funding coming through from the Government, this is an opportune time to deliver social housing decarbonisation fund projects throughout the region."

Carl Yale, regional refurbishment director at Lovell, said: "Matt is a fantastic addition to our team and has a thorough understanding of and excellent experience in the industry.

"Continuing to push forward with our refurbishment and retrofit goals in order to meet the Government's net zero target is extremely important, and we know Matt's expertise will be invaluable in helping us do this."

## New managing director at Prime Accountants Group

West Midlands accountancy practice Prime Accountants Group has announced Morgan Davies as its new managing director, succeeding the long-serving Kevin Johns.

Morgan steps up from his role as director overseeing the firm's audit and accounts department. This is a milestone year for him, having worked for the firm for 20 years and been in practice for 30 years.

Kevin has worked for Prime – which has offices in Solihull, Birmingham and Coventry – for 31 years, and has been its managing director since 2015.

As well as holding the positions of Solihull BID chairman and vice-president of the Solihull Chamber

of Commerce, he has spearheaded Prime's fundraising efforts, which have seen the business raise tens of thousands of pounds for charities such as Solihull Life Opportunities and Birmingham Children's Hospital.

While he is stepping down as managing director, he will continue to work with his portfolio of clients and remains on the senior leadership team.

Kevin, who was awarded a British Empire Medal in the New Year's Honours list in 2019 for services to Solihull, said: "I have planned to gradually retire over the next few years, so handing over to Morgan now means we will have a far more controlled and better transition."



## Woodbourne Group announces new chief innovation officer

Real estate investment and development firm Woodbourne Group has appointed Jo Birch as chief innovation officer.

The appointment supports Woodbourne Group's expanding life sciences portfolio, which includes biopharma, med-tech, and AI.

In her role Jo will foster strategic partnerships and aims to build a vibrant knowledge community in a bid to drive growth and innovation across the firm's life sciences development pipeline.

She is the former director for innovation, enterprise and employability at Birmingham City University, and co-created STEAMhouse, BCU's collaborative centre for innovation.

Jo has also led on skills and employability

initiatives at BCU, working closely with employers to address talent needs and inform regional skills policies.

Woodbourne Group's Curzon Wharf development is set to be a major contributor to employment and economic growth within Birmingham's Knowledge Quarter, with a strong focus on life sciences.

Tani Dulay, CEO of Woodbourne Group, said: "Jo's appointment underscores our commitment to creating world-class life science facilities in Birmingham and driving regional growth. Innovation is at the core of our vision for Curzon Wharf and Birmingham Knowledge Quarter."



## Entec Si expands specialist team

Business change consultancy Entec Si has reinforced its specialist team after appointing a new consultant.

Victoria Brownell, an experienced learning manager and business transformation consultant, has joined the company to support the delivery of a host of new business wins across local government, higher education and the third sector.

Victoria brings experience working with big brands such as Rolex, Jaguar Land Rover and International Airlines Group to the business.

Hailing from a global consulting firm – a portfolio company of Goldman Sachs Assets Management and Everstone

Capital Giants – she helped to deliver 360-degree digital transformation projects and co-ordinated learning and development programmes for multinational companies.

Eman Al-Hillawi, CEO of Entec Si, said: "Victoria is a gifted consultant and visual thinker. Her creativity and understanding of the inner workings of many sectors will prove invaluable as we motor forward with new clients."

Victoria said: "My zest for change management is grounded in developing long-term relationships with clients.

"I love getting to grips with their pain points and building that connection to break down and resolve their challenges."



# Five minutes with...



## Dr Tru Powell

CEO of Black Business Magazine/  
Multicultural Inspire Awards

### In short, what does your role involve?

I am an award-winning entrepreneur, and run a coaching business as well as a magazine. I also recently launched an awards business. Essentially, my role is to use my platform to platform others, especially those from ethnically marginalised communities. I help entrepreneurs build their personal brands.

### How long have you been in your current job?

Twelve months.

### Please give a summary of your professional career to date.

I started my career in event management. I've planned everything from corporate events to consumer/entertainment events. I spent seven years as CEO and business owner at the MBCC Awards, responsible for building it into a recognisable brand. I am also the CEO of Black Business Magazine, spotlighting and championing black talent and business owners in the UK.

Prior to these roles I ran my own event management agency, Alternative Events, planning and delivering events for corporate organisations across the UK.

I also run an online coaching business helping hundreds of people to build and monetise their personal brands. Primarily this is done through online group coaching programmes and/or digital products.

Alongside the online coaching business and the magazine, I run the Multicultural Inspire Awards, celebrating and recognising inspirational people across the country. The inaugural event will take place next autumn.

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

Yes. Attending higher education gave me the opportunity to be a critical thinker – this is one of the greatest gifts anyone can have. Not accepting everything at face value and objectively looking at how the world works is a massive superpower.

### How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?

Like most jobs, the current economy and cost of living has impacted my businesses. In events, fluctuations in business spending have influenced budgets and attendance, making adaptability crucial. As a personal branding coach, economic trends often shift how clients prioritise personal development and marketing efforts.

For my magazine, both digital and print, changes in advertising spending and consumer demand have required strategic shifts in content and monetisation to maintain readership and revenue.

### What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?

I see AI as a bit of an opportunity and a challenge. It offers incredible potential to enhance creativity, streamline processes and reach audiences in new ways, especially in my work with events, personal branding, and publishing. However, it also presents challenges, particularly in maintaining authenticity and the human touch, which are crucial in personal branding and meaningful content creation.

### Social media platform of choice, and why?

This is a tough one. Six months ago I would have said Instagram. However, in the last six months, I've taken more of a liking to LinkedIn. People think it is a place where you just talk about your professional experience. However, you can actually have a personality on LinkedIn and you can build a strong community. I am loving the community I am building on the platform and enjoying the content I am putting out.



Photo: Tori Lens

### How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

I think they will say I am extroverted. They will also say I am charismatic and a wannabe comedian. I am always making bad dad jokes in the office. They will also say I stand on morals and principles. I don't deviate from what I believe in, and I will walk away from work if values don't align with mine.

### Highlights of your career so far?

Wow. There are so many. I have received many awards throughout my career and even received an honorary doctorate. I've also worked with some incredible people and given awards to the likes of Sir Trevor McDonald and Baroness Floella Benjamin. However, above all of this, my highlights are seeing the people I provide platforms for advance their careers and lives. Seeing the young people in the academy increase their self-esteem and confidence. For me, people benefiting from the work I do will always be my highlights.

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

There aren't. I am grateful for all my mistakes and embarrassing moments as they have shaped me to be the person I am.

### Pet hates?

When people compromise on their values.

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

I would tell myself to be unapologetically me sooner. I've spent a long time suppressing myself to centre others.

### How do you relax away from work?

This is easy. Gym, tennis and time with the family.

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

I met Nelson Mandela when I was nine years old.

### You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

Ooohh... so my book is Key Person of Influence by Daniel Priestly, my film will be Sister Act 2 as I love a sing song, and my CD The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.

### Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Michael Jackson, Beyonce, Michael Jordan, Whitney Houston and Malcolm X.

### What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Oxtail and rice, plantain, coleslaw and a glass of Guinness punch.



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