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The power of time:

why cricket hospitality is different

In a business world where attention is short and diaries are full, meaningful time together has become one of the most valuable commodities. That's where cricket hospitality stands apart.

Unlike short form sporting events that are over almost as quickly as they begin, cricket offers something rare in modern corporate entertaining. Time. Time to talk, connect, build rapport and strengthen relationships, all within the backdrop of a live sporting experience.

At Edgbaston, cricket hospitality isn't just about watching the game. It's about creating an environment where business relationships genuinely grow.

Building relationships, not just moments

Many live sports hospitality experiences are intense but fleeting. A football match delivers 90 minutes of action, often in a loud, high energy environment where conversation is limited.

Cricket is different.

Competitions such as the Vitality Blast and The Hundred give hours of shared experience. With Men's and Women's double headers now stages on the same

day, the occasion extends event further, allowing conversation to evolve naturally without the pressure of time ticking away.

This extended experience creates ideal conditions for trust. Conversations aren't forced, relationships develop organically through shared reactions, moments of drama and relaxed time away from the office. Add world-class stars and iconic surroundings, and the day becomes something guests genuinely remember.

A sociable, shared environment

Cricket's structure naturally encourages conversation. Scheduled breaks in play and a flowing pace mean guests can engage without competing against the action.

Combine this with the unmistakable summer atmosphere of sunshine, social crowds and a sense of occasion, cricket hospitality becomes an environment where people feel comfortable and open. There's no hard sell or rigid structure. Instead, connections form naturally over the course of the day.

At Edgbaston, hospitality spaces are designed to enhance this. Rooftop terraces with panoramic views and stylish

open plan restaurants allow guests to move, mingle and network beyond their immediate group, encouraging wider connections and meaningful dialogue.

Relaxed, yet electric

While cricket hospitality is sociable and welcoming, the excitement is never lost. Edgbaston's famous atmosphere, combined with the intensity of white ball cricket, delivers moments that captivate throughout. From the biggest players to close finishes, the energy of the crowd creates shared experiences talked about long after the final ball.

Why cricket hospitality works for business

Cricket hospitality isn't about rushing an event. It's about creating space for conversation, connection and genuine relationship building.

In a world where face-to-face interaction is more valuable than ever, cricket offers a rare blend of elite sport, relaxed hospitality and meaningful time together. That's the power of cricket hospitality and why it continues to stand apart.



hospitality



Birmingham Business Welcome

If I had to choose a business leader I admire most, it would be John Timpson, the chair of the eponymous retail chain.

I'm sure I would be far from alone in picking him. He stands out for building a highly successful retail business using principles that are almost the opposite of traditional corporate management.

His best-known idea is what he calls 'upside down management' – the belief that frontline staff, not head office, are the most important people in the company. Shop colleagues are trusted to make decisions themselves; managers exist mainly to support staff rather than control them.

This is unusual in retail, where businesses are normally tightly controlled through rules, scripts and targets.

Timpson famously says the firm recruits 'on personality'. The company values warmth, initiative and kindness more than CVs or formal credentials.

Of course there are many ways to skin a cat when it comes to running a successful business, but if there are any leaders out there who place their people first quite so brazenly – and in the process, to inspire them and make them feel valued in a way they might not ever have expected – I am yet to hear of them.

This is what the *Birmingham Business* Best Places to Work Awards are all about: to pay tribute to those who value and inspire their people, and in doing so are maximising their potential, maintaining loyalty and ultimately generating a more lucrative business model.

What is so impressive about these leaders is their vision and ability to implement such a culture in the workplace in spite of the endless flurry of problematical external factors beyond their control.

Wars, political uncertainty, a wobbling economy, high taxes, exorbitant cost of living . . . just a handful of issues which business owners and leaders have to contend with in their bid for survival, let alone success.

The natural option to keep the factory gates from closing is to become fixated with the bottom line, and ride out the short-term challenges.

So here's to all those with the long-term savvy to inspire their workforce and create a workplace which is inspirational in itself.

The various interviews, talking-head round-ups, historical features and insight pieces which lie in the pages ahead are centred around leaders and workplaces where people are valued as much as the product.

Roll on the awards – the gala evening of June 11th promises to be a very special occasion recognising some very special businesses.



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The scene is set for the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards 2026

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It comes from the top

The value of leadership can never be under-estimated. After all, it shapes an organisation's direction, culture and long-term success. In a fast-changing world, today's business leaders have had to adapt in order to extract the very best from their people, and *Birmingham Business* has asked four prominent figures from different industries to assess the various qualities needed for effective leadership.





Rowan Crozier

CEO, Brandauer

When it comes to inspiring people, what does effective leadership look like to you?

I have always tried to lead from the front with a crystal clear, unfaltering focus on vision and setting objectives that are intrinsically linked to the long-term business plan.

Respect also breeds respect, so I try to treat people as I want to be treated myself and this should lead to a fun but challenging work environment at Brandauer.

It is also important to hold regular check-ins with senior management and team leaders, ensuring we all remain focused on the horizon without being weighed down by day-to-day pressures. For us, the vision is to achieve £12m sales by the end of 2027 and we're well on course to achieve that.

How difficult is it to marry a people-first ideology with a successful bottom line?

Very difficult. In honesty, it is driven by making sure you have the right behaviours in all new recruits and for us that's team members who are keen, inquisitive, broad thinking and respectful of others.

People and culture aren't a quick fix. They take years to develop and, in order to see a step-change at Brandauer, we focused on behaviours of all our staff (existing and new) and driving our culture over a long-term period.

Rewarding the right behaviours is important and that doesn't always have to be financial. It can be access to new projects, greater responsibility and, most importantly, a regular pat on the back and a simple thank you.

How has leadership changed over the last few years, in both concept and practice?

Gone are the days of iron fist micro-management. This approach does not work for the majority and can set you back years in terms of culture.

'Carrot' approach works best for the majority I have found. Brandauer has seen its entire senior leadership change in the past ten years with two of them homegrown in Oli Eskriett and Adam Burgoyne. Both were In-Comm Training apprentices and have progressed to Tool Room Manager and HSE and NPI Manager respectively.

By investing equally in people and new technology, coupled with a focused business plan, our profitability has grown significantly during the last decade. This led to a successful MBO in 2025 and a new 10-year plan rooted in making us one of the UK's biggest manufacturing success stories.

Henrietta Brealey

CEO, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce

When it comes to inspiring people, what does effective leadership look like to you?

Thanks to my job, I have the good fortune of meeting many inspiring leaders from across all sectors and size of business.

The ones that stand out to me have a few things in common: they are great communicators who get the people around them excited about vision, purpose and direction. They lead with clarity, building effective teams that they trust to deliver while maintaining a close enough knowledge of the business to spot issues as they emerge, steady the ship and course correct.

They care about the people around them and support their growth as leaders too and they listen – weighing up points of view other than their own before coming to a conclusion.

How difficult is it to marry a people-first ideology with a successful bottom line?

Any big decision involves trade-offs but to me, ensuring a successful bottom line is very much in line with a people first ideology.

After all, without a financially sound business there are no employees. The question is, when making big decisions, how often do the needs of your people end up coming second (or being disregarded entirely) in favour of purely financial or profit seeking goals?

If it's every time, that sends a clear message about an organisation's culture and the value they place on people.

How has leadership changed over the last few years, in both concept and practice?

Post-pandemic there has been a lot more expectation on leaders, right down to team leaders and people managers, to be responsive to the needs of each individual in their business.

That has many positives, and can be really rewarding. It can also be incredibly challenging because individuals are, well, individual and spectacularly diverse in their personalities and needs.

What's inspirational and motivational to one person might be eye roll inducing to another. An effective incentive or support for one person might disengage someone else. Throw in the need to ensure consistent approaches in key areas to keep on the right side of employment law and it can be a tricky equation to balance.

The reality is you'll never please everyone – and that's ok. To the many leaders I meet who are genuinely doing your best to balance the needs of your people, customers and business in a fast changing world: thank you.



“The ones that stand out to me have a few things in common: they are great communicators who get the people around them excited about vision, purpose and direction.”



Ninder Johal

CEO, Nachural Group

When it comes to inspiring people, what does effective leadership look like to you?

Effective leadership, for me, starts with authenticity. People aren't inspired by titles or balance sheets, they are inspired by purpose and by someone who genuinely believes in what they are building.

I have always tried to lead by example, whether that's turning up first, staying last, or making the phone call that nobody else wants to make.

I also believe deeply in the power of narrative. When I co-founded Achanak (a bhangra band) in 1989 and later launched Nachural Records, there was no roadmap for what we were doing which was bringing British Punjabi music to a global audience. What kept people rallying around us was a shared story.

Leadership is really about being the custodian of that story – keeping it alive, keeping it honest, and keeping it relevant to the people around you.

How difficult is it to marry a people-first ideology with a successful bottom line?

People will tell you it's a tension. I would say it's actually an alignment – if you can get it right.

The Nachural Group has been built entirely on relationships. Our events, our media and our training ventures . . . none of it works without trust, and trust is built by putting people first, consistently and unconditionally.

That said, I will not pretend that there are no difficult moments. There have been times when I have had to make commercially difficult decisions precisely because I refused to compromise on people. But in my experience, the businesses that treat their teams and communities as assets and not as costs, tend to build something far more durable than those chasing short-term margin.

How has leadership changed over the last few years, in both concept and practice?

The last few years have fundamentally reset expectations of leaders and of organisations. The pandemic, the cost-of-living pressures, the acceleration of AI – all of it has forced leaders to become far more visible, far more human, and far more accountable.

The command-and-control model is finished. People today (especially younger professionals) want to understand the why behind decisions. They want to feel that their leader is accessible, that they share the values they talk about on LinkedIn, and that the organisation they are part of actually stands for something beyond profit.

For me personally, the shift has been toward what I would call convening leadership – bringing the right people into the same room, creating conditions for collaboration, and stepping back to let the collective intelligence do its work.

Colin Fyfe

CEO, Unity Trust Bank

When it comes to inspiring people, what does effective leadership look like to you?

Everyone sharing the same values and walking the same walk regardless of seniority. Unity Trust Bank has five core values which shape everything we do – integrity, collaborative, inclusive, straightforward and bold. They're the bedrock of our culture which all colleagues and departments across the bank are aligned to.

For me personally, as a CEO, there's nothing I enjoy more than visiting a customer in person with one of our relationship managers, or spending time with our Unity Experience team and helping customers on the phone. That insight into both our customers and our colleagues' world is invaluable.

How difficult is it to marry a people-first ideology with a successful bottom line?

The two go hand in hand at Unity. Our people are our greatest asset and without them we wouldn't be able to deliver the customer service, operational efficiency and financial stability we need to grow as an organisation.

By investing in the wellbeing and development of our colleagues, we're able to successfully deliver what we call our 'double bottom line' – positive social impact as well as sustainable returns.

How has leadership changed over the last few years, in both concept and practice?

The pandemic along with economic and environmental uncertainty are just some of the things that have impacted the workplace in recent years. Business and employee priorities have changed as a result.

A lot of organisations now embrace flexible and hybrid working patterns that support employees' work/life balance; adopt more sustainable operating practices that help the planet; or have introduced AI to drive development and productivity.

However, open and transparent dialogue and employee engagement are still crucial in a changing working environment.



“For me personally, as a CEO, there's nothing I enjoy more than visiting a customer in person with one of our relationship managers, or spending time with our Unity Experience team and helping customers on the phone.”

THE RIGHT MIX



Hundreds of disadvantaged people have found employment thanks to specialist food retailer Miss Macaroon. JON GRIFFIN talks to its founder, the irrepressible Rosie Ginday MBE, who has created one of the region's great purpose-driven success stories.



Rosie Ginday has a unique claim to fame – she is the driving force and inspiration behind the only macaron-based social enterprise in the world.

There could be no more suitable moniker for this Birmingham-based, not-for-profit venture which has churned out millions of macarons over the past 15 years to help society's most vulnerable people onto the employment ladder.

The facts speak for themselves. Miss Macaroon has supported more than 300 18 to 35-year-olds – including struggling single mums, ex-prisoners and many people from deprived backgrounds – in their quest to find meaningful work and bring self-reliance, dignity and purpose into their lives.

None of those candidates who have chosen this route would have been able to transform their lives without the vision and work ethic of Miss Macaroon herself – Rosie Ginday MBE.

It has not all been plain sailing as you might expect for a social enterprise whose modus operandi is helping the most vulnerable members of society find work. But a success rate of 65 per cent attests to a concept which has increasingly established a firm foothold in the often volatile world of charities and social enterprise.

Like so many of the people who have benefited from her niche business concept, the Walsall-born Ginday has also taken an unconventional path in the world of work.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do at school," she says. "I was good at arts, quite liked science and did fine art as a degree at Leeds."

"I realised that one of my big passions in life was food and I really wanted to open a restaurant, but I didn't feel that I wanted



Pictured from left are Rosie Ginday MBE of Miss Macaroon, StageCraft's Ray Scott, Fozia Fazil of Skanska, Miles Allibone-Dover of National Highways, and Miss Macaroon's Louisa Beckett at Miss Macaroon's Resorts World store after the refurbishment in September 2025

to go to catering college after finishing university.

"So I went to Taiwan and taught English as a foreign language. I was 21 and it was a huge adventure. I ended up opening my first business, a vegan and vegetarian restaurant, with a Canadian friend in the old capital Tainan."

"It was amazing. I was working part time as an English teacher in the week and at weekends we opened up this cute restaurant with 40 covers and hosted loads of different arts exhibitions and dance nights. It was a bit of a cultural venue."

"What we were doing was quite unique at the time. All fresh food from around the world with no MSG or nasty stuff, everything made from scratch."

The buzz of running a specialist diner in an exotic location, often frequented by expats, proved a life-changing catalyst for the venture which would become Miss Macaroon.

"I wanted to build up my skills and see how you run a business. It was a real success – we broke even very, very quickly. It was a bit of an expat hangout, a good party place. The costs were covered by our teaching wages and it gave me confidence. I learnt a huge amount and I thought this is what I really want to do."

Like so many of the young people who would later be helped into the working world through Miss Macaroon, Ginday found her niche – and after 18 months in Taiwan she returned home to train as a chef at University College Birmingham.

"I did my professional cookery levels 2 and 3 in a year and then went to work at Purnell's. I was a commis chef on pastry, pavs, starters. I then went to work in the pastry section at the Hyatt Hotel and got to redesign their afternoon tea menu – that really helped me to build my skills."

"I used my time at the Hyatt as an opportunity to trial new products that I would launch in my own business. I got to use that time to see what might interest me and research what might be up and coming . . . and I became obsessed with macaroons."

That unusual obsession would ultimately pay dividends in the shape of a one-off business concept which involved both the not-for-profit and commercial sectors.

"Macaroons are incredibly difficult to make," says Ginday. "I made a first batch of a few hundred and thought they were brilliant. The next batch I made were a complete disaster. I was just obsessed by the science behind it."

"Even now, millions of macarons later, if I go into the kitchen to make them I have to

really concentrate – they are very tough to get right."

Armed with her new passion for the delicacy – which has Italian origins – Ginday set about turning her newly acquired culinary love into a business venture with a social twist.

"I got to the point where I could stay, build up my skills and make my way in the industry or I could come out to focus on my own business. So I took a decision. My passion is to always make a difference, creating opportunities for young people."

"I had had a tough childhood myself. One of my close family members was in care when he was a young kid and I saw the big impact that had on him."

"It was my grandad who had come over in the early 90s from the Punjab who really held my hand through those times and said 'education, education, education' – that is how you get out of a tough spot and really make a difference in your life."

"When you have one person holding your hand through a tough time it can really make a big change in your trajectory. I felt like I wanted to do something more than just a nine-to-five job. I am not money-motivated, it was really about doing something that you love, having that purpose and making a difference."

Ginday launched Miss Macaroon in February 2011 from her old stomping ground at University College Birmingham, whilst still working at the Hyatt. It was the start of a 15-year odyssey which would bring her regional and national recognition.

"I went back to the college and said 'this is my idea for the business, it is going to support young people with complex needs'. They were incredibly supportive and let me use their kitchens for a year for free."

"I built up enough money in the business to get some grant funding from Birmingham City Council. They put 10k in and we put 10k in and set up in an old little Victorian building in Hockley."

The only macaron-based social enterprise in the world was up and running and by September 2011 Ginday delivered her first training programme from UCB with six young people – initially a four-week project offering two days a week tuition.

"Essentially, they come onto a training programme and then we support them to apply for jobs in mainstream industry," she says.

"We have supported 322 young people now. It's a four-week training programme, and once a week they will have a wellbeing-at-work workshop with a counsellor, which can help them overcome any anxieties."

"They also have training around health and safety, applying for jobs, interview practice, working in and leading a team, customer service skills and preparing for a work experience placement."

"We train them up and give them the opportunity, a safe space so they can make

mistakes, get the coaching, have another go and then move into work experience. That could either be in our production kitchen or, if it's the retail or hospitality version of the programme, then it's at our store in Resorts World."

"They do four weeks of training and then four weeks of work experience, with the counselling running throughout."

Referrals to Miss Macaroon can come from a variety of sources, from job centres to charities, social enterprises, housing associations and women's refuge groups.

"We started to work with a lot of ex-offenders who had maybe been in prison a couple of times, and also many young parents who had taken 10 years out to raise kids. They expected there would be support to help them move into work and were shocked to see that it just wasn't there."

Miss Macaroon has brought Ginday and her 12-strong team into contact with hundreds of people from difficult backgrounds and with varying needs, from carers looking after younger siblings or older family members, the sick, ex-prisoners, victims of domestic violence, people from deprived inner-city areas and other vulnerable members of society.

"Almost everybody has a really complex path but the amazing thing is that they turn up. It is incredible what people have overcome."

"It's pretty evenly split between male and female. Sixty per cent have mental health conditions and 17 per cent are ex-offenders."

"Almost two-thirds have not had a job before or haven't worked for five years. Our success rate is 65 per cent getting into work, college or university."

Miss Macaroon has spread her tentacles across the West Midlands since its infancy,

with outlets in Aston, Resorts World and a collaborative project with the Mid-Counties Co-op at its town centre store in Walsall aimed at 18 to 30-year-olds living locally.

"We have a cafe at Resorts World where we sell macarons, lots of social enterprise products, coffees, teas, proseccos and gins. We make the macarons at our headquarters here in Aston, our website sales are from here, we also sell from Selfridges and Mid-Counties Co-op stores around the country and direct to corporates as well."

"We have got about 27 flavours and we also have macaron-flavoured vodka where we work with a distillery. We also create hampers which contain several social enterprise products as well – for instance, we have got a lovely macaron and English sparkling wine hamper."

This growing variety of products have helped Miss Macaroon succeed as a business as well as fulfil its social enterprise ambitions.

"We are 100 per cent a business as well as a social enterprise. Without making a profit we can't reinvest in social impact work and we can't support young people to build their skills and move out into industry. It is really important that we do make a profit."

Ginday hopes continuing profits will help propel Miss Macaroon into more corporate partnerships.

"We are looking at other partnerships we could have with corporates who want to use the power of their normal day to day to create opportunities for young people," she concludes.

"It is just incredible to see people who have never worked before, or who have severe anxiety, being able to make that significant change."



The Miss Macaroon team, supporters, partners and graduates of the Macaroons that Make a Difference programme and Fairer Futures Programme and their friends and family at their graduation in 2025 at Aston University



Oli Hills, Nonsensical Agency, Anita Bhalla of BCU, and Rosie Ginday MBE at the 15th birthday celebrations of Miss Macaroon in March 2026

West Midlands trio win King's award

Three West Midlands organisations have been awarded the King's Award for Enterprise 2026 for promoting opportunity through social mobility.

Birmingham-based hydraPower dynamics, Evtec Automotive, a Coventry firm, and Sandwell College, have been praised for their 'innovative and unique employer partnerships giving disadvantaged young people the chance to succeed in work'.

Nationally, there are 185 recipients in the 2026 awards with 75 receiving an award for international trade, 52 in innovation, 36 in sustainable development and 22 for promoting opportunity.

The awards were launched in 1966 with just two categories – export achievement and technological innovation. Nationally, 115 companies were honoured, but since then, around 8,000 organisations have received the award.

The Lord-Lieutenant of the West Midlands, Derrick Anderson CBE, said the three awards for promoting opportunities through social mobility were a great credit

to their organisations' leadership and workforce.

"Evtec Automotive, hydraPower dynamics and Sandwell College have all recognised the great benefits of engaging with young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to improve their skills, employability and job prospects," he said.

"All three have gone above and beyond in their support of the next generation and I congratulate each of them on their great achievement.

"The King's Award for Enterprise stands as one of the most respected and globally recognised marks of excellence.

"These three organisations are united by a shared determination to lead, innovate and excel.

"The assessment process is rigorous and exacting – and it is this thoroughness that gives the award its international prestige, helping recipients to open doors to new markets, partnerships and opportunities in the UK and across the world."



Derrick Anderson CBE



Launch of free creative industry places

Birmingham's Punch Records has announced the return of Community Routes, its free creative development programme offering 50 fully funded places for 18 to 25-year-olds in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

The project supports the next wave of DJs, vocalists, broadcasters, photographers and digital artists, helping them to break into the highly

competitive creative industries – and retain this talent in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

Community Routes is designed to remove barriers stopping young people entering creative careers, particularly those who are developing their craft outside mainstream pathways.

The programme begins with an intensive week-long summer residency in Birmingham – a 'bootcamp-

style' environment led by industry professionals – followed a structured programme of mentoring, workshops and networking.

Across the programme, participants build industry tools in areas including leadership, producing and budgeting, alongside the practical know-how to navigate creative careers and grow sustainable practice. Applications close on June 29.

Cyber, resilience and the human side of transformation

ANDY HORKAN, CEO of Cyber Tzar, summarises the Tech Transformation Summit in the first instalment of a new column

The conversation around cyber security is changing.

Not long ago, cyber was widely treated as a technical function handled quietly by IT departments, compliance teams or external specialists somewhere in the background of the organisation. Increasingly, that framing no longer reflects reality.

At this year's Tech Transformation Summit 2026 in Birmingham, one theme surfaced repeatedly across discussions around cyber security, AI, operational resilience and leadership: modern organisations are operationally dependent on digital systems whether they think of themselves as technology companies or not.

For manufacturers, logistics providers, healthcare organisations, universities, local government and SMEs alike, cyber resilience is no longer simply about protecting data. It is about continuity, trust, operations and economic resilience. When systems fail, production stops. Supply chains stall. Services degrade. Trust erodes. Cyber resilience has become operational, and operational resilience is increasingly becoming a leadership challenge.

Across the summit, discussions moved beyond technology and into people, culture and organisational behaviour. Cyber today is increasingly socio-technical rather than purely technical. The challenge no longer sits solely within software vulnerabilities or infrastructure, but at the intersection of technology, governance, operations and human behaviour.

One of the more striking discussions came during an early leadership session involving Dani Grieson, Dr Christina Yan Zhang and Russ Shaw CBE, where questions around workforce engagement, future capability and societal change surfaced repeatedly. Discussions around UK capability and innovation sat alongside concerns around disengagement, uncertainty and the pace of technological change. It highlighted an important reality: the challenge facing organisations is no longer simply technological transformation but helping people navigate transformation itself.

Culture, AI and the human factor

This was particularly visible during cyber discussions led by Daljinder Mattu, alongside contributions from John Maguire, Dr Emma Philpott MBE, Professor Zeeshan Pervez, and Wayne Horkan. Boards are beginning to understand cyber not as discretionary IT spend, but as part of core operational risk. In industrial regions such as the West Midlands, where manufacturing, logistics and interconnected supply chains form the backbone of the economy, cyber disruption increasingly means operational disruption.

The most effective leaders are no longer treating cyber as an annual compliance exercise or awareness campaign. They are beginning to embed resilience into operational culture itself, much like health and safety or quality assurance became embedded over previous decades. Awareness alone does not create resilience. Culture does. And culture is shaped by leadership behaviour far more than policy documents.

Artificial intelligence formed another major thread throughout the summit. AI is increasing the speed, scale and accessibility of cyber activity on both the defensive and adversarial side. At the same time, organisations are grappling with workforce uncertainty, economic pressure and rapidly evolving operational models. In that environment, inspirational leadership becomes less about charisma or certainty and more about helping people find their feet during periods of rapid change.

The leaders who succeed over the next decade are unlikely to be those who simply adopt technology the fastest, but those capable of reducing ambiguity, building trust and helping people navigate continuous transformation without becoming disconnected from it.

Cyber security also remains one of the most neurodiverse professional sectors in the UK, and that diversity increasingly represents a genuine strategic strength. Modern cyber resilience depends heavily upon systems thinking, pattern recognition and the ability to understand

interconnected dependencies across technical and human environments. The future workforce will also depend upon widening participation across women, underrepresented groups and non-traditional career pathways.

Building the regional ecosystem

That wider ecosystem theme was visible throughout the summit itself, including contributions from regional business leaders such as Ninder Johal DL. Alongside discussions around AI and resilience, there was a strong emphasis on regional collaboration, local capability and practical support for SMEs.

For many smaller organisations, the barrier is rarely willingness, but bandwidth, trusted guidance and accessible next steps. Most SMEs do not need a 400-page strategy document. They need practical implementation support and realistic pathways forward.

This is where collaborative leadership and regional coordination increasingly matters. In the West Midlands, organisations such as the West Midlands Cyber Hub, the Cyber Resilience Centre network, Cyber Advisors and wider regional partnerships are helping create connective infrastructure between awareness and implementation. Discussions with Rupert Lyle from the West Midlands Co-Investment Fund also reinforced the growing recognition that cyber startups and resilience-focused SMEs require stronger progression pathways and investment support if the region is to scale its capability effectively.

The wider relationship between academia, innovation and cyber capability also remained visible throughout the day, including discussions with Professor Yussuf Ahmed at Birmingham City University around technology, innovation and workforce development. The West Midlands has an opportunity to become a recognised centre for industrial cyber-resilience and supply-chain security. Resilience is no longer just technical. It is human, operational and economic.

Our journey to build accessibility and belonging at WTW

Our journey to build accessibility and belonging at WTW starts with a belief — accessibility and belonging go hand in hand. When accessibility is built into the everyday experience of a business, people can see whether their needs have been considered.

That matters for employees, clients, prospects and future employees alike, because the earliest signals a business sends often shape whether someone feels they would be welcomed, supported and able to thrive.

As a person with lived experience of managing disability in the workplace, Suzie has seen how those signals influence a person's sense of belonging. At WTW, a global company focused on people, risk and capital, this understanding helped shape a practical journey of learning, listening and improving. In this article, we share some of the changes we made, what we learnt along the way and how other organisations can apply these changes.

Imagine you're a person with vision loss, hearing loss or you're neurodivergent. Your impression of a company starts with the very first signals you see — and those signals matter in businesses of every size.

- Does the image in a social media post have a description?
- Does the company share social posts about colleagues with disabilities?
- Does the company website incorporate accessibility requirements and have an accessibility statement?
- Does website imagery include people with disabilities?
- Does the job description and website include a pathway to raise interview adjustments?
- Do your videos have captions and, where needed, transcripts?

On the surface, these seem relatively minor, but these are the signs that our employees with disabilities wanted to see.

"People make their mind up about a business quickly. If your job ad, your website or your social posts aren't accessible and inclusive, you're telling potential talent they're not for you. We've learnt that small changes send a big message — you belong here." Sara Fardon (regional director, WTW)



By SUZIE AUSTEN,
brand manager, and
SARA FARDON, regional
director, at WTW

How did we understand this?

At WTW, our UK Workability disability inclusion network used journey mapping — tracing each step of the employee experience when accessing workplace adjustments — to identify where people faced challenges. This helped us pinpoint opportunities to improve for:

- The experience of a new candidate joining with a disability.
- The experience of acquiring a disability while already in work.

This helped us learn from colleagues managing disabilities across the employee journey at WTW.

What did we learn?

1. Start with belonging

Accessibility and disability inclusion deliver the greatest value when framed around belonging. We learnt that our employees are far more likely to stay, contribute and grow when they feel accepted and valued for who they are.

2. Language costs nothing but means everything

A quick win is to make subtle changes to language. Simply shifting from "disclose" to "share" or from "suffering from" to "managing" makes workplaces feel safer

and more respectful. Language is also vital in how you position reasonable adjustments in the workplace. Reasonable adjustments are the legal term defined in the Equality Act 2010. At WTW, our preference is to focus on enabling performance, so we refer to reasonable adjustments as workplace adjustments or enablement tools.

3. Accessibility, inclusion and belonging are cross-functional

Accessibility and inclusion work best when everyone has a role. We made faster progress by bringing together colleagues across IT, recruitment, facilities, HR and occupational health to solve specific challenges. In practical terms, that often looks like:

- **Recruitment:** Clear steps to request interview adjustments and inclusive job adverts.
- **IT:** Accessible defaults, assistive technology support and simple guidance people can find.
- **Facilities and workplace:** Signage, spaces that work for different needs and small practical fixes.

4. Make recruitment interview adjustments easy to raise and easy to act on

Ensure there is an identifiable process for prospective employees to raise interview adjustment requests. This needs to be supported by a clear process — who sees the requests and how they will be handled. Crucially, this clarity builds trust at the start of a person's experience with your organisation. You are raising awareness and normalising that it is okay to ask for adjustments.

5. For workplace adjustments focus on enabling performance

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 sets the legal context for reasonable adjustments. In our experience, the most important starting point is the conversation — what would help you perform at your best? Often, adjustments are low-cost changes such as flexible hours, minor technology tweaks or small changes to how work is organised.

For someone who is neurodivergent, it might be a pair of noise-cancelling headphones or a quieter space to focus. By keeping the focus on enabling a person, you support the business and optimise performance.

6. Keep your workplace adjustment process simple, visible and quick

Adjustments work when people can find and use them easily. Often, we place the focus on the start of the employee journey, but more people acquire disabilities while in the workplace. Ensure that your current employees know where and how to access workplace adjustments. This might mean a short internal guide, a named manager responsible for decisions or a centralised form. There are caveats like

"People make their mind up about a business quickly. If your job ad, your website or your social posts aren't accessible and inclusive, you're telling potential talent they're not for you. We've learnt that small changes send a big message — you belong here."

Sara Fardon (regional director, WTW)

what technology can be used within your infrastructure. However, demonstrating that you have an employee findable process for workplace adjustments is key.

7. Community sustains momentum

Finally, we learnt that process alone is not enough. Storytelling, peer support and buddy-style approaches help normalise the conversation on disability and help build trust within the organisation. When employees feel comfortable to share their stories, others can see themselves reflected in those stories, and this in turn builds belonging.

Lastly, accessibility and belonging are a journey. It's not about having perfect systems — it's about being open, curious and willing to adapt. It's about having the

right signals in place to show that people belong and can thrive in your organisation.

Where can you start?

- Ensure there's a way to raise interview adjustments within your recruitment journey.
- Make the adjustments pathway visible so current and prospective employees know how to access them.
- Set one cross-functional accessibility improvement and deliver it in a timeframe that works for your business.

Start small, learn as you go and you will find that change happens, especially when everyone feels they have a role. This approach can deliver better engagement, stronger retention and greater trust — outcomes that matter to every business, regardless of size.

At WTW, we provide data-driven, insight-led solutions in the areas of people, risk and capital that make your organization more resilient, motivate your workforce and maximize performance.

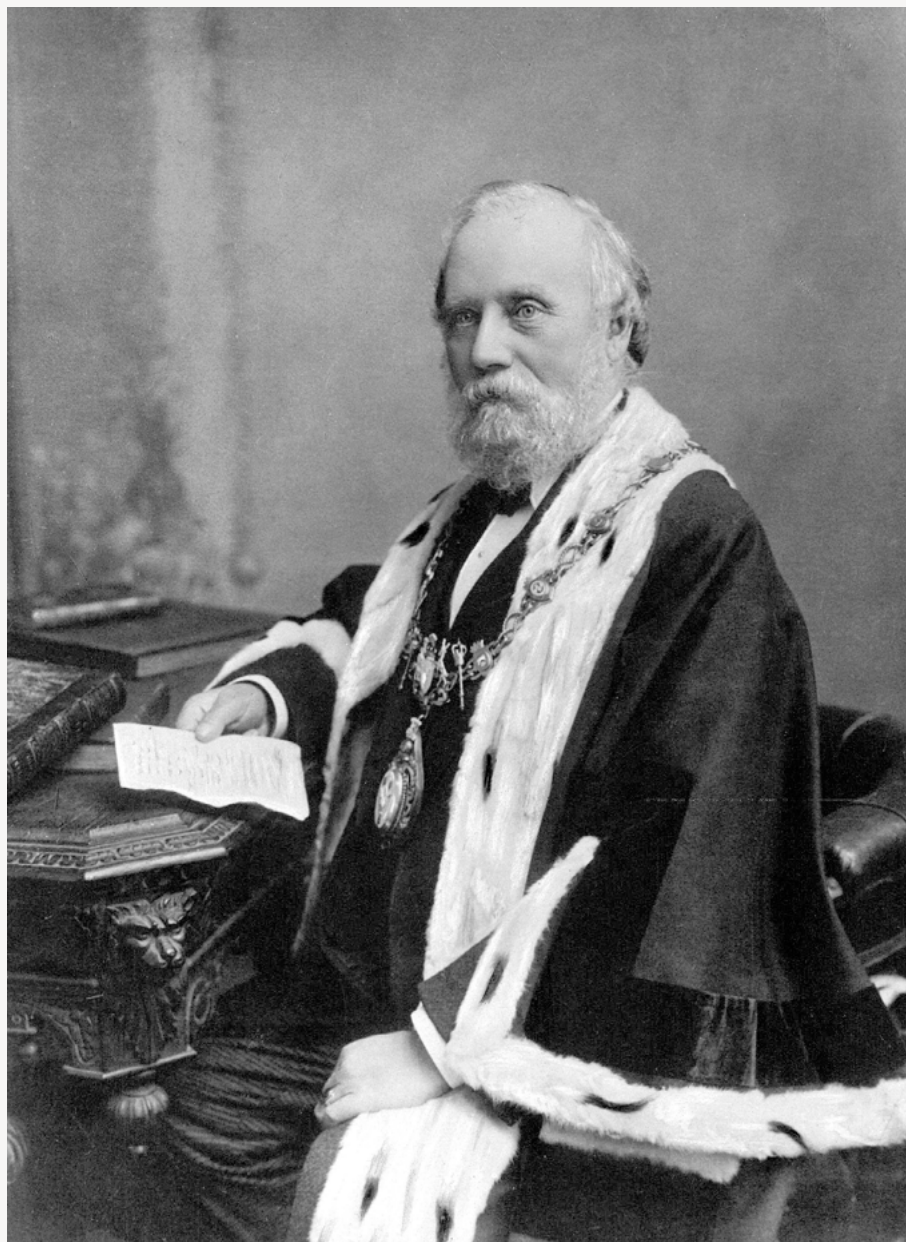
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Reuben Farley

Industrialist and benefactor

Historian Professor CARL CHINN profiles the great commercial and civic leader of West Bromwich



Reuben Farley – the embodiment of the municipal pride and identity of West Bromwich

If Bradford had Titus Salt, Manchester had John Bright, Birmingham had Joseph Chamberlain, then West Bromwich was fortunate to have Reuben Farley.

The epitome of the self-improving man, born in 1826 he was the eighth of ten children to Thomas, a Black Country mining agent, and his wife Elizabeth nee Llewelyn. When he died 73 years later, Reuben Farley had been a colliery and iron foundry owner, chairman of the Midland Canal Freighter Association, the South Staffordshire Iron Founders' Association and Edwin Danks boilermakers, mayor of West Bromwich five times and a justice of the peace amongst other offices.

A most successful businessman, Farley was one of the most significant public men of the West Midlands and the foremost civic leader in the history of West Bromwich. That high position was acknowledged at a special meeting of the town council in December 1895 when steps were taken to admit him as a freeman of the borough.

Although a purely honorary award, it was the highest honour this body could bestow, one which the president declared was thoroughly deserved.

In moving the motion, the mayor, Councillor G. Salter, stated that it was "in appreciation and recognition of the eminent services rendered to the borough by Alderman Reuben Farley JP, throughout a long series of years, and of the many acts of munificence and the benefits he has conferred upon the inhabitants of the town".

It was seconded by Alderman Underhill who affirmed that Farley was the greatest benefactor West Bromwich had ever known. In supporting the motion, Councillor Pitt emphasised that the man they honoured had served them for 40 years and unlike so many wealthy men, "he had not run away from them".

That point was taken up by Councillor Turley pointing out that others in the town had the opportunities for doing as much good as Farley and he hoped that



The Oak House. Belonging to the well-off Turton family and built in the early 1600s, it was donated as a museum to West Bromwich by Farley in 1898.

his fine example would be a stimulus and encouragement to them. Turley emphasised that what Alderman Farley had obtained he had not kept to himself but had given to others, so much so that his motto could be "Give and spend, God will send". Unsurprisingly, the resolution was carried by acclamation for Farley had done more than lived in West Bromwich, he'd lived for it.

How had he managed to achieve so much and to gain such recognition? There's little doubt he'd helped himself through diligence, aptitude and a reasoned approach to life. To develop these positive attitudes, from the 1850s, he was active in the Great Bridge Mutual Improvement Society, made up mostly of aspiring middle and upper working-class men, and later he was a keen member of the West Bromwich Institution for the Advancement of Knowledge.

Some idea as to Farley's belief in the importance of self-help and self-improvement can be gained from an address he gave in November 1871 at the inaugural meeting of the Christ Church Parish Institute and Recreation Club. He stated that whilst they had happily outlived the time when it was a matter of doubt whether education was a good thing or not, "the erroneous idea still persisted that children had finished their education when they had left school". They had not for they had but obtained the foundation whereupon to build the superstructure necessary to make them good and rational

members of society.

Farley emphasised that reading was as essential for the nourishment of the mind as was food for the body. By reading, "men became acquainted with the master mind of every generation and this held sweet communion with the wisest and best men that ever adorned humanity".

Yet it was not a question of how many books a man could read but the manner in which he read them. It was possible to read a great deal but not to be much better for it. By contrast to the reader who skimmed lightly over the surface, the intellectual reader had an abundant reward in store. The mind was naturally prone to evil, but it was softened by such an approach which brought its passions down to obey the dictates of reason. Contrarily, ignorance was the parent of crime, and the uncultivated mind was narrow and limited and more likely to be swayed by senses than reason.

Such sentiments marked Reuben Farley as a middle-class liberal believing in rational recreation and making your own way through your own endeavours. Yet like so many successful self-made men, Farley built his own success upon firm foundations, for he'd enjoyed a relatively prosperous upbringing, even though his father died in 1830 when he was merely four.

Eleven years later his mother, Elizabeth, was living in New Town, West Bromwich, with her oldest son, another Thomas, who was 28. A mine agent, until recently he'd

been a coal master of the Eight Locks Colliery in Great Bridge, in partnership with two other men. That relationship was dissolved in June by mutual consent. Thomas Farley died two years later, but he and his father must have provided well for the family as the 1851 Census indicated that Elizabeth was living in Oldbury Lane, West Bromwich, and that she gained an income as the proprietor of houses.

As for Reuben, he was fortunate to have a good and expensive education at the West Bromwich Heath Academy of George Borwick. Set up in the late eighteenth century, it took in boarders and ensured that "young gentlemen are regularly instructed in the classics, mathematics, and every branch of commercial education". After finishing his schooling, Farley served an apprenticeship with a mining surveyor and then in 1847, and aged only 21, he took over the Dunkirk Colliery in Great Bridge, West Bromwich.

Within four years, he was giving himself as a coal master, agent and surveyor and by 1861, still unmarried, he was also the owner of a brick works. That year was an important one for him as he and his partner George Taylor bought the Summit Foundry in Union Street, near to Spon Lane, West Bromwich. The husband of Farley's oldest sister, Susannah, Taylor was an established iron founder and his seniority was made plain by the business name of Taylor and Farley.

Fronting the Birmingham Canal, it was an extensive works that boasted warehouses



Above: The Farley Clock Tower, Carters Green, West Bromwich

Below: West Bromwich Building Society 3rd Annual Report 1852, signed by Reuben Farley as one of the two auditors of the accounts. He was 26 and already established as a prominent personality locally.

and steam engines, boilers and other machinery as well as moulding, grinding, annealing, grate, pattern, blacksmiths and turning shops. In the 1870s, the company benefitted from the demand for mill and forge machinery from firms in the north of England and it took out patents for improvements in casting chilled rolls and its apparatus.

The Summit grew into one of the largest iron foundries in the Black Country and in 1881, Farley became its sole proprietor.

Nine years later, he was one of the few iron founders from South Staffordshire who attended the meeting of the Iron and Steel Institute in the USA.

A leading industrial figure in the Black Country, from 1870, Farley was the deputy chairman of the new Sandwell Park Colliery Company; he went into partnership in another colliery with the family of his first wife, Hannah Duce of Wednesbury; and in 1876 he took on the Whyley Colliery and adjoining Cutler's End Colliery. Both had

been inundated with water for a quarter of century, but Farley's wealth and expertise enabled him to get at the coal.

The shafts were sunk through the lower mines, and levels were driven to draw the water from the deep workings to reach the thick coal. To enable this expensive operation, large sums were spent building machinery and plant of the most improved character in addition to existing plant.

The whole operation relied upon a powerful pumping engine worked by a steam capstan at the Whyley Colliery. In constant use, it could raise 1,200 tons of coal per day. Local newspapers reported that the work of reopening the mines was one of no slight magnitude, but Farley was also an astute businessman as well as a mining expert. His success benefitted adjoining mines, and under the new Mines Drainage Act, he was entitled to compensation from their owners.

Although a keen supporter of education for the working class and for the extension of the vote to many working men in 1867, Farley was a classic liberal in his relations with his workers. He believed in non-interference in the relations between individual workers and their employers and didn't favour the men combining in trade unions.

In 1858 and because of a depression in the trade, the coalmasters of South Staffordshire sought to reduce the daily wages of the colliers of Oldbury and West Bromwich by one fifth, from five shillings (25p) to four shillings (20p). In protest, the miners went on strike for many weeks. With Farley amongst them, the owners resolved that the action was unreasonable and unjust and would be strenuously resisted.

Originally a Liberal in politics, Farley later followed Joseph Chamberlain into the breakaway Liberal Unionist Party which allied itself with the Conservatives. Despite this, he maintained his liberal economic and social beliefs. In February 1891 and as a director of Hamstead Mining Company, he spoke at its AGM regarding the miners' campaign for an eight-hour day.

He decried it as "a restriction on our manufacturing supremacy", asserting that the economic loss of one hours' work a day would mean a reduction of output by 20 million tons of coal a year from 180 million to 160 million. Moreover, he pronounced that such campaign "meant an interference with the liberty of the subject which as a liberty loving people we were bound to resist".

Yet whatever his views on the actions of trade unionists, Farley was a man committed to the wellbeing of the people of West Bromwich. He declared that "it was a man's duty in his native town to do all that he could to improve the condition of the people, to make the lives of the people brighter and happier". Unlike so many others who were prominent in public life he practiced what he preached. According to the 'Free Press' of 1883, Farley "unceasingly identified himself with all the principal movements having their object



Farley Park, West Bromwich



In 1979, Farley's Fountain was returned to Dartmouth Square where it had been placed a century before it was taken to Dartmouth Park in 1919

the progress and wellbeing of the town and its inhabitants".

Farley's remarkable commitment to the welfare of the people of West Bromwich was wide-ranging and inspiring. He bestowed the Oak House Museum and Farley Park to the municipality; he was a county magistrate and a long-serving president of the West Bromwich Building Society, and he was a member of both the local Board of Guardians and School Board.

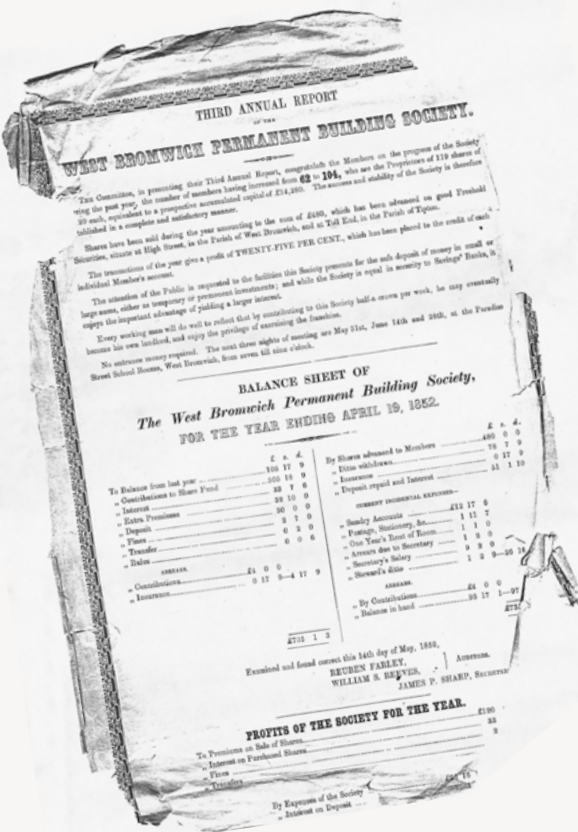
Under his inspired leadership of the Improvement Commissioners, the body that ran West Bromwich before it had an elected council, the town obtained its own gas works, town hall and other civic structures. It also adopted the Public Libraries Act in 1870, one of the first 50 places in the country to do so. Unsurprisingly, given his dedication, commitment and unceasing work for his town, Farley was chosen as the first mayor of the borough in 1882.

Four years previously, Dartmouth Park

had been opened by the Earl of Dartmouth thanks mostly to Farley's efforts. He was pleased with his acquisition for the town he loved so well, but he was not satisfied and in 1887, he asked the earl for more land and gained an extension in the south-east corner, in which a boating and fishing lake and bathing pool were built.

Reuben Farley died in March 1899 aged 73. Outside the region he was described as one of the leading figures in Black Country industrial life and a well-known public man in the Midlands who had held numerous important offices and had made valuable gifts to the town.

In West Bromwich, he was recalled as a man who "by his own ability, energy, and conscientious discharge of duty, together with his unvarying courtesy of demeanour, acquitted himself to the approbation of his fellow townsmen of all classes, without distinction of creed or party".



Dignitaries alongside a fountain presented by Alderman Reuben Farley at the Sons of Rest Pavilion, Farley Park. Officially named Greets Green Recreation and Reading Room, it was presented by Farley to West Bromwich in 1892. It was in Whitehall Road, where Farley was born.

The scene is set

The Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards 2026 is an out-and-out celebration.

It is a tribute to those visionary leaders who place their people at front and centre of their operation to create workplaces which are inspiring, motivational and – yes – all the more profitable as a result.

Over the next few pages we meet all those who are so clearly invested in this concept: the judges, sponsors, commentators and, of course, the remarkable shortlisted companies and individuals who have made the judges' jobs so difficult.

It promises to be a wonderful night.



The superpower of being fully you

By HOLLY RABIN, people leader at Heligan Corporate Finance

In a world that celebrates speed, visibility, and constant achievement, it is easy to believe that success belongs to the loudest voices or the most technical expertise. Yet, in an era shaped by rapidly developing AI, the future will be defined by something far more human. The leaders and changemakers of tomorrow will not stand out solely for their intelligence or capability, but for their authenticity, empathy, and the often-overlooked strength of softer skills.

To truly inspire the future is not about doing more or becoming more; it is about doing less and becoming more, yourself.

The courage to be authentic

Authenticity is no longer just a personal value; it is a professional advantage. In environments where the pressure to conform is high, showing up as your genuine self takes courage.

At Heligan, we've hosted challenging graduate assessment centres. Interestingly, the most successful candidates were not those with the highest grades or the most polished presentations. Instead, they were individuals who could communicate clearly in the moment by working effectively in groups and explaining complex ideas in a simple, digestible way. These qualities, grounded in emotional intelligence and authenticity, are highly valued by our clients.

The leaders who inspire most are rarely those who appear flawless. They are the ones who are real, acknowledge uncertainty, share their journey, and lead with transparency. In doing so, they create space for others to do the same, fostering trust, confidence, and genuine connection.

Growth through life's defining moments

Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, is a powerful example of a leader who felt real to me. She did

not separate her personal life from her professional identity. Becoming only the second world leader to give birth while in office, she openly spoke about motherhood, exhaustion, and responsibility. Rather than weakening her credibility, this honesty made her more relatable and proved that you do not need to suppress parts of yourself to be taken seriously.

As a mother myself, I've felt my own skill set evolve over time. I sometimes joke about being "the office mom," (Birmingham spelling!) but the softer skills that come with it, whilst subtle, are invaluable. Listening deeply, recognising when someone is struggling, and adjusting your communication style to suit others can significantly improve team performance and morale.

We often think of growth as something that happens in structured environments consisting of education, promotions, or formal development programmes. But some of the most meaningful learning happens in less formal, more personal spaces.

Life events that shift priorities and perspectives, such as having a young child or caring for family members can profoundly reshape our capabilities without us realising. They challenge us to manage competing demands, build resilience, and lead with empathy (while also redefining the meaning of tired!). Over time, putting people first becomes instinctive, not intentional.

And on a more personal level, there are many very difficult mornings before the working day starts, but sometimes it's the understanding of colleagues, a knowing look, or a well-timed coffee when you finally get to the office that makes all the difference. These small moments are where culture is truly built.

Empathy through experience

One of the most powerful outcomes of navigating personal challenges is the ability to better understand others. When we have faced difficulties ourselves, we

develop a deeper awareness of what those around us may be carrying.

Satya Nadella, CEO of Microsoft, is a strong example of this kind of leadership. Operating in a highly competitive and technical environment, he has consistently led with humility and empathy. He often shares how raising his son with complex special needs, and later experiencing profound loss, shaped his perspective. These experiences influenced how he listens, leads, and connects with others, and led to initiatives such as the Microsoft Autism Hiring Program.

In my own life, developing a deeper understanding of the colourful world of Autism and ADHD within my family has influenced how I show up at work. It allows me to recognise when someone might need a different approach, reasonable adjustments, or alternative communication styles.

We are all still learning. Acknowledging that we don't have all the answers can feel uncomfortable, but it is essential for growth. Or, as the US Marines Corps would say, we must learn to "improvise, adapt and overcome."

A more human future

The future will not be built on perfection, but on authenticity. It will belong to those who recognise the value of softer skills, who embrace their lived experiences, and who lead with empathy.

You do not need to become someone else to succeed. Your skills will evolve as your life does. Your experiences, both personal and professional, are shaping you into someone uniquely equipped to contribute. At Heligan, one of our core values is integrity, and that includes being unapologetically yourself.

To inspire the future is to embrace that journey fully. It is to lead with heart, to connect with purpose, and to recognise that who you are is not separate from what you achieve.

In fact, it is the very reason you will.

Picture by: Lorentz Gullachsen



The finalists' shortlist

Many congratulations to all those who have made it through to the very final stage – and good luck!

BEST COMPANY OVERALL

LARGE

(100+ employees)

- BMet College
- BDO
- FBC Manby Bowdler
- S&R Construction

MEDIUM

(20-100 employees)

- Rudell the Jewellers
- Liquid
- CyberQ Group
- OWB Creative

SMALL

(up to 20 employees)

- Entec Si
- KSB Recruitment
- FASTSIGNS Birmingham
- Odyssey Contractor Solutions

BEST COMPANY FOR ...

DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

- Smart Works Birmingham
- West Midlands Cyber Hub
- Warwickshire County Cricket Club

TRAINING, EDUCATION & APPRENTICESHIPS

- Heligan Group
- BDO
- Rudell the Jewellers
- Loddors Solicitors

HEALTH & WELLBEING

- Carter Jonas
- Tyler Grange
- Entec Si
- Warwickshire County Cricket Club

MOST INSPIRING LEADER

FEMALE

Professor Inez Brown
Elisabeth Lewis-Jones
Dawn Bannister
Tracey Sankey

MALE

Neil Lloyd
Jon Weston
Wayne Horkan
Iain McCallister

The judging process

Judges deliberating in the boardroom at Liquid

To a certain extent anyway, awards stand or fall by their integrity.

Fundamental to that is a judging process which is rigorous, transparent and, of course, totally impartial.

And why is that so important? One word: trust.

The value of awards depends almost entirely on trust. If people believe winners are chosen fairly and consistently, the award becomes meaningful. Conversely, if they don't, the awards quickly lose credibility.

So, defining a completely trustworthy judging process was a key priority for the team at *Birmingham Business*, and in this they were helped by the organisers, AllinAll Events, who have had many years of experience delivering awards programmes.

The process was key – but so too was the panel selected to undertake the actual judging.

We couldn't have been more fortunate in who we assembled, and we will be forever grateful to: Jo Birch, of Growthinnk; Alex Bishop, the former head of office at Shoosmiths; fintech entrepreneur Joel Blake; Alex Cole, of Tin Ventures; Paul Faulkner, now of Barclays and Element45, but formerly the CEO of GBCC and Aston Villa FC; John James, former law firm partner and founder of

Birmingham Forward; Andras Karpati, the CEO of Cordia UK; Denise Myers, of Evenfields Careers; Professor Monder Ram, of CREME; Chris Smith, the founder of the Centre for the New Midlands think tank; Common Purpose's Louise Teboul; Dr Steve Walker, CEO of ART Business Loans; and the current High Sheriff of

the West Midlands, Carmen Watson, of Pertemps.

As well as being leading lights in their own fields, all the judges were united in their conviction that the process should be fair and impartial.

Once an initial sifting process had removed inappropriate entries – some



The judges of the stage 2 phase of the process were, from left, Chris Smith, Alex Cole, Alex Bishop, Denise Myers and Steve Walker



failed to provide a full enough picture of their credentials as employers, while others came from beyond our geographical boundaries, with one even submitted from Birmingham, Alabama – the judging began in earnest.

The first stage involved a panel of five discussing and marking the entries based purely on the written submissions, before drawing up a shortlist based on



Professor Monder Ram, Carmen Watson DL and Paul Faulkner

the marks awarded to each entrant. This was followed by three teams interviewing the shortlisted companies and individuals – mainly in person, but also online – to determine the winners.

The feedback has been consistent. The standard of entries was phenomenal . . . while there were some robust conversations, there was consensus across the board regarding the winners . . .

and if the finalists were anything to go by, the region's business world is in a good place.

Our huge thanks go to judging sponsor Liquid, who not only provided a discreet and comfortable environment for several days of judging in their excellent offices, but also served a delicious lunch to the Stage 2 judges, courtesy of director and David "Chef" Colcombe.

Championing excellence and raising the standard: Why Liquid sponsored the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards 2026

The 2020s have been a period which has upended the standard of workplace norms, with flexible working patterns, video conferencing, and the AI revolution forever altering the world of work.

The best and brightest businesses have used these sudden changes to their advantage by ensuring a people-first culture that sees employees become empowered, engaged and proud of their place of work.

Across the region, many organisations and individuals are a part of this cohort who understand that a happy, engaged and loyal workforce is key to long-term success. The Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards provides the perfect platform to showcase and champion those raising the standard of creating thriving workplaces.

The judging process

At the heart of any credible awards programme lies a judging process that is robust, transparent, and beyond reproach. Recognition only truly matters when it is grounded in fairness and evidence, not perception or profile. Through our sponsorship, Liquid sought



Lis Lewis-Jones

to provide an environment in the heart of Birmingham where the select panel of respected leaders could collaborate and fairly assess each submission against the judges pre-agreed, consistent set of criteria.

By supporting this process and providing a neutral setting, we aimed to reinforce the importance of transparency, accountability and open discussion.

These awards share our belief that great workplaces are built on positive cultures, empowered people, and opportunities for talent to thrive. The businesses that are achieving this deserve to be recognised and celebrated in a meaningful way.

The future of the region

Despite expanding our offices throughout the UK and Australia, Birmingham has been Liquid's main base of operations for over 12 years. During this time, we have seen first-hand the resilience, ambition and collaborative spirit that make the city such a powerful place to do business.

As the city's business landscape continues to grow and evolve, the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards is a chance to celebrate these trailblazers, inspire others to raise their standards and set a genuine benchmark for what modern employment should look like.

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A year to remember for FBC Manby Bowdler

It's been a year of sustained success for fast-growing law firm FBC Manby Bowdler.

In the past 12 months the firm has expanded its footprint, strengthened its senior talent base, secured major award recognition and cemented its position as one of the region's fastest growing legal practices.

The success the firm has enjoyed is no accident.

FBC Manby Bowdler is the founding firm of the Adeptio Law Group which was launched following a £30m private equity investment by Horizon Capital in 2024.

Adeptio is building a national legal services platform rooted in regional excellence whilst FBC Manby Bowdler has set a strategic target of doubling in size over the coming years.

For a firm with a heritage stretching back 200 years and bases across Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Knowle, Worcestershire and Shropshire, it's a remarkable story.

An award-winning firm

FBC Manby Bowdler's exceptional year has been matched by an equally impressive run of awards and industry recognition.

The firm is a finalist in two separate categories of this magazine's Best Places to Work Awards.

Not only is it shortlisted as Best Large Company but chief executive Neil Lloyd is a finalist as the most inspiring male leader.

Meanwhile, the firm secured a major win at Birmingham's Signature Awards, taking

home the Promoting Apprenticeships accolade in recognition of its pioneering work to widen access to careers in law.

The firm's apprenticeship programme has welcomed 40 apprentices since 2016, with 19 currently progressing towards qualification.

Neil Lloyd himself was also highly commended in the Business Person of the Year category, a testament to his leadership during this period of rapid growth.

And there was further recognition at the Birmingham Law Society Awards, with Sarah Bond-Williams shortlisted for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion and the business named a finalist for Firm of the Year.

Its excellence has also been recognised in industry listings.

It had 15 rankings in the Chambers UK Legal Guide 2026, including two prestigious Band 1 listings for Sarah Baugh and Susan Todhunter. Ten individual lawyers and five practice areas were recognised overall, reinforcing the firm's reputation for technical expertise and clientcentred service.

At the same time, more than 30 lawyers from across the firm were also highlighted in the latest Legal 500 guide – a prestigious guide to the most innovative and effective law firms nationwide.

A Birmingham success story

Over the past year, FBC Manby Bowdler has undergone one of the most significant expansions of any regional firm in the city.

The Birmingham practice has seen the arrival of five high profile partners and a cohort of associates from Legal Top 200 firms as headcount has grown to more than 40 in little more than a year.

The pace of growth was reflected in the firm's move to new offices 5 St Philips Place in March. Neil Lloyd described the move as "a statement of intent", positioning the firm at the heart of a city undergoing major regeneration and attracting unprecedented levels of inward investment.

Knowle expands as growth continues

FBC Manby Bowdler's success in Birmingham is mirrored at its Knowle office, which has undergone its own rapid growth.

In May, the firm announced a significant expansion of the site, unveiling new contentious probate and residential property teams and welcoming a series of senior hires.

This cluster of appointments and ongoing investment has turned Knowle into a major hub for the firm's private client, property and litigation work, reinforcing its strategy of building strong regional centres of excellence.

Strategic acquisitions and national ambition

Growth has not been limited to recruitment. In March, FBC Manby Bowdler completed the acquisition of Jordans Solicitors, a respected Black Country practice with more than 30 years of history in Blackheath and Halesowen.

The deal brought a 30 strong team into the Adeptio family and strengthened the group's presence across the wider Birmingham and Black Country region.

For Adeptio, the acquisition is part of its strategy to build a national platform through the integration of high quality regional firms. For FBC Manby Bowdler, it represents another step in expanding its footprint while preserving the community focused ethos that has defined its success.

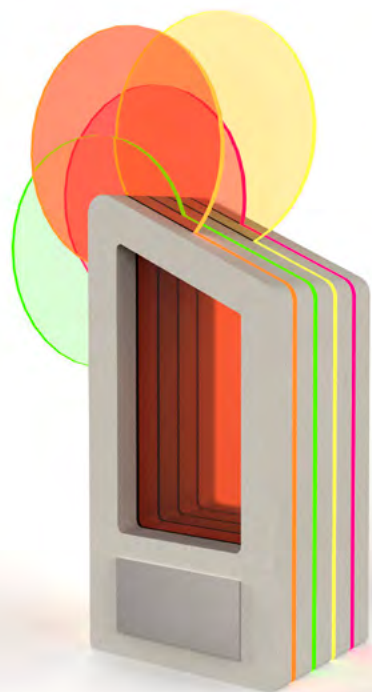
A firm on the rise

With new offices, strategic acquisitions, award-winning teams and a strengthened presence across Birmingham and Knowle, FBC Manby Bowdler is now one of the region's most dynamic legal businesses.

As the firm looks ahead to another year of growth, FBC Manby Bowdler continues to reshape what a modern regional law firm can be.



FBC Manby Bowdler has nearly tripled its team of legal experts in Birmingham city centre with partners and associates arriving from Legal Top 200 firms.
Back row, from left: Neil Lloyd, Chris Recker, Claire Cooper and Richard Dundee.
Front row from left: Vicky Khandker, Hollie Mills, Anna Sutcliffe, Michelle Harvey and Shelley De'Worringham.



A new level of design

Are the trophies for these awards the most modern and original presented in the region for years? We speak to those involved in a project which is Birmingham through and through.



Discussing the trophy at Dual Works

Without wishing to disparage conventional trophy designs, is it fair to say that sometimes they can be just a little bland?

Not that the winners will ever give a hoot – these are celebratory keepsakes, important mementos of meaningful victories. Quite right too, that's their purpose.

But the trophies which will be presented on June 11 are different, as fascinating conceptually as they are stunning visually.

We're confident in saying that they will stand out on winners' mantelpieces regardless of how many other trophies accompany them. They might just be the most eye-catching and thought-provoking trophies presented in the region for many a long year.

Furthermore, they represent the best of Birmingham's creative forces – this is a true and successful collaboration between various organisations based in that time-honoured hub of design and industry, the Jewellery Quarter. They could – and perhaps should – proudly and totally legitimately be stamped with 'Made in JQ'.

But first the concept, and the brainchild behind the trophies is Nicola Fleet-Milne, the founder and MD of prominent property firm FleetMilne, the trophy sponsors of this year's awards.

"The awards celebrate organisations that are creating outstanding workplace cultures and putting their people first," says Nicola, who amongst her other roles is on the board of the Jewellery Quarter Development Trust.

"As these are the inaugural awards, I was keen that the trophy must embody pride – in Birmingham, in our companies, and in the workforces that make them exceptional places to work.

"I needed a really creative production partner who would be able to interpret my vision, so I approached the team at Dual Works with a fairly detailed brief of what I



Zoe Robertson with the designs



Pictured from left are Olivia Ricketts, Steve Snell and Zoe Robertson, all of Dual Works, and Nicola Fleet-Milne and Kelly Haslehurst of FleetMilne

had in mind.

"I wanted a design which celebrates pride in people, workplace culture and organisational excellence; feels confident, celebratory, and contemporary; and has a timeless quality which would be suitable for an annual awards programme."

It's hard to see how Nicola could have made a better choice when selecting

a design workshop who could not only understand the brief but also bring her vision to life.

Dual Works is a furniture and product design workshop in Kenyon Street which was founded in 2015 by designers and makers Zoe Robertson and Steve Snell.

"Based on our hands-on brief from Nicola we designed and fabricated a series of eight handheld awards, created as a physical reflection of Birmingham's business culture – grounded and people-focused," says Zoe.

"We wanted the trophies to embody the same qualities the awards celebrate – honesty, optimism and a genuine investment in people.

"We love experimenting with materials and the combination we've chosen here became a way of expressing those values. Grey Valchromat brings weight and permanence, while the light-gathering acrylic introduces colour, energy and a sense of momentum.

"Rather than creating something overly polished or corporate, we focused on making an object that felt distinct and joyful, something with presence and a sense of celebration.

"To us, the trophies reflect Birmingham itself: confident, creative and ambitious."

To add further technical detail, the individual pieces combine Grey Valchromat with light-catching, fluorescent acrylic in four distinct colours: orange, yellow, pink and green which Zoe says embody the values at the heart of the awards –

integrity, collaboration, resilience and long-term investment in people.

"The trophies are designed as miniature architectural forms that interact playfully with light," she adds.

"When placed in sunlight, the fluorescent acrylic casts colourful patterns and spotlight-like reflections across the trophy and surrounding space, subtly reinforcing the idea of 'shining a light' on the award winners.

"The parallel acrylic layers also create the impression that the pieces are internally illuminated, giving each trophy a vibrant sense of energy and presence.

"We want each trophy to be an object recipients would be proud to display, a lasting symbol of meaningful achievement within the city's business community."

There was final collaboration required. Birmingham City University's School of Jewellery – overseen by course director Rebecca Skeels – have produced the plaques, with each one being individually engraved by the team for the award winners.

Back to Nicola Fleet-Milne, the mastermind behind these extraordinary trophies. Was she pleased when Zoe and the Dual Works team revealed the design for the first time?

"To say they nailed it is an understatement," says Nicola. "When the design was revealed I was genuinely thrilled and as far as I was concerned it was unimprovable and didn't need altering at all."

The winners are in for a treat.



The trophies – a truly collaborative effort



Making magical moments

We have chosen Kids' Village as the charity partner for our Best Places to Work Awards. Here's why . . .

Kids' Village is building the UK's first holiday village exclusively offering free-of-charge respite holidays to critically ill children and their families.

The charity was founded by the Fletcher family, who experienced the reality of childhood critical illness first-hand when their daughter Sammie, now 31, was diagnosed with cancer aged nine.

Inspired by a visit to 'Give Kids the World Village' in Florida, Gary, Claire and Sam had a vision to create the UK version of their experience and the UK's first respite holiday village.

The charity was registered in 2018 and a beautiful 30-acre woodland site in Wychnor, Staffordshire was donated by a local farming family.

After securing planning permission in 2023, an independent board of Trustees and small team was recruited in 2024 and a £5 million capital appeal launched to fund the first Kids' Village.

In November 2025, the £5 million target was reached just over a year after launching. The first site name was also announced as 'Charlotte's Kids' Village' in memory of a little girl named Charlotte who sadly died of a brain tumour aged 11, with Charlotte's family making a significant £2.9 million donation to the capital appeal.

While the long-term vision for Kids' Village is to create several respite holiday villages across the UK, our current focus is on building and opening Charlotte's Kids' Village in Staffordshire.

At Kids' Village, these children and their families will receive important life-enhancing respite, fun, magical moments and great memories. The focus is on the whole family being embraced for a while and ensuring they leave the Kids' Village experience feeling re-charged and more confident for the path ahead.

Katrina Cooke, Kids' Village CEO, said: "As a new charity with a small team, we

are very grateful for every opportunity to raise awareness of Kids' Village and the current construction of our first village, Charlotte's Kids' Village, near Lichfield.

"The Birmingham and West Midlands business community has played a crucial role in supporting our capital appeal, and tonight's awards are another great example of that support in action.

"The award is a wonderful celebration of the best places to work in the region, and we are delighted to be associated with and supported by the event in its inaugural year. Thank you to the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards for choosing to support Kids' Village."

Please take a moment to make a moment for critically ill children and their families and help us deliver a much needed UK first.

■ **Head to kidsvillage.org.uk to find out more.**

Meet the speaker

Securing Jesper With-Fogstrup as our awards keynote speaker is quite the coup. Not only is his record as a leader vastly impressive in itself but the firm he heads, Moneypenny, is a trailblazer in focusing on the culture and environment it has provided for its people.

We are delighted that Jesper With-Fogstrup has agreed to be our keynote speaker on June 11th.

Jesper is the group CEO of Moneypenny, a global customer conversations company founded in Wrexham. The business has grown into an industry leader and has been repeatedly recognised, in numerous high profile awards, for its outstanding workplace culture.

Jesper's professional career is formidable, bringing to Moneypenny a wealth of global experience, transformative leadership, and a steadfast commitment to people and technology.

With extensive operating experience across multiple industries, Jesper has a proven track record of driving innovation, fostering relationships, and building high-performing, diverse teams.

Previously, as CEO of Smoove plc, a technology company, Jesper rebranded

and transformed the company into a digital, customer-focused platform that revolutionised the home buying, selling, and owning process through prop-tech and legal-tech solutions. Under his leadership, Smoove achieved 37% revenue growth, significant margin improvements, and a successful public-to-private transaction with PEXA, delivering shareholders a 74% premium.

Before Smoove, Jesper held senior roles at HSBC and Compare the Market, where he led large-scale digital transformations and growth.

Jesper's career began in the travel industry, where he spearheaded commercial growth and strategic exits. He holds an Executive MBA from the London Business School and serves as an advisor and Non-Executive Director for tech companies.

Based in the UK, he has lived and worked globally, bringing a multicultural perspective



to his leadership.

"I love how technology empowers people to excel, fostering meaningful, trustworthy conversations that solve problems and seize opportunities," he says.

In a fireside Q&A with host Carl Jones, we'll hear how Jesper is blending deep tech expertise with Moneypenny's people-first culture – unlocking the full potential of both its platforms and its people.

Expect insights on wellbeing, DEI, and what meaningful investment in people and workplace culture really looks like.

About the company

Moneypenny was founded in 2000 in Wrexham by siblings Ed Reeves and Rachel Clacher.

The company began in a small office above an optician's shop with just £15,000 of start-up funding. Today, Moneypenny employs more than 1,000 people across the UK and the US and handles millions of customer conversations each year. It has grown into one of the world's leading outsourced communications companies while still maintaining its roots in Wrexham.

Initially, Moneypenny focused on providing telephone answering services for small businesses. However, the company quickly expanded as more organisations recognised the importance of professional customer communication.

Over time, Moneypenny evolved from a local call-handling company into an international communications business. It expanded into the United States in 2014 and later acquired several American

companies, including VoiceNation and Ninja Number, strengthening its global presence.

A major milestone came in 2016 when Moneypenny opened its £15 million headquarters in Wrexham. The innovative building, featuring facilities such as a treehouse meeting room and village-style pub, reflected the company's focus on employee wellbeing and workplace culture.

Moneypenny has received several 'best place to work' style recognitions over the years, including being listed multiple times in The Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For rankings, including a top-5 UK placing in 2015, receiving Great Place to Work certification in 2022 and being named one of the UK's Best Workplaces for Wellbeing in 2023.

Its Wrexham headquarters is frequently mentioned for employee-focused design features like walking paths, gardens, social spaces and wellbeing initiatives.



Our sponsors

We are enormously grateful to those businesses who have made the awards possible by giving so generously.



What makes a great place to work?

By PAUL FAULKNER, vice chairman of the Midlands region for Barclays, and co-founder of Element45

What a fantastic initiative the 'Best Places to Work' awards are!

While it is certainly possible to feel that the world needs another awards ceremony like the proverbial hole in the head, when I heard about this initiative my first reaction was to assume that surely such an event must already exist to celebrate brilliant workplaces and the people that make them so.

The fact that wasn't the case was a glaring oversight in the regional business calendar, and so full credit must go to the team behind Birmingham Business magazine for recognising this and creating the space to celebrate the best places to work.

Personally, I was delighted to be invited to be a judge for the awards. Readers will be pleased to know that I was joined for my categories by the indomitable Carmen Watson, the current High Sheriff of the West Midlands, and Professor Monder Ram from Aston University, and so all who entered can be assured that they were judged with utmost integrity, and that the winners truly are deserving of their awards.

With all that said, what does make a great place to work?

I'd suggest that there are of course many factors that play a part in this, all of which may have greater or less importance at various moments in time. These can include elements such as the purpose of the work and the tasks in hand, the physical environment in which you work, and of course good old 'compensation and benefits'.

However, for me, the biggest single factor that makes a great place to work is of course the people that you work alongside – your colleagues and your teammates.

With Aston Villa having just won the Europa League and paraded the trophy through the streets of Birmingham at the time of writing, it feels apposite to reflect back for a moment on my time at the club and the fantastic team of people that I had

working there alongside me off the pitch for many years.

While life was certainly easier when the team were winning on the pitch, it was when they were struggling that a true sense of team and togetherness was forged amongst those of us working on the commercial side of the club. Anyone can sell tickets, shirts and sponsorship when you are winning, but can you do it when you've just been beaten by Millwall in the 4th round of the FA Cup on a foggy Friday night in January?

For the team at Villa the answer was a resounding yes, as people across the various departments of the club would pull together to support each other, drive initiatives and work towards a common goal of putting fans (never customers) first and delivering memorable experiences.

In adversity, bonds were forged between people and teams, which made subsequent successes, however large or small, all the sweeter. People

enjoyed coming to work because even if times weren't easy, you knew that those around you had your back and were pulling in the same direction. Within that environment some brilliant initiatives were developed, fantastic results delivered, and relationships between people established that endure to this day, over a decade later.

Villa Park was a great place to work, whatever was happening on the pitch!

People make a culture and bring it to life, and it is this which really makes the difference in determining if a business is a great place to work or not.

Congratulations to everyone who entered the awards this year. Judging certainly wasn't easy given the quality of people and businesses that we saw, but we stuck to our task and winners were selected, which I am now looking forward to seeing revealed at the awards night on June 11.

Good luck!



ART Business Loans celebrates further growth supporting Midlands SMEs

ART Business Loans is celebrating further growth in lending to SMEs across the Midlands.

Over the 2025/26 financial year, ART Business Loans saw lending grow by 20 per cent year-on-year, supporting businesses to create and protect jobs, invest in their teams, and contribute positively to their local communities.

Birmingham-based ART Business Loans is reporting an even stronger start to the 2026/27 financial year following the allocation of £7million under the British Business Bank's Community ENABLE Fund to provide loans above £25,000 to underserved businesses across the West Midlands.

Access to the new finance increases the range of funds available through ART Business Loans, which lends to companies wanting to borrow between £10,000 and £250,000.

ART Business Loans chief executive Steve Walker said: "This has been a strong year for ART and, more importantly, for the businesses we have been able to support.

"More than 75 per cent of the businesses we support come from underserved areas and communities, and we are proud that our lending is making

a tangible difference to people's lives and livelihoods.

"Demand has been especially high for larger deals in sectors where growth potential is significant, with some funding deals agreed in partnership with other sources of finance. The signs for 2026/27 are looking very promising, and we are excited about the opportunities ahead."

One of the firms to have recently benefitted from ART funding is scrap metal specialist Total Metal Recovery, which has expanded its recycling offering to customers by purchasing a skip hire company, retaining seven staff and adding a driver position.

Family business Total Metal Recovery, based in Bromsgrove, acquired neighbouring firm A-Z Skips by using funds secured through ART Business Loans and BCRS Business Loans, which both operate as not for profit community development finance institutions.

The owners of Total Metal Recovery, who now employ 17 staff in total across the two companies, decided to purchase the skip hire and waste recycling business, which has the next door premises, as part of a diversification strategy to extend their waste service offering.

Total Metal Recovery is a recycling specialist which collects, processes and recycles metals to promote the circular economy while A-Z Skips offers services including skip delivery and collection, waste sorting, confidential waste destruction and aggregate sales.

The management team worked through the application processes for ART Business Loans and BCRS Business Loans to secure two six-figure deals to secure the purchase.

Total Metal Recovery Director Matthew Dunn said: "We valued our experience with ART Business Loans and BCRS Business Loans, as they took a holistic approach by considering both the opportunity and the people behind the business.

"The acquisition comes at a pivotal time, with market conditions evolving and demand on the rise. We are excited about what lies ahead."

ART Business Loans Business Lending Manager Roz Haque said: "Total Metal Recovery's acquisition of A-Z Skips is an excellent example of how the right funding can help established businesses expand their capabilities and serve their customers better.

"We are pleased that ART Business Loans could provide the support to realise their business growth plans, capitalising on an opportunity literally next door to their existing premises. Their focus on providing trusted services shows the kind of sustainable growth we like to support."

BCRS Business Loans Business Development Manager Mark Savill, who oversaw the loan, said: "As a community-based lender BCRS Business Loans is driven by a goal of supporting viable businesses to realise opportunities so we were pleased to help the Total Metal Recovery team."

Andy Moss, from the debt advisor Ricosta Capital, introduced Total Metal Recovery to the two lenders. Andy said: "Working together, we have delivered a funding package to a great business that has a strong future."

Since its establishment in 1997 as Aston Reinvestment Trust, ART Business Loans has lent more than £40 million to more than 1,800 customers, enabling them to create or protect more than 8,500 jobs.

The organisation lends between £10,000 and £250,000 to businesses across the Midlands and adjoining counties, supporting those that can demonstrate a viable proposition but have been unable to secure the full finance they need from mainstream lenders.



From left, Roz Haque of ART Business Loans, Matt Dunn of Total Metal Recovery, Andy Moss of Ricosta Capital, Will Dunn of Total Metal Recovery and Mark Savill, BCRS Business Loans

Hair group grows future talent following ART Business Loans support

One of the most established hair salon groups in the West Midlands has expanded its apprenticeship programme and trained a new generation of hair professionals since securing a £75,000 loan from ART Business Loans.

Francesco Group approached ART Business Loans in 2021 to secure investment to strengthen its Birmingham academy apprenticeship delivery team in delivering the Level 2 hair professional apprenticeship programme across its network of 35 salons.

The business has since expanded its team of educators to 13 working within its academies, which has supported the training and development of 600 apprentices.

Francesco Group is committed to developing talent from within by recruiting and developing apprentices to ensure sustainable business growth while creating a dedicated, skilled workforce for the future.

Fourteen of the group's current franchisees began their careers as trainees,



ART Business Loans manager Martin Edmonds with Francesco Group managing director Ben Dellicompagni

ranging from YTS starters through to apprentices. A number of the group's educators also began their careers as apprentices, progressing from the salon floor into training and education roles.

The business operates 35 salons across the West Midlands, as well as training academies in Birmingham and Stafford.

Francesco Group finance associate

Richard Stenson said: "The funding from ART Business Loans in 2021 gave us the platform we needed to invest in our people at exactly the right time, supporting our ability to work with new salons across the West Midlands. Coming out of Covid, we needed to rebuild and push forward.

"Good training has been our founder's mantra for 50 years, and it will always be at the heart of everything we do. We grow our own and like to watch them build their careers with us.

"ART were very easy to deal with. They were recommended to us through contacts, and they delivered exactly what we needed. They understood our business and our ambitions, and that made all the difference."

Martin Edmonds, manager at Birmingham-based ART Business Loans, added: "It's been a pleasure to support Francesco Group and watch the business grow.

"Richard and the team have shown real commitment to their apprentices and to the communities they serve across the West Midlands and beyond."

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First anniversary



Jaiya and Ruby Bansal

Regina's Bar on Newhall Street celebrated its first anniversary by welcoming journalists, lifestyle and beauty influencers, and prominent Birmingham personalities for an exclusive anniversary celebration.

The evening, hosted by owners Jimmy Devollaj and Sabi Ukaj, featured fire breathers, live entertainment, champagne, and canapés prepared by executive chef Michael Edgar.

The event raised £820 for Birmingham Children's Hospital which provides life-saving care to over 90,000 children each year.

Main picture:
Keshia
and Scott
Golbourne



Brad Pattni, Alex Tross,
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Jimmy Devollaj, Adam Tibbatts
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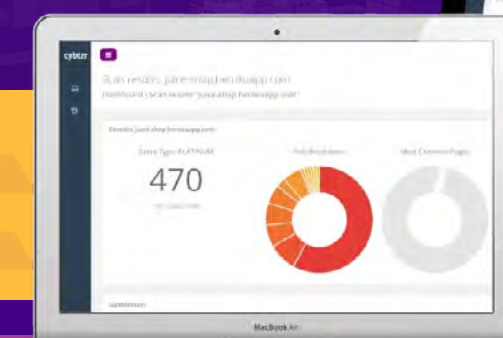
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From Wolverhampton to the national stage

Inside the mind of BIBA's 'Best Young Broker'

When Jack Briggs, Senior Account Executive at NFP, was announced as the British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) Young Broker of the Year, it marked a major moment not just in his career, but for the wider West Midlands business community.

The award is one of the most competitive in the UK insurance sector. With around 30,000 young brokers across the country being eligible, the pathway to winning is anything but straightforward. Candidates go through a rigorous multi-stage process, including written submissions, peer collaboration exercises and formal presentations in front of senior industry figures. Finalists are drawn from across the UK's biggest brokerages and global firms, making the standard exceptionally high.

But while the accolade itself is

impressive, what really stands out is how Jack got there - and what his story says about what makes a modern workplace truly inspiring. That's why, for this issue focusing on inspiring people and places to work, we sat down with Jack to ask him more about his journey to becoming the person and the broker he is today.

"I didn't have a grand plan . . . I just liked solving problems"

Q: What path led you to become a broker?
"I didn't really fall into broking with a grand plan. I found it because I liked solving practical business problems."

I started in the West Midlands insurance market and quickly realised that good broking is about far more than just selling policies. It's about understanding people, understanding risk and giving businesses confidence when things go wrong.

Over time, I built a specialism in commercial insurance, particularly transport, logistics, fleet and more complex trading risks."

That early mindset of focusing on solving problems rather than selling products is a thread that runs through Jack's career. It also reflects a broader shift in the industry, where businesses increasingly expect advisers to act as long-term partners, not just providers.

Building expertise the hard way

Q: What support and training have you had throughout your career to get you to this point?

"I've been fortunate enough to work with people who took the time to teach me the trade properly."

The technical training through the Chartered Insurance Institute, including achieving ACII, gave me the professional foundation. But the real development came from day-to-day broking - sitting with experienced colleagues, handling claims, negotiating with underwriters and learning how to advise clients properly.

NFP have also given me the platform to work on larger, more complex clients, which has accelerated my development massively."

Behind the qualification sits a significant personal commitment. Achieving ACII - one of the highest professional designations in the industry - often means years of study alongside a full-time role.

For Jack, that meant putting in hours outside of work, balancing professional development with family life. It's a reminder that inspiring workplaces don't just provide opportunity - they actively support people to take it.

The role of culture and leadership

Q: What qualities in your colleagues and managers have most helped you become a better broker?

"The most helpful qualities have been honesty, high standards and trust."

The best people I've worked with don't just give you the answer but they challenge you to think commercially and technically. Good managers have backed me, but they've also pushed me to take ownership, communicate better and stand behind my advice.

In broking, you need people around you who are calm under pressure, generous with their knowledge and serious about doing the right thing for the client."

This idea of being challenged, rather than managed, is central to high-performing cultures. It's also a theme that resonates strongly with this edition's focus on inspiring workplaces - environments where individuals are trusted to grow, but also expected to step up.

Challenging misconceptions

Q: What are the main myths and misconceptions Birmingham businesses have about commercial insurance or brokers as a whole?

"The biggest misconception is that insurance is just about getting the cheapest premium."

Price matters, especially in the current economic climate, but the cheapest policy can be the most expensive mistake a business makes if the cover doesn't respond properly.

Another myth is that brokers simply 'shop around'. A good broker should be a risk adviser, a negotiator and a claims advocate.

The real value is in understanding the business, presenting it properly to insurers and making sure there are no nasty surprises at claim stage."

In a region as diverse as Birmingham, where businesses range from SMEs to large, complex operations, this insight is particularly relevant. It also underlines the importance of trust - something that sits at the heart of both client relationships and internal workplace culture.

Supporting businesses in a challenging environment

Q: What common challenges do you see Birmingham businesses facing and how do you support these in your role?

"Birmingham businesses are dealing with a tough trading environment - inflation, rising claims costs, supply chain pressure, underinsurance, cyber risk, contract demands and tighter insurer scrutiny."

My role is to cut through that noise and make sure their insurance programme is fit for purpose.

That means reviewing sums insured, explaining key conditions, challenging insurer assumptions, preparing proper market presentations and helping clients improve their risk profile.

The aim is simple: protect the business properly today and make it more resilient for tomorrow."

The answer reflects something broader than insurance - it highlights the role of advisers in helping businesses navigate uncertainty. In many cases, that guidance can be the difference between resilience and disruption.

A new generation shaping the industry

Beyond his day-to-day role, Jack is also part of the Chartered Insurance Institute's New Generation programme, which brings together emerging professionals from across the UK to help shape the future of the sector.

Through this initiative, he has contributed to discussions at a national level, including presentations in Parliament and engagement with policymakers, focusing on how the insurance industry can evolve and support the wider economy.

It's another example of how younger professionals are increasingly being given a voice - and how organisations that invest in development are helping shape future leaders.

A reflection of the region

For Birmingham and the wider West Midlands, stories like this matter.

They showcase the strength of the region's professional talent and underline the role local businesses play in developing it. They also challenge outdated perceptions of industries like insurance, which are often seen as traditional or static, but in reality are evolving rapidly.

More importantly, they demonstrate that inspiring workplaces don't happen by accident. They are built through investment in people, a commitment to development and a culture that values both performance and potential.

Looking ahead

As Jack continues to build his career, the focus now shifts from recognition to impact.

Whether that's supporting more businesses through complex risks, mentoring the next generation of brokers or contributing to the ongoing development of the industry, the foundations are firmly in place.

And while the BIBA award may be a headline moment, it's clear that for Jack, it's just one step in a much longer journey.

As he puts it simply:

"The aim is straightforward - do the job properly, help people when it matters and keep improving."

In an industry built on trust, that mindset may be the most valuable asset of all.

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Are businesses ready for greenwashing?

By KATRINA ANDERSON, principal associate at law firm Mills & Reeve

The rules of the road for environmental claims have shifted considerably over the past year, and West Midlands businesses need to pay close attention.

A combination of expanded regulatory enforcement powers and a new corporate criminal offence of failure to prevent fraud means the consequences of getting green claims wrong are now significantly more serious.

The expanding regulatory landscape

The regulatory focus on greenwashing stems from a 2021 Europe-wide review led by the CMA, which found that 40% of green claims made online could be misleading.

Now, the CMA has gained significantly enhanced civil enforcement powers to pursue these claims under the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act. The act has equipped the CMA with direct financial sanctioning powers, removing the need to pursue enforcement through the courts and consequently lowering the barrier to regulatory action.

To make matters more complex, the CMA's definition of an environmental claim is deliberately broad, covering any claim – whether implicit or explicit – that suggests a product, service, process, brand or business is better for the environment.

Meanwhile, the failure to prevent fraud offence – introduced by the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 and in force since September 2025 – means that where greenwashing can be characterised as fraud by false representation, the consequences could extend to criminal liability for the organisation itself.

At this stage, the FTFP offence is untested in the courts. However, the Serious Fraud Office has made it clear that it is looking to exercise its power to prosecute someone for this offence, and an area such as greenwashing could prove to be an early test case for prosecutors looking to establish the scope of this new offence.

A particular challenge for the West Midlands

Several of the West Midlands' flagship sectors are particularly vulnerable to this combined regulatory and criminal risk.

Take automotive manufacturing. The West Midlands is widely recognised as the automotive capital of the UK, producing over a third of British-made cars and one in four engines and host to global names including Jaguar Land Rover, Aston Martin and LEVC.

Few sectors anywhere in the country are making more public-facing environmental claims than automotive – from 'zero emissions' EVs and 'carbon neutral' production lines, to 'sustainable materials' in vehicle interiors and 'net zero' supply chain commitments. With the industry's transition to electrification well under way and supported by assets such as the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre in Coventry, the volume and ambition of green claims is only going to grow.

That brings real exposure, especially as the automotive sector is already firmly on the regulatory radar. The Advertising Standards Authority, for example, has been actively monitoring environmental claims in the hybrid and electric vehicle sector as part of its Climate Change and the Environment project, and in 2024 upheld complaints against both BMW and MG Motor UK over "zero emissions" claims used in paid search advertising.

Of course, it isn't just automotive in the crosshairs, a number of other sectors that thrive in the West Midlands face the same exposure.

The wider advanced manufacturing, aerospace, rail, construction and logistics sectors – all heavily concentrated in the region – face equivalent risks, whether the claim is sustainable homes, a lower carbon component, or a greener delivery network. Other sectors, such as retail, also face particular scrutiny.

How should businesses respond?

Getting environmental claims right – accurate, clearly expressed, properly substantiated and reflective of full lifecycle impact – has never carried more weight. Building compliance systems capable of evidencing all of this should be considered a core part of how businesses manage risk.

What's more, for West Midlands businesses making environmental claims, responsibility for accuracy does not stop at the factory gate. This is a particular issue for the region's automotive and advanced manufacturing sectors, where multi-tiered, often international, supply chains are the norm.

The CMA's recent guidance makes clear that businesses across the supply chain must support efforts to ensure that claims are accurate – whether made directly or indirectly. In practice, this means conducting annual checks and spot checks, and ensuring that data flows reliably through the supply chain. Relying on a third party for information does not remove a business's own responsibility to verify its accuracy.

The Green Claims Code's six core principles remain the benchmark: claims must be truthful and accurate, clear and unambiguous, must not omit important information, make only fair and meaningful comparisons, consider the full lifecycle of a product or service, and be substantiated with robust evidence.

Risk and reward

While greenwashing is not a new concern, the risk profile for businesses making unsubstantiated green claims is materially higher than it was even twelve months ago.

There is, however, a silver lining. This more stringent regime should ultimately benefit principled West Midlands businesses that take compliance seriously by bearing down on those seeking to gain commercial advantage through claims that simply do not stand up to scrutiny.

Regional leaders launch drive to create world-class manufacturing cluster

A new report has set out an action plan to create a world-class advanced manufacturing cluster in the Midlands able to compete with intensifying global competition.

Project MADE – the Midlands Advanced Manufacturing Ecosystem – has brought together regional stakeholders including Unipart Manufacturing, Midlands Aerospace Alliance, Warwick Manufacturing Group, the Manufacturing Technology Centre, Rigby Group, WM Growth Company and the West Midlands Investment Zone, to deliver a 10-year plan for growth and investment in the region's advanced manufacturing sector.

By 2035, the vision is to achieve 5% compound annual GVA growth in the sector, deliver £44 billion in final annual output, create 50,000 new jobs, and catalyse £1.6 billion in aggregated advanced manufacturing investment.

Chaired by Steve Rigby, CEO of Rigby Group, Project MADE provides a framework for growth.

The report proposes the formation of a new entity to drive delivery of an advanced manufacturing supercluster in the West Midlands. This includes the recruitment of a chair and funding from public and private investors to deliver the outlined growth plan.



Steve Rigby

Mr Rigby said: "The project has brought together key leaders across the region to turn a clear ambition into practical, co-ordinated action."

"The West Midlands has all the ingredients to lead globally in advanced manufacturing – our task now is to bring those strengths together with pace, focus and discipline."

Neil Rami, chief executive of the West Midlands Growth Company, said: "Innovation starts, and scales, in the West Midlands. The region operates as a fully integrated system where ideas are rapidly developed, tested and industrialised within a single regional economy."

"We also have one of the UK's largest applied R&D ecosystems outside London, supported by six research-intensive universities producing over 50,000 graduates each year."

"Project MADE will help develop the region's advanced manufacturing sector further and ensure it remains a market leader, both nationally and internationally."

While the West Midlands remains the UK's industrial heartland, producing more manufactured goods than Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the Liverpool City Region combined, the report says that the sector faces critical supply chain distress and chronic under-investment in automation.

Project MADE argues that without urgent co-ordinated intervention and implementation of the recommendations, the UK risks losing ground as global manufacturing systems are reshaped by electrification and digitalisation.

Birmingham food startup expands into Asda stores

A Birmingham-based seasoning brand that began as a £100 dream in the founders' mum's kitchen has secured a nationwide listing with Asda.

Dragons' Den-backed Lumberjaxe – founded by brothers Jaydon and Brendon Manders – is launching its range of single-serve sachets into 320 stores across the UK.

The move marks a significant retail milestone for the business, whose seasonings are now available in the sachets which are designed to make cooking easier, fresher and more accessible.

The range includes Backyard BBQ, Moonshine Mango, Cowboy Butter and Louisiana Cajun.

Raised in a single-parent household, the brothers drew inspiration from their grandad's brick-built barbecue, sparking a lifelong love for cooking.

When they appeared on BBC's Dragons' Den last, entrepreneur Emma Grede backed the tiny Birmingham-based business.

"Emma didn't just invest in our seasonings, she invested in us as people and believed in us from the start," said Brendon.

"Coming from a very similar background to us, she related to our story and our determination. She gave us the chance to turn a kitchen dream into a business that can reach millions."

Jaydon added: "With Asda now stocking our range, we're helping home cooks recreate the good times of outdoor BBQs in their own kitchens."

"Our journey proves that even when you start with nothing, passion, hard work and the right support mean that you can achieve incredible things."



Jaydon, left, and Brendon Manders



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Afroze ZaidiLillian Elekan, Paula
Bates and Grace MorganJas Sansi and
Deb Leary

Business awards night

An IT and cybersecurity services specialist was crowned the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce Business of the Year 2026.

Rugeley-based Techcare picked up the Chamber's overall Greater Birmingham Business of the Year award in front of 1,000 guests at the ICC in central Birmingham, after winning the Customer Commitment category.

Judges said Techcare "demonstrated company values towards customer commitment" and praised the firm for "going above and beyond for customers, charities and other businesses in the region".

The awards were hosted by broadcaster Amber Sandhu. Headline sponsors were Birmingham City University and Elonex.

Pictures by Edwin Ladd

Paul Faulkner,
Kasim Choudhry,
Ed James and
Zoe BennettGary Phelps, Martin Hall, Eileen Schöfield,
David Mitchell and Naeem Arif

Monica Ghai

Becca Horley, Sarah Griffiths, Kasim Choudhry
and Joginder Loha

Richard Wileman, David Mitchell and Nasir Awan

Carmen Watson and
Eileen Schofield

Marverine Cole and Denise Myers

Henry Wilkinson, Steve Whitmarsh
and Jim Bourne



Pictured from left are Thomas Fraser-Bacon, marketing director, Allsee Technologies, Laurence Turner MP for Birmingham Northfield, Simon Topman MBE, deputy lieutenant of the West Midlands, and Dr Baoli Zhao, founder and managing director, Allsee Technologies

£20m Longbridge development unveiled

Digital signage firm Allsee Technologies has officially opened its new Innovation Centre in Longbridge, representing a £20 million investment.

The opening event included employees and their families, suppliers, integration partners, academic collaborators and industry stakeholders.

The centre was formally opened by Simon Topman, deputy lieutenant for the West Midlands, alongside Laurence Turner, MP for Birmingham Northfield, and Allsee's founder and managing director Dr Baoli Zhao.

Dr Zhao said: "The innovation centre

represents an important step forward for Allsee Technologies and for the digital signage industry more broadly.

"At a time of economic uncertainty, we remain focused on providing a stable, reliable, and forward-thinking manufacturing partnership for our customers globally. This investment reflects our long-term commitment to innovation, growth and collaboration."

Located in Longbridge, a site with significant industrial heritage, the development forms part of the area's ongoing regeneration into a centre for innovation, technology, and employment.

Heligan expands into risk intelligence

A Birmingham investment firm has launched a specialist unit of veteran investigators, analysts and operational technologists providing risk intelligence services.

Heligan Group's Strategic Advisory has been set up to deliver fast and specialised insight in complex transactions and disputes.

This includes corporate intelligence and strategic advisory services, due diligence and risk assessment, investigations and dispute support, as well as digital intelligence and investigations.

HSA will also offer consultancy services with a focus on the defence sector – delivering strategic insight and analysis, technology and market assessments, sector-specific M&A due diligence, strategic acquisition targeting, competitive intelligence reporting, access to influential networks, and commissioned thought leadership.

The arm will serve ultra-high-net-worth individuals, family offices, multinationals, law firms, and organisations across the sports industry.

Adam Irwin, managing partner at HSA, said: "The business environment has fundamentally shifted and organisations can no longer afford to operate without robust intelligence and rapid investigation capability.

"A client came to us recently about a prospective investor offering a substantial minority stake. On the surface it was clean – a reputable jurisdiction, credible advisers, plausible source of wealth.

"Two layers into the structure, we found nominee directors. Four layers in, we found entities linked to sanctioned individuals. The investment didn't happen.

"The same discipline sits behind our national security and defence practice. Whether a client is stress-testing an acquisition target, assessing a technology's real-world trajectory or positioning for a programme award, the question is the same – what do we know that the spreadsheet can't tell us, and who do we need to speak to in order to know it?"

Aston University opens new padel courts



Amir Amin, left, and Vova Semenyaka

Aston University is bringing one of the fastest-growing sports in the world to the heart of Birmingham.

The Padel Loft Aston consists of three new courts on the university's campus. They will provide students, staff and the public with access to what will be the city's most centrally located padel site.

Padel blends elements of tennis and squash and is played on an enclosed court with glass walls. Originating in Mexico and hugely popular across Spain and southern Europe, it has recently seen growth globally and is now rapidly expanding across the UK.

Vova Semenyaka, co-founder of the Padel Loft Aston, said: "We founded this with a clear mission – to work with universities to make padel more accessible and affordable for students, while also creating welcoming facilities for the wider community.

"Padel is an incredibly social and inclusive sport that is easy to learn but difficult to put down once you start playing. We're excited to introduce it to thousands of students and local residents.

"Whether you've never picked up a racket before or already play regularly, the facility aims to make padel more accessible than ever for people living, working or studying in central Birmingham."

Birmingham entrepreneur collects MBE

A businessman born and raised in Alum Rock has spoken of his pride after collecting his MBE in recognition of services to diversity and inclusion in business.

Safaraz Ali, a Birmingham entrepreneur and social impact leader, received the honour after nearly 25 years of work across skills, employability, care and enterprise, with the last 10 years strongly focused on promoting apprenticeships, social mobility and inclusive leadership.

Before becoming an entrepreneur, Mr Ali began his career in banking and financial services. He later went on to build businesses and initiatives across skills, employability, care and social impact, spending the last 24 years creating organisations designed to combine enterprise with purpose.

In recent years, much of his work has focused on changing the way apprenticeships are seen by families, employers and communities.

Through his work with the Multicultural Apprenticeship & Skills Alliance and the Multicultural Apprenticeship Awards, and the Apprenticeship Diversity & Social Mobility Forum, Mr Ali has become a leading voice in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands for promoting apprenticeships as a respected and ambitious route into careers and long-term success.



"It was a real privilege to receive my MBE and a moment I will never forget," he said.

"Meeting the Princess Royal made the occasion even more special and brought home the significance of the honour in a very personal way.

"What this recognition really does is strengthen my sense of responsibility. It reinforces why the work around skills, social mobility and inclusive leadership matters, and why it is important to keep pushing for better outcomes."

Coventry wealth firm completes acquisition



Dan Boardman-Weston and Ian Gough

Coventry-based firm BRI Wealth Management has added approximately £50 million in client assets after acquiring an IFA firm in the region.

The firm, West Midlands Wealth Management, was founded in 2015 by Ian Gough to provide independent financial advice across key areas of financial planning, supporting clients through major life stages including investment management, retirement planning and estate preservation.

Dan Boardman-Weston, chief executive at BRI Wealth Management, said: "I have great admiration for the value and service that Ian has provided to his clients over the years.

"This acquisition underlines our commitment to offering a client-first alternative to private equity driven consolidation."

Aurrigo launches new manufacturing hub

An international provider of autonomous vehicles and mobile robotics platforms has announced the opening of its new UK hub facility.

Aurrigo International plc, which raised £14.1 million to support its global expansion at the end of last year, will shortly start

production of its autonomous vehicles at a state-of-the-art facility on Power Park in Coventry.

The new site measures 130,615 sq ft, more than three times the size of the firm's current facility, and will serve as its main UK hub.

Once operating at full capacity, Aurrigo believes the new facility will be capable of manufacturing over 500 autonomous vehicles a year.

Professor David Keene, chief executive officer of Aurrigo International, said: "This new centre marks an important milestone for our business and our unwavering commitment to the UK, delivering investment in autonomous technology.

"It significantly enhances our manufacturing and engineering capability, provides the capacity to scale in line with demand, and underpins our ambition to build a sustainable, capital-efficient platform for long-term growth."

The premises have been secured with turnkey infrastructure already in place, including IT systems, fully fitted offices, EV charging infrastructure and manufacturing facilities, enabling rapid operational ramp-up.

It also gives the firm space for an on-site autonomous vehicle test track, supporting in-house validation, customer demonstrations and accelerated development cycles.



Family business opens Brierley Hill base

Family-run Black Country business Castle Blinds & Awnings is opening the doors to its new showroom after relocating to larger premises in Brierley Hill.

Located on Little Cottage Street, the new showroom marks a significant milestone for the company, having outgrown its previous 3,400 sq ft space. The company has now expanded into a 10,500 sq ft facility, which sits alongside its existing showroom in Kingswinford, and includes a dedicated manufacturing base.

The firm, which specialises in made-to-measure blinds, shutters and awnings for domestic and commercial properties, was founded by Brian Jones in 1993 and is now run by his children, Amanda and Lee. The company has even appeared on the small screen, providing blinds for popular TV shows including Doc Martin, Holby City, Silent Witness, Skins, Dalziel & Pascoe and Adolescence.

The deal was brokered by Birmingham-based property consultants Johnson Fellows, who acted on behalf of the seller.

Brian Jones, owner of Castle Blinds & Awnings, said: "We are excited to be opening our new showroom after searching for the right property for over 10 years.

"The new premises provides us with ample space for a combined manufacturing base and a second showroom, and also gives us the space to showcase our full outdoor product range."



Richard Bache, left, and Brian Jones



■ A Birmingham manufacturing base of car components maker Sertec Group has changed hands in a £10.4 million deal.

MK2 Real Estate disposed of the 111,727 sq ft unit at Redfern Park Way, Tyseley, on behalf of vendor, the Canal & River Trust.

Canmoor – a developer and asset manager in the warehouse and business space sectors – has acquired the property, which is set on 5.19 acres of prime industrial land.

Mark Rooke, director in the investment team at MK2, said: "Only a handful of units of this size have come to the market in the last six months. It's a real sweet spot for investors and as a result we saw a lot of interest in this asset."

The sale reflects a net initial yield of 5.6%.



■ A potential residential development opportunity in Wolverhampton is on the market for £1.5 million.

The property at 78 Darlington Street and 11 Clarence Street consists of two substantial vacant commercial buildings with access and frontages to Darlington Street, Waterloo Road and Clarence Street.

The buildings have been stripped back to a shell status and the total of 30,740 sq ft is now ready for redevelopment or refurbishment, subject to planning permission.

James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe, who are marketing the opportunity, said: "This is a freehold site in a prominent city centre location close to all amenities."

He said the properties are considered suitable for a number of uses, subject to planning permission, and the redevelopment plans announced by Invest Wolverhampton in its Future City Centre Plan would give developers confidence.

Retail and homes scheme planned near HS2

Plans have been submitted for a six-storey mixed-use development which will sit opposite Curzon Street rail station, the HS2 Birmingham terminus.

The proposal – delivered by Studio KMA architects on behalf of Hanson Investments – incorporates 3,500 sq ft of new retail space with 10 apartments and a landscaped roof-top terrace.

Hanson Investments have extensive interests in the southside district of Birmingham city centre and have owned the commercial space at Masshouse since 2020.

Director Han Liu said: "This is a very important project for us and for the city – a final piece of the jigsaw for the highly visible Masshouse development.

"We are excited to move into the residential sector, and our architects have successfully met our brief for a contemporary, eco-conscious urban residential landmark."

The building has been designed within the constraints of the Building Safety Act and considers the impact of daylight and views upon the completed Phase 1 and 2 residential blocks within the wider Masshouse development.

Richard Hamill, associate at Studio KMA describes the curved building as "complimenting the design of the HS2 station building directly opposite with an aesthetic that straddles a line between late-modernist rationalism and 21st-century sustainable urbanism".



Education provider moves to Brindleyplace

Professional education provider BPP has selected Brindleyplace as its new Birmingham home following its relocation from Colmore Circus.

BPP delivers apprenticeships, short courses and professional qualifications across sectors including law, finance and technology.

The firm has taken 20,000 sq ft of space in 3 Brindleyplace on a 10-year lease, and it now occupies part of the ground and first

floors of the building since its move in April.

The space provides 11 classrooms with the flexibility to combine smaller rooms into larger teaching spaces, together with online classroom delivery rooms, student support spaces and the latest audio-visual technology.

Mark Griffiths, BPP chief property officer, said: "Brindleyplace makes complete sense for us. Its location is in the heart of a vibrant part of the city, in a private estate, which is transforming into an educational hub. This move is part of our commitment to creating the best possible learning environment for our students."

Matt Long, asset manager at Praxis, which operates the site, said: "Welcoming such a high-profile educational tenant as BPP to Brindleyplace signals the start of an exciting time for the estate. BPP's decision to join the Brindleyplace community is a significant endorsement of the quality of workspace and environment being delivered."

Knight Frank, Newmark and Savills acted as joint letting agents for Praxis, and Jaggard Macland represented BPP.



Mark Griffiths, BPP chief property officer, left, and Matt Long, asset manager at Praxis

EY strengthens Midlands team with senior partner hires

EY has strengthened its Midlands practice with two senior partner appointments.

Tony King joins as partner in data risk and AI within the technology risk practice, focusing on government and healthcare clients, while restructuring specialist Kris Aspin will lead the Midlands restructuring practice and joins from EY's Edinburgh office.

Tony brings 23 years of professional services experience and a track record in growing highperforming teams. In his previous role, he built a data risk and AI practice from its startup phase into a national team of more than 40 people, delivering revenues exceeding £10 million across the UK.



Tony King, Adrian Roberts and Kris Aspin

In his new position, he will focus on enabling clients to have confidence in their data, ensuring it is high quality and

accessible to those who need it.

Kris is an experienced restructuring partner with extensive regional and national market experience. He has spent 15 years working for EY in Manchester and a further six years in Scotland, advising on large financial restructuring, as well as a broad range of midmarket engagements.

Adrian Roberts, EY's managing partner for the Midlands, said: "Tony and Kris's appointments mark a significant investment in our Midlands practice.

"Their arrivals strengthen our ability to help organisations address risk and performance challenges in an increasingly complex environment."

Promotion at MK2

MK2 Real Estate has promoted Louise Lokucewicz to the role of director having joined the firm's property management team in 2022.

She has worked in the commercial property industry since 2010, including stints at BNP Paribas, JLL and Lambert Smith Hampton.

At MK2 she is responsible for advising clients including Christian Vision, Our Coop, Watkin Property Ventures Investments and Brighton STM. Louise also manages a team of five, oversees the firm's apprentices and co-ordinates RICS training.

MK2's property management team now comprises 40 staff, with responsibility for approximately £1.5 billion of property assets under management. The team advises landlords with both single- and multi-let assets, as well as larger portfolios, across the UK.

Marcello Della Croce, who heads the property management team, said: "Louise has made a strong and consistent contribution to our evolution.

"She is trusted by clients, respected internally and demonstrates the values and professional standards we expect at MK2. This appointment recognises both her performance and her leadership."



New Birmingham director appointed



Surveying firm Innes England has welcomed a new director to its Birmingham office.

Andy Johnson joins from construction consultants MPP Group, where he spent five years. He also worked at Mace and Faithfull+Gould during the course of his 43-year career in construction and consultancy.

He has extensive experience in party wall matters, neighbourly issues, dilapidations, clerk of works and project monitoring, technical due diligence, asset management, defect diagnosis and schedules of condition surveys with risk management. He is also an RICS APC counsellor.

Andy was lead clerk of works for Jaguar

Land Rover's Triangle building at Gaydon and estate planner at its Whitley plant. He project-managed refurbishment schemes at BMW's Hams Hall plant and advised Aston University and Wolverhampton University on their estate strategies.

Adam Rock, who heads the Birmingham office of Innes England, said: "Andy's appointment strengthens our team and increases the services we are able to provide.

"The opportunity to provide project monitoring work from Birmingham complements our valuation services. Andy will also be working in tandem with our lease consultants on building surveys, schedules of condition and dilapidation negotiations."



James Taylor, Mark Taylor and Tim Thackaberry

Accountancy adds three partners

Accountancy firm Bishop Fleming has appointed three new partners to its Birmingham office.

The trio takes the number of partners to eight and brings the total based in the city to nearly 30 people – in a little over a year since its Colmore Row office was launched.

James Taylor has been appointed audit partner, specialising in notforprofit organisations, while Tim Thackaberry joins the firm as valuations partner.

James brings more than 15 years of experience in auditing a range of charity, social housing and education organisations, advising clients on governance, controls and financial reporting. His previous roles include director and senior managerial positions at BDO and Cooper Parry, as well as earlier audit roles at Dains.

Tim Thackaberry joins the advisory team in a newly created role, providing non-contentious valuation services to the firm's audit and tax clients. He brings over two decades of experience in forensic accounting and valuations, specifically within the SME and mid-market sectors. He has held senior roles at BDO, Mazars and, most recently, Azets.



Law firm expands with new team

Law firm FBC Manby Bowdler has unveiled a significant expansion of its Knowle office, with a number of new appointments and the formation of contentious probate and residential property law teams on site.

The move comes as the firm continues to expand after becoming the founding member of the Adeptio Law Group, which was launched following a £30 million private equity investment by Horizon Capital in 2024.

The new contentious probate team is led by partner Anna Sutcliffe who brings more than 20 years' experience and is a full member of the Association of Contentious Trust and Probate Solicitors.

Also joining the team is solicitor Hollie Mills, who specialises in disputed estates and handles a wide range of matters

including will validity challenges, inheritance claims, intestacy disputes and challenges concerning executors.

The new residential team is strengthened with the appointment of senior associate Elisa Everitt, who advises on all aspects of residential conveyancing work, including lease extensions, sales and purchases, transfers of equity, remortgages and new builds.

Two further appointments have also strengthened the team at Knowle.

Perveen Dhami joins as a partner in the property litigation team, while senior associate Victoria Upton – an expert in wills, probate, estate planning and trusts – has moved to Knowle from the firm's Redditch office to expand its private client service.



Pictured from left are Milena Strass, Hollie Mills, Anna Sutcliffe, Elisa Everitt, Neil Lloyd, Victoria Upton, Perveen Dhami and Lynne Steptoe

Construction partner joins Bevan Brittan

Commercial law firm Bevan Brittan has bolstered its construction practice with the addition of an experienced construction and infrastructure partner.

Perveen Akhter has joined from Freeths, where she was head of construction and engineering in Birmingham. She has worked with private and public sector clients on a range of projects across her 20-year career, specialising in drafting and amending

building and engineering contracts.

She also advises on consultant appointments, warranties, bonds and guarantees, as well as development and funding agreements, agreement for leases, novation agreements and ancillary project documentation.

She has particular expertise in the energy sector and has advised on developments related to solar, battery storage, wind and carbon capture.

Five minutes with...

Zoe Bennett

CEO and founder of both Training Personified and the Multicultural Business and Community Champion (MBCC) Awards



downtime

In one sentence, what does your role involve?

Helping people recognise their value, build confidence and move forward in life with purpose.

How long have you been in your current job?

I have been running my businesses for 11 years.

Please give a summary of your professional career to date.

I am the founder and CEO of Training Personified, a personal development mindset upskilling organisation and also the founder and CEO of MBCC Awards where we recognise and honour unsung inspirational community champions.

My work has always been centred around helping people improve their lives through confidence building, employability, personal development and encouragement. I genuinely believe everybody deserves the opportunity to live a happy, fulfilling and purposeful life, regardless of their starting point or circumstances.

Over the last 11 years I have built a national independent training provider delivering government-funded and private contracts across the United Kingdom. Through Training Personified we support people not only into employment, but also into healthier mindsets and greater self-belief. A huge part of our work focuses on helping individuals understand the importance of communication, professionalism, emotional awareness, accountability, and responsibility for their own lives and choices.

I am passionate about helping people self-coach themselves so they can navigate setbacks, challenges, and negative thinking in a healthier and more productive way. Many people simply need someone to help them recognise their strengths and realise they are capable of far more than they believe.

Everything I do is rooted in lived experience. I have faced significant trauma in my personal life, including surviving a brutal attack that left me for dead and the devastating loss of my father who was tortured to death.

Those experiences gave me a deep understanding of resilience, compassion, and the importance of helping others find hope even in difficult moments.

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

Education gave me useful knowledge, but life experience taught me the importance of empathy, resilience, communication and understanding people from all walks of life.

How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?

When times are difficult financially, confidence can also take a huge knock. Many people begin doubting themselves and their future, so my work becomes even more important because people often need encouragement as much as opportunity.

What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?

A bit of both. Technology can support growth and innovation, but human connection, emotional intelligence and genuine care will always matter.

Social media platform of choice, and why?

LinkedIn because it allows me to connect with people professionally while still sharing authentic and motivational content.

How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

Positive, approachable, resilient, and someone who tries to make people smile even during difficult moments.

Highlights of your career so far?

Building two successful businesses over the last 11 years has been a huge achievement for me. Delivering my TEDx talk 'Get Out of Your Own Way' was another proud moment because it allowed me to openly discuss overcoming adversity and negative mindsets.

Creating the MBCC Awards has also been incredibly rewarding because it gives recognition to people who quietly make a difference in their communities and businesses.

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

I once started singing to myself on stage thinking my microphone was switched off. It definitely was not. Thankfully everyone laughed and I just carried on.

Pet hates?

Rudeness, arrogance, and people who intentionally make others feel small.

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

Do not let other people's behaviour define your worth. The difficult chapters of your life will one day help somebody else survive theirs.

How do you relax away from work?

I enjoy travelling, music, laughter, spending time with loved ones, and being around positive people with good energy.

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

People often see me smiling and motivating others, but there was a period in my life where trauma impacted my mental health so deeply that I attempted suicide. I now speak openly about it because I want others to know that healing and rebuilding your life is possible.

You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

Book: The Art of War by Tsun Tsu

Film: The Fugitive

CD: Anything by Mariah Carey

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Joan Collins, Oprah Winfrey, Nelson Mandela, Princess Diana and Jesus.

What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Roly poly and custard.



NET DEBT

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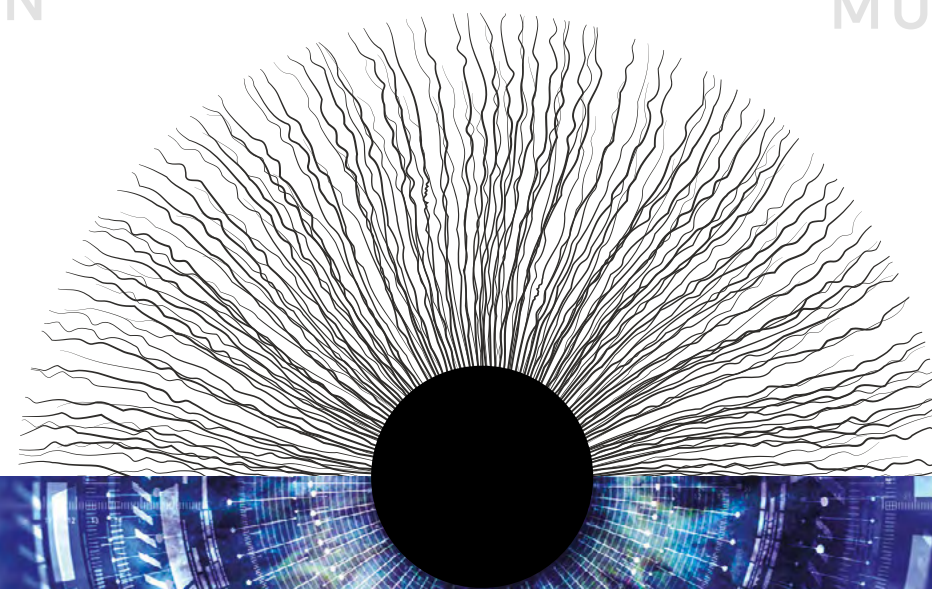
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