

THE NEXT STEP

HOW AMBITIOUS BUSINESSES CAN
ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL



EVERYONE INVOLVED
IN EVERYTHING

Interview with Andy Best, Managing Director
change++

COMMISSIONED BY



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A report commissioned by SAS Specialist Accounting Solutions considers the biggest challenge for any independently-owned company which has the potential to go further.

The ability of the owners to scale the business.

In their own words, directors talk about the issues they are having to address and how they want to achieve their goals.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.



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“As a twenty-one-year-old straight out of university, sitting in a boardroom having my ideas listened to by the owners of the business was very important to me. I know of companies where the directors and managers don’t do much listening at all. For them, if it goes well, they get the credit, and if it doesn’t, then the team is at fault.”

Now Andy Best is managing director of that business, change++, which for some twenty-five years has been developing performance management systems to drive growth and sustain profitability.

And that early experience has influenced his thinking. When one of the original founders Della Payne decided to retire, Best and co-director Matt Taylor - both have been with the business for more than a decade - acquired the company in 2019. He had plenty of time to acclimatise himself to his new role.

“Five years before, the founder and managing director of change++ said she was beginning to think about her retirement, and asked if Matt and I would be interested in a buy-out,” Best explains. “The business



Andy Best



Matt Taylor

had been her life for twenty years and she wanted to see it continue. I hadn't thought about being the owner, but we knew it best and had the relationships with the clients and each other. We were given share options and first refusal, and at the time there was no timetable, so we had a good long transitional period.

“When I was offered the opportunity for the buy-out, my initial reaction was ‘fantastic’, but then the prospect became a bit daunting. Then when I realised that I knew everything about the business, I thought of course I could do it. It’s about having the confidence to make it happen. I’m naturally introverted, not the one who is looking to make an impact at a networking event, but you’ve just to get on and do it.”

His journey had actually started with a summer internship at change++ while he was at university. “That introduced me to a world I never knew existed,” he recalls. “At college it was mainly to do with coding not the commercial application of computer science.” After graduating from the University of Nottingham as a BSc (Hons) in computer science, Best got back in touch with the company and was taken on.

Which is when he really experienced that sense of engagement. “We would have a company meeting every month when the directors ran through our financial performance, prospects, and direction, followed by an open forum so every member of the team could give their view and be listened to,” he says. “So there was very little about the business that we didn’t know. Everyone was involved in everything.

“It meant that when we took over the running of the business, we were pretty clued up. It wasn’t a massive leap from what I was doing before and what I am doing now, and once the decision was made about the buy-out, everyone had time to adjust to it. Of course I am in a different



position as a co-owner, but it's about how you conduct yourself. Very little has changed; this has never been a business where directors or managers pull rank."

There was one fundamental change though. "I always worked closely with Matt but the buck always stopped with Della, so we were one step removed from making a decision," Best explains. "So the big lesson I have learnt is that it's not necessarily about whether you make a decision but how you react if it turns out to be wrong. If you sense it was the bad one to make, change it - don't focus on how much time and money you have already spent on it.

"If Matt and I have a different opinion, we'll open it up to the team, because their impartial voice can be quite important. After hearing their thoughts, I'm not too proud to say 'do you know what, maybe my idea isn't the one we should go with'.

"I would like to double the size of the business in the next couple of years, but for someone in my position, the difficulty is trying to focus on



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what is really important rather than trying to cover every base at the same time. I'm naturally risk adverse, but if a business is to grow, the owner is going to have to be prepared to take a chance, which becomes more calculated if you have the right data.

“Knowing which audience to pitch to is important in terms of being able to reach your goals. For an SME, a particular size of project might be attractive but you have to factor in that while the return might be considerable, it might not be immediate. And larger potential clients might have expectations beyond what you can provide in terms of resources to deliver the project. The key is to identify where you can add most value. If you can demonstrate the art of the possible and then establish the first step, that will give the customer a tangible benefit.

“By and large, for corporates, an SME service provider will be filling the gaps rather than contributing to strategy because a client of that size will have a clear idea of where they want to get to. They will have a budget and a timeframe in mind and will come with a detailed brief.

“I think what Covid-19 has done is to make business owners focus on what is really important, and in doing that, managing data has come



to the fore. It is harder to adapt your business model if you don't have data which you can rely on that enables you to do it right away. If there is a silver lining to a year of lockdowns it's that companies won't just be resuming what they were doing before. They've had time to look at different options and to plan. But the reality is that changing the way you operate immediately really can be the spanner in the works. A small firm can react quickly, but the impact on their bottom line, the threat, is also immediately more apparent."

Having hospitality as their biggest sector when lockdowns were introduced might not appear to bode well for change++, but clients continued to engage because of the need to be able to use data to find the way forward. "But," says Best, "the pandemic sped up our plans to move into other markets, logistics for example, as well as move further into data science, such as machine learning. For a small team it's about managing that desire to expand the offering and being able to invest to develop your skillset."

As well as being able to bring new people on board. That is a particular challenge, as Best explains: "By its very nature, a small team is going to be a tightly-knit set of people. I don't refer to them as colleagues; they're my friends. As a result, when you bring someone else in, while they don't need to be like anyone else, at the end of the day it has to go beyond the skills they will bring. How well they fit is crucial because it will have an impact on the dynamic of the team.

"I feel strongly about the need to keep in touch with what the team is doing, because a leader has to be aware of everything. The flip side is that you then get bogged down in day-to-day operations. It's key to recognise that you have a team for a reason. You can't do everything yourself, so the owner-manager has to recognise and respect their



team’s expertise and be able to trust them to run with something. And that process might also result in them delegating tasks to me as well as the other way around.”

So how does Best balance ‘in the business’ with ‘on the business’? “I will set time aside in the calendar to address specific issues such as business development,” he says. “Unless you ring-fence that time, you just get sucked into other things. If I’m involved in a project, it is all too easy to put other matters to one side. I’m task driven. Each day I write a list of what I definitely have to do. That’s how I focus my efforts.

“On a personal level, being able to separate home and work life when you become the owner of a business is a balancing act. Before I became a co-owner, I would focus on my work, do it to the best of my ability, and then I went home. Now it comes back with me. A reason why the owner-manager spends so much time on the business is because they are responsible for its success and the benefits that brings to their family and employees.

“But in everything you do there has to be an enjoyment element, and you must find the joy because you will be spending more hours at work than anywhere else.”

About Specialist Accounting Solutions

‘We strive to give our clients the most reliable, accurate and insightful financial information’, says founder Sean Hackemann. ‘Our passion is to help businesses fully understand the numbers which in turn helps them create, grow and sustain great businesses’.

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