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THE PEOPLE EDITION

**INSPIRING FUTURES**

WHAT MOTIVATES THE NEXT  
GENERATION

**BAGGING THE BRAND**

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## CONTACTS



## EDITOR

SARAH THOMPSON

PR OFFICER

T: 01902 912319

PROSPER@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK



## ADVERTISING

ALYSON ROCHELLE

ADVERTISING &amp; SPONSORSHIP

T: 01902 912335 / M: 07810 377793

ADVERTISING@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK



## MARKETING &amp; POLICY

NEIL ANDERSON

DIRECTOR OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

T: 01902 912311

NEILANDERSON@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK



## MEMBERSHIP

KAREN WEBB

DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS SERVICES

T: 01902 912338

KARENWEBB@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK



## CREATIVE

STEVEN PARKER

M: 07710 418036

INFO@INTERATIVEMAGAZINES.CO.UK



## COVER PHOTOGRAPHY

CHANPHIPHAT JANTHRA

WWW.CJANTHRAPHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK



## ILLUSTRATIONS

SPARKIUS

INFO@SPARKIUS.ONLINE



## PUBLISHER

INTERACTIVE MAGAZINES

INFO@INTERATIVEMAGAZINES.CO.UK

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**PROSPER**  
MAGAZINE

Black Country Prosper Magazine is the official magazine of The Black Country Chamber of Commerce.

Providing news, information and insights, Prosper is the region's longest running business publication.

Produced on a quarterly basis, the magazine is supported by an array of the Black Country's most influential business leaders and is read by business owners throughout the region and further afield.

## THE CHAMBER PATRON GROUP

The work of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce is supported by these strategic partners - working together to make the region a better place for business.



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## IT'S A NEW YEAR AND A NEW DECADE HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?



**SARAH THOMPSON**

PROSPER EDITOR

[SARATHOMPSON@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK](mailto:SARATHOMPSON@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK)

**W**e now find ourselves in 2020, with a host of fresh opportunities and challenges, and as the dust settles from last month's General Election, and we push the button to print this Prosper with the UK set to leave the EU in just a matter of days - what does the future hold for businesses across our region?

As we bid farewell to a turbulent 10 years, we look forward in this edition to the future and explore some of the innovative and inspiring ways in which people, places and businesses are helping to prepare and train the next generation of our Black Country workforce.

We take a trip around our region to bring you news, views, debate and updates from our educators, skills assessors and training consultants and talk to some of those young people currently in apprenticeship roles.

We ask why teachers are hesitant to advise pupils to opt for apprenticeships, learn how students from some of the region's most deprived areas are being encouraged to become entrepreneurs, discover how one of the oldest companies in the Black Country is working to help rehabilitate offenders and take a look at a young regional business which is increasing its global reach.

And in this edition, we introduce you to our new President, Jude Thompson.

Our interview with Jude gives an insight into plans for the next two years in a role with a Chamber he describes as 'positive, innovative and forward thinking'.

Meanwhile as you read this first edition of 2020 we look ahead to our next Prosper, out in the Spring, we explore the diverse region we live and work in and how businesses are working towards an inclusive economy, championing diversity and celebrating how everybody can make a difference across the Black Country.

*Happy New Year - here's to a successful 2020 and prosperous decade.*

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### EDITORIAL

The opinions expressed in this issue are not necessarily the views held by Interactive Magazines. All information is correct to the publisher's knowledge at the time of going to print. News and press releases should be sent to [prosper@blackcountrychamber.co.uk](mailto:prosper@blackcountrychamber.co.uk) for the attention of The Editor.



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**Clare Yorke, Director, Owen Payne Recruitment**

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# WORKING HARD FOR THE BLACK COUNTRY'S BUSINESS COMMUNITY



**CORIN CRANE**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
[CORINCRANE@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK](mailto:CORINCRANE@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK)

**W**elcome to the first edition of Prosper of 2020 and the second in the new format. As we reflect on the start of a new decade it is sometimes difficult to recall all the dramatic events which have taken place over the preceding ten years which have influenced the economic landscape and shaped the business agenda.

Driven by political upheavals and their ensuing instability and impasse; in many ways it feels that we are not much further forward from the start of 2010 and the impacts of the great recession. Growth in many areas remains flat and many businesses are still holding out on making key decisions whilst we await the resolution of large macro influences.

The recent general election returned a majority government with a clear view on how to tackle Brexit and it looks certain that we will be exiting the European Union at the end of January.

However, the trade and workforce agreements made over the next 12 months during the transition period will have a massive impact on our economy, so as a Chamber, we will continue to champion the needs of the Black Country business community and ensure that government and policymakers hear the voice of our businesses regarding Brexit and beyond.

Over the forthcoming months, Chamber members will learn more about our plans for developing and shaping our policy and

lobbying work and I would encourage many businesses to ensure that their voice is heard and take part.

## ONE OF THE WAYS WHICH BUSINESSES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEBATE AND POLICY PRIORITIES IS BY TAKING PART IN OUR ECONOMIC SURVEY.

Each quarter, we invite you to take part in a survey which forms part of a call-out by 52 other Chambers across the UK to create a compelling case for action and is keenly viewed by economists and decision makers.

In our latest findings, both the manufacturing and service sectors reported that they were operating at well below capacity with competition, taxation and inflation cited as being the top external factors facing both sectors.

Key sectors also indicated that towards the end of 2019 they had seen some positive increases across domestic orders and export sales but also reporting significant challenges

when it came to recruitment.

As a Chamber, we are focused on driving awareness of the skills agenda and inspiring the next generation of our employees and business leaders so that the Black Country remains a great place to do business from.

Indeed, this edition of Prosper features a range of great articles and stories from across the region and business community on how to engage with this key demographic and ensure that your teams are equipped and motivated.

Tackling the skills gap is a big focus for us as a Chamber over the next 12 months, and along with our renewed call that business needs an end to uncertainty, an emphasis on domestic economic policy and clarity on large infrastructure projects benefiting the region including HS2, will form part of our upcoming dialogue with the new government.



## NEWS IN BRIEF

NEWS FROM THE BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS COMMUNITY



### MEMBER NEWS

#### PRESCO ARE CHAMBER'S LONGEST-STANDING MEMBERS

Chamber President Jude Thompson presented a specially commissioned award to Walsall based Presco Components this month as the company celebrated becoming a long-standing Chamber member.

Presco Components, a member since January 1964, were given the award which was designed by Asha Nahl from Q3 Academy Langley, it was manufactured by Ashley Wainwright and colleagues from In-Comm Training in Aldridge.

John Morgan, Presco Components Director said "We have enjoyed membership since 1964 and all through this long relationship we have benefited from the many services that the Chamber have provided. We look forward to many more years of working together."

Jude said "It's brilliant to see members having such a long-standing relationship with the Chamber, it was an honour to meet John and Linda and to present them with the award. It was also great to meet Asha the young lady who designed the award and to see her original drawing brought to life."



### MEMBER NEWS

#### IT'S 40 YEARS FOR MACKWELL

Walsall based Mackwell Electronics celebrates its 40th birthday in February with the company now identified as one of the leading providers of solutions to the global lighting market.

On-going success and expansion are attributed to the development of global transport networks and improved infrastructures. With the world becoming far more accessible for cross-country and intercontinental trading the company can now boast dedicated offices in the Middle East and Hong Kong, together with a vast distributor network.

Mackwell have established themselves as the go-to experts on emergency lighting and compliance and offer advice and training on all the latest emergency lighting legislation, standards and best practice, providing clients with the tools and knowledge to deliver and maintain on-going compliance in safety critical applications.



### MEMBER NEWS

#### ENGINEERING FIRM'S SEARCH FOR AN APPRENTICE IS NOW OVER

With the West Midlands facing a shortage of 20,000 young engineers every year, Dudley based, Alloy Heat Treatment (AHT) was struggling to find the ideal candidate despite heavily promoting the opportunity through their usual channels.

Keen to explore new ways to find apprentices and contribute to inspiring the next generation locally to consider a career in industry, AHT became Champions of Next Gen Makers.

Next Gen Makers is enabling the region's engineering and manufacturing firms to inspire and engage the next generation of engineers, future proof their workforce and create opportunities for local young people in their companies.



### MEMBER NEWS

#### NUCLEAR BOOST POWERS ALLOY WIRE'S EXPANSION

Supplying high-performance nickel alloy wire to fuel the growth in nuclear power is helping a UK manufacturer expand.

Alloy Wire International (AWI) has seen a 10% surge in orders for its specialist wire, which is being used within components for the sector and critical seals and springs found in many of the world's largest reactors.

Employing 31 people across sites in the West Midlands and Yorkshire, the company is on course to hit £1m of sales for this industry for the first time in 73 years and the management team believe its ability to fulfil orders in three weeks is a big factor in this increase.





#### MEMBER NEWS

### NEW CROP OF STUDENTS REPORTING FOR DUTY AT UNIVERSITY

The University of Wolverhampton has launched a new policing degree which enables successful students to apply to become a police officer in any force in England and Wales.

The first students on the BA (Hons) Professional Policing reported for duty in September.

Licensed by the College of Policing, students taught by experts including former police officers, learn about key policing structures, processes and practices relating to areas of criminal investigation, public order, counter-terrorism, response policing and digital crime, among others.



#### MEMBER NEWS

### NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP WEEK

City of Wolverhampton College will be celebrating National Apprenticeship Week in February with a variety of activities and fun social media content.

The week runs from 3–7 February and aims to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships to both learners and employers.

As part of the week, the college will be dispelling the myths surrounding apprenticeships and look forward to championing the apprentices and employers.

The college, which currently supports around 1,200 apprentices working for employers across the region, offers apprenticeships in a variety of subjects including engineering, hairdressing and motor vehicle, as well as work in business, hospitality, IT and marketing roles in companies across the West Midlands, Shropshire and Worcestershire.



#### MEMBER NEWS

### A PLEDGE TO CHANGE HOW WE THINK AND ACT ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Walsall-based charitable training provider and recruitment specialists, Steps To Work, have signed an employer pledge with Time to Change, the growing social movement run by charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, which supports people to open up to mental health problems.

The signing ceremony took place at the organisation's head office in Walsall, where representatives pledged their support with an action plan of activity that will help to break the silence that surrounds mental health in the workplace.



#### MEMBER NEWS

### 20 YEARS IN THE MAKING!

Owen Payne Recruitment Services Ltd head into their 21st anniversary year having supported local businesses for over two decades.

Helping thousands in the region to find work, they celebrated the opening of a second branch in West Bromwich in 2014 due to client demand. Originally established in the centre of Wolverhampton the team, headed up by directors, Lisa Lovell and Clare Yorke, have overcome many obstacles including the recession of 2008, and have grown the business through hard work, adaptability and sheer determination.



#### MEMBER NEWS

### FBC MANBY BOWDLER ACHIEVE MORE SUCCESS IN TOP LEGAL GUIDE

Members of staff from a Wolverhampton law firm is celebrating success after winning recognition in the most prestigious guide to the UK's best legal specialists.

Ten Wolverhampton-based solicitors from FBC Manby Bowdler have joined seven colleagues from the firm's Shropshire offices in being singled out for praise in the 2020 edition of the Legal 500 guide.

Five partners have been named in the elite Leading Lawyers list in the 2020 edition of The Legal 500, with a further two making the list of up and coming Next Generation solicitors and two more being named Rising Stars.

Lawyers awarded the elite ranking are James Sage, Guy Birkett and Craig Ridge. They are joined on the list by Shropshire colleagues Niall Blackie and Steven Corfield. Wolverhampton-based commercial litigation partner Charlotte Clode is named a Next Generation partner – reflecting the 'material difference' she makes to the practice.

## CHAMBER NEWS



### FREE MONTHLY NETWORKING EVENT EVERY THIRD WEDNESDAY

Third Week Wednesday is a free networking event for individuals, business owners and anybody looking to do business in the Black Country taking place on the third Wednesday of each month at Casino 36 in Wolverhampton.

Open to businesses of all sizes and sectors, Third Week Wednesday runs from 10am to 12pm with attendees having the opportunity to make new connections, raise their profile, and meet potential clients and suppliers.

The event also coincides with #BlkCountryHour, the weekly twitter networking session and gives Third Week Wednesday attendees the added opportunity to reach more businesses. For more information please email [richardbrooks@blackcountrychamber.co.uk](mailto:richardbrooks@blackcountrychamber.co.uk) or visit [blackcountrychamber.co.uk](http://blackcountrychamber.co.uk) to book your place at the next event.

### EDITORIAL SUBMISSIONS

*If you would like to submit your business news for consideration, please contact:*

[PROSPER@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK](mailto:PROSPER@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK)



Black Country  
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### STRATEGIC NEWS

## BLACK COUNTRY DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC INTELLIGENCE JOINS THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON AS VISITING PROFESSOR

Delma Dwight, Director of Economic Intelligence at Black Country Consortium joins the University of Wolverhampton as Visiting Professor bringing over 24 years of experience to the Business School.

The role will see Delma working with the University to develop evidence-based policy delivering real impact to the Black Country communities and businesses.

She said, "It is a real honour to be taking up this role. The work of the team at the Intelligence Unit informs, supports and influences decision-making at all levels across the Black Country and I hope to work even closer with the University to ensure the strengthening of this evidence base to make real Impact."



### STRATEGIC NEWS

## FIRST CAREERS EVENT FOR YEAR 6 PRIMARY KIDS LAUNCHED

The Black Country Skills Factory and Ryders Hayes School hosted the first in a series of innovative careers events as part of the new Careers 2030 project. The event saw over 60 Year 6 primary pupils hear from over 10 employees on public sector jobs of the future.

The Careers 2030 project, funded by The Careers & Enterprise Company, aims to build on the already successful Secondary School programmes delivered by the Black Country Skills Factory, the Black Country Careers Hub and the Enterprise Advisor Network. The Careers 2030 project will deliver 10 events covering 8 sectors across the academic year.







#### PATRON NEWS

## FAIRTRADE HITS 25 YEARS

As the Fairtrade Mark hits 25 years, The Midcounties Co-operative has launched its '1 Swap campaign' encouraging shoppers to swap one item in their trolley for a Fairtrade equivalent.

Over the years it has been estimated that the Fairtrade logo and the premium it pays has helped to improve the lives of over 1.6 million farmers and workers across 73 countries including some of the poorest communities in the world. Many of those who originally benefitted from the scheme have grown-up children of their own. Their standard of living and education has been subsidised by us paying a little more for the products we love from coffee to wine.



#### PATRON NEWS

## BIRMINGHAM AIRPORT COMMITS TO NET ZERO CARBON TARGET BY 2033

Birmingham Airport has announced its commitment to become a net-zero carbon airport by the year 2033, prioritising zero-carbon airport operations and minimising carbon offsets.

Recognising that climate change is happening, the airport feels it needs to set an ambitious target ahead of the UK's target of 2050, to reduce its carbon footprint further, quicker. The Midlands airport has already cut its carbon emissions since 2013 by 33 per cent, and emissions per passenger by over 50 per cent, despite growing passenger numbers by 40 per cent.

## AVERAGE R&D TAX CLAIMS ARE CLIMBING

Innovative SMEs are investing in research and development and stand to reclaim an average of £50,000 according to new figures from HMRC.

The government's latest Research and Development Tax Credit Statistics Report dated October 2019 revealed that since the scheme was launched in 2000, over 300,000 claims have been made, and in the region of £27bn has been paid to SMEs in tax relief, with the average value of an individual claim now standing at £50,000.

The figures confirm high numbers of claims by SMEs since the government's R&D Tax Credits scheme launched, however more UK SMEs should be encouraged to make a claim.

Whilst the number of claims has broadly increased year-on-year, it is clear the total number remains at significantly less than 10% of all UK eligible SMEs. With the average claim now worth £50,000, eligible and innovative SMEs are simply missing out on reward and financial support for their R&D, and potentially a considerable amount of money that they could use for the next stage or ongoing investment in their product or service development activities.

The latest figures show the number of first-time applicants has also increased, by around 15% year-on-year with more than 60% of claims made by companies in the manufacturing, professional, scientific and technical, information and communications sectors.

- £4.3bn of R&D Tax relief support has been claimed for 2017/18, corresponding to £31.3bn of R&D expenditure.
- In 2016/17, the total number of claims rose by 20% on the previous year to £52,335, primarily driven by a rise in the number of SME claims.
- Companies with a registered office in London, the South East, and East of England made more claims than the rest of the UK – accounting for 46% of all claims and 61% of the total amount claimed.
- Claims by SMEs in the Midlands has increased by about 15% year-on-year, with average claim values up by around 3%, but these are still in the region of 20% lower than the national average claim value, meaning there is certainly more scope for even more Midlands-based companies to both claim and to potentially claim more.





#### EVENT NEWS

### INSIGHTFUL MEDIA TALK FOR CHAMBER MEMBERS

Members from the Chamber's Patron and Platinum Groups heard about the importance of trusted news brands in the modern age during a talk recently by the editor of the Express & Star.

Martin Wright, Editor-in-Chief of the Midland News Association, publisher of the Express & Star and Shropshire Star, revealed how his team of journalists deliver content in the age of 'fake news'.

Martin explained how research by YouGov showed 74 per cent of those surveyed trusted local newspapers in print and digital for news and information, compared with 22 per cent for social media platforms.

He also explained how regional newspapers put localness at the centre of their output, holding the authority to account in the communities where their staff live and work.



#### THE PLATINUM GROUP NEWS

### TRUCKMAN 'PICKS UP' WHAT VAN? AFTERMARKET ACCESSORY OF THE YEAR AWARD

Truckman, the UK's leading manufacturer and distributor of 4x4 vehicle accessories, has won the prestigious WhatVan? Aftermarket Accessory of the Year Award for its ultra-accessible RS-3 hardtop.

The company's latest British-built commercial hardtop scooped the award at the Hilton Bankside in London and follows in the footsteps of Truckman's truck bed drawer system, DECKED, which won the 2019 Aftermarket Accessory Award.

The WhatVan? Awards are recognised as the most prized independent endorsements of excellence in the Light Commercial Vehicle (LCV) industry. It is a major achievement for the Truckman RS-3, which was only launched to the market in the summer and has recently been granted OEM approval status by Isuzu UK.



#### THE PLATINUM GROUP NEWS

### WHG'S 'THE WORKPLACE' TRANSFORM 3,000 LIVES

Leading Midlands' landlord whg is celebrating after helping an impressive 3,000 people transform their lives and get on the path to employment.

The huge milestone is the culmination of three years of hard work for whg's Employment and Support team, who provide a range of programmes to help its customers gain the skills they need to get into a job, training or volunteering.

The team, who are based at whg's learning centre The Workplace, in Leamore, offer a tailored package of support for anyone unemployed aged 16 or over.

Programmes include confidence building, volunteering, community work clubs, free training courses and Black Country Click Start, which focuses on increasing customers' financial and digital skills.



#### THE PLATINUM GROUP NEWS

### OPENING OF NEW TESTING FACILITY FOR RUBERY OWEN

To celebrate the collaboration of Merlin Powder Characterisation, Phoenix Materials Testing and Rotech Laboratories, within the Rubery Owen Materials Testing Division, Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands, was invited to officially open The Rubery Owen Testing and Research Centre back in November.

The new site combines the latest in high temperature, humidity and pressure testing capabilities along with current fatigue and thermomechanical fatigue (TMF) testing. It also houses the Merlin Powder Characterisation test facility in which the physical properties and compressibility of pharmaceutical drugs (API's), excipients and formulations are determined by use of a hydraulic compaction simulator, coupled with the latest in compression science technology.

### ABBIEGAIL SNAPS UP METALS INDUSTRY '2019 APPRENTICE OF THE YEAR AWARD'

voestalpine Metsec apprentice Abbiegail Hill celebrated recently after winning The Metals Industry Apprentice of the Year 2019, Career Development Award.

Designed to encourage and reward exceptional personal development and commitment to career progression, the awards, now in their 20th year, are the only awards specifically for metals industry apprentices.

The judges looked for apprentices, who had made exceptional progress in developing their knowledge, skills and career in the metals industry; who have made an outstanding contribution to their company; and who have demonstrated the greatest development during their apprenticeship.



#### THE PLATINUM GROUP NEWS



#### THE PLATINUM GROUP NEWS

### BLAKEMORE LOGISTICS STEPS UP FOR SAFER STREETS

More than 700 pupils from across the West Midlands have been educated on the rules of the road as part of Blakemore Logistics' annual Road Safety Week campaign.

Year 7 students from five secondary schools across the region took part in the event, which ran alongside the charity Brake's National Road Safety campaign.

The first part of each school session saw Blakemore Logistics volunteers give a live vehicle demonstration to highlight the dangers of playing near large heavy goods vehicles, the students then participated in various classroom-based activities.

Blakemore gave a presentation highlighting the dangers of blind spots, the importance of using pedestrian crossings and how to be safer on the roads; for many Key Stage 3 students it was their first time commuting to and from school on their own, so it is vital to know the importance of road safety.

St Thomas More Catholic School Careers Lead, Natalie Prior said, "As a predominant employer within Wolverhampton, A.F. Blakemore prides itself on community engagement and reaching out to young people within the local area, they are in a prime position to support students in understanding this practically and Year 7 were engaged, enthusiastic and keen to learn from the team of employees."

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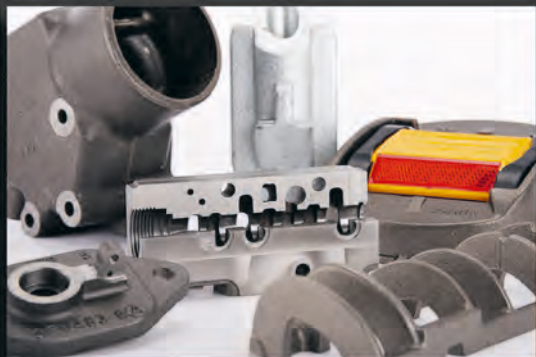
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Celebrating  
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# CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURIAL AND THE RIGHT KIND OF BAGGAGE

WE SPEAK TO PAUL JONES, FOUNDER OF GOODSTART JONES, THE BLACK COUNTRY LUGGAGE AND BAGGAGE LABEL TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HIS JOURNEY AND HIS PASSION TO INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF DESIGNERS.

A lot of baggage isn't something which instantly conjures up the best images, yet the flair, imagination and determination displayed by Paul Jones mean that many leading retailers are now showing a keen interest in his story.

Destined to design the future generation of luxury cars, Paul Jones, the young, fashion-conscious, luggage entrepreneur and founder of Goodstart Jones in Wolverhampton was all set for a career in the Midlands automotive sector when a quirky twist of fate drew him towards the world of luxury travel bags.

Growing up in Walsall, Paul aspired to design high end, luxury, futuristic vehicles for the 21st century, following a transport design degree at Huddersfield University.

During his final exams, he created a piece of work which, although was certainly no vehicle, became the spark for his future business journey and a stepping-stone to the start of his company.

Tucked away in creative studios a stones-throw away from the centre of Wolverhampton Paul and his small team now create bespoke luggage designs for buyers around the world.

Formed from an idea back in 2010, following a stint in footwear design and lessons learnt at Sutton Coldfield College, Paul sat working at his kitchen table to create a lightweight and durable bag with a waterproof wooden stability panel.

He called it the Woodsack and in 2013 Goodstart Jones was born.





## RETAIL BRICKS AND RETAIL CLICKS

After being approached to set up a pop-up shop in Birmingham's famous Oasis Market in 2015 for just two months - which turned into two years - Paul introduced his designs to a whole new audience, and, after several approaches from other young and upcoming designers, he formed 'The Colab', a collaboration of creatives to offer a range of products designed and manufactured by fourteen young and inspiring designers.

Ill health and the need to get back to his first love of design, Paul moved the business to its current home in Wolverhampton at the end of 2017, with plans to expand the range and build an online presence on the back of what he could see as the impending 'death of the high street'.

"I needed to get back to designing," Paul said, "And after forging a mutually beneficial link with another local luggage manufacturer, we pushed ahead to build up Goodstart Jones."

By this point, the design and innovation displayed by this Black Country creative entrepreneur was also beginning to get noticed and it wasn't long before the eBay team came knocking at the door and invited Goodstart Jones to take part in the Wolverhampton Retail Revival in 2018, the team, who had never previously sold on eBay, took every opportunity to learn from the online retail masters.

Helping retail businesses to find customers online the scheme, a steep learning curve for Goodstart Jones, helped them to sell to eBay customers across the world and build their brand; a brand built on creativity and freedom of expression.

"Our products are not just unusual, they're also fully customisable, with every bag hand made in our Wolverhampton workshop," said Paul, "We continue our collaboration with up and coming artists to make bags that are ethical and original but I have to admit we struggle to find skilled staff to produce our bags in the local area. We are happy to train anyone who wants to join our journey, but we do struggle to find people."

Paul also admitted he's found it hard to step back from his love of design to concentrate on the business side of Goodstart Jones, "Our initial challenge was getting people to understand the concept behind the Woodsack design, but my own personal challenge was to take on board everything required to run the business side; finance, marketing, sales. We have to be reminded by our accountant to hold regular board meetings, it must be my creative brain as opposed to the businessman in me."





## EVERY STEP IS A CREATIVE JOURNEY

Enjoying the increased visibility that comes from being on eBay has led Paul alongside his team, designer Anson Carridice-Davids and Paris Walker-Barnes, illustrator and social media guru, to continue their work to inspire the next generation of Black Country designers.

Data gathered from the eBay sales account has taught the team that their product offering was perceived as good quality but a little pricey, further research showed the top 5 best-selling bags, so armed with the data, Paul and his team set about a new project to work with design students at the University of Wolverhampton.

The Goodstart Jones Project eBay gives university design students a project-based learning module and the opportunity to design and create a travel or carry accessory with a low manufacturing cost that can be sold on eBay.

Paul said, “We trialled the concept in Heath Park School in Wolverhampton with their sixth form students and it was incredibly well-received, the degree students have to take many design factors into consideration, such as the target market, materials, product costs and postage along with fitting their design with our brand image, functionality of the product, its USP and purchase cost.

“By understanding the price issue, our solution was to create a new product range that appealed to the price-conscious consumer but didn’t compromise on quality, giving this opportunity to students, who in a few years time may well be running their own creative industries will benefit them gratefully and stand them in good stead for their future careers.”



## WHAT’S IN STORE FOR 2020 & BEYOND FOR GOODSTART JONES?

“New collaborations and designs, and less 3 am starts in the workshop hopefully for me,” Paul said, “that’s if we can find more staff,” he added, “plus more work with the younger generation, including working with University of Wolverhampton photography students on live briefs for our product range, a contract to supply UK vintage stores Harper & Lewis and a chain of 60 Japanese retail stores is just the start,” concluded Paul.



## BUSINESS VOICES

THOUGHTS, COMMENTS AND ADVICE FROM THE REGION'S EXPERTS AND INFLUENCERS...



### HOW SHOULD YOU PLAN TODAY, TO OFFSET YOUR FUTURE £100K GRADUATION DEBT?

STEWART BICKNELL, HEAD OF INVESTMENTS AT PROSPERITY WEALTH LTD, OUTLINES HOW FAMILIES MUST PLAN AHEAD IF THEY WANT THEIR CHILDREN TO BENEFIT FROM A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

**F**amilies who want to ensure children leave university without debt should start saving now as the cost could soar to £100,000 just by rising in line with inflation.

After a three-year degree course, most can expect to leave university with a debt of around £50,000, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Parents or grandparents to young children can help them get a higher education without facing a lifetime of paying for it by starting to save and invest for them while they are still in nappies.

University tuition fees are up to £9,250 a year. The National Union of Students has calculated living costs, accommodation and food can average £12,160 a year, bringing the total price for a three-year course to as much as £64,000.

Based on these figures, Stewart Bicknell, Head of Investments at Prosperity Wealth Ltd in Brierley Hill, calculated that by the time a child born today turns 18, the average price of going to university away from home could rise to as much as £105,000; based on inflation remaining on or near the target rate of 2.5%.

Investing £346 per month into a stocks and shares Junior Isa when a baby is born will cover the full cost by the time they graduate at 21 - assuming average returns of around 5% a year.

Alternatively, families could invest a lump sum of £42,400 now and expect it to grow to cover these future costs from age 18.

Using the same growth rates as above, waiting until five years before your child goes to university to start saving means you will need to invest £953 a month or a lump sum of £76,698.

#### GRANDPARENTS CAN ALSO GET IN ON THE ACT

By gifting money to grandchildren to help with university costs, which also reduces future inheritance tax (IHT) bills for loved ones. Up to £3,000 can be given away each tax year without being subject to IHT at 40%.

On top of this, any amount can be given any time free of IHT if it comes out of the giver's income and their standard of living is not affected.

Potentially exempt transfers are another way to give tax-free gifts, but the giver must survive for seven years after this has been given and can no longer benefit from it.

Stewart said: "We see parents, and increasingly grandparents, happy to make financial sacrifices to ensure their children receive the best education and to prevent them from being saddled with debt at graduation.

"As a firm we encourage people to start thinking about their finances as early as possible, to make the most out of the

funding solution that suits their individual circumstances. Aside from funding education, future generations will need more money than their forbears have, especially when it comes to the cost of living, property purchases & retirement - It's estimated that for a millennial to ensure they retire at a similar point in their lives as their grandparents did; they could need as much as an additional £80,000 saved in order to do so."

Stewart continued, "Saving or investing money at an earlier age is always a good strategy, as it means you can also benefit from compound growth.

"Whilst there is no possible way of guaranteeing the performance of future investments (as the value of investments may well fall as well as rise, affecting your initial capital invested) putting a financial strategy into place as early as possible, will give you the best chance.

"As demonstrated by the calculations above; investing a larger sum at an earlier point in time can mean you may achieve your financial goals with less contributions and often in a shorter period of time than small regular amounts - but having the financial capacity to do so, may not be an option for the majority."

*(Disclaimer - All information included in this article is based on our understanding of the law and HMRC practice, as of 1st November 2019. The above information does not constitute personalised advice and it is strongly recommended that professional advice is sought before you take any action).*



# DIS GROUP AIM FOR GOLD

AWARD WINNING WOLVERHAMPTON BASED DIS GROUP HAVE SECURED A MAJOR GRANT TOWARD A SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT PROJECT WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL

**T**he grant of £50,000 for the Wolverhampton company has been awarded through the Black Country AIM for GOLD programme which supports business growth for small to medium enterprises, and is part funded by the European Regional Development Fund.

Mark Bradley, MD of DIS Group, approached the Council as he was looking to invest half a million pound in a new state of the art LED printer. Saving hugely on electricity consumption and massively reducing the environmental impact by using cutting edge inks are just two of the reasons DIS chose to buy this innovative printing machine - only the third of its kind in the UK.

DIS are a digital print, sign and graphics specialist, work with some of the world's leading organisations on a range of business transformation projects - from office interiors to retail, and the new machine will play a key part in securing future contracts.

Mark commented: "It's a combination of our strength at building close relationships with clients, a real understanding of their demands, along with investing in our staff and in state-of-the-art machinery that has been the foundation of our success."

The new printer will produce traditional print and multilayer printing, as well as printing on a huge range of previously unprintable materials including ones made from waste plastic retrieved from the oceans. It will deliver twice the current production capacity and take up less space than the existing two machines, enabling DIS to hold



more stock, turn around more work and take on jobs they previously turned away.

Rolls Royce, Virgin Gyms and the Paris Fashion Show are some of just a few well-known names and brands that DIS work with regularly. Of course, the household names do not stop there, as DIS also works closely with Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club.

**THE AIM FOR GOLD PROGRAMME SUPPORTS AMBITIOUS COMPANIES TO DEVELOP ROBUST GROWTH PLANS WHICH CAN ATTRACT EUROPEAN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDING TOWARDS CAPITAL PURCHASES AND REVENUE EXPENDITURE.**

With an average grant offered of £18,000 for capital equipment and up to £5,000 for revenue support, both grants could be claimed at the same time for the same project.

Cabinet Member for City Economy, Councillor Harman Banger, said: "The AIM

For GOLD programme is absolutely critical for small and medium businesses in the City of Wolverhampton. It gives the businesses the support they need to help them grow and get to where they wish to get to. Small and Medium enterprises are vital to the Wolverhampton economy."

The programme also provides fully funded coaching and workshops to the value of £2,500, alongside an initial business review, all run on a cohort basis. DIS were part of the first cohort of companies who between them to date have secured over £275,000 of grant, underpinning just over £1m of business investment in City of Wolverhampton.

New lathes, hybrid digital printing machinery, venue finding IT system, warehouse racking and pipework, crane, steelwork and civils, robotic camera and video production items, virtual reality headset and computer, industrial embroidery machinery and a steel splitter and cutter are among the other investments supported, which together are creating over 50 jobs.

The City Council's award-winning Business Development Team are now looking to recruit businesses to the second cohort of the Aim for Gold programme which will begin in February 2020. This is a great opportunity for ambitious growth-minded businesses in the manufacturing, creative and digital, and business services sectors.

**i** [WWW.INVESTWOLVERHAMPTON.COM/AIMFORGOLD](http://WWW.INVESTWOLVERHAMPTON.COM/AIMFORGOLD)

**AIM FOR GOLD**  
Business Growth Programme

Register now

**INVEST**  
City of Wolverhampton

**CITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON COUNCIL**

**AIM FOR GOLD provides ambitious companies with:**

- consultancy, workshops, and growth planning support valued at £2,000
- the opportunity to apply for grant support averaging £15,000

Applications are welcome from businesses in the following sectors who have been trading for at least 3 years:

Manufacturing | Creative | Digital | Business Services | Environmental Technologies

[www.investwolverhampton.com/aimforgold](http://www.investwolverhampton.com/aimforgold)



**European Union**  
European Regional Development Fund

Aim for Gold is part funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). ERDF eligibility criteria applies.

# WHAT DRIVES GENERATION Z?



**ISO QUALITY SERVICES' DIGITAL APPRENTICE, BRYONY RICHARDS, EXPLAINS WHAT'S IMPORTANT**

**T**he next generation of career seekers will be Generation Z, known as the 'True Gen', these digital natives are looking for truth and realism.

There will always be job hunters of every age, but thanks to the generational shift, the next flurry of CVs coming through your doors, figuratively speaking, will be a specific group of youths, who value their – well, values.

So, what exactly are people valuing now? The answer – their futures, followed by the future of the next generation, then the next.

It's no secret that almost everyone is aware of the climate crisis, and it's certainly no secret why. Its not only taken over our media headlines but fuelled the multiple climate strikes late last year.

The rise of Corporate Social Responsibility in the 1950s inspired change in businesses, followed by further changes in the 1970s, when both the Clean Air Act and Safe Drinking Water Act were introduced.

Potential employees will be seeking workplaces that mirror their beliefs in some way. Buying a product from a more ethical source isn't the same as choosing a career, however, a career is something that reflects your interests, your values and your talents. With that in mind, why should people choose your company?

Practicing eco-friendly processes within your business goes from little things; buying recycled toner and ink and reducing the amount of materials going to landfill, to investing in energy saving appliances for the workplace. These are things that may not seem important, but not only do they all add up and save businesses a lot of money over time, they actually show a forward thinking company ethos, and awareness of what needs to be done now in order to be successful still in the future.





# SECTOR FOCUS

INDUSTRY SPECIFIC NEWS AND INSIGHTS  
FROM THE BLACK COUNTRY & BEYOND

## EVENT DIARY:

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE

11 FEBRUARY 2020

**WORKSHOP**Market Selection  
Wolverhampton Science Park**NON-SECTOR SPECIFIC**

JAYNE.SHIELDS@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

12 FEBRUARY 2020

**WORKSHOP**Business Culture: Scandinavia &  
Nordics

The Studio – Birmingham

**NON-SECTOR SPECIFIC**

GERTI.WILLIS@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

13 FEBRUARY 2020

**CONFERENCE**GoGlobal: Grow your digital  
footprint

The NEC – Birmingham

**NON-SECTOR SPECIFIC / ONLINE SELLING**

LORNA.BARRADINE@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

4 MARCH 2020

**WORKSHOP**Export Sales Guide to Minimising  
Risk and Maximising Profit  
Wolverhampton Science Park**NON-SECTOR SPECIFIC**

JAYNE.SHIELDS@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

10 MARCH 2020

**MEET THE EXPERT**LATAC (Latin America and the  
Caribbean Roadshow)

ANDY.SMITH@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

8-14 MARCH 2020

**MISSION**ConExpo Exhibition  
USA (Las Vegas)**CONSTRUCTION/INFRASTRUCTURE**

ANYA.NOVAK@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

MARION DOHERTY: +44 (0)1902 912325

MARION.DOHERTY@MOBILE.TRADE.GOV.UK

SO JUST HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO  
BECOME AEO ACCREDITED?PROSPER SPOKE TO ONE TIPTON BASED BUSINESS RECENTLY  
AWARDED AUTHORISED ECONOMIC OPERATOR (AEO) STATUS

There are challenging times ahead for anyone involved in international trade.

Along with Brexit, currently on every UK business agenda there is also an increasing threat of tariff wars constantly reported.

Each bring opportunities and challenges for those wishing to trade as either an importer or exporter of goods or services.

Preparing for different scenarios has been one of several challenges faced by Tipton based H&R ChemPharm (UK).

The business, one of the UK's leading formulators of specialist oil and wax products, supplies a diverse global customer base, with 80% of its output exported.

In addition, the business sources many of its raw materials through European and other globally based trading partners.

Assessing their Brexit options, the business identified the AEO accreditation as a critical milestone in supporting their aggressive business growth, at the same time ensuring their global customer base continues to enjoy an efficient service.

Paul Waterfield, Purchasing Manager at H&R ChemPharm explains the route they took to gain the accreditation;

"H&R quickly identified Authorised Economic Operator status as one of the key goals in fulfilling our Brexit preparations. It was clear what the benefits would be to the business and our significant export customer base. The analysis carried out in the pre-assessment stage ratified the robustness of our existing procedures and our supply chain.

"This is a process every business should go through to be a successful exporter. Being well-organised eased us through the HMRC audit process, with formal accreditation following quickly afterwards.

"H&R are very proud to have obtained Authorised Economic Operator status and share the advantages of our trusted trader status with our global customer base to improve our service to them.

"Brexit or not, AEO status is a must have for any forward-thinking business to succeed in today's competitive global marketplace."

AEO status will create a number of advantages for the business, including;

- Recognition to an internationally recognised standard in over 70 countries, either with AEO or compatible legislation (Mutual Recognition Agreements)
- Simplified or more efficient import and export procedures for both H&R ChemPharm (UK) and their customers
- More efficient transportation through borders
- Priority clearance in the event of any import control, with AEO approval H&R ChemPharm (UK) are now acknowledged as a 'trusted trader' by customs authorities

The Black Country Chamber run a number of training courses throughout the year to help companies with up to date procedures for Export Documentation, Letters of Credit, International Trade Operations & Procedures (ITOPS), Incoterms 2020 Programme and a Practical Guide to Importing.

**TRAINING@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK**





## DELIVERING EDUCATION ACROSS THE GLOBE...

SEVEN YEARS OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION FROM DUDLEY COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY

Instituted in 1862, Dudley College of Technology has forged a reputation for the breadth and excellence of the educational service they provide in a wide range of countries, as well as domestically.

The current international team was developed seven years ago after the decision was taken to not only recruit students from overseas but to also deliver their outstanding educational programmes across the globe. The progressive approach adopted by the international unit has enabled them to become acclimatised to the specific challenges of overseas projects.

The international strategy has always had social impact at its core. Engendering lasting positive effect has relied upon building a strong network of partners, such as the British Council and the Department for International Trade (DIT), to identify opportunities in new geographic territories; programmes have now been run in the Middle East, Africa, India and – most recently – China.

Prosper spoke to the team about their recent venture in China, which was not without a few hurdles.

**THE COLLEGE WAS FIRST APPROACHED BY ASSOCIATES IN CHINA AFTER THE CHINESE STUDENTS HAD BEEN REFUSED VISAS TO STUDY IN AUSTRALIA FOLLOWING IMMIGRATION CHANGES.**

The team were keen to put together a proposal for the Motor Vehicle course for government-sponsored students tackling the two main obstacles: obtaining visas and imparting vital English language skills. Having previously developed a strong relationship with the DIT, they were able to access visa support and are looking forward to welcoming the students to the College.

The relationship with the DIT stretches back to 2017 when the opportunity arose to send seven members of the construction department to Nigeria to upskill 100 workers and empower them to build an orphanage. The endeavour affected a permanent impact on the region, with plans now underway to set up a centre of excellence.

Meanwhile, the College has benefitted from the support of their International Trade Advisor, Heather Crocker, who has been proactive in sending regular opportunities and advice on funding streams which has

led to financial support from the Education is GREAT campaign. The team have recognised the value of working holistically to bring the benefits of international work to the wider West Midlands region.

Flexibility has been a cornerstone to their work overseas. Managing an international project necessitates a responsive approach as cross-border timelines are particularly susceptible to fluctuations. Navigating the fine line between deadlines and adaptability has been something the College has become good at over the last few years. The international division has reached a certain degree of maturity wherein the rolling programme of large-scale projects has become self-sustaining.

Going forward the focus for the team is to continue prioritising relationships with various partners both abroad and at home. With a sharp upturn in the number of overseas students studying at the College, accessing the best knowledge and expertise from around the world is vital to providing their students with a level of educational excellence which is truly ahead of the game.

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

THE BLACK COUNTRY HAS A HISTORY OF PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESSES GIVING THEIR SUPPORT TO HELP OUR COMMUNITIES, CHARITIES AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT INITIATIVES.



### PAYCARE'S FUNDRAISING BRINGS OVER £17K TO LOCAL CAUSES

Paycare, the not-for-profit Health Cash Plan, is celebrating collective success after raising over £17,000 for good causes in the region.

Paycare's MyGiving scheme saw each of its 32 employees provided with £250 which they could either donate directly to a cause of their choice or use to amplify an existing fundraising initiative.

In just seven months, the team has raised £17,171.41 which has been shared with various organisations including Project GIVE, The Good Shepherd Ministry, and Bliss Baby Charity.



## CHAMBER CHAMPIONS BLACK COUNTRY ACORNS HOSPICE APPEAL

BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER AWARDS RAISES ALMOST £6,000

Former Black Country Chamber President, Julie Cunningham, along with Nella Share and Robin Tong from MET Recruitment, and Ruth Serrell and Emma Templeton from Plumbing World, handed over a cheque for almost £6,000 towards the Save Acorns Black Country Children's Hospice Appeal in November.

The money, raised at the recent Black Country Chamber Awards, was the culmination of donations from guests on the evening and the amazing generosity of Chamber members, MET Recruitment, charity sponsor on the evening, who donated £1,000, and Plumbing World, who generously matched the amount raised on the evening.

Urgent funds are still needed to help save the Walsall based hospice, which provides a lifeline for local life-limited and life-threatened children and their families.

Nella Share from MET Recruitment said, "We have always been a small business with a big heart, charity and giving back to the local community has always been at the centre of everything we do and it's so important to us to fulfil our corporate and social responsibilities by working with local charities that really need our help."

Ruth Serrell, of Rowley Regis based Plumbing World, said, "We chose to match the amount raised on the evening as we feel it is an incredibly good cause. I have worked in the hospice sector and they rely so heavily on the goodwill of the community and their fundraising initiatives."

The Save Acorns Black Country Hospice Appeal was launched by Acorns in July 2019 as the proposed closure of its hospice in Walsall was put on hold following pledges of additional NHS support, that should ensure the hospice is adequately funded from 2023/24 onwards. The Appeal sets out to raise £2million over the next two years.

Vicki Rowles, Head of Fundraising at Acorns, said: "What a fantastic amount! Thank you to everyone who donated in support of Acorns and our Black Country Hospice Appeal. This wonderful sum will help us get another step closer to our £2million fundraising target as we continue the fight to safeguard the longer-term future of Acorns hospice in the Black Country. Every penny counts and thanks to generous donations like this, we're hopeful that we will reach our goal."

[WWW.ACORNS.ORG.UK/APPEAL](http://WWW.ACORNS.ORG.UK/APPEAL)





## THE APPRENTICE – YOU’RE HIRED!

**A&M EDM’S EXPANDING WORKFORCE DEMANDS A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO APPRENTICE OPPORTUNITIES**

**S**methwick-based precision engineering company A&M EDM takes a proactive approach in developing its apprentices. We caught up with them to see how the team of apprentices are honing their skills today for the workforce of tomorrow.

A&M, manufacturers of prototypes, precision components and tooling for aerospace, automotive, manufacturing assembly and motorsport customers, has doubled its workforce since 2013, now boasts a team of 71 and sales in excess of £6m.

Along with all UK manufacturers, one of the major challenges they faced, is the shortage of skilled engineers and technicians, becoming more acute as growing numbers of experienced engineers retire.

This demographic time bomb has its roots in the 1980s when manufacturing suffered recession and was perceived as an unattractive career, resulting in young people turning away from apprenticeships and factories towards degrees and service sector jobs.

A&M began its Apprenticeships in 2013, selecting individuals with creative enthusiasm and STEM qualifications. Using experienced staff as mentors on the programme which starts with basic engineering as its foundation. Apprentices then move onto practical skills for different

*Research by Make UK, the organisation representing UK manufacturing revealed:*

**UK COMPANIES NEED 124,000 SKILLED ENGINEERS IN 2020**

**A PROJECTED SHORTFALL OF 59,000 ENGINEERS**

**46% OF MANUFACTURERS REPORTING RECRUITMENT DIFFICULTIES IN 2019**

operations such as milling, turning, CNC operation and spark and wire eroding.

A&M works in partnership with Dudley College, as its chosen academic training provider for Level 3 Apprenticeships and HNC. In recent years A&M has trained over a dozen individuals, with four currently on apprenticeships, three progressing to the Dudley College HNC Higher Apprenticeship programme and three recently completing their HNC qualifications.

**i** [WWW.AMEDM.CO.UK](http://WWW.AMEDM.CO.UK)

## ...AND WHAT DO THE APPRENTICES THINK?

Three A&M employees gave their views Joe Siviter, aged 18 is in the final year of his Manufacturing Engineering Apprenticeship.

Joe now works on electro-discharge machining spark erosion and has already worked on hundreds of jobs for diverse customers.

Joe said, “Combining the theory I learn at Dudley College with on the job training has developed my skills much faster. My favourite job is spark eroding a component for a product with over 200 years of heritage.”

Joe plans to progress to a higher HNC and then a degree. His long-term aim is to focus on aerospace engineering design. He said, “My Apprenticeship gives me relevant work skills and a qualification. Schools should do more to encourage apprenticeships as an alternative to the university route.”

Jack Kemp, aged 24, has just completed his Apprenticeship; he wants to continue learning by taking a part-time engineering degree.

“Most of the college work is theoretical, including mathematics, material properties and CAD/CAM design. I’ve put this into practice, working in different parts of the company. I’ve CNC milled parts for a rotary engine and machined components to precise tolerances for a motorsport customer.”

David Tomkins aged 23, was one of A&M’s first apprentices in 2013 and is completing his HNC. A memorable job for David was spark eroding an injection mould tool for a major manufacturer of razor blades to a tolerance of 5 microns.

David’s clear on the advantages of an Apprenticeship “I earn a good wage and have six years’ engineering experience in a job which I’ve been trained to do. I completely support apprenticeships and believe my experience gives me an edge over graduates.”



## ENGINEERING ACADEMY HELPS TO BRIDGE SKILLS GAP FOR EMPLOYERS ACROSS THE REGION

Dudley College of Technology is meeting the current and future demand for higher-level technical skills in many sectors by working closely with employers across the region.

We examine one of the College's newest initiatives, it's Engineering and Manufacturing Academy which launched recently, with the backing of local employers, to help identify young talented engineers and develop their skills to help bridge the skills gap for businesses across the region.

Learners from the Academy complete an initial 4-week technical training programme before moving on to an Apprenticeship or further full-time study and then securing a career in the Engineering or Manufacturing sectors.

The first cohort of 29 students completed their programme in September 2019 with all of them moving on to an apprenticeship with a local employer or enrolling on to a full-time programme of study. One of the first 14 who moved to an Apprenticeship at Hockley Pattern & Tool Co Ltd, was Derry Naylor, aged 16.

Derry said, "The programme was hands-on and practical, allowing me to learn many new skills which in turn allowed Hockley Pattern & Tool Co Ltd to employ me as an Apprentice something I'm really grateful for as I absolutely love my job."

Principal at Dudley College of Technology, Neil Thomas told us, "I'm extremely pleased to see so many students from the Academy secure exciting Apprenticeships with local employers. I'm particularly delighted that in many cases this has been brought about by the flexible way in which the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has allowed businesses to fund placements through the Skills Deal."



## PLEASE SIR, CAN WE GROW UP TO BE ENTREPRENEURS?

**SCHOOLCHILDREN IN DEPRIVED AREAS ARE BEING GIVEN THE CHANCE TO LEARN ABOUT ENTERPRISE AS WELL AS MATHS.**

**J**ames Ludlow, the headteacher of the King's Church of England School in Wolverhampton, often stops pupils in the corridor to ask them what they want to do in the future. For years, the answer has always been the same: "I don't know, sir."

The secondary school contends with some of the most complex conditions in the country for providing education. Its near-700 students are drawn from 40 different primary schools and speak more than 40 languages. One pupil who joined recently had escaped the war in Syria.

Pupils talk regularly to entrepreneurs and business leaders and are invited to work at local companies — including The Mount Hotel Country Manor.

Along with English, Maths and Science, pupils are being taught the skills required to start businesses and thrive as workers in a changing economy that values entrepreneurship as much as it does qualifications in traditional subjects.

King's is part of a scheme run by the Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC),

which was set up by the government in 2015 to improve careers education. More than 2,500 Enterprise Advisors now volunteer in schools and colleges across England, with the aim of giving kids their first taste of working with businesses.

The project has proved especially effective in deprived areas, where generational unemployment means young people have no chance to build a network of contacts to give them a leg-up into the world of work. A report released by the CEC last week showed schools in the Black Country, Humber and Tees Valley regions were among the most improved for careers education.

"It's given the whole school a big lift," said James, who joined King's in 2016 to help turn the school around. "There are some pupils here who can be very hard to reach. We're telling them that they can do it — they can achieve."

It is working, as well: a recent Ofsted report commended the school for its careers programme.





## TEACHERS UNLIKELY TO ADVISE PUPILS TO OPT FOR APPRENTICESHIP

A GROWING PROPORTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE INTERESTED IN STARTING AN APPRENTICESHIP RATHER THAN GOING TO UNIVERSITY, BUT TEACHERS ARE STILL UNLIKELY TO ADVISE THEIR HIGH-ATTAINING STUDENTS TO TAKE THIS ROUTE NEW POLLING BY THE SUTTON TRUST INDICATES.

**O**ver 2,000 young people attending academies and maintained schools in England and Wales were surveyed by Ipsos MORI about their attitudes to apprenticeships.

Around two-thirds (64%) said they would be very or fairly interested in starting an apprenticeship for a job they wanted to do instead of going to university, a rise of nine percentage points from 2014 when 55% of young people said they were interested in this route. A quarter (25%) of those polled in 2019 said they were not very or not at all interested in starting an apprenticeship.

Previous research by the Sutton Trust found that the best apprentices – those with a level 5 qualification or higher – will earn £50,000 more in their lifetime than someone with an undergraduate degree from a university outside of the Russell Group.

The polling highlights a disconnect between young people's interest in apprenticeships and the advice they're offered at school. 40% of the young people surveyed said their teachers had never discussed the idea of apprenticeships with them. However, the proportion saying they had discussed apprenticeships with their teacher is improving, up from 31% in 2014 to 41% this year.

### EARN WHILE YOU LEARN

The ability to earn while you learn, in order to fast-track your career, are two of the main reasons young people choose apprenticeships according to a recent survey carried out by Black Country based In-Comm Training.

Aldridge based In-Comm, which supports over 2,000 learners every year, asked two cohorts of students for their opinions on vocational learning and the results were emphatic, with 95% of respondents feeling that undertaking an apprenticeship had helped accelerate their career.

Furthermore, 90% would recommend it as an alternative to going to university, with HNC Higher Apprenticeships launched in the Autumn of 2019, to take budding engineers all the way to a degree.

Bekki Phillips, Managing Director of In-Comm Training, stated, "There has been a massive change in attitudes towards vocational learning and that is reflected in the number of young people that are now choosing to go down the apprenticeship route as their 'first choice' and not as a backstop.

"It has taken us a while to get to this position, but I think businesses and education have started to make real inroads into putting together a persuasive case for being an

apprentice.

"In addition to being able to apply learning to live manufacturing situations, we have estimated that doing an apprenticeship all the way through to degree level could be a £100,000 opportunity when you consider the wages you are paid and the tuition fees that you save."

Over £7.5m has been spent on equipping the three In-Comm centres in Aldridge, Bridgnorth and Shrewsbury, with the latest CNC machinery, fluid power cells, 3D printing capability and metrology, not to mention hosting the National Power Press and Tooling Centre.

Sir Peter Lampl, Founder of the Sutton Trust and Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation, said, "The best apprenticeships offer young people outstanding career prospects and financial rewards. So, it is good to see that a growing proportion see them as offering genuine alternatives to A-levels and degrees. However, we need to do much more to make sure teachers advise their students to opt for apprenticeships. This includes dispelling their view that apprenticeships are not of high quality and giving teachers access to the information they need."

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**i** FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:

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**ALISON TRINDER: +44 (0)1902 912301**  
[ALISONTRINDER@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK](mailto:ALISONTRINDER@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK)



## NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION

COMFYSE - A START-UP BUSINESS BORN FROM PAIN

**W**ith 70% of first-time mothers experiencing physical trauma caused by childbirth, it really can be a painful experience, yet there are few specifically designed solutions for them to use to ease their pain.

Runner up in the Business Start-Up category at the recent Black Country Chamber Awards, was Anita Hill, founder of Comfyse and a mum who decided to tackle the problem.

After experiencing perineal trauma and wanting a more flexible approach to work in order to fit around her children, Anita decided to create a solution for new moms across the world to use. "I really struggled to sit down after giving birth to my first baby and it continued for 12 months.

"I wasn't able to find a solution to ease my discomfort as I had both perineal and coccyx pain, so I thought I'd create a new product for other women to use to make their lives better.

"Setting up the business I was keen to use British suppliers to make my maternity seating cushion, supporting the British economy and keeping the carbon footprint of the product as low as possible, were both important to me."

But as Anita explains it hasn't been easy, "If I'm honest it has been a real challenge to find suppliers that were prepared to work with a start-up business and ones which had the seamstress skills needed."

However, Anita's tenacity and persistence paid off and she now has two British suppliers who have helped in the design and creation of a new maternity seating cushion that is soft, supportive and flexible in design.

And with that Comfyse was launched in early 2019.

But the first year has thrown up significant challenges for Anita and her product.

Her first supplier of cushion covers ceased trading just one month after the launch of Comfyse, plunging the start-up business into 'a rollercoaster ride', but driven by the desire to help the 300,000 women in the UK who suffer physical issues caused by childbirth every year, Anita forged ahead and plans are now in place for the product to sell across several online retail platforms in early 2020.

**i** [WWW.COMFYSE.COM](http://WWW.COMFYSE.COM)





## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DRIVING THE 'NEXT GENERATION' OF JOBS IN THE UK

### HOW WILL THE RISE OF AI IMPACT FUTURE WORKERS?

**T**he uptake of AI by industry will drastically change the UK job market in the coming years – with 133 million new jobs expected to be created globally and up to a third of jobs will be automated or likely to change as a result of the emergence of AI – impacting 10.5 million workers.

The findings come from a new report – Harnessing the Power of AI: The Demand for Future Skills - from global recruiter Robert Walters and market analysis experts Vacancy Soft.

Ollie Sexton, Principal at Robert Walters said, “As businesses become ever more resilient there is an increasing amount of pressure on the processes of data capture and integration. As a result, we have seen an unprecedented number of roles being created with data skill set at their core.

“Our job force cannot afford to not get to grips with data and digitalisation. Since 2015 the volume of data created worldwide has more than doubled – increasing (on average) by 28% year-on-year.

“Now is the perfect time to start honing UK talent for the next generation of AI-influenced jobs. If you look at the statistics in this report, we can see that demand is already rife, what we are at risk of is a shortage of talent and skills.”

### DEMAND FOR DATA PROFESSIONALS

IT professionals dedicated to data management appear to be the fastest-growing area within large or global entities, with volumes increasing ten-fold in three years – an increase in vacancies of 160% since 2015.

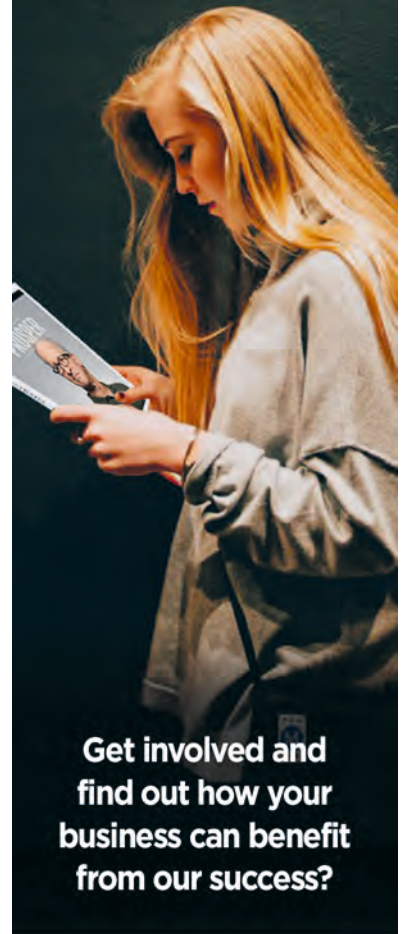
More generally speaking, data roles across the board have increased by 80% since 2015 – with key areas of growth including data scientists and engineers.

What has been the most interesting to see is the emergence of data scientist as a mainstream profession – with job vacancies increasing by a staggering 110% year-on-year. The same trend can be seen with data engineers, averaging 86% year-on-year job growth.

# PROSPER

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## JAILHOUSE ROCKS WITH CHOIR RESTART PROGRAMME

HOW WORKING WITHIN THE PRISON SYSTEM HAS LED TO A CHANGE OF HEART FOR THE HEAD OF ONE BLACK COUNTRY MANUFACTURING FIRM...

**F**or many years, hard labour and prison ministries were the only forms of rehabilitation and support a prisoner could get.

In more recent years, prisons have opened up their doors to non-profit organisations, education programmes and rehabilitation services that are dedicated to helping prisoners live better lives and prepare for the challenges of re-entering society.

A Black Country Chamber speed networking event at Brinsford Young Offenders Prison in 2018, run in-conjunction with Beating Time and Restart, the prison choir programme and employers network, introduced Alan Mann, General Manager of Darlaston based, Rozzone Limited to the scheme; a scheme which saw him take an incredible personal journey from doubting sceptic to humble businessman.

Speaking about his experience Alan said, "Whilst many people in prison are naturally entrepreneurial and aspire to work for themselves, to date, practical entrepreneurial skills have been missing from prison education therefore Restart, a totally new and innovative approach to stopping people who have served a custodial sentence from returning to prison, involves serious joined-up thinking and is a collaboration between organisations to bring greater lasting change. "I have to admit I was very sceptical when

first approached by our Group Chairman, Richard Jenkins of Rubery Owen. Richard was keen to get involved with the project having visited Brinsford along-side the team from the Chamber.

**"WORKING WITH MEMBERS OF THE BEATING TIME CHOIR AND LEARNING MORE ABOUT WHO THESE GUYS ARE AND THEIR LIFE STORIES, CONVINCED ME THAT THE PROGRAMME WAS WORTH INVESTING MY TIME IN."**

Alan, along with KPMG's Head of Consulting, Simon Albrighton and the Restart Team worked with seven men in HMP Featherstone Prison to develop a business plan for a franchised sales arm of Rozzone Smart Washers, a technology developed in conjunction with the University of Wolverhampton, which cleans grease and oil from industrial parts without the use of environmentally damaging solvents.

Over the 15-week Restart programme, the business team worked with the prisoners across every business discipline, from business planning and objectives to sales, marketing, finance and budget control.

Funded by the Worshipful Company of Weavers, KPMG and G4S, the Restart

programme works across the country to help rehabilitate prisoners and give them a chance to train for work on the outside.

Alan said, "Some of these guys have had a tough start in life, many come from very chaotic backgrounds and sadly parental care, support, guidance and discipline has just not been a part of their upbringing. Falling off the straight and narrow was inevitable for some of them."

With reoffending rates currently at 47-60% nationally and the cost to society around £15 billion a year, having a job is a known factor in reducing re-offending.

However, reluctance to employ people with convictions, poor academic records and often a lifetime of being socially excluded, makes it difficult to find a job on leaving prison. A rational response is to create work for yourself.

And as Prosper goes to print, the team at Rozzone are hoping that one of the prisoners that have worked with them on the programme may consider joining them on their release in the coming weeks.



[WWW.BEATINGTIME.ORG](http://WWW.BEATINGTIME.ORG)



# LAW FIRMS OPTIMISTIC FOR FUTURE AND FOCUS ON TALENT DESPITE UNCERTAIN TIMES

PROSPER REVEALS THE RESULTS OF CROWE'S BENCHMARKING SURVEY 2019 WHICH PROVIDES A TIMELY SNAPSHOT OF THE UK LEGAL MARKET.

**A**gainst a backdrop of Brexit, political and economic chaos, the UK legal industry has shown remarkable resilience, with the majority of firms (80%) seeing an increase in revenue and more than a third achieving growth in excess of 10%.

More than half of participants stated they have a negative outlook for the UK economy as a whole in the coming year, however, the Oldbury based company reported firms are more confident about their own position, with 76% stating they have a positive, or very positive, outlook for 2020.

UK law firms are more focused on shoring up their own internal operations and managing operational risks. While previous benchmarking results showed that Brexit worries and the threat of new market entrants were keeping firms up at night, attitudes have shifted in the past 12 months.

When it comes to the top two risks to their businesses, firms are in agreement on what matters most, highlighting talent retention and the threat of fraud and cybercrime as the top two concerns going into 2020.

As part of this inward focus on talent, 71% of participating firms and 60% of regional firms are making plans to increase their level of agile, remote and virtual working and 41% of all firms are planning to update their people strategy in the next 18 months.

Having identified cybercrime as the other major threat to their bottom lines, many are undertaking periodic reviews of their digital hygiene. Ultimately, visible robust data and transactional security may become one of the defining factors for law firm clients when they choose an advisor.

Regional performance remains encouraging. 2019 saw a bounce-back for local firms whose top lines increased to 78% (up 7%



from the previous year). Just under half of regional firms enjoyed growth in PEP of more than 10% with the overall growth rates for regional firms for this year higher than those in the Capital - a reversal of last year's position and indicating a level of self-confidence and optimism for the coming year.

# EMPLOYERS ARE REGULARLY 'GHOSTED' IN THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

MET RECRUITMENT'S NELLA SHARE CALLS FOR BETTER EMPLOYEE CONNECTION AND ENGAGEMENT

**F**our-fifths (84%) of UK employers have experienced a candidate 'ghosting' them at some point during the recruitment process, according to new research from law firm Joelson.

The term 'ghosting' was traditionally used to describe the practice of serial daters trying to terminate a conversation or relationship without an explanation - it has moved into the working world, leaving some employers and recruiters severely in the lurch.

Candidates or new employees failing to turn up, either to an interview or to work, can cost employers between £2,000 and £5,000, according to a third of surveyed employers (31%).

The ways in which employers and recruiters have been ghosted varied, with the survey pointing to 62% of employers trying to

contact applicants two or three times after they had gone silent and heard nothing, with a further 62% observed a no-show on the new recruits' first day of work.

According to 52% of respondents, employees have ghosted their employers by simply not turning up for their shift and failing to provide any resignation note or explanation as to their absence.

Nella Share, Director at MET Recruitment Ltd based in Dudley and Wolverhampton shared her thoughts about the problem, "Both direct employers and recruitment agencies are being hit hard by the backlash of 'ghosting' and the associated costs both in monetary terms and lost time are rising rapidly.

"The current recruitment market is highly candidate-driven and as a result of this candidates are now considering several



employment opportunities, in many circumstances, they are also fortunate to be considering more than one job offer. There has never been a time when building a strong candidate/employee relationship has been more important.

"This is a recruitment wide issue that is on the rise and I can't urge recruiters and employers to engage with and understand and connect with their candidates/employees more, I believe this is key to turning the issue around."

**i** [WWW.METRECRUITMENT.COM](http://WWW.METRECRUITMENT.COM)



## RESULTS FROM THE CHAMBER'S QUARTERLY ECONOMIC SURVEY:



### WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT HEALTH AND WELLBEING BUDGET?

- ▶ DID NOT SAY | 32%
- ▶ DO NOT INVEST | 24%
- ▶ SPEND UNDER £20 | 20%
- ▶ SPEND BETWEEN £20 AND £50 | 7%
- ▶ SPEND OVER £50 | 17%



### WHICH BENEFITS DO YOU OFFER?

- ▶ FLEXIBLE WORKING | 33% DO | 67% DON'T
- ▶ HEALTH CASH PLAN | 17% DO | 83% DON'T
- ▶ EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE | 14% DO | 86% DON'T
- ▶ TELEPHONE GP | 7% DO | 93% DON'T



### WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES YOU FACE?

- ▶ HIGH ABSENTEEISM / PRESENTEEISM | 7%
- ▶ MENTAL HEALTH | 18%
- ▶ EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT | 16%
- ▶ STAFF RETENTION | 13%
- ▶ HIGH PRESSURE WORK ENVIRONMENT | 29%
- ▶ LONG TERM SICK | 7%
- ▶ OTHER | 10%

### OTHER USEFUL STATISTICS

45% of businesses responding to the survey employ more than 20 members of staff, while 55% employ less than 20.

Of those employing more than 20, 40% said high work pressure was a challenge in their company.

Of those employing more than 20, 30% said that mental health was a challenge.



FOR MORE INFORMATION REGARDING THE QUARTERLY ECONOMIC SURVEY PLEASE CALL 0330 024 0820



## A QUARTER OF BUSINESSES HAVE NO HEALTH BUDGET BUT EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH IS STILL A BIG ISSUE

A QUARTER OF BUSINESSES STILL AREN'T INVESTING IN THEIR EMPLOYEES' HEALTH AND WELLBEING, DESPITE WIDESPREAD WORRIES ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WORK PRESSURES.

**K**evin Rogers, Chief Executive of Health Cash Plan provider Paycare, has urged bosses across the region to educate themselves about the benefits of a proactive approach to team wellbeing.

His call comes following the results of the latest Black Country Chamber of Commerce's Quarterly Economic Survey, which included several health and wellbeing questions posed by the Wolverhampton-based not-for-profit company.

A total of 24 per cent of respondents admitted they had no health budget currently. In contrast, 20 per cent spend up to £20 per year per employee, 7 per cent invest between £20 and £50, and 17 per cent allocate more than £50 per person annually.

When asked about the biggest challenge they faced, 29 per cent of respondents said their staff worked in a high-pressure environment, 18 per cent said mental health, 7 per cent said high absenteeism and presenteeism levels, and a further 7 per cent had problems with long-term sickness.

Kevin told Prosper, "It's great to see some firms investing but really worrying to see others ignoring the very real benefits – to

both staff and the company itself – of having a health and wellbeing budget. Everyone has had to tighten their belts in recent years, but your employees are your most priceless asset; most bosses wouldn't think twice about servicing the office photocopier or maintaining factory equipment, so why ignore everything your staff might need to keep them functioning at their most productive level?

"It's clear from feedback that there are many health and wellbeing worries shared by lots of the region's employers, but two thirds also said they didn't offer flexible working, more than eight in ten don't have a Health Cash Plan in place, and 86 per cent of companies don't have access to an Employee Assistance Programme.

"Ignoring employee wellbeing completely or not investing in the right areas is going to have an impact on sickness rates, presenteeism, morale and productivity. So, setting aside even a small budget can reduce all the major challenges reported to us through this survey," Kevin concluded.

**i** [WWW.PAYCARE.ORG](http://WWW.PAYCARE.ORG)

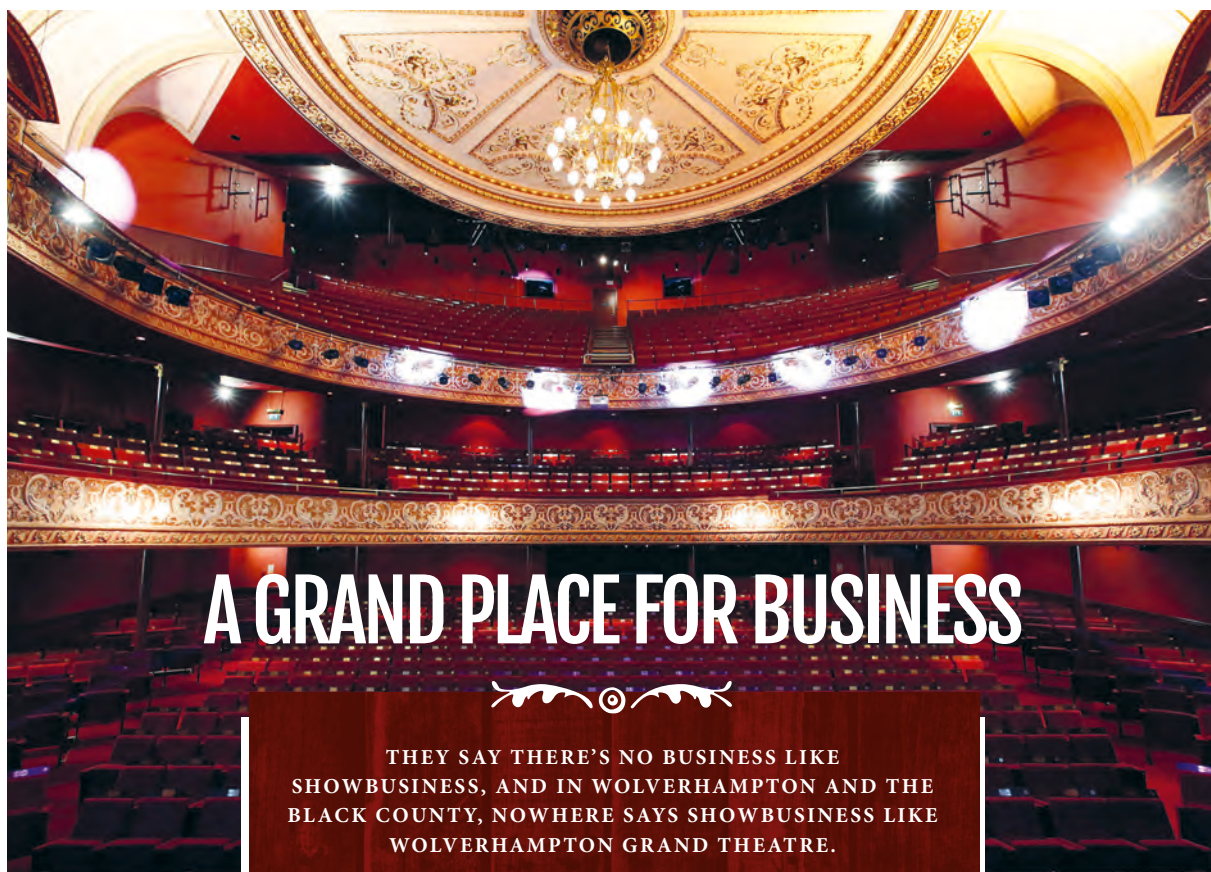


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# A GRAND PLACE FOR BUSINESS



THEY SAY THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOWBUSINESS, AND IN WOLVERHAMPTON AND THE BLACK COUNTY, NOWHERE SAYS SHOWBUSINESS LIKE WOLVERHAMPTON GRAND THEATRE.

With its iconic status and city-centre location, the Grand makes an ideal venue to help you hit your targets and meet your goals, whether you work in HR, marketing or business development. Charlotte Davies, Development Manager at the Grand Theatre explains how...



## ♥ YOUR FOCUS IS HR 🐯

Your team has worked hard to win that all-important contract and now you want to celebrate!

Organise a team night out and come and see a show! Drinks packages are available and if you want to go all out, the Spotlight Lounge is perfect for pre-show parties and interval drinks for up to 30 people. Depending on the size of your team, you may be eligible for group discounts on show tickets too.

**You are looking for new and interesting ways to enhance your team's skills and CPD.**

Where better to develop your public speaking skills than in a theatre? Not only do we offer Public Speaking with Confidence workshops led by a professional actor and public speaking coach, but we can design Away Days to suit your business needs. Dare you walk The Grid, 30 ft above the stage?

You need a neutral environment for important/sensitive meetings or you're just bored of the same four walls.

Our function rooms are full of personality and available to hire during the day for meetings and workshops. The Spotlight Lounge can accommodate up to 40 people theatre style or 18 people boardroom style and is equipped with a 65" screen, while The Utopia Suite is your venue for smaller meetings and interviews.

On the Ground Floor, the Encore Lounge has hosted workshops, networking events and quiz nights, seating up to 50 people theatre style and up to 100 for standing events.

Don't forget our beautiful Grade II listed auditorium seats up to 1,200 people, making it ideal for conferences and full team briefings.

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**GRAND**  
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## ♥ YOUR FOCUS IS BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT 🦋

**You're looking for opportunities to make new connections.**

We have a calendar of networking events throughout the year to help you meet other local business professionals. The evenings start with a relaxed networking session and pre-show hospitality and then you watch the show. If you find small talk awkward, the show and networking bingo make great icebreakers. We have events for general business, women in business and young professionals.

**You want to treat your clients and prospective customers to a night out.**

Our eclectic mix of shows has something for everyone... West End Musicals, murder mysteries, comedians, sports legends. We can also cater for the smallest to the biggest of groups with our range of corporate hospitality options. From a VIP booth for two to the whole of the Grand Circle level (Bar and Spotlight Lounge) for a large party, a night out at the Grand is sure to impress.

**You want to support the local community as part of your CSR strategy.**

The Grand Theatre is a registered charity (number 515154) and we run life-changing projects throughout the year to help improve the lives of our community through the arts. Projects range from the 'Intro to Panto' schools tour, a monthly 'Memory Café' for people living with dementia and their carers, and the upcoming 'Stand Up If You're Funny' stand up comedy workshops for teenagers.

Corporate sponsorship is essential and allows us to run more and bigger projects and reach more people through the magic of theatre.

## ♥ YOUR FOCUS IS MARKETING 🦋

**You want to promote your brand to thousands of people.**

We welcome more than a quarter of a million people through our doors every year. There is a range of advertising opportunities across the Grand, from the interval and till screens to back of the toilet door (and everyone needs to go to the loo at some point!)

Different shows appeal to different audiences, so if you have a target demographic in mind, we can advise on which is best.

**You need an impressive venue to launch a new product or project or host an awards night.**

Our stage has played host to some of the biggest names in showbiz and politics. Winston Churchill, Sean Connery, Sir Ian McKellan... the list goes on! Now you can join them. Our technical and Front of House teams can work their magic to create an unforgettable experience in line with your brand which will leave people talking for years to come.

***And for those who manage the purse strings...***

We offer value for money packages and competitive rates.

For more information and to discuss your business needs, please contact the Grand Theatre Events Team at:  
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# MEET THE NEW PRESIDENT

JUDE THOMPSON IS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE BLACK COUNTRY-BASED CSCM IT SOLUTIONS A LEADING MANAGED SERVICES AND CLOUD-BASED COMPUTING PROVIDER AND A PATRON OF THE BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.

**T**aking over as President of the Chamber for the next two years, we spoke to Jude about his business, his views on the prospects for the region and what his ambitions are during his Presidency.

Jude Thompson is passionate about the West Midlands. It is the region he grew up in and returned to in order to establish his business. A well-known figure; over the last 25 years, Jude has become a committed champion and advocate for the region and firmly believes that its best years lie ahead.

"We were once considered to be the beating heart of the UK economy," begins Jude as he starts to talk about his views on the West Midlands; "and, in many ways we still are. Whilst our physical outputs have changed over the years; the determination and enthusiasm often displayed by our local businesses in delivering those outputs remain largely unchanged." Indeed, for Jude, West Midlands display a pragmatic and resilient attitude which he has aimed to nurture and support as a business leader.

"The people I meet each day in this region are my inspiration. Everybody has their own story to tell and can draw on a wealth of different experience based upon their individual backgrounds which are often the cornerstones for what drives them personally and in business. For me, it is this drive and



commitment which makes doing business from the West Midlands extremely attractive and powerful."

Despite having a global reach, it was, therefore, an easy decision for Jude to establish CSCM in the Black Country – even though, like most new ventures there were the usual challenges in setting up a new business.

"I knew early on that I wanted to run a business which delivers quality customer service and excels in the support it gives to its clients. At college, I studied IT Engineering and have mostly stayed within this sector.

What I discovered was that some companies providing an IT solution to customers weren't as responsive to the ever-changing needs of a client's computing needs, let alone the rapidly changing world of the technology sector. In my head was always the nagging thought that this can be done better."

All that remained for Jude was to find the right time and opportunity. "Back in 1994, a company I had worked for closed and, even though I'd moved on nearly 2 years before; I'd stayed in touch with former colleagues.

"I was working as an IT Manager for a Marketing Company and felt that I was on a good career path before one of those former colleagues contacted me to say that their customers were now without IT support and could I help?"

Jude explains that "after about three weeks of meetings and conversations; I decided to leave the company I worked for and start CSCM. It was a massive decision at the time but remains one of my proudest."

The idea of 'people' is central to CSCM's success Jude explains. "I have built a great team who are passionate about what we do. They have become known as experts in both their technical expertise but also in delivering an outstanding customer experience. For anybody thinking of starting their own business I would absolutely urge them to consider carefully how they build their teams.



"THIS CHAMBER HAS UNDERGONE A MASSIVE AND RAPID PERIOD OF MODERNISATION OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS AND I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT ITS MEMBERS GET THE MOST OUT OF THEIR MEMBERSHIP."

"People," Jude continues, "remains one of the biggest challenges for our industry and my business. I have amazing people around me now but finding the talent of the future is a struggle. In part, this is down to the technical world changing so quickly and there are now many routes open to a person who fancies a career in IT."

So, what is Jude's vision now for CSCM? "Over the years, CSCM has grown from strength to strength and, we have just acquired a new building which allows us to further expand. My vision now is to grow our international footprint – we already have several UK-owned customers with multiple and global offices so naturally further establishing our credentials as a provider beyond these borders is a priority."

This theme of 'people' is central to the priorities Jude has as he starts his two-year tenure as President of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce.

I know and value first-hand how being a Chamber member has helped the profile of my own business within the region "Now, emerging from that period of change, the attitude and positivity of the people running the Chamber is something quite spectacular

– it now feels like a contemporary business services organisation full of fresh thinking, creativity and innovation designed to support the business community within the region.

"As a lobbying organisation also, the Chamber will work with the new parliament and call upon Government to listen to the needs of the Black Country business community. At some point, we will move beyond Brexit and the Chamber will help to lead that conversation so that policymakers are responsive to the demands of our firms and the needs of both our existing and future workforce."

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**i** JUDE THOMPSON | @PRESIDENTBCCC





## EQUIPPING THE BLACK COUNTRY WITH THE SKILLS IT NEEDS

**N**ot so long ago, the West Midlands had a serious skills problem. Go back just 12 years and you will see that a fifth of the region's workforce had left school with no qualifications at all. It was an issue that impacted businesses of all kinds.

In the Black Country, it was more pronounced - with the highest proportion of people with no skills anywhere in the country. This posed a huge challenge.

Today, while there are undoubtedly still issues to deal with regarding skills, the picture is much improved. The number of unqualified school-leavers has been almost halved.

The Black Country has made the most rapid progress in terms of reducing the proportion of people with no qualifications. This has been achieved through retraining in areas like construction and digital, and in the huge growth in modern apprenticeships.

Apprenticeships have changed. They are no longer the old-fashioned indenture-style training of previous generations. Apprenticeships offer a great way to earn and learn at the same time, provide key work experience and a clear pathway for a career, no matter what age you are. They provide learning at all levels, right up to a degree - and the business community in the Black Country has embraced them.

When it comes to apprentices, we have a real advantage here in the West Midlands in the shape of the Apprenticeship Levy Transfer Scheme. We are the only region to benefit from a scheme of this kind, which allows us to use the unused Apprenticeship Levy paid by big local companies to help smaller firms.

So, if a big firm is paying the levy but not using all of the money, rather than being swallowed by a national pot those funds come back to the West Midlands - where we then use it to help smaller firms take on apprentices.





A series of construction training 'hubs,' funded by the West Midlands Combined Authority with £2.3million from the Government's Construction Skills Fund, can be found on-site at some of the most significant developments going on across the West Midlands – such as at the new Athletes Village being built for the Commonwealth Games.

Elsewhere, technical education is being boosted. Dudley College's bid to build a £32.5 million institute of technology near the Black



Through apprenticeships, innovative training programmes and with a healthy dose of West Midlands determination, the Black Country is now once again leading the way.

 ANDY STREET | @ANDY4WM





## RAMADA BY WYNDHAM PARK HALL HOTEL RAISES THE CULINARY GAME

**IT MAY HAVE ONE OF WOLVERHAMPTON'S BEST INDIAN RESTAURANTS, ANJU'S, ON ITS PREMISES BUT THE RAMADA HOTEL ISN'T RESTING ON ITS LAURELS WHEN IT COMES TO BUSINESS BREAKFAST, BRUNCH, LUNCH AND DINNER.**

**B**uilt in 1757, by the first Viscount of Dudley and Ward; the Grade II listed Georgian mansion remained a private residence until 1981 prior to its conversion into a hotel.

Since then, the hotel has played host to global guests, including David Bowie, Vera Lynn and Roger Moore as well as numerous other prestigious names.

Purchased in 2011, by Angela Bir, the hotel has undergone a multi-million-pound transformation with plans for further refurbishments and enhancements this year. Thanks to recent investments, it has regained and surpassed its former glory and now offers a host of culinary options, a luxury spa and conferencing facilities.

The hotel's Indian restaurant, Anju's offers popular authentic Punjabi dishes and in research commissioned by the team, it was declared that Jalfrezi was the region's favourite curry, closely followed by a traditional Black Country Balti.

In a poll of its diners, Anju's discovered the ideal Black Country Indian meal consists of a Sheekh Kebab to start, Jalfrezi as the main course, with a Garlic Naan on the side and a pint of lager.

Commenting on the results, Rajesh Kumar, Head Chef at Anju's, said: "It's fantastic to see such a wide variety of responses. We all have our favourite dishes and Jalfrezi with its careful mix of spices and ingredients is a worthy winner."



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## TWENTY YEARS OF ADVICE, PLANNING & CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

A MILESTONE HAS BEEN REACHED FOR BEAUFORT FINANCIAL (BIRMINGHAM) AS IT CELEBRATES TWENTY YEARS AS INDEPENDENT FINANCIAL ADVISERS.

Co-founders, Paul & Lorraine Gorman believe the longevity of the business stems from the client-centred approach they have taken from day one. Paul explains “We continue to work with clients today who started with us in our early years, and, for me, that’s a real genuine endorsement of the way we work and our family-friendly approach.”

Paul is a Chartered Financial Planner and Chartered Wealth Manager as well as being a Pensions on Divorce Expert (PODE) and Education Champion for the Chartered Insurance Institute.

Located at the prestigious Hilton Hall in Essington, they are ideally situated to work with clients and fellow professionals across the Black Country and Birmingham.

The business is one of 19 partner firms, that comprise Beaufort Financial Planning Ltd, a group that Paul &

Lorraine aligned their business with 7 years ago. “This gives us a great balance between local autonomy and the support of a financially strong group with a growing national presence,” explains Lorraine.

As a Chartered Financial Planning firm, it is one of a very small number of firms advising clients in the Black Country who are able to wear this highly respected badge.

The business has matured into one with an increasing focus on working with fellow professionals, both solicitors and accountants, with the majority of new clients referred to them when significant life events occur.

They are increasingly being recognised as financial planners whose strengths lie in exit planning for business owners, retirement planning and financial guidance and planning on divorce.





# BREXIT

AND ITS EFFECT ON

# EDUCATION

IN THE LAST EDITION OF PROSPER, WE LOOKED AT THE IMPACT BREXIT IS HAVING ACROSS A RANGE OF BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS SECTORS, IN THIS EDITION WE TURN ONCE AGAIN TO THE ACADEMICS AT THE CENTRE FOR BREXIT STUDIES BASED AT BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY FOR THEIR EXPERT OPINION ON HOW BREXIT IS AFFECTING OUR EDUCATION SECTOR.





## SO, WHAT'S THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF BREXIT FOR UK STUDENTS?

WE SPOKE TO DR STEVEN MCCABE, SENIOR FELLOW AT THE CENTRE FOR BREXIT STUDIES.

**L**eaving the EU without arrangements for pre-18 education, i.e. Schools and Further Education Colleges, would create change for both pupils, students and, of course, those who teach them,” Steven explained.

“The most obvious would be an end to the freedom of movement and goods that currently exists. As part of the agreement achieved in Maastricht in December 1991 was the Single European Act (SEA) that became the law covering all EU members in 1992 and which created freedom of movement of goods, services, capital and workers.

“Leaving without a deal would end these freedoms and have a potentially disruptive impact on the ability of pupils to travel freely on trips and exchange schemes that have been extremely popular. Equally, those teachers who are from EU countries must apply to be part of the ‘Settlement Scheme’. Unless they do so, they will not enjoy the ability to work and live in the UK. Given what has been stated in the withdrawal

agreement that has been negotiated with the other EU members, there are lingering uncertainties about workers’ rights. Crucially, the continuance of recognition of teaching qualifications across the EU is not something that can be taken for granted.

“Advocates of Brexit argue that leaving the EU will mean that it becomes easier to recruit teaching staff from other non-EU countries. This may be so but, as management of schools and colleges will attest, the bureaucracy of achieving the intended outcomes merely adds to the already extremely high levels and attendant costs.”

Dr McCabe continued, “Following the decision to leave by voters in the June 2016 referendum, some teachers have already concluded that the environment that was once benign no longer exists and have returned to their home country. This represents a loss of vital talent. Equally, UK teachers who were able to take up teaching opportunities in any of the other 27 EU countries will not be able to do so with the unfettered ability they enjoy at present.



**"SOME SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES MAY BE HIT BY FALLING NUMBERS OF FEWER STUDENTS; ESPECIALLY IF EU CITIZENS WHO WORK HERE RETURN TO THEIR HOME COUNTRY, AND THEIR CHILDREN WITHDRAW AS A RESULT."**

"There are those who warn that leaving without arrangements to continue the four cherished freedoms would have negative consequences on supply chains for schools and colleges that would disrupt everything from building materials and vital medicines to specialist equipment for SEN students. Any disruption creates uncertainty and additional costs for organisations that, because of spending cuts in recent years, are already hard-pressed.

"Some schools and colleges may be hit by falling numbers of students; especially if EU citizens who work here return to their home country, and their children withdraw as a result. Though the effects will be limited, the consequential impact on individual institutions, particularly in metropolitan areas such as the West Midlands and populated cities like Birmingham and Wolverhampton, cannot be disregarded."

But Dr McCabe concluded, "Undoubtedly, the greatest concern for schools and colleges is the undermining of harmony and understanding that was possible through regular visits and exchanges. These were, most particularly for those from deprived backgrounds, a way to experience culture elsewhere and, as such, utterly transformational. Such trips create bonds that allow both students and staff to enjoy friendships and relationships that are priceless. With continued Brexit uncertainty, the true impact that leaving the EU will have on education within the West Midlands will no doubt become much clearer in 2020."



## WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR WEST MIDLANDS EDUCATION INSTITUTES IN A POST-BREXIT LANDSCAPE?

WE ASKED BETHAN TOLLEY, COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER AT THE CENTRE FOR BREXIT STUDIES FOR HER THOUGHTS ON THE SUBJECT.

**W**ith so many higher education institutes within the West Midlands, a huge question mark hangs over the future of all of them in a post-Brexit landscape," Bethan highlighted.

"The Black Country is of course home to the University of Wolverhampton, but just a stone's throw away we have Birmingham City University, University of Birmingham, Aston University, Staffordshire University, Coventry University and many colleges within the region which offer similar courses.

"In 2017/18 there were 458,000 overseas students studying at UK universities, with 139,000 coming from within the European Union. The UK has, in recent years, been the second most popular global destination for international students after the USA. However, market share has been slipping; with other English-speaking countries such

as Australia, New Zealand and Canada now seeing significant increases in overseas students. The decline to UK universities has been attributed to a wide range of factors, from student visa arrangements and the net migration target. However, since 2016, the decline has also been because of Brexit," Bethan said.

"Though there is variation across the sector, EU students are incredibly important to the Higher Education sector. These students have been allowed to enter UK universities on a basis that is identical to applicants indigenous to the UK. A loss of EU students coming to the West Midlands and the UK represents a loss of vital income.

"The very high potential of the UK leaving the EU in 2020 could actually undermine the willingness of students from countries within the EU27 to apply to British universities. With the UK voting to leave the EU, many students from outside of the UK may not be



**EU STUDENTS CAN OFFER ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO THE ESTABLISHED WAYS OF THINKING AND, AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL, INPUT INTO DEVELOPING RESEARCH AGENDAS.**

able to study at British universities, at least without it being an easy process as it is at present. These students may also face higher fees.”

She continued, “EU students can offer alternative perspectives to the established ways of thinking and, at postgraduate level, input into developing research agendas. This will be a loss of research income from EU funders that could occur after the UK ceases to be a member.

“According to Universities UK, the consequences of a No Deal Brexit for British universities will undermine continued participation in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus programmes as well as funding of skills development through ‘Structural Funds’ including European Social Funds (ESF).

“Qualifications that are currently gained at any university in the existing 28 EU members are mutually recognisable. As Universities UK state, should a No Deal scenario occur,

the current mutual recognition of the professional qualifications (MRPQ) system between the EEA, Switzerland and the UK will cease. Therefore, a new qualification recognition system will need to operate after Brexit.”

Bethan said, “This has the potential to cause some concern and potential disruption for systems and protocols that have taken many years to implement. The Government seem to appreciate the need to continue to operate recognition of qualifications after a No Deal Brexit. This is comforting but does not remove uncertainty.”

She concluded, “There is still uncertainty as to what will happen if, and when, the UK leaves the EU. Much depends on the nature of the final deal. Assuming the withdrawal deal were to be a success, nothing will change in the transition period. However, this will only last until 31st December 2020 and, if a free trade agreement with the EU is not

achieved, the UK would leave the EU with none of the arrangements covering aspects of training and education vital to the next generation who will be instrumental to this country’s continued prosperity. UK citizens will continue to go to university long after we have left the EU, but the impact that EU students not coming to study in the UK could have will no doubt last for much longer.”

**i BETHAN TOLLEY | @BETHANINBRUM**





# BREXIT & APPRENTICESHIPS

WITH A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION TO DEGREE LEVEL NOW BEING QUESTIONED AS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO BECOME QUALIFIED, WE KNOW THAT APPRENTICESHIPS, INCLUDING THOSE THAT ARE PART OF A DEGREE, OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE ROUTE TO ENTERING THE WORKPLACE.

ONCE AGAIN, WE ASKED DR STEVEN MCCABE FOR HIS THOUGHTS ON THE IMPLICATIONS, IF ANY, BREXIT MAY HAVE ON THIS AREA OF LEARNING.

**A**pprenticeships offer an alternative route to learning and even in the event of a no-deal exit from the EU by the UK, will allow young people to be regarded as highly valuable assets. This perception is reinforced by evidence which shows that the public are highly supportive of on-the-job training that is fundamental to apprenticeships,” continues Dr McCabe.

“There are many concerns about the future of Apprenticeships within the West Midlands in a post-Brexit Britain. The issue of Apprenticeships after Brexit is a two-edged sword in that there is a concern that if the manufacturing sector were to suffer as a result of a No Deal Brexit, there would be fewer opportunities in the future for young people – and that is just one of the industries that could be significantly impacted by Brexit.

“Though the target of achieving three million Apprenticeships by the end of 2020

is most likely not going to be achieved, there has been good progress. However, the continued uncertainty surrounding the UK’s membership of the EU has not been helpful. Nonetheless, there is universal recognition that Apprenticeships are very positive and offer business an extremely effective way to develop their workforce for the future.

“Dealing with concerns firstly, it was noted by former Labour Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, now head of Labour In for Britain, that as many as 50,000 manufacturing Apprenticeships could be at risk in the event of the UK leaving the EU with no-deal due to a potential decline in exports caused by the imposition of tariffs.

“Investment in all sectors of British industry, particularly manufacturing, that is so crucial in the West Midlands and, of course, the Black Country, is absolutely critical to the prosperity of the region.

“A World Economic Forum report published in 2018 reported that by 2022, the skills

that any employee should possess will have shifted significantly. All organisations, regardless of sector, will require a workforce that is as skilled as it is agile.

“Investment in Apprenticeships is equally critical to underpinning the development of future expertise and skills. They are cost effective and can be a fantastic way to ensure that companies are able to cope with the rapid change that will continue into the next decade.

“So,” concluded Dr McCabe, “It is therefore good to report that despite the uncertainty that has characterised the debate surrounding the UK’s departure from the EU, Apprenticeships have been growing in popularity.”

**i** DR STEVEN MCCABE | @BCU\_BREXIT

## PROSPER PEOPLE

THE BLACK COUNTRY'S BEST BUSINESS & SOCIAL EVENTS



FUTURE LINK YOUNG PROFESSIONALS SOCIAL EVENT | VAAL & VAAL



A LOOK INTO THE COMMERCIAL  
WORLD AT THE MOLINEUX







PROSPER MAGAZINE RELAUNCH EVENT | THE LIGHTHOUSE CINEMA, WALSALL



WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: FESTIVAL OF ENTERPRISE | THE NEC





# INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

ONE BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESSWOMAN IS STRIVING TO PROVIDE INSPIRATION

**T**he idea of inspiring the next generation is a theme that runs deep through everything Dion Fanthom does.

As a big sister, the hotel digital marketing executive, Black Country Chamber Future Link member and now West Midlands Young Combined Authority board member, Dion feels it's her job to not only encourage and inspire her siblings, but to inspire others whilst challenging people's perceptions of the 'younger generation'.

"Letting my siblings know that they can achieve whatever they set their minds to is important to me," Dion told Prosper.

"The qualities I have, because I am a big sister, have motivated me to mentor students at school, stand as Head Girl, and since leaving school, throw myself into whatever opportunities allow me to add value to an important cause."

Recently, her passion for inspiring the next generation and pushing for change has been awarded by a seat on the board of the West Midlands Young Combined Authority.

One of 32 members, each with their own specific passion but with a united desire to represent the younger generation of the West Midlands, Dion and her fellow board members are working to make long lasting change and inspire the next generation.

"A priority for me when I applied for the board role was to help raise awareness of mental health and wellbeing. I am proud to be directly involved, putting across my ideas and influencing decisions on this subject.

"A recent study conducted by Beatfrees, showed that one of the top issues young people are concerned with is Mental Health (Brum Youth Trends Report).

"This is what drives me to continue to open conversations, not only on the Young Combined Authority board, but also with my siblings, amongst my friends and colleagues and wherever else I may find a platform to share this important message."

Dion continued, "One of the questions on the YCA application form was, how do we plan on paying it forward - how will we inspire the next generation?

"A tough question, but a question that I think we should all be considering at some point. Since I was appointed, it is something I have thought about more and more, and as a board member, it is inspiring me to work and plan many projects.

"I hope to launch a monthly meeting to promote better workplace wellbeing, a novel (my first), will be a free resource for schools in the region that will educate students and teachers on mental health.

"I want to create a mental health lunch time radio show for schools, and of course to continue being the best possible big sister I can be."

Dion concluded, "I feel honored to have been given this opportunity, to represent the young people of our region and to provide thoughts and ideas that will continue to impact people, for years to come.

"It's up to us to lead by example, inspire the next generation, not only with words but with actions because ultimately, they are our future and we owe it to them."





## CLASS OF 2019 THE NEW BLACK COUNTRY MPs HEADING TO WESTMINSTER

The election at the end of last year marks the Conservative Party's biggest win since 1987 – securing 365 seats and giving the Prime Minister a comfortable majority. With a number of well-known and long-standing local MPs either standing down or losing their seats locally, we've provided this handy guide for businesses to see who now represents the Black Country.

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce will continue to engage with MPs and is renewing its call to government for clarity on major issues facing business including Brexit and its next stages, infrastructure projects such as HS2 and has already introduced new MPs to its Black Country Business Manifesto.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CHAMBERS POLICY WORK PLEASE EMAIL

[POLICY@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK](mailto:POLICY@BLACKCOUNTRYCHAMBER.CO.UK)



# MEET YOUR MPs

THE BLACK COUNTRY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES & MPs



**12** | RT. HON PAT MCFADDEN  
WOLVERHAMPTON SOUTH EAST  
LABOUR



**11** | JANE STEVENSON  
WOLVERHAMPTON NORTH EAST  
CONSERVATIVE



**6** | EDDIE HUGHES  
WALSALL NORTH  
CONSERVATIVE



**1** | WENDY MORTON  
ALDRIDGE & BROWNHILLS  
CONSERVATIVE



**2** | MARCO LONGHI  
DUDLEY NORTH  
CONSERVATIVE



**7** | RT. HON VALERIE VAZ  
WALSALL SOUTH  
LABOUR



**13** | STUART ANDERSON  
WOLVERHAMPTON SOUTH WEST  
CONSERVATIVE



**9** | NICOLA RICHARDS  
WEST BROMWICH EAST  
CONSERVATIVE



**3** | MIKE WOOD  
DUDLEY SOUTH  
CONSERVATIVE



**10** | SHAUN BAILEY  
WEST BROMWICH WEST  
CONSERVATIVE



**5** | SUZANNE WEBB  
STOURBRIDGE  
CONSERVATIVE



**4** | JAMES MORRIS  
HALESOWEN & ROWLEY REGIS  
CONSERVATIVE



**8** | RT. HON JOHN SPELLAR  
WARLEY  
LABOUR





# THE BLACK COUNTRY MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

CONSTITUENCY	MP	PARTY	CONSTITUENCY FACTS	MP FACTS
<b>1</b> ALDRIDGE & BROWNHILLS	WENDY MORTON	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative hold for Wendy Morton who was first elected in 2015</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Former Assistant Government Whip</li> <li>Currently Under Secretary of State for Justice</li> <li>Born North Yorkshire</li> <li>Obtained MBA with Open University</li> <li>Worked in HM Diplomatic Service at the Foreign Office</li> <li>Founder of electronics company with her husband</li> </ul>
<b>2</b> DUDLEY NORTH	MARCO LONGHI	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative gain from the retiring Independent MP Ian Austin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Born in Walsall and raised in Rome</li> <li>Studied at Manchester and Warwick Business School</li> <li>Trained pilot and worked in civil engineering</li> <li>Mayor of Walsall in 2017</li> </ul>
<b>3</b> DUDLEY SOUTH	MIKE WOOD	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative hold for Mike Wood who was first elected in 2015</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studied Economics and Law at Aberystwyth University</li> <li>Worked for four years as a policy advisor in the European Parliament</li> <li>Chair of the Parliamentary group on Beer</li> </ul>
<b>4</b> HALESOWEN & ROWLEY REGIS	JAMES MORRIS	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative hold for James Morris first elected in 2010</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studied English Literature at University of Birmingham, holds an MPhil from Oxford and an MBA From Cranfield School of Management</li> <li>Former small businessman specialising in computer software</li> <li>Former chief executive of Localis, a local government thinktank</li> </ul>
<b>5</b> STOURBRIDGE	SUZANNE WEBB	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative hold for the newly elected Suzanne Webb</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional Auditor</li> <li>Senior leadership role within global logistics provider</li> </ul>
<b>6</b> WALSALL NORTH	EDDIE HUGHES	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative hold for Eddie Hughes who was first elected in 2017</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studied Civil Engineering at University of Glamorgan</li> <li>Former Walsall Councillor</li> <li>Former deputy chief executive of local charity supporting accommodation for young people</li> </ul>
<b>7</b> WALSALL SOUTH	RT.HON VALERIE VAZ	LAB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Labour hold for Rt.Hon Valerie Vaz who was first elected in 2010</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Currently Shadow Leader of the House</li> <li>Studied Biochemistry at Bedford College, University of London</li> <li>Qualified as a solicitor in 1984 &amp; Founder of her own law firm</li> <li>Worked as a presenter and interviewer for BBC TV programme Network East in 1987</li> </ul>
<b>8</b> WARLEY	RT.HON JOHN SPELLAR	LAB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Labour hold for Rt.Hon John Spellar who was first elected in 1997</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Held a number of ministerial and shadow ministerial roles in Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland, Transport, Armed Forces</li> <li>Educated at Dulwich College and St Edmund Hall Oxford</li> </ul>
<b>9</b> WEST BROMWICH EAST	NICOLA RICHARDS	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative gain from Labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studied politics at Birmingham University</li> <li>Local Councillor in Dudley since 2015</li> </ul>
<b>10</b> WEST BROMWICH WEST	SHAUN BAILEY	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative gain from Labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Studied Law and French at Aberystwyth University and legal practice at University of the West of England</li> <li>Fluent in French &amp; self-taught Welsh speaker</li> </ul>
<b>11</b> WOLVERHAMPTON NORTH EAST	JANE STEVENSON	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative gain from Labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional singer</li> <li>Performed and taught singing in over 40 countries</li> <li>Former Councillor for Tettenhall Wightwick</li> </ul>
<b>12</b> WOLVERHAMPTON SOUTH EAST	RT.HON PAT MCFADDEN	LAB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Labour hold for Rt.Hon Pat McFadden who was first elected in 2005</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Former Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills</li> <li>Former Shadow spokesperson on Europe</li> <li>Former to becoming an MP he worked As Special Advisor to Tony Blair becoming his Political Secretary in 2002</li> </ul>
<b>13</b> WOLVERHAMPTON SOUTH WEST	STUART ANDERSON	CON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservative gain from Labour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Army Veteran</li> <li>Founder and CEO of a travel safety technology company</li> </ul>



# BUSINESS IS DONE BETTER TOGETHER

Happy New Year to all our members and everyone across the business community.

I took over as President of the Chamber at the end of last year and would like to pay tribute to our previous President, Julie Cunningham, and thank her for her hard work and commitment during her time in office.

You can find out more about me and my ambitions for my Presidency in this edition of Prosper and I look forward to connecting with many of you at future events and meetings.

Over the next few pages, you'll discover some of the exciting developments and activities that the Chamber has been carrying out and is set to deliver as we begin a new year and a new decade.

I would actively encourage you all to get involved and discover how the Chamber can help you and your business.

These are exciting times with the Black Country Chamber of Commerce regarded as a positive, innovative, forward thinking business support organisation with fresh ideas and exciting plans for the decades ahead.

**JUDE THOMPSON**



President | Black Country Chamber  
@PresidentBCCC



## BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER'S AWARD EVENING IS ANOTHER RESOUNDING SUCCESS

THE ANNUAL BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER AWARDS AT WOLVERHAMPTON RACECOURSE WERE HAILED A RESOUNDING SUCCESS FOLLOWING INCREDIBLE FEEDBACK.

**T**he prestigious awards were hosted by comedian and celebrity impressionist, Aaron James, who spent December appearing in the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre's Christmas pantomime, Dick Whittington.

Amongst the night of pure entertainment, 14 overall awards celebrated Black Country companies and individuals for their outstanding contributions to the business community and the region as a whole.

X-Factor runner up, Dancing on Ice finalist and Eurovision star, Saara Aalto, performed a series of songs, culminating in the Finnish version of Disney's global hit movie 'Frozen', in which she voiced the main character, Princess Ana.

Guests were wowed by a modern, new laser dance performance and were magically mystified by Mentalist and Magician, Katherine Mills, who is one of the very few females in The Magic Circle and gain her own prime time show in the UK.

The Black Country Chamber Awards have always been renowned for the extensive

judging process and are the perfect way to celebrate and showcase the region's diverse and dynamic business community.

They allow the Chamber to show businesses that their efforts have been recognised by the wider community but allows them to promote the Black Country as a healthy place to invest and do business with.

Over the years, the Chamber has played a significant role in generating regional, national and international opportunities and making sure the local community links stay strong.

Over 4,000 people voted for the overall 'Business of the Year', sponsored by DY5, Dudley's Business & Innovation Enterprise Zone. The winner, Klick Business Solutions, was chosen on the night through a combination of the judges and public vote.

Meanwhile over £6,000 was raised for the chosen charity of the evening, Acorns Children's Hospice, which provides palliative nursing care and support to babies, young children and young adults, with life threatening conditions.





Corin Crane, Chief Executive of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce said, "The 14 categories were created to reflect the region's growing business economy and to showcase the wonderful businesses within it. I would like to thank everyone who entered, it was a difficult process for the judges and the winners are very well deserved."

"I would also like to thank the sponsors and partners for their support – especially the headline partner, the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre. It was a delight to see so many people supporting the Awards and wanting to be a part of the event, so much so, we even had to release more tickets to accommodate the high demand!

"The Awards are only set to get bigger and better and I am excited to see what this year will have in store!"

Vicky Price, Associate Director, Development and Communications at the Grand Theatre said, "The evening was bigger and better than in previous years and a fantastic night was had by all. As the headline sponsor, it allowed us to showcase the wonderful productions and projects we produce at The Grand as well as introducing this year's pantomime comedian Aaron James."

*See more photographs overleaf...*

## THE AWARD WINNERS...

**HIGH GROWTH  
BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**  
SIMWORX LTD

**EDUCATION & BUSINESS  
PARTNERSHIP AWARD**  
BLACK COUNTRY  
LIVING MUSEUM

**COMMUNITY CHAMPION**  
IMPACT SALES COACHING

**PROFESSIONAL SERVICES**  
KLICK BUSINESS  
SOLUTIONS LTD

**LARGE BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**  
THE MOUNT HOTEL  
COUNTRY MANOR

**FAMILY BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**  
DOLPHIN LIFTS  
(MIDLANDS) LTD

**START-UP BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**  
SAVESTA CONSTRUCTION LTD

**EXPORT BUSINESS OF THE YEAR**  
SIMWORX LTD

**SMALL BUSINESS OF THE YEAR AWARD**  
DIGITAL IMAGING  
SERVICES LTD

**YOUNG PERSON OR APPRENTICE  
OF THE YEAR AWARD**  
JAMIE WILKES

**EXCELLENCE IN MANUFACTURING  
& ENGINEERING**  
IPU GROUP

**CUSTOMER COMMITMENT AWARD**  
STK FIRE & RISK  
MANAGEMENT LTD

**BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS  
PERSON OF THE YEAR**  
MARTIN DUDLEY

**BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS  
OF THE YEAR**  
KLICK BUSINESS  
SOLUTIONS LTD



*Alongside headline sponsor Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, sponsors of the awards included:*

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, Black Country Business Festival, MHA MacIntyre Hudson, Walsall College, Wolverhampton Racecourse, Sandwell College, University of Wolverhampton Business School, Associate Events, Crowe UK, Black Country Growth Hub, Burke Bros Moving Group, MSV Consultancy, Dudley College of Technology, DY5, Casino 36, MET Recruitment and Klick Business Solutions.





## HOW THE BRITISH CHAMBER'S LATEST CAMPAIGN IS LOOKING TO CELEBRATE, SUPPORT AND DEVELOP THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF ANY BUSINESS - IT'S PEOPLE

**I**n every corner of the country and sector of the economy, we hear that access to skills is one of the top concerns for businesses.

Research carried out by the British Chambers of Commerce shows that around three-quarters of UK firms trying to recruit are having difficulties finding the right person for the role with some roles sitting empty for as long as 6 months. In fact, over half of the businesses say the time taken to fill average vacancies has increased in the last five years.

Skills shortages put a brake on business competitiveness and productivity.

UK productivity growth (as measured by output per worker) has averaged just 0.4% in the ten years since the financial crisis, with the weak levels weighing on wage growth, living standards and overall UK economic growth.

The changing nature of the workplace is also creating new types of jobs that demand digital skills and displace some traditional roles – a quick glance of any vacancy site reveals a whole list of job titles that didn't exist 10 or even 5 years ago and many employers are revaluating the skills they will need from their teams in the years to come.

Investing in talent will not only benefit individuals and their employer but also local business communities and the wider economy.

Therefore, the Chamber Network has launched a campaign to support companies to address these crucial issues. Working with government, businesses, academics and employees; the campaign hopes to help make the UK a more productive, attractive and modern place to work.

### SHAPING POLICY THROUGH A NEW WORKPLACE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION:

This UK-wide Commission will bring together employers and academics to identify the barriers to business investment in skills. Focusing on the training, up-skilling and re-skilling of people aged 25 years and over in the workforce - those likely not to have engaged in education or training for many years - the Commission will identify areas of best practice for companies and recommend policy changes to the government which will be of relevance over a 10-15 year timeframe.

Showcasing the range of diverse career paths on offer in towns and cities across the UK through Chamber of Commerce Business Showcase Days:

In February, the Chamber Network will be running Business Showcase Days. Focused on addressing business concerns about the loss of skills from local areas to larger cities and regions, the campaign will support businesses to open their doors to their local

communities to showcase the wide range of career opportunities available.

### CHAMPIONING A FLEXIBLE WORKING CULTURE BY ENCOURAGING FIRMS TO ADAPT THEIR WORKING PRACTICES IN ORDER TO ATTRACT NEW AND DIVERSE TALENT:

The final piece of the puzzle will be to support business in the recruitment and retention of a skilled and diverse workforce. The Chamber's research found a 39% increase in the number of employees requesting flexible working arrangements compared to two years ago. The flexible working initiative will provide firms with the guidance and resources to create modern, flexible working environments for all employees. The focus is to enable firms to recruit from a wider talent pool and retain workers who might otherwise leave the business by helping firms establish their own flexible working policies.





## THE RT. HON JOHN SPELLAR MP MEETS WITH VACUUM & ATMOSPHERE SERVICES

In September, the Rt. Hon John Spellar MP for Warley was welcomed by Vacuum & Atmosphere Services (VAS).

Mike Long, Managing Director at VAS raised various policy issues facing the company with Mr Spellar before outlining how they have continued to recruit despite a difficult recruitment landscape. The visit was finished with a traditional tour of the facility.

## CHAMBER CONSTRUCTION FORUM HEARS FROM INVEST WOLVERHAMPTON

In October, Chamber members heard from Ian Culley, Lead Planning Manager at Wolverhampton City Council.

The second meeting of the Chamber's Construction & Planning Forum was well attended and discussions focused on a range of key topics for the area. From recruitment and skills within the construction industry, to plans for regeneration of Wolverhampton city centre.

*For more information on the Chamber's Construction Forum, contact:*

## POLICY ROUND-UP

THE BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: WORKING HARD FOR OUR MEMBERS AROUND THE REGION



## BLACK COUNTRY MANUFACTURERS TAKE A TOUR AROUND MIDDLETON FOODS

**A**s part of the Chamber's Manufacturing Campaign, delivered in partnership with FBC Manby Bowdler, September saw local manufacturers tour the world-class facilities at Middleton Foods in Willenhall.

Members and attendees were taken through the various processes that see Middleton's continue to be at the forefront of food production in the UK. From batters and marinades, to sweet and savoury, the morning session was a real success and the fish and chips luncheon went down a treat.



## CHAMBER & FEDERATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES MEET WITH BEIS

August saw a joint meeting between the Black Country Chamber, West Midlands representatives from the Federation of Small Businesses and civil servants from the Department for Business, Energy and the Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Hosted by the Wolverhampton Business Solutions Centre, the meeting covered important points relating to the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the development of local industrial strategies and the future of businesses within the Black Country region.





## CHAMBER DELIVERS SERIES OF BEIS 'GET READY FOR BREXIT' EVENTS

**T**hroughout October, the Black Country Chamber hosted a series of Brexit Readiness events in partnership with the Department for Business, Energy and the Industrial Strategy (BEIS) delivered across all areas of the Black Country.

Delegates heard from a range of guest speakers on crucial Brexit-related business policy issues and the important steps they need to think about to get ready for Brexit. Across the four weeks, the events covered topics such as the Home Office Settlement Scheme, Regulatory Divergence, Compliance and Contracts, Customs Procedures, GDPR and Data Protection and Intellectual Property. Following the presentations from our experts, delegates were then invited to 1-1 conversations and could take the opportunity of asking any specific questions for their business.

## A HUGE SUCCESSFUL COMMONWEALTH GAMES EVENT IN WEDNESFIELD

The most recent Commonwealth Games event hosted by GTG Training was a huge success.

The event saw guest talks from Chris Jones, Project Director for the Sandwell Aquatics Centre and Viren Ghandi, Head of Procurement for the Birmingham 2022 games. The Commonwealth Games are generating a real buzz for businesses in the Black Country with delegates expressing a desire to get involved. We welcomed Paul Long from Find it in the Black Country to discuss procurement opportunities for the games and also Klick Business Solutions to assist businesses as they look to become involved with the opportunities the games bring.



## ADRIAN BAILEY MP VISITS LORD COMBUSTION

In August 2019, Adrian Bailey, retiring MP for West Bromwich West, visited Sandwell based Lord Combustion Services, a member of the Chamber's Platinum Group.

On the day discussions focused on their recent economic growth and the company's forecasts for the future all followed by a tour of their newly refurbished office space. Chamber Members can find out more about our engagement with local parliamentarians by contacting us directly.

## THIRD BREXIT AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE EVENT

On the morning of the Big Black Country Business Fayre, the Chamber held its third Brexit and International Trade event.

Delegates heard an update from Department for Business, Energy and the Industrial Strategy (BEIS), all about the importance of Intellectual Property post-Brexit from Black Country International Sponsor Forresters LLP and automotive expert Professor David Bailey.

## OUR NEW MEMBERS

ZENG SOLUTIONS LTD  
 GINOSKO ACADEMY OF  
 INSPIRED LEARNING LTD  
 ANSALDO NUCLEAR  
 TPSQUARED  
 TNM DESIGN GROUP  
 PAUL BUTLER HEALTH & SAFETY  
 ALTDIGITAL NETWORKS LIMITED  
 ADVANCED SERVICES GROUP  
 CRONER  
 SPECIALIST INDUCTION  
 REFRACTORIES LTD  
 THE BRADES LODGE  
 WALDRONS SOLICITORS  
 CHAREY CARE UK LTD  
 AUBREYS ANGELS  
 TRANSFORMING LIVES LTD  
 WOODHALL PRODUCTS  
 BION ELECTRICAL LTD  
 NUTCRACKER DESIGN  
 & MARKETING LIMITED  
 TYTEK MEDICAL UK LTD  
 DIAMOND BLUE EVENTS  
 MY CENTRE OFFICE LTD  
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 AND CONSULTANCY LIMITED  
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 CHANGE YOUR LIFE SOLUTIONS  
 JUNIPER TRAINING LTD



## WORK EXPERIENCE PUTS PHOTOGRAPHY GRADUATE'S SKILLS IN THE FRAME

ANNIE SNAPS UP PROSPER PHOTO-SHOOT OPPORTUNITY

**W**hen the Black Country Chamber of Commerce decided to give the region's longest running business magazine, their very own Prosper magazine, a complete overhaul it was decided that great images would be paramount to the overall aesthetic look of the new contemporary designed magazine.

Step forward University of Wolverhampton graduate, Annie Benton, who put her photography skills in the frame and got the opportunity to work on the relaunch edition.

Annie Benton, 21, from Wolverhampton, studied for a BA (Hons) Photography degree in the University's School of Art, and was put forward for work experience to take photographs for the Prosper magazine, before its official relaunch in September.

One of the articles in the magazine focused on the West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, and Annie took a series of photographs of him within the university's photographic studios, as well as attending Chamber events to provide a catalogue of images for use in other stories in the magazine.

Annie Benton is a Wolverhampton-based self-portraiture and performance photographer, who works around the areas of Feminism and Women's rights within history and the modern day. She is currently a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University.

She said, "I was given the chance to photograph for the Chamber at their Black Country Women in Leadership event and it has provided me with a chance to develop my own network of connections and to build my portfolio within Press and PR photography. Working with Andy Street and with Prosper on a professional live brief is valuable experience for any photographer, and to have achieved this before I had graduated was a big achievement."

West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street said, "Annie is clearly a very talented and technically-skilled photographer and I enjoyed being photographed by her – because she made it so easy. She impressed me greatly in the way she set up the shots for Prosper, and in the way, she communicated what she wanted me to do.

"Attitudes to photography are, I think, changing a great deal thanks to social media and the explosion in digital technology. However, I think it's only when you meet a photographer of Annie's ability and skillset that you appreciate the difference between professional photography and the pictures, we all take and share on our phones every day.

"After the photo shoot I was lucky enough to be shown around the Wolverhampton School of Art with Annie, which is where she studied photography. I understand that, having graduated, she is now part of the teaching faculty there, which I think is fitting – as she can share her skills and talent with the next generation of photographers."



# BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER EVENTS FOR YOUR DIARY:

The Chamber has unveiled its events calendar for the next 12 months. Announcing the 2020 programme, Penny Griffiths (Events Co-ordinator) said: "Last year the Chamber held over 70 events and welcomed nearly 5,000 attendees. We have looked closely at the events which are popular and, following feedback from members; we're pleased to unveil our packed diary."

Over the next year, members and the business community can look forward to the return of favourites including three instances of the popular Baggies Breakfast and two Speed Networking events. Third Week Wednesdays, the regular free monthly event will continue at Wolverhampton's Casino 36 following its launch in 2019.

"We have also created events where attendees can hear from an expert speaker talking about a hot topic as well as two speed networking events; the first of which is at Village – The Hotel Club at Dudley in February and the second at Sandwell's National Metalforming Centre in November. We're particularly thrilled to be announcing a Spring and Autumn edition of the Black Country Business Fayre which proved such a popular concept last year. The Fayres are an affordable, fun and entertaining way for exhibitors to meet new customers and talk to a range of businesses offering discounts and promotions on the day.

"The Chamber's policy and lobbying work will also be supported by a range of events in 2020," continues Penny; "including newly sector refreshed forums, Bank of England events and other opportunities for our members to hear updates from experts on themes and trends which matter to their business. We are also planning to keep local firms up to date with briefings on legislative and regulatory changes and new members will be able to discover how to get their best from being part of the Chamber family at Maximising Your Membership events."

All events are viewable on and can be booked by visiting the Chamber's website

## JANUARY 2020

FRIDAY 24TH JANUARY 2020  
**BAGGIES BREAKFAST**  
WEST BROMWICH ALBION FC

TUESDAY 28TH JANUARY 2020  
**SOCIAL MEDIA FUNDAMENTALS**

WEDNESDAY 29TH JANUARY 2020  
**MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

THURSDAY 30TH JANUARY 2020  
**IMPORT PROCEDURES**

FRIDAY 31ST JANUARY 2020  
**MANUFACTURING FORUM**  
BLACK COUNTRY LIVING MUSEUM TRUST

## FEBRUARY 2020

TUESDAY 4TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
NATIONAL METALFORMING CENTRE

TUESDAY 4TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**EXPORT DOCUMENTATION**

TUESDAY 4TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**SPEED NETWORKING**  
VILLAGE THE HOTEL CLUB DUDLEY

WEDNESDAY 5TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**INTERNATIONAL TRADE OPERATIONS & PROCEDURES (ITOPS)**

THURSDAY 6TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
HIMLEY COUNTRY HOTEL

THURSDAY 6TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**ESSENTIAL SALES SKILLS**

THURSDAY 6TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**FUTURE LINK: SOCIAL**

THURSDAY 13TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**BANK OF ENGLAND PANEL**

MONDAY 17TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**INCOTERMS TRAINING**

TUESDAY 18TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
NATIONAL METALFORMING CENTRE

WEDNESDAY 19TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**THIRD WEEK WEDNESDAY**  
CASINO 36

THURSDAY 20TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**LINKEDIN LEAD GENERATION**

THURSDAY 20TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
HIMLEY COUNTRY HOTEL

WEDNESDAY 26TH FEBRUARY 2020  
**START-UP BUSINESS CLUB**

## MARCH 2020

TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
NATIONAL METALFORMING CENTRE

WEDNESDAY 4TH MARCH 2020  
**EMPLOYMENT LAW UPDATE**

WEDNESDAY 4TH MARCH 2020  
**BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
HIMLEY COUNTRY HOTEL

THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2020  
**ADVANCED SALES SKILLS**

THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2020  
**FUTURE LINK: PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOP**

THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2020  
**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**  
COPTHORNE HOTEL MERRY HILL

TUESDAY 17TH MARCH 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
NATIONAL METALFORMING CENTRE

WEDNESDAY 18TH MARCH 2020  
**THIRD WEEK WEDNESDAY**  
CASINO 36

THURSDAY 19TH MARCH 2020  
**START-UP BUSINESS CLUB**

THURSDAY 19TH MARCH 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
HIMLEY COUNTRY HOTEL

TUESDAY 24TH MARCH 2020  
**MAKING AN IMPACT AT NETWORKING EVENTS**

TUESDAY 24TH MARCH 2020  
**THE BIG BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS FAYRE**  
WOLVERHAMPTON RACECOURSE LTD

THURSDAY 26TH MARCH 2020  
**FACEBOOK ADVERTISING**

TUESDAY 31ST MARCH 2020  
**NETWORKING CLUB**  
NATIONAL METALFORMING CENTRE

TUESDAY 31ST MARCH 2020  
**MAXIMISE YOUR MEMBERSHIP**  
WALSALL COLLEGE HUB

## STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS MAKING THE BLACK COUNTRY BETTER FOR BUSINESS



THE CHAMBER PATRON GROUP PROVIDE A POWERFUL AND DYNAMIC PLATFORM FOR BUSINESSES TO CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER, PROMOTE THEMSELVES AND CHAMPION THE NEEDS OF ITS MEMBERS.

Key strategic partners with a sense of pride for the region who share a sense of urgency in promoting the best of the area, driving the local economy forward and working to influence positive change.

One Patron member, Wolverhampton Racecourse, part of the Arena Leisure Group, the largest racecourse operator in the UK, have been part of the group for eighteen years.

Managing Director at Wolverhampton Racecourse David Roberts, said, "As a Patron member since the inception of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, we believe in the ability of our Chamber to be a voice of business in the area and nationally."

One of the busiest racecourses in Britain, welcoming over 120,000 visitors each year across 80 race fixtures, David said, "We believe that being part of the organisation adds a measure of gravitas to our reputation for reliability and trust in a changing community, where it is imperative for us to engage.

"Many of our customers and guests are members of the Chamber and it remains an excellent place for us to network directly with these people."



## THE CHAMBER PLATINUM GROUP WELCOMES SIMWORX AS ITS NEWEST MEMBER

THE PLATINUM GROUP WHICH IS AN EXCLUSIVE PLATFORM FOR SENIOR LEADERS TO COME TOGETHER TO SHARE BEST PRACTICE, INSIGHTS AND NEW IDEAS WELCOME A NEW ADDITION.

As a platform that provides positive impact to member businesses, the Platinum Group and the Platinum Service Sector Group, provide regular meetings and confidential peer-to-peer discussions enabling strategic leaders to expand their networks, tackle business challenges and work together to promote the region locally and nationally.

In November the Kingswinford based company, whose mission it is to create out of this world experiences, became a member of The Platinum Group.

Simworx, the award-winning thrill makers, British trade champions, winners of two Black Country Chamber Awards and leading suppliers of dynamic simulation attractions & 4D effects theatres across the world, joined forces with Gail Arnold, Head of Premium Membership, to expand the growing Platinum Group in the region.

The expanding business, based on the Pensnett Industrial Estate, create bespoke projects for theme parks and visitor

attractions across the world, from Malaysia to Mexico and from Dubai to New Zealand; their creations, a combination of the thoughts and imagination of a talented team of creatives and software engineers, are in high demand, which has seen the company grow from a team of 25 to 55 in just three years.

Terry Monkton, Managing Director at Simworx, himself a Department of Industry & Trade Regional Export Champion for the Midlands, and recently named EY Entrepreneur of the Year, said, "We are delighted to have joined the Black Country Chamber's Platinum Group, in particular the opportunity to join a peer to peer business learning group to meet with fellow business leaders, combined with the various programmes and seminars to support staff development, were all very appealing to us.

"The majority of our PR has always been industry specific, but we now wish to raise the company's profile within the Black Country, and this will provide us with the perfect platform to achieve that."





## SUPPORTING THE REGION'S FUTURE LEADERS

MEET GURPREET BOPARAI: THE BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER'S FUTURE LINK RELATIONSHIP MANAGER

**W**hen the Black Country Chamber of Commerce was planning their new initiative for young professionals, Future Link, they needed to find the right person to head up this important new role and take charge of events, networking and training opportunities across the region for the next generation of regional business leaders.

Step forward Gurpreet Boparai, an enthusiastic, vibrant, memorable, people person who has relished the challenge and grown the Black Countrywide network of young business professionals.

Gurpreet passionately believes that there has never been a more important time to harness and nurture the talent of the next generation.

"With performance pressure and high expectations," explains Gurpreet, "young professionals are experiencing stress, burnout and dejection more than ever. Driven by the desire to help young professionals succeed, gain confidence, explore opportunities for personal growth and career development - Future Link was born."

Wolverhampton born Gurpreet, joined the Chamber team with experience in the professional services sector, having worked in both the environmental and chemical industries and values how hard work and

personal development is important to helping individuals realise their full potential.

His grandparents left India for a life in the West Midlands in September 1964 and instilled in his parents, who in turn influenced him, that continual learning and strong work ethic is paramount to success.

A born networker, Gurpreet works as a conduit amongst young professionals and Chamber members in the area, creating training events, seminars and social gatherings for like-minded professionals to connect, develop and support each other, in turn, offering guidance, mentoring and knowledge sharing for career progression.

Gurpreet said, "Relationship management for the Chamber of Commerce is a rewarding role and gives me a lot of satisfaction. Helping members with business growth, development and offering the support they need is at the heart of what we do.

"Being a field-based role and client-facing, it allows me to build long-lasting relationships with members and helps nurture the relationship between the member and the Chamber.

"I'm extremely proud that I have been given the opportunity to lead our young professional's business club and the plans we have going forward in 2020 are exciting."

Future Link



### FORTHCOMING EVENTS:

16 JANUARY 2020

**FUTURE LINK:  
PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOP**

6 FEBRUARY 2020

**FUTURE LINK:  
SOCIAL EVENT**

5 MARCH 2020

**FUTURE LINK:  
PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOP**

2 APRIL 2020

**FUTURE LINK:  
SOCIAL EVENT**

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW TO GET INVOLVED WITH FUTURE LINK PLEASE CONTACT

**i GURPREET BOPARAI | 01902 912326**



## DEVELOPING YOUR TEAMS – DEVELOPING YOUR BUSINESS

**B**lack Country Training has released training dates for the forthcoming year. Supporting a range of training and development programmes from social media to sales skills and management development to international trade, even more dates and topics are available to businesses across the region looking to develop their teams and grow their business.

Kristian Jones, Training and Events Co-ordinator said: “Our training courses have been based on the feedback gathered from companies across the region to support essential skills and equip individuals with tools and techniques to help them in their day to day roles.

“With matters such as Brexit still very much at the forefront of businesses’ minds; we have added more topics and dates to help train

those companies which export and import. We’re also pleased to announce the return of the popular Management Programme. I’m extremely proud to have the chance to champion young professionals across the region and look forward to sharing our plans for 2020.”

**i** KRISTIAN JONES | 0330 024 0820



Empowering Black Country Businesses

# Chamber Members Benefit From Discounts on a range of Training Courses



For more information visit [blackcountrytraining.co.uk](https://blackcountrytraining.co.uk) or contact us on **01902 912305**

CHAMBER MEMBERS BENEFIT FROM UP TO 20% OFF A RANGE OF COURSES FROM BLACK COUNTRY TRAINING





## CONTROL ENERGY COSTS – LAUNCHES FORENSIC COST RECOVERY SERVICE FOR BCCC MEMBERS

**C**ontrol Energy Costs has been in the energy procurement business since 1981 and is proud to be the commercial energy partner of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce and has been able provide a valuable service to numerous members. But procurement is not all they do ...

### WHAT IS FORENSIC COST RECOVERY?

Forensic Cost Recovery is an industry leading audit service specifically designed to interrogate the complex energy market across electricity, gas and water retrospectively, going back up to six years.

The service is based on the knowledge that not all energy bills will be correct; you should not be paying for energy you haven't used.

The approach by Control Energy Costs is to forensically interrogate, challenge and recover monies where overpayments have been identified.

### A DEDICATED TEAM OF SPECIALISTS

Control Energy Costs Forensic Cost Recovery service provides businesses with "peace of mind" philosophy, supported by a dedicated, experienced team of energy analysts and account managers on hand to provide progress updates, analysis and reporting.

The software used to identify both visible and non-visible billing errors, as well as inaccuracies and trends, is developed in house. This software can be adapted to meet the ever-changing demands of the volatile energy market, giving Control Energy Costs a distinct advantage over its competitors.

Where errors are identified, Control Energy Costs will work on your behalf with suppliers to secure refunds or credits, ensuring a minimal impact to your business, leaving you to get on and do what you do best.

### RECOVERING MONEY OWED

Control Energy Costs has successfully recovered monies for a wide range of manufacturing clients across multiple manufacturing sectors and processes. They have a track record and commitment to creating relationships built on trust, transparency and professionalism.

"We're delighted to launch this service to members of the Chamber. It can benefit not just existing customers but those who might just want peace of mind that their business has only paid for the energy they have used. We will only be remunerated where we recover overpayments, so businesses have nothing to lose and the potential to recoup money that is owed to them."

Liam Conway, Head of Business Development

### OTHER SERVICES PROVIDED BY CONTROL ENERGY COSTS

Control Energy Cost has been in the energy procurement business since 1981 and has expanded their range of services over the years to now incorporate:

- *Energy procurement*
- *Water procurement*
- *Reporting and compliance for legislation such as SECR*
- *Dynamic energy procurement*
- *Invoice validation and resolution*
- *Siteworks such as electric car charging point installation, meter installation and any other specific energy related project you might need help with?*

Control Energy Costs consultants are based around the country, and they are able to provide a nationwide service.

*Get in touch to find out more*

**i** LIAM CONWAY | 07501 221728



# Have you been inaccurately charged for your energy or water?

To be sure, let us take a detailed look at your bills to uncover those errors we know exist and arrange a refund if you are due one.

We are only remunerated where we find you savings.

**And relax.**

**cec.uk.com**  
**01737 556631**



**CONTROL**  
ENERGY COSTS





# THE BLACK COUNTRY STARTS TO GEAR UP FOR 2020 BUSINESS FESTIVAL



PREPARATION FOR THE BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS FESTIVAL  
2020 HAS OFFICIALLY STARTED AND IS SET TO RETURN IN  
SPRING FROM THE 11TH - 22ND MAY.

**T**he Festival will once again reflect the Black Country's strong business community and offer local businesses a powerful platform to showcase unique skills and insider expertise.

Built to create opportunities, enable local businesses to find potential clients and gain new knowledge, businesses can apply to run an event on any subject, which can take place anywhere across the region. Each event must contribute positively to the business community and organisers are looking for events that pioneer innovation, culture and commerce.

The Festival was introduced to the region in 2018 by the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, to stimulate growth, investment and interest within the region. In 2019, it boasted 113 registered events with nearly 4,000 attendees across the fortnight.

The two-week programme is structured around eight core sectors, which have been identified from interests and prominence within the area and as zones with huge investment potential. By categorising events, it not only allows attendees to be specific with what events they wish to attend, but individual sector communities are able to promote events on a national level.

The Business Festival needs sponsors, partners and supporters to make it sustainable. Over the years it has seen sponsorship from high street legends eBay, respected local authorities, business support bodies, universities and many more. Sponsors and partners not only help the Festival thrive, but demonstrates the commitment of the local business community, government bodies and educational establishments, to driving up business growth and inward investment into the region.

For more information about the Business Festival, please visit  
**[WWW.BLACKCOUNTRYBUSINESSFESTIVAL.COM](http://WWW.BLACKCOUNTRYBUSINESSFESTIVAL.COM)**

For those interested in becoming a sponsor, partner or want more information on packages, please email:  
**[GW@ASSOCIATE-EVENTS.COM](mailto:GW@ASSOCIATE-EVENTS.COM) OR CALL 0116 464 5998**

## NEW APPOINTMENTS

YOUR GUIDE TO THE REGION'S NEW FACES AND THOSE WITH NEW CHALLENGES AHEAD



### POLICY EXPERT JOINS THE BLACK COUNTRY CHAMBER

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce has welcomed Matthew Lowe to the role of Policy and Lobbying Manager.

Matthew has been working in Chambers across the West Midlands since 2017 and was the British Chambers of Commerce Transport Fellow - focusing on transport policy discussions at a national level with stakeholders across the UK network.

Matthew, a former secondary school teacher, who taught Geography and Government & Politics, will build on the work started over the last two years whilst developing the representation offer to members.

### LEGAL EXPERTS IN FAMILY AND RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY JOIN THURSFIELDS' BLACK COUNTRY TEAM

A specialist in family law and children issues and a former legal ombudsman for residential property have been recruited to join Thursfields Solicitors' team in the Black Country.

Sandeep Sandhu, who has practiced in all areas of family law since 2006, has been appointed as an associate solicitor in the leading Midlands law firm's Sedgley office.

Meanwhile Darren Cox, who has spent the last seven years handling and deciding the outcome of residential property complaints for the Legal Ombudsman, has been appointed as an associate solicitor in the same Sedgley office.



### BLACK COUNTRY BUSINESS FESTIVAL GETS PROJECT MANAGER

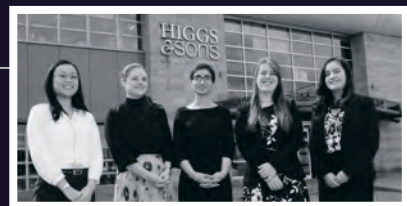
Gemma West has joined Associate Events as Project Manager to head up and manage the Black Country Business Festival.

Having previously worked at Imperial Corporate Events, Gemma has a wealth of experience in the events and hospitality industry and has regularly organised events across the world.

Gemma said, "I am really looking forward to managing the business festival and am particularly pleased to be working with all the lovely people in the Black Country, having heard all about how enthusiastic the business community is."

### NEW LAWYERS FOR HIGGS & SONS

Leading Black Country law firm Higgs & Sons has welcomed six new legal trainees. Victoria Boucher, Laura Hackett, Jagdeep Lall, Elizabeth Owen, Charlotte Tsang and Lucy Williams are the latest recruits to what is regarded as one of the leading training programmes in the region.



### SON RETURNS TO ZAUN AND TAKES OVER DAD'S OLD ROLE

An experienced steel fencing industry salesman has returned to his first proper employer – to take on the same role his dad held for many years.

Chamber Platinum Group member Zaun has appointed Andy Holloway as Internal Sales Manager. The mesh fencing manufacturer previously employed his dad Paul for 10 years until his untimely death in October 2012.

In tribute, Zaun named their second factory in Wolverhampton the Paul Holloway Manufacturing Facility and also called one of their vertical railing products the Holloway Railings.



# WHAT NEXT FOR BUSINESS AND BREXIT?

BREXIT IS HAPPENING AND ON 31 JANUARY BRITAIN WILL FORMALLY LEAVE THE EUROPEAN UNION.



**P**rosper asked FBC Manby Bowdler Brexit Director Peter Wilding, the man who invented the word 'Brexit', to take a look at the herculean task which now lies ahead for Black Country businesses.

Now that Brexit will be done, the fact is, it will have only just begun. Boris Johnson's government is already up against the clock with a manifesto commitment to get a free trade deal done by New Year's Eve 2020 which leaves precious little time to negotiate.

Given the government's record in securing a deal towards the end of last year where we witnessed a 'smudging' of previously set-in-stone and unchangeable red lines there are two sticky issues we need to keep an eye on.

First, will the PM stick to his decision ruling out any extension to the transition period, in effect imposing a 31 December deadline for concluding a free trade deal with the EU? Second, will he stick to his policy of diverging from EU rules and standards and thus risking future business access to the single market?

The initial signals don't look good. Although he now has an 80-strong parliamentary majority, extending the transition means years of more paying into and no say over EU

rules which would infuriate Eurosceptic MPs and some voters.

So, this will leave seven months to hammer out a deal.

In February both sides will publish their respective mandates and by September a deal must be done to give time for all 27-member state parliaments plus – would you believe – regional parliaments to ratify the deal by years end. That's just months to agree the type of deal that typically takes five years.

This is a tall order. By acting in haste, the government risks business repenting at leisure. The search for a quick deal will either mean the UK signing up to the EU's terms – with all the tariff and regulatory burdens that would entail – or rejecting them and facing even harder tariff and regulatory burdens under the WTO regime.

The real problem is that many at the top of government see diverging from EU rules as the big prize of Brexit. It is doubtful this government will agree to follow EU rules imposing a level playing field in the future.

Ireland, for example, has already implemented the new rules on exporting live breeding animals from the UK. In order to send a rare breed pedigree bull there, we now need three separate vet inspections, blood

tests and animal health history and complete 67 pages of documentation. No free trade deal will remove any of these requirements which apply to any non-EU country outside the customs union.

Even so, not agreeing to follow other EU rules will make it difficult to defend manufacturing industries from EU tariffs and regulatory barriers – cue the looming prospect of job cuts and factory closures that the new Tory MPs from the Midlands will be anxious to avoid.

If someone is going to be disappointed soon, the thing to watch is distraction techniques.

The Tories' new working-class former Labour voters are likely to be used as a justification to deliver a quick deal earmarked by a tough approach to immigration. Standing up to the EU won't play badly if the PM wants to play tough with Brussels especially if we see "buy British" procurement rules and state aid for companies struggling to survive.

However, if the last three years have taught us anything, commercial imperatives will always take second place to politics. The central dilemma is how to reconcile two contradictory, ideological objectives.

The first is that, for many in the Conservative Party, Brexit will not be Brexit unless the UK

is entirely free to set its own taxes, tariffs, rules and regulation unfettered by European law. The second is that, to achieve this, business – and the jobs dependent on it – will face possibly ruinous barriers to trade from January 1, 2021.

Equally, the EU are unlikely to do the UK any favours. They fear the UK becoming a bargain-basement economic and political competitor and have all the time in the world plus the collective weight to impose much of the European model on an anxious UK. Moreover, they will try to retain their privileged access to such things as fishing rights whilst denying the UK retained access to such things as the services market.

Which is why the political imperative for the government will be to silence Brexit.

## EXPECT THE GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE THAT THE LEGITIMATE CONCERNS OF MANUFACTURERS, FARMERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS ARE RELEGATED TO THE BUSINESS PAGES.

I predict Boris Johnson will focus the government's 2020 messaging on anything but Brexit except when Brussels-bashing can disguise a climbdown.

Hostages to fortune such as full EU alignment on the one side or cliff-edge breakdown on the other will be avoided. Through the middle may come a messy, low-alignment trade deal dictated by the EU and spun as a British victory.

A Conservative Party quieted, a public sated and a press distracted will be enough to get the Prime Minister into 2021 unscathed. And the actual real end result - tariffs and regulatory barriers will be buried in the back pages and will anyway be the fault of the rigid EU not plucky Britain.

The only time you'll see Brexit on the front pages is when No 10 tries to enrage its newly acquired voter base with lurid anti-Brussels headlines as the power differential between the two sides reveals itself during the negotiations.

In the meantime, 2020 will be business as usual. The transitional period keeps single market access and thus current supply chains intact. The only difference is that, under the radar, the government will be reshaping the country's economic order. Given that this cannot happen until it has made up its mind as to what trade deal it wants, business now

must make up the government's mind for it.

I have always said that, because business has other things to think about on a daily basis, the two low-hanging-fruit imperatives to focus on are contracts and compliance.

Businesses across the Black Country and beyond need to ensure that all the legal terms and conditions by which they operate are watertight regarding the costs and liabilities which may result from the economic upheaval that is coming.

And they also need to make sure that all the regulatory and financial compliance requirements previously not needed as members of the single market are now considered and put in place.

I have visited many companies across the West Midlands whose contracts and compliance procedures haven't been considered for decades. This will need to change, and we are here to ensure that you are protected from surprises.

Finally, you need to know how the government intends to deal with your sector in the negotiations.

Will it understand your requirements and fight to protect you from adverse consequences or will your sector suffer in the inevitable trade-offs and compromises that will emerge?

That will require you to do something unusual for most businesses: influence decision-makers.

As some MP's once told me – for them the benefit of Brexit is that they will have new powers previously devolved to Brussels. They will now be required to serve their constituents by ensuring that their business communities are not sold down the river.

As a former lobbyist I know how this works.

West Midlands businesses are resilient and innovative. There is no question that most will survive and, subject to the new trading regime that emerges, prosper. If politics had not plagued this issue for so long, we could expect a long transitional period until a reasonable free trade agreement was reached.

After all, the government has the option to keep everything the same for another three years under the Withdrawal Bill. Because of politics we have to expect that this will not be palatable to the government.

*So now it is time to get ready and prepare.*



**PETER WILDING** | 07501 221728



# T LEVELS A COLLEGE PERSPECTIVE

**JAMES NORRIS, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT WALSALL COLLEGE TELLS PROSPER WHY IT'S TIME TO SIT UP AND TAKE NOTICE OF T LEVELS.**

**E**ducation providers and employers are arguably at a critical juncture in terms of what more we can do to bridge gaps in skills attainment, increase access to opportunities and future proof our industries.

"This is why it's time to sit up and take notice of T Levels," said James.

"When they arrive in September 2020, starting with Childcare, Construction and Digital, the T Levels will act as a game changer in the UK's efforts to maintain a world-class technical education system.

"We believe these qualifications demonstrate how technical qualifications are a viable route towards a Higher-Level Apprenticeship and a degree, a T Level qualification is equivalent to three A Levels, making them equally as effective in securing employment" he told us.

"The calibre of T Levels lies in them being employer-led from beginning to end."

Amazon, KPMG, Fujitsu, Skanska and the NHS are just some of the organisations that have ensured T Levels meet industry needs and prepare students for work. The unique format – 80% classroom theory and practical learning plus 20% industry placement – means businesses will go even further to support young adults pursuing this training route.

The industry placement is equivalent to 315 hours. In light of their crucial role, Walsall College has this year delivered a pilot programme around them.

"48 employers welcomed 65 students for a period of around 45 days. This enabled us to understand how the placements work in a range of employer settings and to develop best practice," continued James.



"The mutual benefits of these placements cannot be underestimated. Feedback from our pilot programme proved that employers recognised the potential in creating a local talent pipeline for entry-level jobs and specialist roles, reducing their recruitment costs.

"A number of learners actually took up roles with their placement company after completing their studies. It also emerged that for businesses with apprentices attending college on day release, a T Level student could help infill roles, therein maintaining company productivity and efficiency levels."

T Levels are described as a 'once in a generation opportunity to reform technical education'. The industry placement is a make or break component of them.

"We understand that for many businesses, providing work experience of this scale is a big commitment, particularly if you have never done it before. Although a 315-hour placement might seem overwhelming, it needn't be. There is some flexibility around the format.

"Walsall College continues to be proactive in building employers' understanding around

T Levels in order to remove any barriers to involvement. The government has also pledged £0.5 billion annual investments in these programmes to support their roll out over the next few years.

"Our Construction T Level in partnership with Balfour Beatty VINCI is just one example of the way the college and an employer are giving students the best possible career start. We are also collaborating with those in our local childcare and digital sectors in readiness for next year.

"By 2023, there will be 25 T Levels in operation covering all industry areas from business to health science to engineering.

"We urge employers to make industry placements a vital component of your recruitment and development strategy so that T Levels achieve what they have set out to. And of course, we ask that you reach out to providers like ourselves for advice and support.

"Let's make sure that these opportunities to grow and recruit individuals with the right skills, as well as to widen participation and diversify workforces do not go amiss."

# SICKNESS ABSENCE & PRESENTEEISM IN SMALL BUSINESSES

EMPLOYEES ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF ANY BUSINESS. BUT, IN SMES, A SMALLER TEAM MEANS THAT YOUR PEOPLE ARE EVEN MORE VITAL TO THE OVERALL SUCCESS OF YOUR BUSINESS.

So, when a team member is off work due to ill health, it can have a noticeable impact. However, employees turning up to work despite being unwell could be having an even bigger impact on your business than sickness absence.

## SICKNESS ABSENCE IN SMALL BUSINESSES

According to figures from the Office for National Statistics, 131.2 million working days were lost due to sickness in 2017. Of these lost days, the biggest causes of absence were:

**26%**

MINOR  
ILLNESSES

**21%**

MUSCULOSKELETAL  
PROBLEMS

**15%**

OTHER\*

**10%**

STRESS, DEPRESSION  
AND ANXIETY

It's no surprise that staff sickness absence can have a negative effect on small businesses. However, the extent to which it may be costing them can often go undocumented. According to one study, over 70% of businesses admitted that absence has a direct effect on profitability although more than a third of these have no idea how much absentees have cost them.

\* INCLUDING ACCIDENTS, POISONINGS, INFECTIOUS DISEASES



## WHAT IS PRESENTEEISM?

While much attention is often paid to the rate of sickness absence within an organisation, presenteeism levels can often fall under the radar if it goes unnoticed.

Presenteeism occurs when employees attend work despite being unwell. This could be as a result of issues with their physical or mental health. Unlike with sickness absence, presenteeism can be hard for employers to spot amongst their team, as they may not notice any symptoms or indications that someone is unwell. However, presenteeism may be more common than some business leaders and managers may think. According to a CIPD report, 86% of over 1,000 respondents said they had observed presenteeism in their organisation over the last 12 months, compared with 72% in 2016 and 26% in 2010.

## HOW CAN PRESENTEEISM AFFECT A SMALL BUSINESS?

While it can be a common misconception that employees being absent from the workplace is more costly to a business than if they were at work, presenteeism could be impacting a business just as much or even more. However, unlike sickness absence presenteeism can often go unnoticed. This can make its impact hard to measure. Despite this, a Health at Work Economic Evidence Report found that, for every £1 cost to a business of absenteeism, there's estimated to be an additional cost of £2.50 due to presenteeism.

As well as the financial impact on a business, presenteeism can also have adverse effects for the rest of the team who are left to pick up the workload for their colleagues who are present at work despite being unwell. This could therefore have a negative impact on the overall productivity of the business.

## CAN SICKNESS ABSENCE & PRESENTEEISM BE REDUCED?

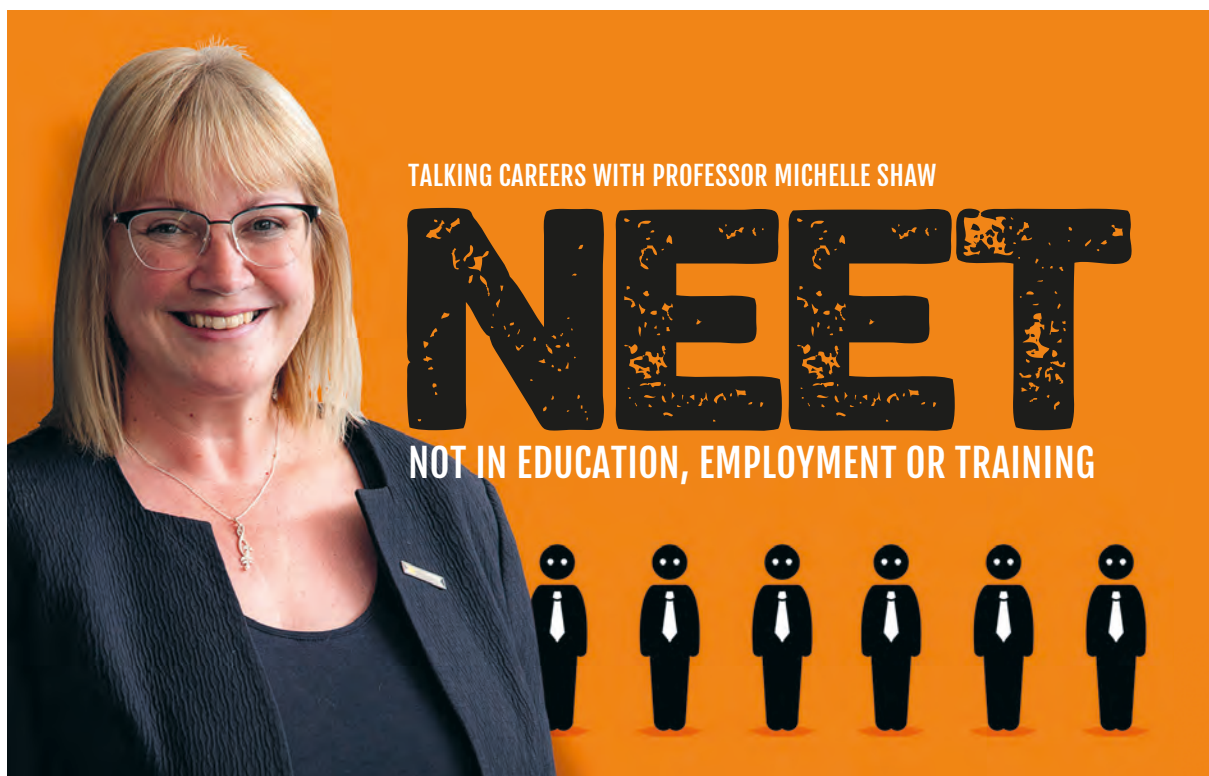
While a certain level of sickness absence is unavoidable, there are ways in which small business owners can work to improve the overall workplace culture which may benefit sickness absence and presenteeism levels. These include:

- Offer the option of flexible working - According to research by Moorepay, around 72% of business owners believe that introducing policies such as flexible working, time off for family reasons and return to work programmes could reduce the rate of absenteeism by as much as 11% or more.
- Allow employees to switch off - Encouraging employees to switch off outside of working hours is important to give them time to relax and recover from the stresses and strains of work. Avoiding emailing your team outside of working hours, encouraging them to take a lunch break and ensuring that they aren't regularly staying in the office late into the evening are all ways in which you can help your team to have a positive work-life balance.
- Encourage a culture of open dialogue - Ensuring that your team feel comfortable opening up to their line manager when they may be struggling with workloads etc. can help to encourage a culture of open dialogue. This can help to ensure that members of the team are asking for help when they need it.
- Practice healthy work-life balance behaviours - As the owner of the business, members of your team

may be looking to you to gauge how they should be behaving in the workplace. Demonstrating positive work-life balance behaviours, such as leaving the office on time and taking a lunch break, can encourage the rest of your team to follow suit.

- Allow employees to rest when they're unwell - If an employee is off work due to ill health, it's important to allow them time to rest and recover without the stress of worrying about work. According to one study, over a third of employees admitted that managers often put pressure on them to return to work before they're ready, with 52.9% of managers still contacting their employees whilst off sick.

While the impact can be hard to measure, developing a health and wellbeing strategy within your business can be beneficial to absenteeism and presenteeism levels. It can also have benefits for your business too. According to one survey, respondents reported that their organisation's health and wellbeing activity had positive effects including better employee morale and engagement (44%), a healthier and more inclusive culture (35%) and lower sickness absence (31%).



TALKING CAREERS WITH PROFESSOR MICHELLE SHAW

NEET

NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR TRAINING

**F**or the first three months of 2019, there were over three-quarters of a million young people, aged 16 to 24 years, in the UK who were not in education, employment or training, known as (NEET). A figure that represents some 11% of the population in this age group.

Shocking statistics with one in ten of our young people not able to get their feet on the first rung of the economic ladder.

“When we drill down into the statistics,” Professor Shaw said, “It’s even more disheartening.

“Just under 40% are actively looking for and are available for work, therefore being classified as unemployed. However, the remainder is either not looking for work and/or not available for work and therefore classified as economically inactive.”

Whilst numbers of NEETs are decreasing over time, linked to a shift in education policy which now proactively drives more young people into continuing their studies, the decline is marginal with a paltry 0.3 percentage point decline over the last year. The education policy shift has had limited success. From 2016, all students who failed to gain a grade 4 GCSE in Mathematics

**PROSPER VISITED CHAMBER PATRON MEMBER, THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON AND MET WITH ITS DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & CEO OF THE MULTI ACADEMY TRUST, PROFESSOR MICHELLE SHAW, TO GET AN INSIGHT INTO TODAY’S YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR MOVE FROM EDUCATION TO THE WORLD OF WORK.**

and English were required to re-sit the qualification to ensure they had the basic skills for future employment. However, the policy has had limited success. GCSE data for 2019 shows the scale of the challenge. Only 23% per cent of students aged 17 and above achieved this grade in GCSE Mathematics. In GCSE English it was only 33% per cent.

“It is not only the waste of talent and young lives that should concern us,” Professor Shaw added, “there is a recognised cost to our wider society of being NEET.”

Government research as far back as 2001 indicated that the estimated additional lifetime costs of being NEET were as high as £7 billion in resource costs, and £8.1 billion in public finance costs - and this was a modest estimate. The average per-person costs over a lifetime were just under £100,000. These figures did not include significant additional costs related to health

impacts; the justice system, social housing, additional education courses, initiatives to reduce unemployment and support for the voluntary sector. Not surprisingly it is the costs of unemployment, in the form of benefits, that dominate. Where young people have multiple challenges at this age, such as crime combined with being NEET, the costs increase significantly. Even for those young people who eventually secure a job, the impact of being NEET will persist over their lifetime with an average loss of up to £50,000 in lifetime earnings compared to a young person who was never NEET.”

Clearly, this is an issue for all of us. Taking time to identify the causes of young people becoming NEET and trying to ameliorate them will benefit wider society. “The first issue of course, is raising the overall standard of education,” reports Professor Shaw, “to ensure all young people achieve the GCSE grades they need to access further opportunities. However, we also need to





provide high-quality careers education. Schools are legally required to provide.

“Careers education means young people learning about different kinds of work. This begins in primary school. Careers guidance helps young people think about their personal skills and interests to enable them to have realistic career aspirations.

“Put simply,” she said, “it is about providing young people with the information they need to enter the world of work - to prevent them from becoming NEET.

“Employers routinely identify that young people are not ready for the world of work. They indicate that they want skills in their employees such as confidence, the ability to communicate, problem-solving skills, and self-organisation skills. They want employees who can negotiate and persuade, who are team players. They want employees who have motivation and perseverance and the ability to work under pressure. They want to see leadership. And they want all of this underscored with commercial awareness. We appear to have a mismatch between what our education system produces and what employers want.”





“THERE’S AN URGENT CALL TO ACTION FOR BOSSES AND MANAGERS TO REVIEW THEIR LEADERSHIP STYLE AND LEARN NEW SKILLS OR FACE LOSING TALENT IN THEIR ORGANISATION,” SAYS WENDYANNE SHAPIRO – LEADING COACH, TRAINER AND HEAD OF LOTUS FLOWER CONSULTANCY.

“I’ve seen that there is a core set of traits and behaviours often listed as the ‘blueprint’ to success, yet; I’ve noted subtle shifts and changes in people and their desires or wants which regularly changes the management and leadership landscape, - often dramatically and quickly.”

When respondents of the research were asked which characteristic would their boss need to change for them to remain in the company, nearly half (47%) indicated that a boss should inspire their staff. A further 39% believe that the ability to listen is the most important quality for a manager. 10% believe that bosses should provide a clear career structure for all their staff and not just a select few.

**"THERE WILL ALWAYS BE THE NEED TO GET THE BASICS RIGHT WITH TECHNICAL SKILLS TRAINING BEING FUNDAMENTAL IN ANY BUSINESS."**

“We now need to acknowledge cultural change, with ‘people’ considerations and sensitivities on a much larger scale. Developing and enhancing emotional intelligence will help to bridge the gap here.





**"WE CAN NO LONGER ASSUME THAT THE ABILITY TO BUILD LONG TERM MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS, TO CONVERSE AND COMMUNICATE AT ALL LEVELS COMES EASY."**

The same applies to other key abilities such as providing feedback, challenging the status quo, coaching or developing potential – this need to be reviewed fully and carefully so the right approach is taken. This requires individuals to self-reflect and be able to hold up a mirror to themselves before they can respond to others. These skills need time to acquire, then to develop, they need to be considered a priority rather than an afterthought."

For Wendyanne, it is vital businesses take seriously the need to allow their managers and leaders time to develop these all-important skills, adding: "Our 21st Century needs often challenge the way we communicate, interpret and respond to information. More traditional ways of doing things should connect or combine with those new approaches, styles, techniques and theories coming out of the leading business schools.

"When you map over the industrial, technological, political and economic changes with these approaches, you start to see an often seismic shift is needed in how businesses need to ensure that their senior people operate, challenge, or deliver both in the short, medium and longer terms. Professional development shouldn't end when somebody gets a more senior job title – continuous development and learning tailored for those senior people is a necessary and important way for businesses to ensure it retains its top talent and that same talent is able to continue to deliver for the needs of the business."



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## LEGAL ROUND-ROBIN

# NEW GUIDANCE ON MENOPAUSE WELCOMED BY THURSFIELDS

NOW WOMEN OVER THE AGE OF 50 ARE THE FASTEST-GROWING COHORT OF EMPLOYEES LAUREN COPE, A SOLICITOR IN THE EMPLOYMENT TEAM AT THURSFIELDS', WELCOMES NEW GUIDANCE ON MENOPAUSE FROM WORKPLACE EXPERT ACAS.

**T**he online document offers guidance to employers and managers on how to support staff affected by menopause symptoms, along with tips for workers on how to raise concerns.

Statistics estimate that around two million women have experienced difficulties at work due to their menopause symptoms.

Some of the lessor known symptoms of the menopause (which can occur even at the pre-menopausal stage) include anxiety and panic attacks, skin irritation, dry eyes and difficulty sleeping.

Such symptoms can mean women have difficulty concentrating, sometimes resulting in poor performance at work. Although this is clearly a concern for employers, it is crucial that such issues are handled carefully and that employers seek to support staff in the first instance.

*The key points in the advice for employers include the following:*

- Create an open and trusted culture among staff.
- Provide awareness training for managers to deal with concerns sensitively and to handle any difficult conversations.
- Consider practical assistance, such as altering working hours or providing equipment, such as desk fans.
- Carefully manage sickness absence or a dip in job performance.

Examples are also provided as to how employers should deal with staff going through the menopause, with particular attention drawn to managing sickness absence.

Many staff may feel embarrassed to raise symptoms with their employer. By creating an environment where staff feel comfortable and able to discuss such issues, employers are able to get to the root of the problem and ensure that their staff continue to work effectively.

This is particularly important as menopause symptoms have been accepted to be a disability by the employment tribunal. In *Merchant*



vs *BT* (2012) for example, a female employee was experiencing stress and poor concentration as a result of the menopause.

The employer was found to have failed to consider the impact of the menopause when a manager reviewed the employee's performance and she was dismissed. The tribunal upheld the employee's claim on the basis that the manager would not have approached a non-female-related condition in the same way.

The *Merchant vs BT* case is a useful reminder to employers that there is a risk of a discrimination claim if sickness is poorly dealt with by an employer. By seeking to understand and support staff going through the menopause, employers can help reduce such risk.

Other case law has also repeatedly shown that employers should take medical information into account in capability situations where ill-health has been raised by the employee. This will usually involve an employer seeking advice from the employee's GP or occupational health practitioners.

The menopause is a natural occurrence and by helping staff to deal with this in the workplace employers will only increase work rates, quality and loyalty.

Aside from the positive human outcome, employers should take the issue seriously as there are laws that can be used to protect anyone who feels they are not being treated properly at work as a result.

Many employers are now including a menopause policy in their staff handbooks.

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**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP EVENT | THURSDAY 5TH MARCH 2020 | 2PM – 4PM**

# IF NOBODY THINKS YOU CAN..... THEN YOU HAVE TO!

TO CELEBRATE THIS YEAR'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, #EACHFOREQUAL, BLACK COUNTRY WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP WILL PLAY HOST TO ANOTHER FASCINATING EVENT ON THURSDAY 5TH MARCH WITH A HOST OF LEADING BUSINESSWOMEN AND SPEAKERS FROM ACROSS THE REGION.



## SARAH COOPER-JONES

**REGIONAL DIRECTOR - CORPORATE & COMMERCIAL BANKING AT NATWEST**

Advocate of the Year at the Women in Finance Awards 2019, Sarah has been recognised for supporting females in senior levels and stamping out barriers to growth for women in financial services. Championing the importance of maintaining a good work-life balance and the importance of flexible working to ensure a healthy and sustainable approach to life balance and fulfilment at both home and work, Sarah has been commended for her advocacy addressing intersectionality of gender, social mobility and ethnicity.



## JADE LINTON

**SENIOR ASSOCIATE AT THURSFIELDS SOLICITORS**

Jade, chosen recently to appear in a national campaign, 'Project Embrace', and featured across 800 billboards around the country, is a champion for diversity in the workplace. A specialist in employment law, Jade challenges the misconceptions and works to promote a more inclusive workplace.



## MAXINE LACEBY

**FOUNDER & CEO OF ABSOLUTE COLLAGEN**

Beauty entrepreneur, Maxine Laceby, discovered a collagen supplement she formulated in her kitchen at the age of 50. Giving up her career at the age of 25 to become a fulltime stay at home mum, a gift she treasures every day, Maxine returned to the workplace aged 50, a terrifying and exhilarating experience by her own admission. After officially launching Absolute Collagen in the UK in 2017, she is now on track for a £10 million turnover, making Absolute Collagen one of the UK'S fastest growing direct consumer brands.

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## Michele Bickerton

**MICHELE BICKERTON IS PEOPLE & DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR FOR THOMAS DUDLEY LTD  
THE DUDLEY BASED MANUFACTURER CELEBRATING 100 YEARS IN BUSINESS DURING 2020.**

*Her role covers almost everything to do with the lifecycle of team members throughout the group of companies.  
We spent five minutes with Michele to find out how the company work with schools and why she became an Enterprise Advisor.*

### ***So, Michele, tell us about your role in Thomas Dudley?***

No two days are ever the same, I have a great team and together we look after HR, H&S and Compliance, so varied to say the least. I am also on the CSR team, where we do as much as we can for the local community and our employees.

This year our charity is Guide Dogs for the Blind. We also get involved in a couple of national events, but we do like to keep it local.

We are 100 years old this year, so I have been pulling together lots of lovely events for our employees and their families.

### ***Explain how Thomas Dudley helps schools in the region?***

As a business we are passionate about the next generation of Thomas Dudley employees, we have an ageing workforce so enabling students to see and understand what we do at an early age is a must.

This year, we have had 20 work experience students, these are in various areas of the business from accounts to engineering.

We have also had over 600 student visits, these vary from look and see, talks on careers and visits based on the school curriculum.

### ***Why are they so passionate about inspiring the workforce of tomorrow?***

Life is changing daily and we need to get the young people of the Black Country enthused about tradition as well as technology, here at Thomas Dudley we have both.

### ***Why did you choose to become an Enterprise Advisor?***

I have been thinking about it for a couple of years and finally decided that although we do work with local schools, there is so much more that can be done. Hopefully my experience and influence as well as the backup of TD Group will help support St James', which is my school. There is also some healthy competition between Martin Dudley and I as he is an advisor at Beacon Hill Academy.

I went for a tour recently and was overwhelmed with what a forward-thinking school they are. All very different to when I was at school.

### ***How would you advise other businesses to get involved and engage with schools?***

It's simple these students are the future of your business. Yes, it can be time consuming but if you inspire just one child out of a group, what more could you ask for?

It doesn't have to be all bells and whistles, start small and organise workplace tours, a career talk or work experience. But make it meaningful for the student and your business, it's not a tick box exercise.

### ***We are now working in jobs that didn't exist 20 years ago and it's common knowledge that two in every three primary aged children today will do a job that doesn't yet exist. What advice would you give to younger children and their teachers?***

A cliché but think outside the box, open your minds and the children's minds to alternatives - what if's? But we still need to understand where it all started, the traditions that have made our country.

### ***What advice would you give to your younger self?***

That's easy - try harder at school. Doing a degree with two small children and a job is not easy. Also follow your dreams, they may not work out, but you can at least say you tried and have no regrets.

My regret - I wish I had gone into the forces as a pilot!





# Future Link is perfect for young business people who want to forge links with fellow professionals.

Designed specifically for newly qualified professionals, taking their first few steps on the career ladder or for those starting off in a new position at work and seeking to network with like-minded young professionals across the region.

- **NETWORKING AND PROFILE RAISING**
- **SUPPORT AROUND SKILLS NECESSARY FOR CAREER PROGRESSION**
- **ACCESS TO TRAINING**
- **KNOWLEDGE SHARING**
- **GUIDANCE AND MENTORING FROM EXPERIENCED LEADERS**



We welcome individuals to sign up to Future Link to expand their network and meet like-minded young professionals, in turn helping with personal growth and career development.

**Gurpreet Boparai**  
Business Relationship Manager

**01902 912326 or 07810 377813**  
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# We are a firm of chartered accountants

Tax and business advisers, we partner with entrepreneurs and individuals interested in profitable growth

Providing a full range of financial and business strategy services to enterprises and individuals in the UK from offices across the country, we help them to achieve growth and success for the long term. Our access to the wider networks of **Baker Tilly International** and **MHA** makes us a truly national and international partner of choice for all seeking growth.

MHA Macintyre Hudson is a centre for excellence when it comes to advising businesses in the **manufacturing and engineering sector**. Our proactive approach to helping businesses prosper includes guiding your business from start-up, through to growth strategies and surviving a challenging economy. This is complemented by our national and international credentials, meaning we are well-positioned to advise our clients on a diverse range of industry-related areas, from accounting and audit to more specialist areas around tax, including R&D tax relief, capital reliefs and Patent Box & International tax.

**Now, for tomorrow**

## Contact



**Chris Barlow**  
Partner

chris.barlow@mhllp.co.uk  
+44(0)121 236 0465

**macintyreHUDSON.co.uk**