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MIDLANDS MEDIA AWARDS
Magazine of the Year – winner



SHROPSHIRE CHAMBER AWARDS
Best New Business (SBLTV)

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ONLINE

We’ll have all the local reaction from the Chancellor’s March Budget statement, to find out if employers think it could impact the result of the next General Election.



ON TV

Listen to some of the keynote presentations from the ‘Empower Your Business’ event, and business awards launch on Shropshire Business Live TV – you’ll find it on **YouTube**, or **sbltv.co.uk**



By Carl Jones
Shropshire Business Editor

SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS

Welcome

It was author Mark Twain who famously said: “There are lies, damned lies, and statistics.” Looking at some of the headlines delivered to Shropshire Business HQ in recent weeks, I can definitely see where he was coming from.

Exhibit one tells us: “Shropshire has some of the most optimistic businesses in the country.” Exhibit two adds: “The county has some of the most worrying skills shortages in the region”. The contradictions continue. “Aptitude is more important than a polished CV for employers looking to take on first-time jobseekers,” one survey tells me. Another reveals that record numbers of companies are rejecting candidates for interview because of the poor quality of their CVs.

Do you get my drift? I find it’s far better, most of the time, to just get out and about around the county and gauge the mood of the business community for yourself.

And that’s precisely what we’ve been doing. In this issue you’ll find features on several of our stop-offs, including a fabulous ‘Empower Your Business’ event near Bridgnorth which generated much debate and positive feedback, and the packed launch event for the 2024 Shropshire Chamber Business Awards. Have you entered yet? The closing date is mid April.

But our cover story this time round is a topic which is generating plenty of headlines, and not always for the right reasons.

International trade is a crucial ingredient of the Shropshire economy,

with companies doing business in more than 50 countries. Right now, with parts of the world in turmoil, it’s presenting real challenges. But there are still great opportunities and success stories too, as our seven-page special report reveals.

Another crucial ingredient in business success is how you present yourself. Some people absolutely love networking, while for others the thought of having to give a 60-second presentation to their peers fills them with dread.

A Shropshire entrepreneur who pitched to TV’s Dragons’ Den and left with a deal explains why it’s possible to pitch anything, if you have the right approach and attitude.

If you want to test out his networking theory, there are two fantastic events coming up. We preview the Shropshire Leadership Conference at Theatre Severn, and the return of Shropshire Business Festival at Wrekin College. If you’re going to either of these events, I’ll see you there.

And who’s been glued to The Traitors on the telly over the past few weeks? I’ve got my hand up. The good news is that we’ve not been wasting our time – because it turns out that the show is a really useful piece of research for reading body language in the workplace and looking past even the most unbreakable poker face.

What else do we have for you in this packed issue? Well our usual array of top quality columnists who tackle subjects this time ranging from the Post Office scandal to commercial property investments, minimum wage increases, Artificial Intelligence, and much more.

Don’t forget, if there’s a burning business topic you think we should be covering – or something you’d like to comment on yourself – don’t hesitate to drop us a line.

Could you banish a TRAITOR from your boardroom?



By Carl Jones

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a faithful, it can be hard to spot a traitor unless you're aware of their 'tells'. Everyone has something... however brief, however subtle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And don't think for a minute that a beautiful rural county like Shropshire is immune from traitors – they've been in our midst for centuries.

For proof, you only have to take a walk down to the bottom of St Mary's Water Lane in Shrewsbury to find 'Traitor's Gate', built in the 13th century to provide access from the River Severn to the town.

It's believed that the brickwork may be linked to the refurbishment of the town's defences by Royalist forces during the English Civil War.

How did it get its name?

Legend has it that a traitor opened the gate to a force of Parliamentarian troops in February 1645, allowing them to take control of the town.

So what do you do if you think you have a traitor in your midst?

Niamh Kelly, director of the HR Dept Shropshire, says: "Banishing a traitor from your boardroom – or dealing with a deceitful or counterproductive employee – requires a careful approach that involves trust and teamwork, strategic thinking, emotional intelligence leadership and influence.

"You need to foster a culture of openness and collaboration, encouraging team members to share concerns and observations. A strong, cohesive team is more likely to identify and be resilient to disruptive behaviour.

"You should use your understanding of people's emotions and motivations to gauge the sincerity and integrity of team members. Someone who consistently demonstrates manipulative or dishonest behaviour might be a concern.



Traitor's Gate, in Shrewsbury

"You may also need to make tough decisions quickly, especially if the individual's actions are harming the team or company. Ensure your decisions are based on facts and not just assumptions or hearsay."

She adds: "Having said all of that though – sometimes, the board leader needs to have the skills of a traitor themselves!"



Niamh Kelly



Marcus Matthews

"The winner had a clear strategy that they flexed and adjusted according to the changing circumstances. Although their cover was almost blown a couple of times, they remained calm under pressure and treated the other contestants with respect, which made them likeable and undetected.

"A board leader does need to have these type of skills in the current business environment when everything from a cost of living crisis, to energy prices to Brexit can land on their desk at a moment's notice and derail carefully worked out plans.

"Although obviously we would never encourage outright lying from a board or any other leader!"

Shrewsbury-based Marcus Matthews runs Make Your Life Count, a business which fuses life coaching with therapy. His wide-ranging career has included roles as both a soldier and police officer.

He says: "Identifying potential disloyalty and preventing wrong hires demands astute leadership.

"Aligning goals with values prevents discord, while fostering a culture of respect, support, and open communication guards against betrayal.

"Purposeful work and recognition of contributions nurture loyalty, and a people-first mentality prioritises well-being. Yet, the real question is: do we truly live by these missions and values?"

"As leaders, it's crucial to not only deter detractors but to attract those who share our vision. How are you ensuring your actions reflect your stated values, genuinely embodying them to build a cohesive, trustworthy team?"

"The purpose of this is that as leaders and managers we blame others, when in fact we don't take responsibility for creating authentic environments.

"People like people like themselves, so if what you say and do isn't aligned then people will always look after themselves."

News on capital allowances is welcome relief for businesses

FRANCESCA HUTCHESON and GURJ SANDHU explore ways of maximising tax savings on commercial property investments

In the Autumn Statement in November 2023, the Government confirmed that full expensing will be made permanent, rather than ending in March 2026, as previously planned.

Whilst this announcement was not entirely unexpected, it is welcome news for businesses looking to acquire new trading premises, refurbish existing premises and/or make commercial property investments.

Background

Capital Allowances are a type of tax relief for businesses (UK Ltd, partnerships and sole traders/individuals, etc). They allow the business to deduct some or all of the cost of an asset from its profits before paying tax. An area that is often overlooked when making claims for Capital Allowances is expenditure incurred on commercial property . . . and that is where specialist advisors can unlock additional opportunities.

Recent changes

In order to incentivise business investment and fill the void left by the removal of the Super Deduction in March 2023, 'full capital expensing' has now come into effect permanently. This means that capital expenditure invested into new IT equipment, plant or machinery can be deducted in full immediately from taxable profits. Under full expensing, for every pound a company invests, their taxes are cut by up to 25p.

The ability to accelerate the tax savings into Year 1 as a result of full expensing will have a significant positive impact on cashflow and will potentially factor into the decision to proceed with a project or not.

How we can help

The Azets Capital Allowances team is made up of multi-disciplinary specialists that include chartered surveyors, tax advisers and accountants. This means we not only understand property, construction, and valuation matters, but UK case law and complex tax legislation necessary to maximise the tax reliefs available.

The team is based out of our Birmingham office, but works closely with our clients and colleagues across Shropshire and Mid-Wales, having recently undertaken a number of projects in the region.

Recent projects include a review of expenditure on commercial premises in Telford; the original warehouse was acquired over 10 years ago for over £1.1 million and a large extension was later constructed at a cost of £1.1 million.

No Capital Allowances were claimed on the original acquisition, so our team did a historical



The Azets Capital Allowances team works closely with clients and colleagues across Shropshire and Mid-Wales, having recently undertaken a number of projects in the region



Gurj Sandhu, National Head of Capital Allowances



Francesca Hutcheson, Tax Advisory Partner

purchase claim and an extension claim. Of the total spend of £2.2 million, around £250,000 of qualifying Plant and Machinery expenditure was identified, with a further £1 million of Structures and Building Allowances.

With the combined availability of the Super Deduction and Annual Investment Allowance, this gave rise to a total tax cash flow saving of £320,000, and a Year 1 benefit alone of £75,000.

Other notable local projects also include a wedding venue that is being continuously refurbished, the acquisition of a substantial furnished holiday let and ongoing work with a large care home business.

Ultimately, the Azets Capital Allowance team get involved with businesses who are incurring capex on their commercial properties annually or have a significant one-off project that they are undertaking for high value.

- *If you would like to discuss maximising tax savings for your property investments, please reach out to Gurj Sandhu (National Head of Capital Allowances) on gurj.sandhu@azets.co.uk or Francesca Hutcheson (Tax Advisory Partner - Shrewsbury) on francesca.hutcheson@azets.co.uk*



New neighbour for The Shrews

Planning permission has been granted to create a landmark business estate next to Shrewsbury Town Football Club.

Morris Property has been granted permission for the 28-acre Stadium Point site on Oteley Road to create commercial space which will be available for purchase or rent from the summer.

It will include speculative and bespoke units ranging from distribution warehousing to offices.

Chris Morris, director of Morris Property, said: "Despite keen demand for business units on this side of the town, we are aware that economic times remain tough, so we have designed our units to be cost and energy-efficient.

"We are providing flexible commercial space ranging from 1,850 to 175,000 sq ft.

"We have been working closely with Shropshire Council as supporters of inward investment serving Shropshire and Mid Wales and, in partnership with the WMCA and Frontier Development Capital (FDC), we are excited to be transforming this site into a vibrant commercial centre.

"We pride ourselves on our collaborative approach and are pleased to already be working with a number of regional companies developing plans to build their businesses with us at Stadium Point."

Andy Street, Mayor of the West Midlands and WMCA chair, said: "It's been a challenging couple of years for the West Midlands region but throughout that time, the WMCA has continued to invest in schemes such as Stadium Point to help drive economic growth.

"These investments are providing new commercial spaces for our job-creating businesses so it's great to see this latest scheme getting under way. Once completed we expect upwards of 350 jobs based on the site, which is great news for local people and the town's economy."

Kieren Turner-Owen, associate director of FDC, added: "The loan facility being provided for the speculative industrial development at Stadium Point is a prime example of how the WMCA funding can be deployed, accelerating job creation in the region.

"Stadium Point highlights Shrewsbury and



On site at Stadium Point, from Morris Property and FDC, are Chris Morris, Nick Oakley, Elizabeth Lowe, Pete Allworth, Kieren Turner-Owen and Phil Griffiths



Commercial agents at the preview event discovered more about the development

the wider West Midlands' excellent industrial offerings and we very much look forward to seeing the progress over the coming months."

Commercial property agents from across the West Midlands have already been given an exclusive preview of the site.

Hosted by Morris Property's head of development Liz Lowe, and Toby Shaw of retained agents Towler Shaw Roberts (TSR), the 'Winter Warmer' breakfast event welcomed more than 20 guests for a first-hand review of the site.



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These are some instances of Machine Learning driving business transformation, cost reduction, and competitive advantage.

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Cheers! Hospitality sector is still going strong



The Ragleth Inn in Little Stretton

By James Evans

Going out for a meal or a drink is still proving a popular choice for people in Shropshire.

Despite the challenges the hospitality sector has faced in recent years, the county seems to be bucking the national trend of hospitality business closures.

In 2023, nine pubs in the region reopened after being revamped or having previously been closed, and demand for pub and restaurant properties across the county is showing no sign of diminishing.

A perfect example of the level of current interest in the leisure sector is the recent 'off market' sale of The Ragleth Inn, in Little Stretton. Halls Commercial were recently instructed with the disposal of the well-known picturesque pub and interest was so high, that we were able to complete the purchase without ever coming to the open market.

As a practice, we have also recently sold or let several other well-known venues locally, including The Wingfield Arms at Montford Bridge, and The Bull in Bridgnorth, which have been purchased with the intent to continue operating as pubs or restaurants.

And it's not just sales – the letting of hospitality venues is also doing well, with Halls Commercial having recently let The Restaurant at Theatre Severn, The Coach and Horses on Swan Hill, 4-5 Market Street, The Exchange on Bellstone – all in Shrewsbury town centre – and The Olde Bucks Head Inn in Frankwell.

The success that Halls Commercial is having in the leisure sector, as it bounces back after the effects of Covid, is encouraging. As a practice, we are experiencing an upturn in enquiries, and this is resulting in the completion of a variety of sales and lettings across the county.

We would be delighted to provide professional advice to any party seeking to sell or let their property.

Since 2019, the region has seen a 6.4% rise in overnight stays according to tourist bosses, and Visit Shropshire figures for 2022 revealed almost 1.5 million people spent a night or more in the county.

Also, with Shropshire having been named by travel experts ABTA as one of 10 destinations to watch for holidaymakers this year – the only UK location to be featured – it is expected that the county's hospitality sector will continue to see further growth in the future.

● James Evans is head of Halls Commercial, based in Shrewsbury



The Coach and Horses on Swan Hill



The Restaurant at Theatre Severn

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For enquiries & bookings contact Rebeckah Richards on
reb@ryderpartnership.co.uk
07956734831



One of the exhibition halls at last year's event



Chrisbeon will be back with their office chair racing challenge

Doing business differently

Shropshire Business Festival is back this April with the organisers offering companies the chance to do business in a different kind of networking setting.

The free to attend event will take place at Wrekin College in Wellington on Thursday, April 11, from 2pm to 7pm, for networking, talks and all the fun of a festival.

Seminars confirmed so far include digging into the psychology of getting people to buy your products with Pippa Tait from Sales Geek, and a talk on medical negligence from Lanyon Bowdler.

The Exhibition Hall will feature the who's who of Shropshire businesses, with well-known companies such as Base Architects, Clear Design, and Shoothill among the line-up. Volvo Shrewsbury will be offering an electric car experience too. Last year's debut event at the college attracted more than 500 business people.

Beth Heath, creative director at Shropshire Festivals, said: "This is your best opportunity of the year to get your business out there and in front of Shropshire's business leaders. Put your product in their hands, talk to them face-to-face in a relaxed setting, grow your contacts, and embrace a different way of networking."

The Visit Shropshire & Telford Tourism Expo will take place ahead of the main festival from 12pm to 2pm. Tourism and hospitality businesses will come together for several topical presentations, including one on what The Budget means for the tourism industry. There will also be a county-wide leaflet swap.

New for 2024 will be a novel way to enjoy business talks from Silent Seminars, who are sponsoring the concept at the event. Visitors will be given headphones to tune in to a live business talk while on the move, maximising their time at the event.



Networking with a difference at Shropshire Business Festival

Managed service provider Start Tech will be hosting a cyber security zone to promote ways to keep businesses safe from cyber threats, and Chrisbeon will be celebrating its 50th birthday with a custom-built office racecourse for remote-controlled cars. Lanyon Bowdler will be holding a lawyers' lounge at the event where businesses can get free legal advice from the local team.

Beth said: "Shropshire Business Festival works because of the relaxed atmosphere we create with fun activities which break down the barriers to get chatting. Whether you're throwing axes or parking a lorry, we give you reasons to talk to the CEO next to you so you can leave with new, meaningful business relationships."

● To register for your free ticket visit the website www.shropshirebusinessfestival.co.uk

“ Shropshire Business Festival works because of the relaxed atmosphere we create with fun activities which break down the barriers to get chatting. ”



Toby Spence of Wrekin College with Beth Heath

Agricultural collaboration

Rea Valley Tractors, the tractor and agricultural dealer with its headquarters in Shrewsbury, has announced the acquisition of Teme Valley Tractors to strengthen its territories in South Shropshire and Mid Wales.

The company, which also has a base in Newport, is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, and says the acquisition represents a 'significant milestone'.

Teme Valley Tractors began in May 1983 before expanding into Welshpool in 1993, with Martyn Hall and Graham Probert managing the Welshpool and Knighton businesses respectively.

Matt Mulligan, managing director of Rea Valley Tractors, said: "Acquiring Teme Valley Tractors aligns seamlessly with our long-term growth plans."

"The similarities between both businesses make for a great collaboration and we look forward to growing the great reputation and contributions that they have made to the local agricultural community over the years."

Rea Valley Tractors hold the franchises for JCB materials handling equipment, Bailey Trailers and domestic ground care products Milwaukee and Stihl.

Managers said it would be business as usual across all branches, and TVT Welshpool and TVT Knighton would continue trading from the current locations while the necessary preparations are made for the integration.

Graham Probert and Martyn Hall will also continue in key management roles within the business.

"We will continue to serve customers from our Welshpool and Knighton depots. As always, our team are ready to welcome you and look



Joining forces - Martyn Hall, Matt Mulligan and Graham Probert

forward to continuing to support you with the same first-class service you have come to expect," said Graham.

Throughout the last 18 months, Rea Valley Tractors has substantially expanded its sales territory, opening new branches at Middlewich in Cheshire, Ormskirk in Lancashire, and Denbigh in North Wales, after being appointed a New Holland Agriculture dealer late in 2022, and expanding its JCB territory into Cheshire.

With the acquisition of TVT, Rea Valley Tractors will operate from a total of nine locations.

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2024

Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

Apprenticeship Awards

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An eclectic career has seen Pete become a professional trainer, psychologist and stand-up comedian



Peter at the Marches Growth Hub workshop



Motivating fellow investors and entrepreneurs – Pete enjoys sharing his ideas and experiences

Pitching your business idea needn't make you lose sleep

CARL JONES chats to a Shropshire-born inventor about why he refused to be intimidated by a visit to TV's Dragons' Den

It's more than five years now since Shropshire-born entrepreneur Pete Hill emerged victorious from TV's Dragons' Den.

But his first flirtation with one of the notoriously tough 'dragons' actually dates back three decades . . . when he earned his first few pennies walking dogs in Market Drayton!

"I watched Dragons' Den from the very first series," says Shrewsbury-born Pete who runs Petvictus, designing and making a range of innovative pet products.

"It showed me that inventors didn't have to be eccentric men with pipes and massive beards, or genius designers with PhDs and massive budgets.

"Under the stress of the cameras, the inventors on Dragons' Den are shown to be just ordinary, fallible people. If they could do it, maybe I could too."

Pete was hoping to have the millionaires purring at one of his latest ideas; a cat food bowl to keep food fresh and sealed when not in use.

To open the lid, the cat steps onto a ramp to reveal a shallow bowl inside for a single portion of meat and a deeper bowl for larger meals. Customers included Pets At Home.

There was just one hitch – one of the dragons at the time was Nick Jenkins, the former Newport Adams' Grammar School student who made his fortune as creator of online greetings card company Moonpig.com.



Pedaldish, the product Pete Hill showcased on BBC's Dragons' Den

Pete had a connection to the family, having made his first money as a 14-year-old walking Nick's parents' dog, Kai, around Market Drayton in 1992. So he had to bide his time until Nick moved on from the show, to avoid any accusations of an unfair bias.

With vitamins pioneer Tej Lalvani having taken over Nick's seat, Pete entered the Den seeking £35,000 from the venture capitalists in return for a 25% share in his business ideas.

He knew that animal-loving Deborah Meaden would be his best hope of an investment, and she offered him all of the money for a 33% share, which he accepted.

Since then, Pete has gone on to invent many other products including an ultrasonic whistle for cats, and also earned a growing reputation as an energetic expert speaker promoting the art of pitching an idea.

He was part of the Federation of Small Businesses' programme at its recent bootcamp held at the Wroxeter Hotel, and also delivered a session at University Centre Shrewsbury in January for the Marches Growth Hub on mastering what he describes as the 'big three' – pitching, networking and achieving business success.

His eclectic career has seen him become a professional trainer, psychologist, and a stand-up comedian too.

"As a child, one of the first inventions I created was a two-metre straw for reaching a glass of water without having to get out of bed," Pete says.

"The prototype didn't work very well. No matter how much Sellotape I used, it always leaked.

"Every summer, I camp out in the woods by the beach. Here, I created the world's first self-heating camping bath. Two large pails of water placed above six candles and a four-foot-long storage container with bubble bath nearby.

"I love my candle-powered camping bath, but I don't think the Dragons or the world would have much interest in it as a consumer product. If you're looking for a great invention you need to find a great problem; something which lots of people struggle with, but which doesn't have an easy solution. An invention is only as good as the problem it solves."

Pete insists he didn't feel any nerves entering the notoriously daunting Dragons' Den.

"No-one ever remembers the names of the inventors on Dragons' Den – Levi Roots doesn't count as his real name is Keith! I knew shortly after the broadcast everyone would have forgotten me, and at best I'd be referred to as 'The Guy with the Pet Bowl'.

"Pedaldish: 'The Lunchbox for Pets' began just like my camping bath. It was a homemade invention which made my life better. The first Pedaldish was a pedal-bin with a ramp attached. Built to stop my cat food being spoiled by flies, it saved me a huge amount of waste. Unlike my camping bath, I knew this product could be of interest to many other people.

"The creation of Katfone: The Ultrasonic Whistle for Cats was a lot more accidental. At night, I would whistle to owls in the trees behind my garden. Rarely was I visited by an owl but increasingly my cats would turn up for some late night fuss. Eventually, with just a couple of whistles, my cats would come running home.

"When I told other people, I was surprised how many used a high-pitch whistle to call their cats. Because cats' hearing range is much higher than that of humans, I knew that a high-pitch whistle could be an ideal device for calling them.

"Whilst these products are good for cats, I didn't know if they would be suitable for the Dragons. Having watched every episode, I knew they tended to like environmentally-friendly products and a clear, concise presentation.

"I'd also found out that at least two of the Dragons had been cat owners. Before entering the Den, I had thought about all the weaknesses and potential criticism of my products and business, and tried to turn them into positives.

"Being well researched, rehearsed and in a positive frame of mind are the keys to success in the Den . . . and maybe in life too."

● You can watch Carl's full interview with Pete in a video on the business support portal SBLTV Knowledge – sbltvknowledge.co.uk

Thinking of pitching to the Dragons? Here's Pete's top 10 tips

- Practise your pitch. Perform in front of a panel of stand-in Dragons who'll ask you all the difficult questions. Try and use two or three people you've never met before who have some good business knowledge.
- Research each Dragon. Find out from their history why each might be a good fit for your business.

- Don't be intimidated by celebrity. The Dragons are just people too, with their own hopes, fears, dreams and worries.

- Be positive.

Even in the face of bad feedback stay upbeat and positive. An optimist with conviction and passion will always come across better than someone who is defensive and confrontational.

- Watch the show. There are loads of Den pitches on YouTube. You'll see what buttons to press to get a good response and identify some of the pitfalls to avoid.

- Don't argue with the Dragons. The Dragons have the wisdom of celebrity. This trumps any specialist, expert knowledge you may have in your industry. When they're being critical, reassure and mitigate their concerns rather than tell them they are wrong.

- Keep your valuation realistic. Ask for too much equity and you'll be shown the door; ask for too little and you'll have no room to haggle.

- Dress in light clothing. Whilst dressing smartly is a must, you'll be on your feet under studio lights. There's a reason why so many entrepreneurs are seen sweating on the show.

- Think critically about your business. Think of every negative criticism which could be levelled at your product or service. Consider the most positive way you could answer each point. And most importantly . . .

- Have a plan B. Have a course of action you can follow if you don't get investment. If you have no plan B, the Den will become a make-or-break situation, with all the stress and desperation this brings.



Why minimum wage increases could be bad for business



Stuart Danks



This April the minimum wage goes up again. The National Living Wage is to increase 9.8% to £11.44. The minimum wage rates for ages 16-17, 18-20, and apprentices will see their pay increase too.

The narrative from Government is that it's cause for celebration, but I'm concerned the successive minimum wage increases place a burden on businesses. These are the same businesses that have faced surging bills and rising interest rates. And now they need to increase another line in their budget, at the same time that consumers aren't spending any more. The sums don't add up. It's going to be incredibly hard for businesses to absorb higher labour costs without cutting back their staff or turning to technology to reduce the number of staff they need. Either that or they pass the cost on to consumers, who are already in a cost-of-living crisis. As a recruiter, I know that once we start paying minimum wage staff closer to the equivalent of what we pay skilled labour (e.g.

drivers), those skilled labour positions will want more money as they will see it as unfair to be paid the same as unskilled workers. Suddenly it's not just your lowest paid workers getting an increase, it's everyone. This means employers need to become more discerning about their staffing, and ultimately will not be recruiting as many people. Not great news for recruiters! Alternatively, they don't increase the wages of skilled workers, and it makes it harder for recruiters to fill those roles. Or they might want to put people with a higher skill level into the minimum wage roles to justify the expenditure, which means there will be fewer entry-level jobs. I'd recommend businesses start focusing on their staff retention strategies to keep their skilled workers and minimise training and recruitment costs.

Stuart Danks is director of Shropshire-based recruitment business DMOS People

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Creative firm has moved to new HQ

An award-winning creative company has relocated to new premises in Shrewsbury. Yarrington, which handles marketing, graphic design, web design, video and event management projects, has been helping clients across the UK and Europe since 1998. It has moved its headquarters from Frankwell to Vanguard Way on Battlefield Enterprise Park. Lesley Allsop, co-owner and director,

said: "We have moved five or six times now, and moves are actually always quite good. They're a chance for a reboot and a refresh, so I think it's a positive thing." Yarrington is the events behind the Shropshire Chamber Business Awards, and the co-producer of Shropshire Business Live TV. Toby Shaw, who handled the letting for Towler Shaw Roberts, described Yarrington as 'another excellent addition to the area'.



Yarrington team members outside the company's new headquarters at Battlefield

Fantastic four – opting for a different working week

Plans to step-up the campaign for a four-day working week across the UK have been welcomed by a Shropshire digital marketing agency that has successfully trialed and adopted the scheme.

The 4 Day Week Campaign is encouraging businesses to take a look at the benefits of a shorter working week as a way of helping to 'prevent burnout for millions' of people who are 'being pushed to the brink' as a result of Britain's long hours culture. The scheme has already worked well with those companies involved highlighting less stress and better staff retention among the benefits. The hope now is for it to be extended into the public sector. Digital marketing agency Ascendancy, based in Newport, took part in the six-month global project to trial the four-day working week last year and director Helen Culshaw said its success saw the company make it a permanent working arrangement – with Ascendancy now an officially accredited Gold Standard 4 Day Week business.

"Productivity has improved, the team is happy with the four-day working week and it has had a positive impact both in terms of the office environment and the work/life balance for all. "There were concerns for us going into the trial, the main one being could we get all the work done?" "But this hasn't been a problem and we are doing just as much work now, if not more, as we were before." Joe Ryle, director of the 4 Day Week Campaign, said: "Our very British culture of long working hours and low pay is pushing people to the brink. "We are long overdue a reduction in working hours."

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The changing landscape of higher education

In March 2025, access to education and training will change radically, providing individuals with the right to a Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE). That means an entitlement to support continuous skills development, professional growth, and adaptation to changes in the labour market throughout their lives.

This development is significant for individuals and employers alike as it recognises the importance of ongoing learning and the need to adapt to the changing demands of the workforce.

Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) have been created as an alternative to apprenticeships or degrees as part of these higher technical education reforms.

These qualifications, developed in collaboration with employers, are new or existing level 4 and 5 qualifications such as

Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and foundation degrees, sitting between A Levels or T Levels and degrees. They are easily identifiable by displaying the HTQ quality mark logo.

One of the main reasons for these reforms is because employers say they find it hard to:

- Recruit enough highly skilled people as there is currently a higher technical skills shortage
- Recruit people who have the right level of specialist skills for the roles they're advertising
- Identify the right training to upskill their staff.

So, in direct response to this, Shrewsbury Colleges Group is not only offering HTQs but is delighted to be one of a select group of institutions across England that are offering a free Modular Acceleration Programme ahead of these changes – the perfect opportunity to address those higher,

specialist skills you tell us you need to thrive in today's competitive market, at absolutely no cost to you.

This is an unparalleled opportunity to gain tailored training to your specific business challenges and opportunities, and what is so innovative about this programme is the flexibility and choice.

We offer a series of modules that provide focus on the specific areas of your business that need the most attention.

Whether that be leadership and management, specific engineering specialisms, higher level digital skills, or modern methods of construction, SCG has an exciting programme of modules to suit both business and individual needs designed to fit seamlessly into busy schedules, with flexible learning options and convenient online access.

For those employers who wish to find out how these free modules could benefit their business, a member of our employer engagement team would be pleased to visit and expand on the details of this offer at a time that suits you.

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Modules taken from the Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) allowing you the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills you and your workforce need, both now and in the future.

HE SCG Higher Education Shrewsbury Colleges Group

For more detailed information, visit our website www.scg.ac.uk/htq

Contact us at employer@shrewsbury.ac.uk / 01743 342602

Following the leaders

A power-packed line-up of speakers has been unveiled for the 2024 Shropshire Leadership Conference.

This year's event – billed as a 'business conference with a difference' – is taking place on April 16, at Theatre Severn in Shrewsbury.

It is organised by Shropshire HR, and brings together influential speakers from an array of backgrounds to impart their knowledge and experience of the future of leadership.

The first of the keynote speakers will be Michael Heppell, the international best-selling author who is described as 'one of the top three professional speakers in the world'. He will be talking about 'how to be brilliant'.

Joining Michael on the stage will be John Williams, The Institute of Leadership's CEO, problem solver and strategist.

He brings with him experience from a career in international business and leadership development across the UK, Europe, Middle East, Far East and North America. His focus will be to help those listening to be ready to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances they face as leaders.

Completing the line-up of keynote speakers is Joanne Lockwood, the founder and CEO of SEE Change Happen, a diversity, inclusion and belonging practice with a specialism in providing transgender awareness and support to organisations and businesses.

Her mantra is smile, engage and educate, and she passionately believes that 'people are people' and, no matter who they are, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

The day will feature thought-provoking hands-on masterclasses and workshops to inspire, challenge and evolve people's thinking about the future of leadership, focusing on belief in potential, change and technology.

It will also feature exhibit stands and interactive demos and wellbeing activities, as a reminder to prioritise mental health and resilience in the workplace.

Gwilym Butler, Shropshire Council's cabinet member for finance and corporate resources,



Problem solver and strategist – John Williams



Joanne Lockwood of SEE Change Happen



Michael Heppell is a best-selling author

said: "We're so excited that tickets are now on sale for our fourth Leadership Conference.

"This time we'll be offering something a little bit different.

"The day will be much more interactive, allowing you to get exactly what you need to learn and grow.

"Please come along and hone your leadership skills, challenge your thinking, and network with an audience of like-minded leaders.

"Whether you're a senior manager, executive or on the cusp of moving up the ladder to a managerial role, you'll take home ideas and inspiration that you will carry with you throughout your career. It's one not to be missed."

Tickets are priced at £99, which includes drinks and lunch.

Those wanting to come along to the event are encouraged to book their tickets by visiting www.shropshireleadership.co.uk.

Delegates will be able to arrive from 8.30am, for an official start at 9.30am. The day will draw to a close at 4.30pm, with an opportunity to network afterwards.

The event has a track record of bringing big-name speakers to the county.

Last year's line-up included England's

World Cup winning rugby union coach Sir Clive Woodward who spoke passionately and provocatively about what makes the 'DNA of a champion', plus acclaimed global leadership speaker Debra Searle.

Shropshire HR is part of Shropshire Council, providing not-for-profit HR support to councils, charities and businesses in Shropshire, the West Midlands and Wales.

Services include HR advice and development, recruitment and payroll support, occupational health, and health and safety guidance.

• To find out more about the event, listen to the interview with the Shropshire HR team on *Shropshire Business Live TV* – you can watch all previous episodes and interviews on sbltv.co.uk, or on YouTube

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Trading on international experience

Ruth Ross



It's no secret . . . selling goods and services overseas increases business productivity and growth, and has a big impact on regional and national economies.

We know that companies that trade internationally become more productive, more innovative and diversify their risk profile – and exporting can be a significant driver of growth.

However too few firms make the most of trading opportunities globally.

We know that the world of trade is in constant flux, fresh markets are emerging,

the digitalisation of trade documents is accelerating, and more sustainable goods and services are being developed.

The UK's trading relationships around the world are ever-changing, be that from geopolitical conflict or economic change; we understand that businesses need greater support, information and incentives to adapt, identify opportunities to increase trade, and attract investment.

The Chamber has always been about helping businesses to thrive. We provide the advice, training, support and all the encouragement needed by any firm considering exporting. It has been built on our years of experience, and the knowledge and success of our trade facilitation activities to date.

Through our international trade services, we can certify and authenticate a range of export documentation needs as well as facilitating the process of ATA Carnets and Letters of Credit.

We work to connect businesses in the UK to global markets – whether it's for exports, imports, or investment. Last year alone, the UK Chamber network facilitated £16 billion worth of trade.

The UK-wide Chamber Customs service exists to help businesses expand and diversify the number of exports from the UK across the world.

Chamber Customs is the only customs agent with connections to all land, air and sea clearance ports in the UK, and they don't subcontract their customers' declarations meaning that you deal directly with the UK-based team.

Their in-house expertise can save businesses large chunks of time and resources by dealing with their customs declarations: simplifying the process, filing the forms and covering all additional paperwork.

We're also globally-connected through the international network of British Chambers of Commerce.

Whether it's Shrewsbury in Massachusetts, Telford in Australia, or Ludlow in Shropshire, our reach is locally made but globally-connected.

The international network acts as an agile and reliable ecosystem for businesses wishing to widen their international horizons.

This means that a company that is a member of Shropshire Chamber can benefit from international B2B connections, support services, and practical advice about the local business environment and potential market opportunities.

● To find out more about our international trade services contact the Chamber team on 01952 208200 or international@shropshire-chamber.co.uk

Ruth Ross is chief executive of Shropshire Chamber of Commerce, which has bases in Telford and Shrewsbury

Counting the cost of global tensions

By Adam Pringle

When people start talking about a potential teabag shortage in the UK, you know things must be getting serious.

But in truth, it's just one of the many products we take for granted on our supermarket shelves, but which rely heavily on calm seas and a cordial world order.

At the moment, international trade is guaranteed neither of those things.

Freight shipments from regions in Asia and Africa have faced major disruption over the past two months due to attacks in the Red Sea.

Violence by Houthi rebels has forced shipping firms to re-route vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, delaying delivery times by weeks.

And for Shropshire companies exporting or importing their goods, that can mean late customer orders, renegotiated credit terms . . . and increasing costs.

Since the turn of the year, the United Nations believes trade volume using the increasingly perilous Red Sea passage has plummeted by over 40%.

The UK actually had a good year for services exports in 2023, but there is a concern over the drop in physical goods moving across borders.

William Bain, head of trade policy at the British Chambers of Commerce, says: "More must be done to connect exporters and would-be exporters with customers in markets across Europe and the rest of the world."

"The Government should set up an Exports Council to achieve this. It could work with business to build upon our relative strength in services exports across even more sectors, while providing fresh impetus to improve overseas sales of goods."

"This would be a very welcome step as 2024 is already looking like a challenging year for international trade. We are yet to see the full effects of Red Sea disruption and patchy global growth is only adding to the uncertainty."

Data for the whole of 2023 shows that the UK's services trade continues to lead the way. Removing the effects of inflation, total annual UK exports in combined goods and services rose by 0.6% to £690.8 billion.

This was led by strong performances in financial, business, professional, cultural and travel services exports. But the flipside was a disappointing performance in goods exports, which fell by 4.6%.

Shropshire currently exports goods and services to more than 50 countries – and sometimes, it's a case of business people exporting themselves!

Theo Millward, director of swimming education franchise Swimtime with offices in Longden Coleham, Shrewsbury, travelled to Dubai to team up with the International Swim School Association.

It was part of an international campaign to

reduce the number of people who die through drowning, and involved an intensive four-day think tank, working with industry leaders from seven different countries.

They created a comprehensive toolkit to enable individuals across the world to establish and run their own swim schools.

Theo said: "As one of the first swim schools in the world to be awarded the International Swim School Accreditation, it was an honour and a privilege to be asked to join them."

"It was inspiring to work alongside other swimming sector professionals, and to have created this invaluable resource which will undoubtedly save lives across the world."

Surviving a cyclone



The Aviramp system at La Reunion airport

Telford-based Aviramp, which has gained a global reputation for its aircraft boarding ramps and bridges, has completed a high-profile job on a tiny island in the Indian Ocean.

Roland-Garros airport at La Reunion, west of Mauritius, has taken delivery of one of the Shropshire company's solar-powered Aviramp Lite systems for its ultra-narrow body aircraft.

The project, worth nearly £1 million, involved eight weeks of assembly work on site.

Aviramp says: "The units have already had their first wind tests when a tropical cyclone hit the island with wind speeds of up to 106 mph. Although the airport stored them safely in preparation for the cyclone they were still hit end on with the headwind and survived as the cyclone passed."



Aaron & Partners has run joint seminars with a firm in Cleveland, Ohio

Exploring overseas opportunities

Brexit certainly hasn't stopped Shropshire companies seeking to explore overseas business opportunities, according to international trade experts at a county law firm.

Stuart Haynes and Ben Mason, from Aaron & Partners in Shrewsbury, have regular dealings with companies looking to move goods, services or people across borders.

Stuart handles international and commercial contract work including intellectual property licensing. He deals regularly with technology transfer cases, and licensing of products both in the UK and abroad.

Ben is part of the employment team, and works on a number of cases involving Shropshire companies seeking to move staff either into or out of the UK.

"Brexit came immediately before the pandemic, so the combination of the two events has probably compounded issues for international trading businesses in one way – but made it slightly easier in another," Stuart said.

"The advent of more online communication means distance has become less of an issue when doing business. This has perhaps allowed people to take on board the impact of Brexit much more gradually."

The duo said their firm has seen a significant increase in connectivity between its clients and markets in South East Asia and India since the UK left the European Union.

They admit though that Brexit has reduced some deals to a 'pedestrian' pace as companies – and lawyers – come to terms with new rules, regulations and hurdles.

"There is certainly a lot more willingness to engage further afield than Europe now," Stuart added.

"One of the biggest fears when we came out of the EU is that people would be fearful to connect with Europe because it would be less



Ben Mason, a member of the employment team



Stuart Haynes is a former IAG board member

easy. But lots of companies continue to be doing business outside the EU, so it's not been as horrendous as some people thought.

"US markets are opening up too, even though we are nowhere near having a trade deal in place.

"Over the last four or five years, we have done a considerable amount of work both ways across the Atlantic, and run some joint seminars with a firm in Cleveland, Ohio which have worked well – we are planning to do a couple more this year."

Movement of staff also remains a key business challenge for many of the firm's clients.

Ben said: "There are undoubtedly more barriers bringing workers into the UK, but we are still seeing a vast increase in care clients seeking to bring them in from places like Africa and Asia, because there simply aren't the people in the UK who want to do the work."

"Dealing with companies looking to employ people in different countries, I find a lot of employers don't know what sort of contracts they may have to have in place from one place to the next."

"In Australia, for example, you have to set up an office there – you can't just employ people. People are looking at these options more though, and that's where we can help them in setting this up."

He said he was expecting to see 'a lot of jostling' with employment-related policies and pledges in the run-up to this year's General Election.

Aaron & Partners is a member of IAG Global, an international network of independent law firms, accountants, tax advisers and professional services firms.

Stuart is a former board member and has been involved in the organisation for nearly 30 years.

"It used to be very Europe-centric, but now it's truly global with members all over the world including the US, South East Asia, Australia, Europe and Scandinavia."

He went to the group's most recent meeting in Singapore, and came back with a number of enquiries and new contacts.

Ben said: "I've used a member in Singapore for a couple of my clients over the past few months, and there's a really good relationship. It's a big benefit to us."



ACE etching machines at the Hortonwood factory



Exports are driving sales growth at the business based in Telford

Etching a great reputation with latest overseas orders

Exports are driving sales growth at a manufacturing company which supplies precision parts to the aerospace, automotive, and electronics industry.

Advanced Chemical Etching, based in Telford, has secured £800,000 of new orders from companies looking to tap into exacting quality and new product development expertise.

The company, which also supplies general engineering, medical and telecoms, has seen a significant rise in fuel cell projects and several new projects increasing in volume by 25%, all setting the scene for an anticipated drive to achieve £10 million sales this year.

This push will be boosted by the ramping up of two 'Chemcut' etching machines at its Hortonwood 33 facility, giving it a major boost in capacity and faster turnaround times.

Managing director Ian Whateley said: "There is so much manufacturing innovation in the UK, and we are finally seeing other countries switch back on to what we offer here."

"In addition to sales, there has also been a 10% increase in the number of new projects we are involved in, and all of these are looking for a strategic partner that can work with them from design through to early-stage prototyping, and low and medium volume supply."

"Export now accounts for nearly 30% of our annual turnover and we're seeing really strong demand from Austria, Germany, Switzerland and our traditionally strong markets of Belgium and the Netherlands."

"There are also new opportunities coming in from the Far East and the US and this, alongside strong demand from our domestic customer base, is something we want to explore further with our two 'Chemcut' machines nearly up and running."



Advanced Chemical Etching managing director Ian Whateley and executive director Chris Ball

The scope of ACE's activities is far and wide and can include anything from safety critical components for aircraft and F1 cars, to meshes and electronic connectors, battery interconnectors, fuel cell bi-polar plates, cooling plates and heat exchangers.

All parts are developed and manufactured at its main site in Telford and at the company's dedicated sister business, ACE Forming Limited, in Kingswinford.

This means the business is in a rare position of being able to etch or form parts to meet the customer's cost point and, importantly, the desired performance of the end application.

Chris Ball, executive director of Advanced Chemical Etching, said: "We've seen volumes

surpass where they were before the pandemic, with aerospace gathering pace as airport traffic surges.

"The opportunities are out there, and we have taken the decision to not only invest in the latest etching technology, but also to increase our workforce with eight new people recruited in the last 12 months alone."

"£10m sales threshold is definitely in our sights for 2024, as we continue to put Shropshire on the global manufacturing map."

Advanced Chemical Etching has just kicked-off accreditation to the aerospace AS9100 process, with the initial audit taking place in February and approval due to be completed by May this year.

The show must always go on...



Traffic through the Suez Canal has fallen around 40% since the turn of the year

Anton Gunter



As a freight forwarder and someone who has spent a lot of time doing international logistics, nothing surprises me anymore. From general non-hazardous freight, to the sublime moving of someone's ashes, moving a combine harvester to Japan, or importing tequila from Mexico, there is not a lot that I have not moved.

Currently, the world is engulfed in conflict. Ukraine continues to defy Russia and Israel is continuing its offensive on Palestine. Both conflicts are having profound effects on the world of international trade. But one thing can never be disputed – no matter what is happening, the world of international trade goes on.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought higher fuel and utility prices. Our agent in Ukraine is operating out of the Netherlands and continuing to move product from Ukraine and around the world, and gaining new business.

For the Middle East, we are seeing a change in routes due to the now infamous Houthi rebels who are intent on stopping international vessels transiting through the Suez Canal. Vessels are now sailing via the Cape of Good Hope so transits are now longer, but freight continues to move.

Freight has always continued moving despite what the adults in charge have done or indeed not done.

In 2016, Britain narrowly decided to leave the EU. The world was astounded. It was all doom and gloom, but in an office in Telford, guess what? The world continued to rotate. Freight had to continue moving and plans had to be put in place.

What plans? It did not matter, because the process of importing and exporting is the same despite any trade deals, both good or bad. Freight forwarders knew what was coming and despite reports, were putting plans into place.

For me, the overwhelming image is of February 1 2020, when drivers from all over Europe descended on Halesfield to get their customs entries done. I don't speak Eastern European, but after vehicle 15 it was becoming clear that although we in the UK had prepared, the EU hadn't.

That same year we had Covid 19 and again, the show had to go on. Freight forwarders around the world stepped up and continued to move freight despite having to work remotely, short-handed and at times, within restricting conditions.

We were loading and unloading containers sometimes with one person, a mask and gloves to make sure freight was still moving. Pressure on Chinese ports, pressure on shipping lines, all-round uncertainty during

Covid and the new process for Brexit brought price changes.

Shipping rates went through the roof and while shipping lines did their best to continue making profits, a lot of freight forwarders helped customers by making sure their own margins were low until it all settled down.

In the UK, the logistics industry has gone through a lot and continues to work under exceptional circumstances. For those who think it will simply blow over, I have some bad news. It won't, because the circumstances of war won't allow it.

We also need to see the mess that global warming is making of the Panama Canal and realise just how reliant we are on those two water ways – the Suez and Panama Canals.

2024 will be remembered for lots of things, but it will also be known as the year that the show went on. Freight continues to move despite the world's attempt at making it stop and despite being hindered by all manner of obstacles.

But that is why we are freight forwarders. We continue to operate despite customers wanting cheap rates for specialised services, despite shipping lines increasing prices, and despite airlines having space restrictions. We have to, because if we don't, the world will come to a standstill.

There genuinely is no scenario in which freight forwarders will let the show stop. I have images of Mad Max-style freight forwarders roaming a doomed world to make sure people have the ability to trade and also buy their trainers, no matter what. I'm not sure if I resemble Mel Gibson, but in the words of the late Tina Turner, freight forwarders are SIMPLY THE BEST!

Anton Gunter is managing director of Global Freight Services, the international freight forwarder with its headquarters in Telford



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international@shropshire-chamber.co.uk or 01952 208200



Empowering Shropshire SMEs



Marina Ibrahim
In an ever-evolving global market post-Brexit, and amidst the ripple effects of a global pandemic, Shropshire's small businesses face unique challenges and opportunities in international trade.

- **Market Entry Confidence:** Many businesses struggle with confidence and lack the necessary contacts to venture into new markets.
- **Building Trust Through Cultural Intelligence**
Trust is the cornerstone of customer relationships, especially in international markets. It's crucial to understand and adapt to the social, cultural, and economic behaviours of your target markets. A study by the Chartered Institute of Marketing in 2023 highlights that cultural intelligence is not just about navigating stereotypes or etiquette; it's about comprehending deeper societal norms and values.
- **Language and Communication**
Effective communication is vital. Businesses should invest in professional translations of their marketing materials to ensure accuracy and cultural relevance. Relying solely on machine translation can lead to miscommunications, damaging trust and brand reputation.
- **Local Insights and Professional Guidance**
Engaging with local professionals for insights and training can significantly enhance your understanding of a foreign market. This approach helps in developing skills, building confidence, and making informed decisions about which markets to enter.
- **Adapting to Post-Brexit and Pandemic Realities**
The Brexit transition and the aftermath of

the global pandemic have reshaped international trade norms. It's more important than ever for businesses to be agile and responsive to these changes. This includes being aware of new trade regulations, supply chain adjustments, and the evolving needs of international customers.

Technology and Remote Engagement
The rise of digital platforms and remote communication tools offers an unprecedented opportunity to connect with international markets. Small businesses should leverage these technologies to build relationships and trust with overseas customers, even when in-person interactions are limited.

Government Support and Resources
With the UK Government encouraging businesses to explore international markets, there are various resources and support systems available. Small businesses should tap into these to navigate the complexities of exporting and to find opportunities for growth and expansion.

Conclusion
For Shropshire's small businesses, stepping into international trade is not just a growth strategy; it's a journey of learning and adaptation. By building cultural intelligence, focusing on effective communication, and leveraging local insights and technology, businesses can successfully establish trust with customers abroad. In this dynamic global landscape, those who adapt and embrace change will not only survive but thrive.

Understanding and overcoming these barriers is key to thriving in foreign markets. Key challenges in the modern SME export landscape include:

Marina Ibrahim runs Ludlow-based Globility Coaching, delivering coaching and training in global and inclusive leadership skills to business owners, managers, and executives

Hygiene specialist is looking forward to continued growth

International trade has played a pivotal role in the growth of hygiene and decontamination specialist Serchem.



Serchem investors Oliver Wadlow, Simon Lloydbottom and Richard Hale, with Serchem commercial director Alison Arnold

The Telford-based company has seen export sales rise more than 13-fold since 2018 – during which time export customers have grown by around 350%.

The international trade success comes as the Arleston-based business celebrates a record-breaking year with a rebrand – and new investors. Serchem was launched in Telford in 1981 and is now recognised as a global leader in the development and manufacturing of hygiene and decontamination products.

It works with both NHS and private health providers, along with catering and hospitality businesses around the world.

Serchem is now trading with customers from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South America. The core areas currently are the Middle East and Asia.

The company celebrated the rebrand and the first stage of the new era at the Arab Health Exhibition at the Dubai World Trade Centre.

Alison Arnold, Serchem commercial director, said: "International trade is a huge part of our business as we have Serchem distributors all over the world. Our customers love the British standards of quality and the efficacy of our products. We have more Serchem distributors in more countries than ever before, and that will continue to grow."

will be vital in driving our exciting plans for future growth.

"In recent years, Serchem has continued to attract an increasing level of business both in the UK and internationally. We want to not only successfully deliver on that growth but further strengthen our customer relationships and position in the market.

"As part of achieving that, we have carefully selected a group of experienced investors to actively support the team. We welcome experienced corporate finance professionals Oliver Wadlow and Simon Lloydbottom, who have joined forces with Richard Hale, after his successful and longstanding ownership of Deritend Industries."

Oliver said: "Working with industry specialists, we've created a distinctive brand in the health, catering and hospitality sectors that captures all that is incredible about Serchem, enabling us to tap into the wide-ranging opportunities that lie ahead for us."

Alison added that the launch of a new era for Serchem comes at a time when its position within the health, catering and hospitality sectors, both at home and abroad, has never been stronger.

"This is a very exciting time for the business which we are so proud to run here in Telford. This next phase will offer job opportunities and career development for many who are in the business and for people who are yet to join us.

"I am extremely proud of our team – known as the Serchem family – and look forward to a very successful year ahead and beyond."



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Andrew Buchan, Simon Jeavons, and event MC Carl Jones



Nearly 200 people attended the launch event at the Mercure Albrighton Hall Hotel, near Shrewsbury, to hear about the 2024 celebration



The Shropshire Chamber team at the launch event

Hundreds attend awards launch

Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has officially launched its 2024 business awards to champion the local economy's 'vibrancy, innovation and success'

Nearly 200 business people attended the Mercure Albrighton Hall Hotel near Shrewsbury for the launch event to hear from organisers, judges, previous winners, and sponsors.

Entries are now open for the showpiece awards, which will be presented at a glittering black-tie ceremony at Telford's International Centre this summer.

All the details can be found on the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce website.

The 2024 competition, which is free to enter, is open to all businesses with an operational base in the county of Shropshire or Telford & Wrekin. And you don't have to be a Chamber member to qualify.

It includes the return of long-running categories including Company of the Year, Best New Business, Best Small Business, and Outstanding Customer Service.

There are also several new-look categories this year including an Outstanding Business Growth award, and a return of the category recognising Retail, Leisure and Hospitality.

The launch event included a chat with Neal Hooper, managing director of reigning company of the year Aico, who gave an insight into how the Oswestry-based business showcases its success to awards judges.

The audience also heard a panel debate featuring winners, sponsors and judges including Victoria Lawson of Paveaways, Emma Glynn from The Shropshire Distillery, and Andrew Buchan of Barclays.

"The Shropshire Chamber Business Awards are firmly established among the largest events of their kind in the country, with a history stretching back more than 20 years," said Shropshire Chamber chief executive Ruth Ross.

"The past few years have been an extraordinary journey for us all. Instead of dwelling on the challenges, we've embraced them as opportunities to grow, adapt, and create.

"Shropshire businesses have shown remarkable agility and determination, evolving in



Aico managing director Neal Hooper in conversation with event master of ceremonies Carl Jones



Ruth Ross (right) with Tracie Harrison and Sam Haydon from Severn Hospice

ways we couldn't have imagined, while delivering new products and services to a broader array of markets

"We take immense pride in representing businesses of all sizes that shine as beacons of excellence in their respective fields.

"These are the businesses that have not only raised their own profiles but have also elevated the stature of Shropshire on a larger stage. Winning one of these awards can be a real boost for you, your employees and your business."

The closing date for applications is April 12, and winners will be announced at the awards night on June 21, which will also be raising funds for Severn Hospice.

The Shropshire Chamber Business Awards have been firmly established as the largest



Kelly Riedel and Rachel Owen from the Chamber talking to SBLTV

business event in the county for nearly a quarter of a century.

More than 13,000 people have attended the presentation evenings since the event was first launched in 2001 – and well over 300 tickets are already allocated for this summer's celebration.

Winning a trophy is a real badge of honour which has become recognised as a kitemark of excellence. Nearly 300 trophies have been awarded over the years, with company of the year winners coming from all over the county including Telford, Shrewsbury, Ludlow, Whitchurch, Oswestry and Bridgnorth.

- You can watch highlights from the awards launch event on Shropshire Business Live TV – follow the channel on YouTube, or log onto SBLTV.co.uk



This year's categories

COMPANY OF THE YEAR

The showpiece award for an all-round star performer, flying the flag for Shropshire business excellence. Judged on a combination of:

- Financial track record, and pursuit of excellence
- Creativity, innovation and ambition
- Leadership and customer service skills
- Training, people development and marketing strategies
- Commitment to the community
- Effective response to economic challenges
- Awards, testimonials and accolades
- A commitment to staff wellbeing and sustainability

BEST NEW BUSINESS

For businesses in any sector, formed since January 1st 2022. Entries will be assessed on:

- Strength and originality of business vision
- Clear and dynamic business plan
- Financial objectives, and evidence of progress
- Creative and ambitious marketing and growth strategies
- A commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability

BEST SMALL BUSINESS

For businesses in any sector employing up to 10 full-time equivalent staff, demonstrating a high level of success. Judged on:

- Innovation, and forward-thinking strategies for growth
- Gaining and sustaining a competitive advantage
- Commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability
- Clear and creative marketing and growth plans
- Accolades, testimonials, and evidence of financial success

OUTSTANDING CUSTOMER SERVICE

For companies that go the extra mile in looking after the needs of their customers. Judged on:

- Ways of consistently exceeding customer expectations
- Measuring customer satisfaction, and acting on feedback
- Training and development in customer handling and service skills
- Awards, accolades and testimonials
- A commitment to staff wellbeing and sustainability

OUTSTANDING BUSINESS GROWTH AWARD

For companies demonstrating substantial growth over the past 36 months (Evidence will need to be provided during the application process). Judged on:

- Evidence of strategic and profitable expansion including last three years of accounts, evidence of new products/services and expansion into new markets
- A dynamic and scalable business model
- A growth in staff numbers and/or turnover, evidence of payroll growth for three years
- Ability to break into new markets, at home or overseas
- A commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability

COMMUNITY CHAMPION – BUSINESS IN THE COMMUNITY

For businesses that believe in the philosophy of 'putting something back' into the Shropshire community. Judged on:

- Top-to-bottom 'buy-in' from staff at all levels, over and above statutory requirements
- Examples of projects which have made a real difference to local people's lives
- Promoting the value of community work through company vision and values
- Supporting Shropshire suppliers by 'buying local'
- Fostering links with schools, colleges and community groups

EXCELLENCE IN MANUFACTURING AND ENGINEERING

Celebrating the contribution being made by companies of all sizes in the manufacturing and engineering sectors. Judged on:

- Innovation and customer satisfaction
- Quality control processes, and use of new technology
- Effective leadership and management
- Testimonials, and evidence of financial success
- Wellbeing and sustainability policies and processes



The event is firmly established as one of the county's biggest business parties



The post-awards casino tables last year

RETAIL, LEISURE & HOSPITALITY ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

For companies making a positive contribution to some of Shropshire's most important sectors. Judged on:

- Established market position and strong financial performance
- Overcoming challenges to gain a competitive advantage
- Commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability
- Clear and creative marketing and growth plans
- Awards, accolades and testimonials

THE TRAILBLAZER – INNOVATION AWARD

For companies who have spotted a gap in the market, and thought outside the box to fill it. Judged on:

- Your USP: What makes you stand out from the competition?
- Innovation in products, services or processes
- Evidence of profitability and effective leadership
- Testimonials, awards, and potential for future growth
- A commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability

THE ECO AWARD

For environmentally aware businesses that promote innovative practices, processes or technology. Judged on:

- Embracing green technology to lower the carbon footprint
- Promoting or producing eco-friendly products and services
- A cross-company commitment to 'make a difference'
- Substantial and quantifiable improvements in environmental and commercial performance
- A commitment to staff development, wellbeing and sustainability

YOUNG BUSINESS PERSON

Open to anyone aged 30 or below in January 2024, who demonstrates flair, commitment and an entrepreneurial spirit. Judged on:

- Evidence of a significant influence on the business
- A commitment to training and personal development
- Entrepreneurial attitude, reliability and work ethic
- Strong people skills and maturity beyond their years
- Testimonials from managers, colleagues, and/or customers.

THE JOHN CLAYTON AWARD

Named after a previous Shropshire Chamber president, this award is the only one to be chosen by Chamber directors. Judged on:

- Someone judged to have made an outstanding contribution to the local business community.

Football club in partnership



Shropshire's biggest private hire operator, Veezu, is partnering with Shrewsbury Town FC. The company formerly known as Go Carz will be the official ride partner for the remainder of this season and until the end of the next campaign.

Andrew Tretton, the club's commercial manager, said: "This type of partnership is a first for us, and we're looking forward to working together with Veezu in the coming months to develop the relationship."

Pictured: Letitia Young and Craig Bexon from Veezu with Luke Edwards from the Shrewsbury Town commercial team.

Time to park the charges

Controversial plans for inflation-busting parking charge rises in Shrewsbury have sparked concern among town centre retailers.

They include Chris Beane, manager of Howden Insurance, who fears they will make it harder for businesses to attract talent in the future.

"My biggest concern is the impact this will have on my team members both in terms of our existing people and our ability to attract new talent," he said.

"The cost of parking is already a major consideration for our teams. Shrewsbury town centre is a great place to work, but these increases could make it harder to attract people."

The proposals – which have sparked a petition calling for a rethink – include increasing hourly charging in Abbey Foregate and

Frankwell by more than 50 per cent, as well as removing caps and free Sunday parking offers.

Shropshire Council cabinet member Dan Morris said: "We continue to encourage people to visit Shrewsbury and support its local businesses, but we hope these proposals will encourage people to park outside Shrewsbury's river loop – or use alternative modes of travel."

"They will also enable the council to better maintain our car parks and bring them up to the standard that people require and expect."

But Chris added: "A lot of people are prepared to use public transport or cycle whenever they can, but the local bus services are simply not regular or reliable enough."

"Until better alternatives are in place, hiking car parking charges will just result in turning people away from the town centre, whether that's workers or customers."

● *What do you think about the proposals? Email editor@shropshirebiz.com to join the debate*

The impact of technology on employee happiness and retention



In today's competitive business landscape, fostering a positive employee experience is crucial. Happy employees are demonstrably more productive, engaged, and committed to the company's success. But did you know that the technology you equip your workforce with plays a significant role in their happiness?

Outdated technology can be a major barrier to employee satisfaction. Imagine constantly battling slow computers, malfunctioning software, or incompatible systems. This not only creates frustration and unnecessary work, but it also hinders collaboration and communication, impacting team dynamics and overall morale.

I recently came across several articles highlighting the negative impact of outdated technology on employee satisfaction. These reports consistently emphasised the frustration and inefficiency employees experience when working with inadequate tools. One report claimed that a staggering 91% of employees experience frustration with workplace technology. Outdated technology can lead to reduced productivity, communication breakdowns, disengagement, and ultimately, employee turnover.

The solution: Invest in modern tools

Investing in modern, user-friendly technology solutions designed for your specific needs is key. This doesn't necessarily mean throwing money at the latest trends. Instead, focus on tools that:

Streamline workflows: Automate repetitive tasks and eliminate unnecessary tasks, freeing up time for employees to focus on higher-value activities. For example, a strong, automated phone system for customers to navigate their way to the correct team member.

Enhance collaboration: Facilitate communication and teamwork through video conferencing, project management software, and other collaborative tools. It's possible



When upgrading your technology, you're not just making an investment in equipment; you're investing in your most valuable asset – your employees



connexis

to have enterprise-level systems that are accessible and effective whatever the size of your business.

Foster adaptability: Invest in tools that offer flexibility and scalability, empowering employees to adapt to changing work environments and demands. Providing these capabilities is crucial, while maintaining robust business security is equally important.

Benefits of modern technology

You're not just making an investment in equipment; you're investing in your most valuable asset – your employees. When you equip your team with the right tools, you're sending a clear message: we value their time, contributions, and success. This fosters a sense of trust, ownership, and ultimately, a happier

and more productive workforce, contributing directly to increased retention and a thriving business.

Seeking assistance

For many businesses, navigating the complex world of technology solutions can be daunting. Professional guidance from a trusted partner can ensure you invest in technology that aligns with your needs and avoids unnecessary complexity. When you work with Connexis, we take the time to understand your specific needs and recommend the right tools and strategies to enhance your employee experience.

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Joe Newton is Technical Director at Connexis, based in Telford

AI: Sense of excitement, or mourning for the future?



Chris Meah

I saw from my first interaction with AI that this could be humanity's defining contribution to the universe.

Creating intelligence is what we give God the biggest credit for; this was humans aiming to achieve the same thing. A machine that can 'think'.

Our intelligence has evolved slowly over billions of years and is confined to a fleshy lump of grey matter in a bone case on top of a fragile ape body. But machine intelligence is theoretically limitless, and has no such constraint as biological evolution or organic matter.

If a machine can 'think', it can 'think more' by just adding more computer power, more chips. It can 'think better' by adding more data, and consuming everything that has ever been written down or recorded. It can 'think forever' by making copies of itself, and upgrading to new hardware as it becomes available. It can improve itself, not just through self-help books and trips to the gym, but by constantly improving and rebuilding its architecture from the ground up.

The upsides of achieving this are truly remarkable. Let's take one example – personal healthcare.

Imagine a doctor in your pocket, available to talk to 24/7, analysing the huge data set produced by your body each second, knowing your whole medical history, every medical paper that's ever existed, every intervention and its effectiveness on people that match your specific profile.

The doctor can discover new treatments and drugs specifically targeted to you, can simulate one billion different paths forward and listen to your every feeling, worry, complaint, question without judgement.

It is dedicated completely to you with the entirety of its existence and attention, and yet can survey and pool data from every human experience – who never gets tired, distracted, closed-minded, hungry and so forth.

Now apply that to many other aspects of life: food production, conflict resolution, energy production, protecting the environment, transportation, entertainment, education, relationships... AI has the potential to transform everything we experience for the better.

All of that might seem a bit far-fetched, especially from where we are standing now. AI is still pretty stupid after all, but it's in its infancy. We are looking at a toddler, bumbling around trying not to fall over. What will it grow up to become? As all parents experience, it is sure to grow up too fast and we hope we've done our best to shape it!

In the excitement of the potential of AI, I looked around and saw a society not really ready for its promise. Economic systems built on



Chris Meah in action during a bootcamp

valuing people through work – they break down. Social fabrics built on trust – they crumble. People's purpose – it is unclear what it will be.

Many people who have worked in AI often feel a sense of excitement and mourning for the future. In a world of superintelligent machines (that can outperform humans in every task and domain), what agency, impact, or meaning will humans have?

Will we be satiated slobs with no purpose? Will we be unleashed creative geniuses with time for pursuing passions and enjoying life? It's hard to say. Would we all even agree which we should aim for?

AI is why I created the School of Code. One way I saw to potentially help was to support people to rapidly transform, to bring them into the technical world, and empower them to have

a voice in the conversation. A hand on the wheel instead of being left behind.

AI is not a tool. It is intelligence. There are questions about how we should interact with it. For example, even if it is aligned to our best interests, what does that mean? Should it intervene when we ask for something that's bad for us?

It seems obvious in some cases. If I ask it

to harm someone, I'd hope it would refuse. But what if I'm hurting myself by eating pizza for breakfast, lunch and dinner... should it refuse to order the food I'm asking for? What if the AI isn't aligned to our best interests?

These lines are blurry, and these problems are those more associated with philosophy lectures, not technology labs. And yet those are the discussions we need to have and that are required to shape the future.

Elon Musk described humans as potentially a "bootloader for artificial intelligence", saying he has "a deliberate suspension of disbelief in order to remain motivated" to keep making progress and overcome existential paralysis. I feel instead of ignoring the negatives, we need to wrestle with them.

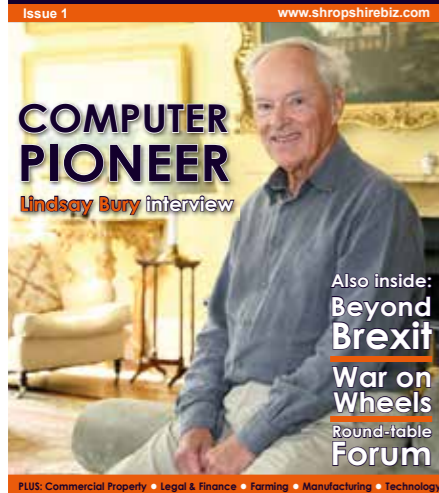
The Stockdale Paradox, named after Admiral James Stockdale, encapsulates the approach we need. He was a prisoner of war, and survived captivity by confronting the brutal facts of his situation while maintaining faith that in the end he would prevail. Similarly, in AI development, we must confront the brutal facts, the dangers and pitfalls, but maintain faith and strive for a shared vision of a better future.

We can't be naive and think there's only upside. We can't be cynical and think there's only doom and gloom. We need to be courageous – to have the strength of mind to carry on in spite of danger. We need to confront the potential demons that lie ahead, mitigate them, but plough forwards together.

I am looking to bring together as wide a group of people as I can to have these discussions and make sure we can shape this path forwards before it's too late.

Chris Meah is the founder and CEO of bootcamp training organisation School of Code, and chair of AI strategy for Tech WM

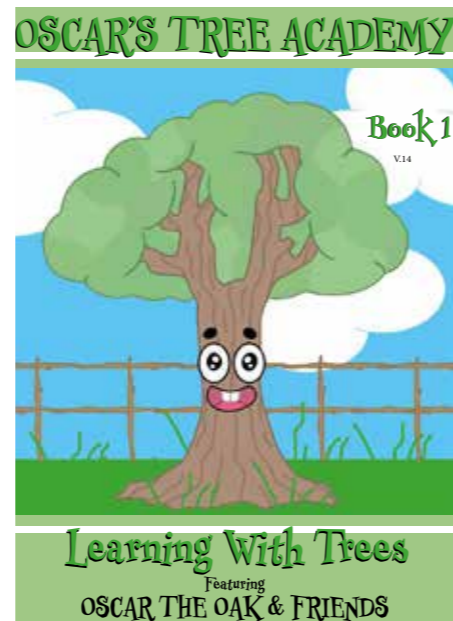
SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS



Paul has been page designer for Shropshire Business since issue 1



Your Chamber, Your Voice is designed and edited by Paul Naylor via Media and You



The resource is being introduced into schools through corporate social responsibility

The accidental entrepreneur



He's the connective tissue between three very different businesses. Paul Naylor talks to CARL JONES about his seven year journey . . .

It's seven years since Shropshire-born businessman Paul Naylor launched his first enterprise.

Media and You celebrated its seventh anniversary on February 1st, with its origins being – in part at least – this very magazine.

"I'd worked in the newspaper industry for almost 25 years," he said.

"I was three months short of a carriage clock, or other commemorative gift, but it wasn't to be."

By the early 2000s, Paul – like many of his colleagues – was more than aware of the changes in the industry. He consciously took on tasks beyond his role as group supplements editor, developing new skills along the way.

At the end of 2016 another round of voluntary redundancies was announced and for Paul it was as if all the stars aligned.

"I had this feeling it was 'now or never,'" he said.

"I was 46 years old. This was either going to be a bold, brave move or a flash in the pan before seeking employment elsewhere.

"Not wishing to live life in regret, I took the plunge."

Needless to say, the decision worked out fine. As well as being part of the team that puts together Shropshire Business magazine, Paul's connection to the county's business community can be seen every quarter in Your Chamber, Your Voice – the members magazine for Shropshire Chamber of Commerce.

He has designed and assembled more than 50 books – including a growing number of titles he publishes under the Media and You brand.

"I made some great connections and friendships during my newspaper days," he adds.

"One thing I was acutely aware of was the silence and loneliness when I began working for myself.

"A friend suggested a networking group. It was a great opportunity to meet other businesses of all sizes and to diversify. Certainly something I'd never shyed away from."

Through networking, Paul met Mark Chester, a Herefordshire-based tree consultant.

Mark handed Paul a sketch. A simple felt-tip pen effort from his eight-year-old daughter, Sophie. In the last few years, Mark and Paul have developed a number of materials relating to trees. Their main focus is Oscar's Tree Academy – an educational resource aimed at Key Stage 1 and 2 school children.

"It helps youngsters become engaged with nature," said Paul.

"It's been piloted in several schools throughout the UK and without exception has been warmly embraced.

"We recognise that schools have limited budgets and have therefore been reaching out to the business community to sponsor the project into schools through corporate social responsibility.

"I'm delighted to say we have gained support from Siemens, with a targeted trial in the Norfolk

area. We will also be working with Birmingham-based Willo Education Recruitment to introduce children to the world of trees."

Towards the end of last year, Paul joined forces with Kim Kelly, Shai Patel, Sherry Barnard, Ami Patel and Ruth Goss to form Granville Credit Control Services (GCCS).

"I'd met Kim and Shai through networking and we'd often worked together on each other's business," said Paul.

"So when the opportunity presented itself, we formed GCCS. It's amazing how each of us brings something different to the table.

"We've already helped a number of businesses recoup five figure sums of outstanding sales invoices.

"In a culture where invoice payments have drifted from 30 days to 60, sometimes 90 and beyond, it is vital to improve cashflow for SMEs – well, businesses of all sizes really.

"We also provide the possibility to act as the credit control department for any business, either short term or as a permanent solution."

It's already been quite a journey, but you get the sense there is more to come from Paul, who it appears has become the accidental entrepreneur.

• You can contact Paul about any of his three businesses by calling 07914 304504.

Email paul@mediaandyou.co.uk with any enquiries.



Laura has returned home to become firm's new partner

Law firm Lanyon Bowdler has appointed a new partner. Laura Weir joined the firm's award-winning clinical negligence team in 2020, returning to her native Wales following a successful career in London.

She said she was looking forward to supporting people in claims arising from delays in, or failure to

diagnose, refer or treat a range of serious conditions resulting in a significant injury.

"I have a particular interest in brain, spine and birth injury claims, as well as cases arising from the diagnosis and treatment of cancer." She is based in the Shrewsbury office, but will be working closely with the team at Conwy in North Wales.



Appointment – Laura Weir

Demand for jobs flooding in

Environmental consultancy Geosmart Information has created 16 new jobs in response to the increasing demand for its flood risk reports, data and services.

The Shrewsbury-based flood risk, drainage, groundwater and contaminated land specialist is looking to recruit a technical flood risk director, hydrologists and environmental consultants.

The appointments follow the record growth of the company to £1.85 million – up

from £1.5 million in 2021-22 – with its flood risk consultants recording a 58% rise in demand from clients over the past 12 months.

The consultancy met its overall 30% growth target in the past year, and saw its sustainable drainage systems work increase by 25%, while contaminated land work rose by 19%.

As a result, it has taken on more office space in the county town's Old Bank Buildings at Bellstone, where it has been based for the past six years, and has also opened a satellite Manchester office.

Dr Paul Ellis, managing director of GeoSmart Information, said: "The team has

grown from 28 to 35 over the last year which is great news for the local economy and for business.

"There is a real need for research, modelling, and reporting of flooding in the UK as Britain sees a tidal wave of storms such as Babet, Ciaran and most recently Henk, leaving hundreds of homes flooded and an insurance bill of millions of pounds.

"We are currently looking at ways that we can support the insurance, business and housing markets to understand where legislation and community needs are growing, and modelling the business to support this growth."



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Trading for six decades

A Telford-based civil engineering and building contractor is celebrating 60 years of trading.

McPhillips has always been based in Shropshire and moved to its current purpose-built headquarters at Hortonwood in 1989.

Initially the firm specialised in digging footings and drainage for local house builders, and then expanded during the 1980s into larger industrial buildings for businesses moving into Telford.

Further expansion saw complex civil engineering projects and now McPhillips provides industry-leading design, construction and development to the residential infrastructure, public civil engineering, and building sectors throughout the Midlands, North West England, and Wales.

Managing director Paul Inions said: "The company gets under your skin – it's easy to feel a valuable part of it, which is why people tend to stay here for a long time. I think my fellow board members would agree that we're the custodians of a very special company."

"We owe it to everyone concerned over the past 60 years to ensure that we keep building on our successes to date."

Over the decades, McPhillips – which is a former winner of the Shropshire Company of the Year title – has recognised the value of



More than 20 per cent of McPhillips's direct workforce began life as apprentices

directly employing its workforce. In contrast to a growing industry trend for sub-contracting on a project by project basis, the company employs over 240 personnel including a 170 strong in-house workforce for on-site labour, 80 per cent of whom live within 20 miles of the McPhillips head office in Telford.

More than 20 per cent of McPhillips's direct workforce began life as apprentices. Every year new apprentices are placed into suitable teams, each fulfilling genuine roles within the company. They receive a competitive wage while also studying towards an NVQ Level 2 in Construction Operations at Telford College.

Dementia-friendly TV proves big hit

A television channel for people living with dementia is proving popular with residents of an independent care home provider.

Coverage Care Services operates 11 care homes across Shropshire and has been piloting the My Life TV app offering specially-selected programmes to help residents with dementia to reminisce, relax and even to eat better.

Debbie Price, chief executive of Coverage Care, said: "We bought the My Life TV licence to assess how we could use it to support residents with dementia, and it has been a big hit already."

"It's an app which we use on our smart TVs and interactive activity tables, and has a huge range of content relevant to the age range of residents."



Thomas Groves and Bryan Donnell, from Briarfields in Shrewsbury, with the interactive digital tables which are being used to stream My Life TV programmes and activities

Commercial sector has its own electrical firm

Electrical services provider Instaspark has launched Orbem – a specialist electrical firm servicing the commercial sector.

The news follows a year of unprecedented growth for Instaspark, reaching a turnover of over circa £1.6million in 2023, driving expansion across the UK, and securing multiple contracts including Co-Op, Haribo and True Learning Partnership.

Directors Brandon Rowlands, Chris Stott, and Rob Stone announced the launch of Orbem to further expand the firm's commercial offering.

Orbem will specialise in a range of electrical solutions, including electrical fit-out projects, LED lighting upgrades, commercial EV charging and renewable energy solutions.

Part of the Instaloft Group – which turned over in excess of £22 million in 2023 and which aims to achieve over £30m in 2024 – Orbem will continue the brand's commitment to excellence in their values.

Director Brandon Rowlands said: "We view Orbem as a massive step towards our goal of changing the face of electrical contracting. Borne from our success at Instaspark, we identified the need for a dedicated commercial brand and we couldn't be prouder of making that dream a reality."

Founder of the Instaloft Group and joint director of Orbem, Rob Stone, said: "I'm proud to introduce Orbem Specialist Electrical dedicated to providing top-tier commercial electrical services across the UK to a vast range of sectors."

Headquartered in Telford, with regional offices in Huddersfield, Reading and Southampton, Orbem is already operating in retail, defence, education, manufacturing and other sectors, and is on track to turn over in excess of £3.3 million this year.





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Developing your Strategy

By Eddie Allan

Any 'start up' will need a strategy for their business, and need to answer two questions:

Who are your customers?

What do you do for them?

To answer these, you need to understand the market. This requires a balanced model in order to meet your needs profitably:

1. Meet the needs, wants and desires of your customers
2. Meet the needs, wants and desires of you, the owners

Prior to 2007, Apple's Steve Jobs identified that smart phones were difficult to use and regular mobiles had limited functionality... enter the iPhone (easy to use and advanced functionality), a product that filled that void. He established the market and presented a solution to it.

Once establishing your market, you need to establish your offer has a balanced ratio of Quality to Cost. Think successful car manufacturers like Bentley (High Cost/Quality) through to Dacia (Lower Cost/Quality) – different in their offer but attractive to different markets.

Understanding your market will establish who your customers are, and who are your competitors.

Understanding customers

A – Amazing (the best)

B – Bread & Butter (the majority)

C – Can't quite make it work

D – Dreadful / Disastrous

Target A and B customers, because the revenue they produce will be in a ratio to your 'Cost to Serve' (i.e. your time and money needed to service your customers).

Servicing C and D will detract you away from your target customers. They will require a lot more resource servicing them in relation to the revenue they produce – in other words, a high cost to serve and lower revenue.

Did you know: 68% of A and B customers leave due to a perceived indifference, caused by spending too much time on the wrong customers (Cs and Ds).

You need to understand your customers by developing an 'avatar' of your perfect client.



Eddie Allan, head of programme delivery at Good2Great

Understanding things like their lifestyle, social and buying habits assists you in targeting your message to the customer most likely to require your products or services.

That understanding will assist you in tailoring delivery to A and B customers, typically into distinct products/services giving clients 'choices.' They won't all want the same thing, and you can deliver in the most efficient way.

You also need to understand who your **competitors** are, and what makes you different to them. What is your Unique Selling Point (USP) differentiating you from your competition. Do you understand what that is?

Features vs Benefits

New businesses initially talk about what they do (Features), and not what the customer gets from you working with them (Benefits).

Customers don't care about what you do; they want to know about the benefits. 'We' in your messaging describes features. 'You' will indicate the benefits you supply.

So in your messaging, you need to lead on the **benefits** your customers get **after** you work with them.

Next time we'll look at how to develop your reputation and brand.

● **Eddie Allan is head of programme delivery at Bridgnorth business consultants Good2Great. Run by Good2Great, the Shropshire Start Up programme is funded by £286,923 from Shropshire Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation, as part of the Levelling Up agenda, and will assist start-ups over the next 18 months. If this has sparked your interest in setting up a business apply here: good-2-great.co.uk/service/start-up/ or contact start@good-2-great.co.uk**

It's a dog's life . . . or is it? Hayley Williams



Hayley Williams said: "Dog ownership has increased significantly since the pandemic and safe spaces to exercise are high in demand."

Hayley set up Rowton Grange secure dog field, in Shrewsbury, to give dogs and their owners the opportunity to exercise in a safe environment. It caters for dogs that are nervous, reactive, or just want a change of scenery. Good2Great supported Hayley to develop this from concept to reality.

"Dog ownership has increased significantly since the pandemic and through no fault of their own, safe spaces to exercise are high in demand, whether it be other dog owners or housing developments taking them up for development," she said. "Good2Great has given me the confidence to push forward with the idea, and the mentorship I received afterwards gave me further insight as to how I could push the business in the future. Dogs are meant to be able to run free and enjoy what is in front of them. Rowton Grange dog field aims to allow your dog to feel like a dog once more and helping it live its best life'.

Call Hayley: 07821 659915

Bike business is on track Dan Smith



Dan Smith said: "The eight-week online workshop programme and subsequent mentoring support helped me plug all the gaps."

Carbon Electra is a mobile cycle and e-bike repair and maintenance service, specialising in repairing a wide range of cycles. Owner Dan Smith, from Wellington, was a keen cyclist and really harboured the dream of setting up his own bike repair and maintenance business.

"I attended Good2Great's start up programme as I had the ideas and had done all the training required to work in a sport I love, but knew that it was a different concept to turn these skills and passion into a business.

"The eight-week online workshop programme and subsequent mentoring support helped me plug all the gaps I had in my ambitions, and added lots more business knowledge and opportunities to my very limited resources.

"Customers can bring any brands to me – from children's balance bikes to top of the range electric bikes."

Call Dan: 07868 274318

'Board' of a regular café? Maria Fisher



"I love games and it really brings family and friends together. You can't beat a great board games night." – Maria Fisher

Maria runs The Board Room, a board games café in Whitburn Street, Bridgnorth, which allows visitors to play a huge variety of board games while they are enjoying their coffee.

It is a unique space for families, friends, or older people to come along and play technology-free games.

She attended Good2Great's eight online Start Up Business Foundation Workshops and, along with one-to-one mentoring from one of their business advisors, realised her ambition of running her own business.

"I love games and it really brings family and friends together. You can't beat a great board games night.

I was very conscious of the effect lockdown had on people, especially those who lived alone, and wanted people to reconnect using board games as a medium."

Call The Board Room: 01746 866903

Employee to entrepreneur Nick Bromley



"I started my business from a passion to provide personal, approachable accountancy and tax services," said Nick Bromley.

Ludlow-based Nick had worked for accountancy practices in Shropshire for 17 years and saw the opportunity to create his own accountancy business, to provide personal, approachable accountancy and tax services to empower small business owners.

"I started my business from a passion to provide personal, approachable accountancy and tax services to empower small business owners," he said.

With support from Good2Great's start up programme, Nick has developed a robust sustainable plan to drive his new business forward.

"I aim to help my clients get more value out of their businesses and realise their ambition – I also see it as an opportunity to demonstrate to my children the importance of following your ambitions."

Call Nick: 01584 874684

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Mastering the art of self-presentation and **NETWORKING**



It's good to talk . . . networking can bring lifelong friendships



Hollie Whittles

2024 is flying by, so it is always great to take a breath and catch up through networking. Whether network meetings are in person or virtual, they are a great way to show and tell what you do.

It can lead to gaining valuable insights, knowledge sharing and referrals. Many of the original people I met 20 years ago through networking are now my trusted friends, and while I don't have as much time to go out locally as I once did, mastering your own self-presentation can propel you forward to new heights of success.

As someone who ran a successful business networking group, I understand how much thought and effort goes into organising them. The opportunities they provide are the cornerstone of career advancement, allowing individuals to establish meaningful connections, exchange ideas, and unlock opportunities.

Where the corporate landscape is evolving towards greater gender diversity, networking provides a platform to break barriers and challenge stereotypes.

Engaging with peers, mentors, and industry leaders enables us to showcase expertise, contribute to discussions, and build a robust professional support system.

Beyond the exchange of business cards and LinkedIn connections, effective networking hinges on the ability to articulate your value proposition. Crafting a compelling personal pitch is an art that empowers business leaders to communicate their skills, accomplishments, and unique perspectives. This self-presentation is not just a humblebrag but a strategic tool to convey confidence, competence, and charisma. (I do not know who came up with the term 'humblebrag' but I am stealing it!)

Public speaking is an integral part of self-presentation, and its importance cannot be

overstated. Being able to deliver a succinct 60 second pitch is an artform to practise in order to seize opportunities.

Even if speaking is not your 'thing' there are coping mechanisms to allow you to develop this skill whether it is writing down bullets to remind you or rehearsing to your cat – a well-delivered presentation not only highlights your expertise but also establishes a powerful personal brand.

Confidence in public speaking therefore fosters credibility, setting the stage for increased visibility and influence.

In a busy world where diversity and inclusion are gaining prominence, any business leader can step up and leverage networking and self-presentation to challenge traditional norms.

Forcing yourself out of your comfort zone and actively participating in industry events and conferences will allow you to contribute and shape the narrative fostering an environment of equality.

By developing a strong professional network, you will create a support system that understands and champions you towards your goals. As these skills become second nature, the path to success becomes not just clearer but paved with opportunities waiting to be seized. Carpe diem – seize the day!

Hollie Whittles is a director of Purple Frog Systems in Telford

Ideas in the pipeline

A multi-billion-pound opportunity for the construction sector in Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin is the focus for a major event for contractors and the supply chain.

Project Pipeline, on March 22 at Theatre Severn in Shrewsbury, is expected to attract companies operating across the industry spectrum – from housing developers to sub-contractors, and civil engineers to main contractors.

Hosted by Shropshire Constructing Excellence (the Constructing Excellence Midlands Shropshire club), the event will hear about opportunities to be involved in a range of projects, such as the regeneration of Shrewsbury's Riverside area and the flagship Station Quarter development in Telford.

Mark Barrow, chair of Shropshire Constructing Excellence and executive director of place at Shropshire Council, said: "This is an exciting time for the construction industry across Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin, and we want our local businesses to get their share of the contracts that will be available over the next decade.

"Sometimes, just knowing what's in the pipeline and when we expect the opportunities to become live can be the key to getting involved in these major infrastructure projects. We also want to make sure that Shropshire and Telford companies are aware of construction projects being delivered currently and how they and their supply chain can benefit.

"There will also be a chance to network with other construction professionals, meet other organisations which can support construction sector companies to grow, and pick up information on business growth, training and skills."

Amy Bould, managing director of Be Bold Media and committee



How the Smithfield Riverside plan could look

member of SCE, is hosting the event which will hear keynotes from both councils about infrastructure projects that aim to develop the economy and prosperity of the region.

Harpreet Rayet, of Cornvii Developments, will give an overview on STAR Housing's successful retrofit project near Oswestry, sustainability plans and SAP calculations, and Matt Laws from event sponsor Shrewsbury Colleges Group will give a brief update on the latest funded skills and training opportunities available to employers.

Andrew Carpenter, from Constructing Excellence Midlands, will also explain how the organisation works together with SCE for the benefit of construction businesses, and the event will wrap up with a networking lunch.

To register for the Project Pipeline event visit www.cemidlands.org

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Scott Anderson, an apprentice at Dodd Group

By Adam Pringle

Apprenticeships are increasingly being seen as a crucial tool to plug skills gaps for local employers.

The West Midlands is now among the biggest apprentice employers in the UK, according to latest statistics, with nearly 38,000 new starters recorded last year.

Most popular sectors include construction, business and administration, health and science, education and early years, engineering and manufacturing, and digital – with more engagement needed with the likes of catering and hospitality, transport and logistics, and creative and design.

Jennifer Coupland, chief executive of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, says: “It’s brilliant to see that so many people are reaping the benefits of world class apprenticeships, designed by employers.

“Demand is in fact outstripping supply for apprenticeship places. What we now need is for many more large and small businesses to invest in training up their workforce by offering apprenticeships.”

Among the Shropshire businesses committed to apprenticeships is former Company of the Year winner Dodd Group, which has its head office at Stafford Park in Telford.

It currently has over 100 apprentices, three of which – Haydn Williams, Scott Anderson and Jay Hinks – are studying at Telford College.

“We actively invest in the development of our workforce,” says Mary-Anne Clayton, Dodd Group (Midlands) Limited’s group human resources manager.

“The positive experiences of Haydn, Scott and Jay are a testament to the success of this programme. Haydn’s three-year training and apprenticeship and upcoming grading demonstrates our commitment to skill development.

“Scott’s enthusiasm and recognition for his excellent work – including the nomination for Employee of the Month – speak volumes about the quality of apprenticeship experiences provided by Dodd Group in partnership with the college.

“The addition of Jay, who is embarking on a software development apprenticeship, is exciting. The fact that Telford College has tailored a bespoke training plan to meet our specific IT development needs showcases a collaborative

Leading the way

Reaping the benefits of apprenticeships



Field Studies Council apprentices learn how to deliver outdoor education courses

and responsive approach to the partnership.”

In many cases, former apprentices are now actively helping to train the next generation.

Millie Talbot-Cooper is nearing the end of her apprenticeship at property agency Berriman Eaton in Bridgnorth, having been with the company for around 18 months.

She is following in the footsteps of sales negotiator Ella Coleman, who achieved a distinction on her apprenticeship at the same office in 2022 and is now supporting 19-year-old Millie’s training.

Director Caroline Eaton said: “We support employing apprentices as it gives small businesses the opportunity and affordability to train somebody in a profession that requires mentoring and experience.

“We believe learning in an active team environment is the most practical way to learn and develop skills.”

Ella, who now works with both the sales and lettings teams, says: “Through my apprenticeship I enjoyed having the opportunity to learn vital skills that have helped to boost my career and



Millie Talbot-Cooper pictured at Berriman Eaton in Bridgnorth

secure my role as part of the team at Berriman Eaton.

“I now have valuable skills that will translate into any future career, but most importantly to me the apprenticeship has guided me to a career I thoroughly enjoy, and I am part of an amazing team because of it.”

Millie says: “I have gained confidence and skills in communicating, active listening, negotiation and commercial awareness.

“My day-to-day tasks in the office have helped me with my business administration course at Telford College as I can relate to a lot of the subjects we cover.”

Another apprentice who says he is delighted to be ‘giving back’ is Harry Rumbles, a mechatronics maintenance engineer at Market Drayton dairy giant Muller.

He was among a group of apprentices who have been helping to mentor year 11 students from Haberdashers’ Abraham Darby School in Madeley at Telford College’s engineering centre.

The former Newport Burton Borough School student says: “It’s really important as we’re



Harry Rumbles from Muller, left, demonstrates how to use a lathe



SJ Roberts Construction apprentices



Telford College apprentices with students from Haberdashers’ Abraham Darby School

instructing the next group of engineers here.

“A lot of them haven’t had the practical experience in it yet, but they’re getting it here. For me, that’s where I thought the disconnect between GCSEs and further education was.

“At their age, I didn’t realise how much practical work there was, and I wasn’t in tune with what a career in the trade would actually be like.

“It’s nice to see how far I’ve come too. If I have the abilities to teach them something, it gives me confidence in my own progression.”

Shropshire’s leading environmental education charity, the Field Studies Council, is also trumpeting the success of its bespoke training programme.

The company, which has its headquarters at Preston Montford near Shrewsbury, recruits a new cohort of outdoor education apprentices each year and trains them to deliver courses at one of the charity’s field centres around the UK.

Kayleigh Hunter, senior tutor and apprentice co-ordinator, says: “Training our own staff through the apprenticeship scheme means we have a steady pool of well-qualified potential instructors coming through each year, and the apprentices have the skills they need to either stay with the Field Studies Council, progress into further or higher education or move into a different part of the sector.

“Our apprentice retention rate is about 80%, and almost all of those that don’t choose to stay with us continue on to further education such as full teacher training which is great for the wider environmental education sector.”

During the apprenticeship, trainee instructors get an insight into the world of work, learn from experienced colleagues, and get the support they need from the rest of the team. Apprentices are observed and supported by experienced mentors and given time to develop their skills in an unpressured environment.

Kayleigh added: “The programme is bespoke and leads to qualifications in areas such as



Alice Sereda, left, and Madeline Harper from Ascendancy, based in Newport

lowland leadership and learning beyond the classroom, setting the apprentices up with the skills and knowledge they need to teach on our huge range of courses.”

Building contractor SJ Roberts Construction has spoken out on the valuable contribution made to the firm by apprentices in a call to encourage more local businesses to invest in future talent in this way.

It hired its first apprentice almost 20 years ago and has since supported many apprentices to become trained in a diverse mix of skilled areas that include carpentry, brickwork, plumbing, electricals, engineering, quantity surveying, architectural technology, and site management. A total of 36 apprentices are currently training with the company.

Managing director Mike Sambrook says: “Apprentices have, undoubtedly, had a positive impact on our team over the past 20 years and I’d highly recommend this approach to recruitment, training and upskilling to other businesses regardless of their size.

“We’ve found it to be an ideal way of both investing in the future of the industry, as well as addressing the ongoing skills gap. Significantly, they’ve contributed across the whole business – it’s important to remember that apprenticeships don’t solely cover the skilled trades.”

Several former apprentices now hold senior positions at SJ Roberts. Dom Owen joined as a 16-year-old apprentice engineer and now, at the age of 24, heads up the engineering department.

He says: “I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do after school and an apprenticeship, with the chance to train and work, seemed like a good option, so I decided to give it a go and find out if it was right for me.”

Telford College, one of the area’s largest apprenticeship providers, now offers 22 different apprenticeships, including five new pathways – Multi Channel Marketer, Lead Engineering Maintenance Technician, Software Development, People’s Professional, and Autocare.

Business development manager Chris Field says: “We have a great deal of repeat business from companies that see apprenticeships as a valuable tool to help meet their recruitment needs and plug skills gaps.

“Some of the businesses we work with may have initially just taken on one apprentice to test the water – but others have employed multiple apprentices over a number of years. And in many cases, we’ve been able to support these companies with other training needs too.”

At the Cosford headquarters of the Midlands Air Ambulance, staff say apprentice Izzy Eastham is making a real difference.

She joined the charity immediately after completing her A levels, and finance manager Karen Oliver says: “It’s very apparent that Izzy is keen to learn, and as an 18-year-old with little workplace experience or skills to date, I have been impressed with the confidence she has displayed.

“We have undergone a period of transformational change in the past 18 months, and we desperately needed an extra pair of hands in the finance department to help spread the increased workload.

“Having an apprentice has certainly helped the team focus on keeping up-to-date and meeting our deadlines.”

Across Telford & Wrekin Council, including the local authority’s maintained schools, over 500 apprentices have started apprenticeships since 2017.

Some of the most popular are in areas such as business administration, teaching assistants, housing and property management, and customer service.

Two apprentices are on the up after joining a Newport business thanks to support from the council’s Apprenticeship Levy Transfer scheme.

Alice Sereda and Madeline Harper have started a digital marketing apprenticeship with marketing agency Ascendancy.

Through the Apprenticeship Levy Transfer scheme, voluntary and community sector organisations, along with small to medium sized businesses that support people living or working in the borough, can apply for Levy Transfer funding to cover apprentices’ training costs, with the employer remaining responsible for paying their wages.

Helen Culshaw, Ascendancy managing director, says: “We are big believers in apprenticeships and on-the-job learning, and we are delighted to be able to offer apprenticeship opportunities to two talented local young people with the help of this scheme.”

Did you know?

- 92% of companies that take on apprentices believe this leads to a more motivated and satisfied workforce
- 86% said apprenticeships helped them develop skills relevant to their organisation
- 80% have seen a significant increase in employee retention
- The estimated yearly gain for employers during an apprenticeship training period is between £2,500 and £18,000 per apprentice during their training period

(Figures from the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education)



Ian Ross with Ishbel Lapper



Craig Kershaw and Sally Themans



Philip Robinson in conversation



Mo Chaudry, Michelle Jehu, Paul McGillivray, Johnny Themans, and Carl Jones



James Corfield, Pete Barfield and Rob Griffiths

Delegates feel the power at an inspirational event

Empower Your Business for 2024 and Beyond – that was the title of a Shropshire business seminar with a power-packed line-up of speakers.

The event was held at Stockton House near Bridgnorth, and organised by business consultants Good2Great.

Keynote speaker was Mo Chaudry, the multi-millionaire leisure and fitness industry entrepreneur who has become one of the UK's most successful Asian business people.

He told how he arrived in the UK as a young boy unable to speak English and, after being raised and schooled in Telford, went on to build a business empire which includes the Waterworld water park in Staffordshire, and a chain of fitness centres

Paul McGillivray from award-winning software development studio Remote, spoke about the fast-moving world of AI, and how to harness its power for the benefit of business.

He is a seasoned expert in digital strategy who works with top brands such as Sony, Volkswagen, Volvo and Tesco.

Government minister Saqib Bhatti MBE, parliamentary under secretary of state at the department for science, innovation and technology, with responsibility for tech and the digital economy also gave a presentation and answered questions.

The line-up was completed by two members of the Good2Great team, Johnny Themans and Michelle Jehu, who covered a host of leadership and training topics.

"We wanted to put together a vital day for business people in the county who were looking to gain a competitive edge," said Johnny.

Delegates were invited to pose questions during the course of the event that were presented to the speakers in a Q&A debate, hosted by Shropshire Business editor and SBLTV



A packed conference room at the business seminar



Carl Jones was compere and Q&A host



Johnny Themans of Good2Great

presenter Carl Jones. The event received terrific feedback – both from delegates, and the speakers themselves.

Mo Chaudry said: "It was very humbling to receive amazing feedback – the positive energy in the room was contagious and I came away energised and buzzing. Positive energy works both ways. This is what true entrepreneur mindset is all about."

Digital marketing coach Louise Burgoyne said: "There were so many takeaways, but I loved the talk about reframing the future workforce with AI by Paul.

"The possibilities are endless and mind blowing, and as a tech-minded business person it excites me.

"To quote Paul, if AI scares you a little, even after delivering so many epic ideas for using AI in your business, remember that technology is not the answer, humanity is."

● Highlights from the event, including Mo's keynote address and the Q&A session, are available on Shropshire Business Live TV – check out the February edition of the show on YouTube, or sbltv.co.uk



Kaye Heseltine, Victoria Brooks, and Mark Turner



Michelle Jehu in conversation



Networking between speaker presentations



Saqib Bhatti gave a talk and answered questions



Mo Chaudry delivering his keynote address



The packed audience at Stockton House



Paul McGillivray explained how to harness the power of AI



Delegates at Stockton House

IT firm named among top 50 of its kind in UK

EPX Technical Services has been named as one of the top 50 best managed IT companies in the UK.

The IT firm, which works with businesses across Shropshire and Staffordshire, has joined a select group from across the UK to be highlighted for excellence in business operations such as sales, marketing, financial processes and leadership.

Dan Ellis, managing director of EPX which partnered with Shrewsbury-based PC Net in 2022, said: "We are delighted to be included in the 50 Best Managed IT Companies Award, which in itself is a really useful benchmarking tool for how we are performing as a business."

The award is given to the 50 companies that manage their business the most effectively. Each applicant answers 200 questions to evaluate their business, drilling into details around organisational processes and digital presence, including websites, social media accounts, search engine results, and marketing initiatives.

"To be named in the top 50 companies for 2023 is hugely rewarding and demonstrates our business practices are among the very best," adds Dan.

"In the words of award organisers, TechnoPlanet, EPX is now part of an exclusive club in both the UK and the world, which is reassuring for our clients to know their IT services are in safe hands."


TechnoPlanet is an America-based IT channel marketing company, established for more than 25 years. It devised the 50 Best Managed IT Companies Award to recognise well-run firms as part of a global mission to help the IT industry to become "bigger, better and stronger".



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Silver anniversary joy for hair stylists



James Dallaway and Carol Boden

A Shropshire hair stylist is celebrating 25 years in business – in the very salon where it all started.

James Dallaway Ltd, in Midgley Court, in Newport, has clients from all over the region and this month it is marking its silver anniversary.

Owner and head stylist James Dallaway is supported by stylist Carol Boden and they have a loyal following of regular clients, some of whom have been with them from the start.

James said: "It's been a marvellous 25 years and we can't thank our clients enough for their loyalty and commitment to us over such a long period of time."

"We don't feel as though it's 'work' as many of our clients have become friends, and it's just a pleasure to help everyone look their very best."

"I can't believe where the time has gone, but it's a real milestone that we're extremely proud to reach, and we're looking forward to seeing what the future holds."

Derailing the economy: the impact of rail link axe

By Carl Jones

Once again, Shropshire finds itself losing its direct rail service to London. The reason, according to current operator Avanti West Coast, is a combination of funding pressures, and a lack of passenger numbers.

Back in 1992, I was sent by my editor at the time to travel on the 'last' direct rail service to Shropshire from London Euston. Then, like now, it was being axed in the face of local outrage, with claims that it could decimate the local economy.

On board, however, no-one was batting an eyelid, and you wouldn't have known it was different to any other service. Life went on, and commuters found a way.

The Wrexham & Shropshire rail company restored a direct (albeit very slow) direct link to the capital from 2008-11, this time using Marylebone station, before Virgin restored the direct service to Euston just over three years later.

Now, from June 2 this year, we roll back the clock 32 years to spark the same old arguments, debates and discussions about the rights and wrongs of the decision.

But just how damaging is the lack of a direct service from Shropshire to London a couple of times a day? It could be argued that in pure passenger terms, not very, with only a few dozen people making use of it each day.

More concerning though, is the message that it sends out about Shropshire's standing on the UK transport network, opening us up to accusations that we are tucked away in some inaccessible, forgotten rural backwater.

That could have a much more serious impact on our ability to attract inward investment – as well as tourism, ironically at



No direct rail service will be available from Shropshire to Euston from June 2

a time when the county has just been named as one of ABTA's top 10 global 'destinations to watch' in 2024.

Rail strikes which have blighted services for many months now haven't helped the situation, nor has the cost of living crisis.

As one Shropshire rail user observed in an online forum: "Charging £136 for a return journey doesn't cause apathy – it causes people not to travel because they can't afford to."

Decision makers and stakeholders are now being urged to reverse the decision and ensure that the county is serviced by at least one direct connection to the capital each day.

But if the past is any guide, no amount of talking over the coming weeks will prevent the axe falling... then the fight starts to mount a business case for it being restored.

Maybe it will strengthen the county's long-running case to see the line from Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury electrified, improving journey times and reliability.

The Government's own Union Connectivity Review has identified the importance of Shrewsbury as a centre for connecting Mid and West Wales to the Midlands.

And isn't there supposed to be a big pot of cash available for just this sort of project, from the abandoned north of England leg of HS2?

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Lessons to learn from Post Office debacle?



ROD PLUMMER runs a Shrewsbury-based software company which has worked with Fujitsu for many years. He says businesses of any size should never let themselves get bamboozled by technology

We've all heard the news about the Post Office scandal. To summarise the story for the purposes of this article – flawed software led to wrongful convictions.

It's a stark reminder of the profound impact software can have on lives and businesses, both positive and negative. As managing director of Shoothill, a provider of business-focused custom software solutions for nearly 18 years, I've worked with Fujitsu and so – like many of us – have closely followed this story with great interest. Our software is vital to our customers' business processes, and often it's entirely responsible for their revenue generation. We hold massive responsibilities to our customers and so I believe there are certain lessons that we must take from this scandal as this story highlights vital truths in our industry.

Don't let yourself get confused
To begin with, businesses shouldn't let themselves be bamboozled by technology, or confused by the language used in software.

For businesses that take the decision to invest in custom software, what's vitally important is that the software vendor totally understands what processes within the business need to be addressed, what are the metrics of a successful outcome to the project, and what are the needs of the end user(s).

With the Horizon application, a custom software solution, I believe there was a fundamental mismatch between the actual customer requirement (i.e. accurate accounting for the Post Office) and the needs of the end users (ease of use by the sub postmasters). This led to software that didn't meet the end user's needs; a confusing system to use with extremely poor post implementation support.

Listen to your users?
The Post Office scandal was fundamentally a failure of software integrity and failings in testing and user support. Instead of understanding, postmasters struggling with the Horizon system were met with disbelief and suspicion from the Post Office.

Nothing created by human beings is ever infallible, and so thorough testing of software by both vendors and users is paramount – having a policy of actively looking for errors and bugs, instead of hoping for the best that they simply don't exist.

The headline figure of 3,500 accusations and 900 prosecutions of Post Office branch owner-operators for theft and fraud is truly shocking. Instead of assuming the problem was 'user error', especially with any recurring issue, the team behind the Horizon platform or Post Office management should have asked themselves: "How come so many postmasters could suddenly be at fault?"

Or: "How many prosecutions did we have before we implemented Horizon, and how many do we have now?"

The first convictions started in 2002 and continued until 2015. While it appears obvious now, in all this time why does it seem that no-one within the Post Office queried this huge rise in cases?

Test, test and test again
It's the responsibility of software vendors to investigate all possible causes of faults.

If many users make the same mistake, then it's probably the fault of the software and not the users.

Championing a culture of excellence in software development is vital and this starts with rigorous testing protocols, an adaptive approach and continuous feedback to get ahead of potential problems.



Mr Bates vs The Post Office made headline news. Picture courtesy of ITV

Never ever cut corners
Never paint over cracks in software development. The anthropologist David Graeber studied work and jobs – identifying a type of worker called the "Duct Taper", a person who exists to stitch a system, company or project back together.

These should never exist in software – the stickiness of the tape will wear out. So 'painting over the cracks' by making new code that solves one problem, runs the risk of creating more problems if it's not fully-tested. Instead, developers need to return to their code and resolve the initial problem without adding more potential pitfalls.

The Post Office scandal is a cautionary tale for the software industry, it reminds us of the consequences of our work.

Those of us who work in this innovative and brilliant sector must take these lessons to heart.

We must prioritise robust software development, exemplary customer support, and unwavering ethical standards.

Only then can we truly harness technology's power and prevent more tragedies like this from taking place.

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Are you suffering from imposter syndrome?

It's estimated that more than three quarters of us have experienced 'imposter syndrome' at work at some stage in our careers.

If that's you, then a new training course being run by Shropshire Chamber of Commerce will be of interest.

Its first ever 'Working With Imposter Syndrome' session is being held at the Chamber's Telford office on April 17.

Booking is now open through the training section on the Shropshire Chamber of Commerce website - www.shropshire-chamber.co.uk.

Training and development facilitator Alex Brown said the half-day event would run from 9.30am to 12pm, with another planned for later in the year.

"Imposter syndrome is more common than many people realise - it's feeling like a fake in the workplace despite any genuine success that you have actually achieved," he said.

"It's extremely frustrating because it can hold colleagues back as they're constantly filled with self-doubt, even in areas of the business where they excel.

"So we've launched our new course to help people recognise, understand, and effectively cope with imposter syndrome.

"The session will include interactive elements which will help with self-reflection, and we aim to offer delegates key takeaways that they can use in the workplace.

"We'll be focussing on confidence boosting techniques and sharing useful coping strategies that could make a real difference to a large number of people."

A recent report suggests that more than two thirds of business people will have suffered from imposter syndrome at some point in their working lives - whether they realise it, or not.

Alex said the session was also designed to help people identify colleagues who may be struggling.

"It's a feeling of nervousness and the constant fear that you'll be 'found out', as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression.

"And yet, people with imposter syndrome are usually highly successful people who have no reason to feel like an imposter, but they still do.

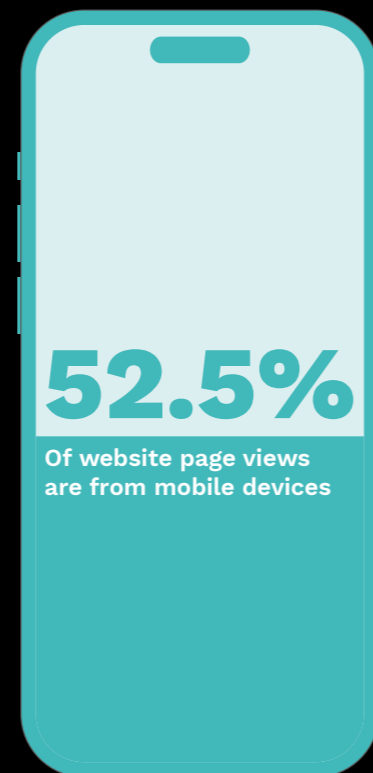
"We hope our course shines a light on this difficult condition and helps anyone struggling to realise they are not alone."



A 'Working With Imposter Syndrome' session is being held at Shropshire Chamber of Commerce's Telford office on April 17

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Advertisement Feature

GDP shrinkage put UK into technical recession in 2023

By James Sproule

Our forecast at the outset of 2023 had been for a shallow recession in the latter half of 2023, a forecast which we subsequently raised as the year progressed.

The issue is that the trend rate of growth is very low and as such wavering in and out of technical "recession" has to be something of a foregone conclusion.

The ultimate issue is that the trend rate of GDP growth has fallen to near zero, and as such minor variations and corrections in data result in technical recession (e.g. two quarters of negative growth).

The fact that labour productivity for Q4, came out at -0.2% q-o-q (consensus -0.2%), points to the trend rate of overall GDP growth looking set to remain anaemic.

While the economic impact of variations in the order of 0.2% is not significant, the political point scoring in an election year is set to be considerable.

Our forecast remains that we will see a very gradual (quarterly sub 0.5%) recovery over the course of 2024, helped by slow rises to real pay, falling inflation, possible reductions in taxes in March and from mid-year onwards, our expectation is for a slow reduction in interest rates.

- James Sproule, is Chief Economist UK at Handelsbanken. For more economic insights follow us on LinkedIn at www.linkedin.com/company/handelsbanken or visit our website www.handelsbanken.co.uk to find out more about our unique relationship banking approach.

- Contact: Handelsbanken Shrewsbury, Michael Place, Anchorage Avenue, Shrewsbury Business Park, Shrewsbury, SY2 6FG. Tel: 01743 263780.

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Bursary exhibitor places for fledglings

An IT service provider will support up-and-coming businesses at this year's Shrewsbury Food Festival. As Bursary Sponsor, Start Tech will cover two thirds of the cost to exhibit at the two-day festival – on June 29 and 30 in The Quarry – for up to three small, local businesses.

Beth Heath, of Shropshire Festivals, said: "We understand the struggles of being a family-run, independent business. It's tough starting out and having the capital to pay for stands at festivals and shows, so it's fantastic that Start Tech will be providing this opportunity."

"Bursary places are for small, fledgling businesses that would struggle to cover the cost of an exhibitor space but would greatly benefit from the platform. If you're interested in applying, please email fun@shropshirefestivals.co.uk."

Start Tech began partnering with Shropshire Festivals' events last year. In 2024 they are also sponsoring Shropshire Oktoberfest and providing a Cyber Security Zone at Shropshire Business Festival in April.

Ian Groves, managing director at Start Tech, said: "Shrewsbury Food Festival offers a brilliant platform for local businesses to get their products in front of customers. Not only is it a great event for sales, but it's where you can build brand awareness and generate new leads."



Ian Groves (managing director at Start Tech) and Beth Heath (from Shropshire Festivals) at the Start Tech office in Shrewsbury

New business for historic setting

A historic property in Weston-under-Lizard has been converted into a personalised gift shop in the latest addition to a diverse range of businesses which have moved into Bradford Estates' commercial premises.

The Old Village Stores, on Weston Bank on the A5, has been updated for use by Madry, a retail business which sells commemorative military medals, personalised trophies and gifts as well as offering engraving and framing services.

The building, which dates back to the 1800s was originally a blacksmith's workshop or "smithy", and then became a village shop, Weston Stores. Most recently it was a country clothing shop.

Madry owner Kevin Paton-Feaver wanted to locate his business in the well-known shop because of its prominence for passing traffic and the opportunity to attract visitors to nearby Weston Park.

Kevin's other business interests include Empire Medals, a company offering Ministry of Defence-licensed military and civilian medals and awards based in Queensway, Telford.

On seeing the lease was on offer, he contacted the Bradford Estates Office to take up the chance to give Empire Medals a prominent bricks and mortar retail site which would also allow him to showcase his other businesses including a popular personalised gifts business.

Kevin said: "Despite many predictions about the switch of retail to online, I could



Asset management director Andrew Barrett of Bradford Estates, left, with Madry owner Kevin Paton-Feaver

see a unique opportunity in moving into this landmark building as it has such a special character, it is close to Weston Park, which attracts visitors all year round, and there are an estimated 350,000 vehicles passing by each week on the A5."

Bradford Estates managing director Alexander Newport said: "We are pleased to welcome Madry to set up what we are sure will be a successful retail addition to our increasingly diverse range of occupiers within the Bradford Estates business community."



Buy now, pay later . . . the pros and the cons

Martyn James



In recent years, a new form of credit has appeared that's used by millions. Buy now, pay later deals are a way to pay for things in chunks, often without interest, allowing you to spend money without using traditional loans.

But my postbag is currently filled with enquiries and complaints about these deals and what happens if you miss payments. Here's my guide to how buy now, pay later credit works and your rights if things go wrong.

What is buy now, pay later credit?

BNPL works by giving you a short-term loan, with or without interest, so you can buy goods or services at the till when you don't have the full balance to hand, or money is tight.

Retailers love BNPL credit and almost all of them have at least one lender offering

the credit at their online checkouts. That's because these loans allow people to buy more than they can afford with just a few clicks.

The credit deals generally fall into the following categories:

Try before you buy

This is where you have a short period of time – usually 30 days but sometimes as low as 14 days – to try goods before committing to buy them. Of course, you can't pop on a nice frock, hit the disco and send it back, no matter what you might read on social media. These deals allow you to try things on, check goods out and see if they work for you before committing to buy. However, if you don't return the goods on time, you could find you've bought them. Bear in mind the 14 days just mirrors your existing online shopping rights – it's not the lender being generous!

Limited instalments

The most well-known form of BNPL deal works by letting you pay in a limited number of instalments interest-free – usually in three payments. This means you can buy things up front that you may not have the money for in full at point of purchase. However, you have committed to buy.

Credit agreements

These deals are closer to the older credit deals in that you pay in instalments over a longer period and pay interest. This isn't as high as some retailers charged in the past – it's usually less than credit card interest, for example – but it is still higher than a standard bank loan.

What's the problem?

No interest doesn't seem that bad, does it? Well, what happens if you can't pay?

This is where BNPL lenders get cagey.

While BNPL firms may not charge debt interest, loads of readers have reported that businesses are quick to pass on debts to debt collectors who have a whole range of penalties and pressure tactics they can apply – and they can register financial debts with credit reference agencies.

Worryingly, this can happen for relatively small sums, reportedly even for under £100.

Some BNPL firms are now saying that they will include details of existing arrangements on your credit file – ostensibly to show to lenders that you are paying off your credit deal and improve your score.

However, this might be counterproductive for some lenders if you have too many deals (or even one), as it suggests you don't have much cash to play with.

Can I afford it?

The desire to treat yourself or friends and family can sometimes overrule logic. So if you're thinking about using BNPL loans, then don't click to buy at the till without taking a moment to consider a few things.

Make a basic budget and have a look at how much money you have left over each month when you've paid all the essentials. If that money isn't enough to cover an emergency, like a car or fridge breaking down, you should avoid BNPL credit.

That's because you're simply moving the problem further down the line – where more could go wrong.

If you've already taken out credit, don't panic! There are free organisations like StepChange to help you if you are struggling to pay the bills.

Martyn James is a leading consumer rights campaigner, TV and radio broadcaster and journalist

Future of the High Street

Shrewsbury's shopping centre management team is expanding its role within the town to include the market hall building, as longstanding market manager Kate Gittins moves to a new position within Shropshire Council.

The council has asked the team, which manages the Darwin Shopping Centre, to broaden its operations and represent its interests at the market hall.

Shropshire Council manages the permanent stalls within the award-winning market on a day-to-day basis and is responsible for the overall management of the building, including Mardol House and the ground-floor retail units in Shoplatch, Bellstone and Clarendon Street. Shrewsbury Town Council manages the canopied stall section of the indoor market.

The shopping centre team, led by shopping centre manager Kevin Lockwood, also assumes management responsibility for the student accommodation and commercial units at The Tannery buildings, in nearby St Austin's Street.

Kevin said: "We plan to build on the market hall's success and enhance its future by bringing it into a wider retail family within the town."

"Independent businesses are increasingly important to the future of the High Street, and we have a unique mix of independent businesses and nationals in Shrewsbury, so we're better placed than many other towns."

"The market is an important incubator for business start-ups and enterprise, with businesses expanding from the market onto the High Street. Because of its success, the market deserves to be recognised as a key stakeholder within the town."

"Shrewsbury will undergo major changes in the future with the Big



Kate Gittins (front left) hands over the management reins of Shrewsbury Market Hall to (from left) Russell Hall, Amy Williams and Kevin Lockwood

Town Plan, Movement Strategy, and the redevelopment of the Riverside/Smithfield area. Bringing the market hall into the wider fold ensures it will be very much part of future plans for the town centre."

The management team also includes tenant liaison manager Amy Williams, who will assume day-to-day responsibility for the market hall, and operations manager Russell Hall.

The team is taking over the reins from facilities manager Kate Gittins who is being redeployed to a new part-time role within Shropshire Council.

Kate said she was excited for the long-term future of the market which last year won the title of 'Britain's Favourite Market' for the second time in five years.

Advisors for consultancy

Three new advisors have been appointed at a Bridgnorth business consultancy.

Kay Heseltine, Luke Boxall and Mark Wakely will be working with Good2Great to mentor entrepreneurs throughout Shropshire, South Staffordshire and Dudley borough.

Based at The Printworks in Bridgnorth High Street, Good2Great has helped around 1,000 new companies to develop over the last decade.

It has been awarded new contracts, financed by the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund, to assist start-up businesses

in the three local authority areas and the trio will strengthen their team of experts.

Kay Heseltine has her own design consultancy, Luke Boxall runs Soil Nurture, and Mark Wakely is a podcast producer.

All have completed the Good2Great start-up programmes in the past and now run successful businesses themselves.

Kay Heseltine, of Bridgnorth, said: "The help I received from Good2Great when I launched my business was invaluable, and I am now really excited to be able to pass on some of my expertise to other entrepreneurs."



New advisors, from left, Mark Wakely, Kay Heseltine and Luke Boxall

Governing corporation growing in experience

Telford College has welcomed four new faces to its governing corporation, bringing with them a wealth of local, national and international business expertise.

Gill Eatough, Hollie Whittles, Teresa Tanner and Jim Arnold have decades of experience spanning education, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, and much more.

Gill – who received an MBE in the New Year Honours list – was the founding chief executive of the Telford-based Learning Community Trust which runs more than a dozen secondary, primary and specialist school sites across the county.

Having trained as a research scientist, she found a passion for education, and in 2005 she was invited to help build a brand new, multi-million-pound school: Hadley Learning Community created a new blueprint for education in the town.

Under her stewardship, which continued until her retirement in December 2022, the Learning Community Trust grew into a collection of ten schools responsible for more than 5,500 children and employing over 1,000 people.

Gill is now the independent chair of Telford & Wrekin Education Strategic Partnership Board, working with education leaders across Telford.

Hollie is a passionate advocate for digital skills and apprenticeships. She is an award-winning TEDx speaker, author, and

director of two digital companies – Purple Frog Systems and FragglesWorks. She is also the National Policy Skills Champion for the Federation of Small Businesses.

Having originally read business studies at university, Hollie completed a level five apprenticeship through Telford College some 25 years later in her own organisation.

She sees her role as an opportunity to bring the small business voice to the table and says she is keen to 'help break down barriers and ensure that the digital skills needed by all sizes of business are accessible to bridge the skills gap and digital divide'.

Teresa Tanner completed her general nurse training in Shrewsbury in 1983, followed by registered sick children's nurse training in Manchester.

She has worked within Shropshire since 1990, and spent the last 16 years as lead for safeguarding children for The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust.

She has been a member of St John Ambulance since 1972, and currently manages the Unit in Market Drayton. She is also president-elect of Market Drayton Rotary.

Jim Arnold launched his career with a business studies BTEC at Telford College and that led to senior leadership positions in finance, sales, operations, and general management, including Alcoa Fastening Systems.

Qualifying as a chartered management accountant, he also earned a masters in business administration from Baylor University while living and working in Texas.



Gill Eatough



Hollie Whittles



Teresa Tanner



Jim Arnold

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Quantity surveyor roles



Sam Green is a new recruit Senior quantity surveyor **Corby Oges**

Two new recruits have joined a quantity surveyor team as it takes on new projects.

Corby Oges has been appointed as a senior quantity surveyor at CQS Solutions which has offices in Telford and in Newtown, as Bowen Consultants.

Corby will be based in Telford as a senior quantity surveyor focusing on public sector work. He is already working with company owner Tim Lloyd on a Government contract.

Corby joined the company from a national construction and cost management consultancy where he handled quantity surveying and project management work across a range of sectors.

Another appointment is assistant quantity surveyor Sam Green who joins older brother Jack at the company, with Jack being promoted to the role of quantity surveyor.

Sam is studying BSc Hons Quantity Surveying with Wolverhampton University. Both brothers started their training with their father's company but moved to separate firms when the business closed during the pandemic.

Helen is made partner at firm

A marketing expert with significant industry experience has been appointed as a partner at Legal 500-ranked law firm Aaron & Partners.

After four years heading up the Shrewsbury firm's marketing and business development team, Helen Johnson has been invited to join the partnership, becoming the firm's second non-lawyer partner.

Helen said: "It's certainly not the norm within the legal sector for non-lawyers to become partners, so I'd like to thank the business for recognising my contribution and encouraging me in my personal development over the past four years.

"Becoming a partner really gives me the mandate to continue the work my team has been delivering, enhancing the reputation of the firm and working with the senior team to develop the direction for the business."



Partner Helen Johnson



Kate Smith, chief executive at Connexus

Delighted with move

Rural housing provider Connexus, based in Craven Arms, has a new chief executive.

Kate Smith has joined from national housing and care provider Anchor, where she was group executive director of business services for five years.

She said: "I'm delighted to have joined Connexus at what is a very exciting time for the organisation. We continue to make good progress against our corporate plan, which aims to transform customer-facing services, invest in existing properties, and deliver around 200 much needed affordable homes every year.

"I'm very much looking forward to meeting customers, colleagues, and key local partners to understand how we can work together to address the challenges facing our rural communities. These areas can often suffer from a lack of investment, especially when it comes to employment opportunities, funding, and infrastructure."

Michele Ibbs, Connexus chair of the board, said: "Our long-term plan is for Connexus to be one of the leading rural housing providers in the country, and we're delighted to have Kate onboard to help us achieve this."

New associates – and director too

Dyke Yaxley Chartered Accountants in Shrewsbury has named two new associates and a new director.

The two new associates are Sarah Crane and Alan Jebb, while associate director Hayley Price is now a director.

Sarah joined Dyke Yaxley as a trainee in 2007 and after passing her final ACA examinations to become a fully-qualified chartered accountant, she also qualified as a chartered tax advisor. Alan also joined the firm as a trainee, and is also a fully-qualified chartered accountant and a chartered tax advisor. He also leads on corporate tax advisory matters.

Hayley initially joined Dyke Yaxley on a one-year placement during her studies at the University of Wolverhampton, and returned to the company as a trainee in 2010. She specialises in agriculture, working with sole traders, partnerships and limited companies.

Access to professional supervision

Catherine Armstrong, who has more than 30 years of experience in education, has launched a new professional safeguarding supervision service in Shropshire.

CA Consultancy Ltd is giving schools, colleges, training providers, and charitable organisations access to professional supervision.

Catherine, a former vice principal at Shrewsbury Colleges Group, says she recognised the limited provision of supervision in Shropshire and founded CA Consultancy to 'address this crucial gap in support for designated leads'.

She said the supervision process was also designed to contribute to the retention of staff in these critical roles within the education sector.



Catherine Armstrong

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Statistics from the Office of the Small Business Commissioner (OSBC) make for grim reading:

- A third of payments to small businesses are late
- The average value of each payment is more than £6,000
- 20% of small businesses have run into cash flow problems due to late payments
- If small businesses were paid on time, it could boost the UK economy by an estimated £2.5 billion a year

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Granville CREDIT CONTROL SERVICES

Five minutes with...

SCOTT WOODLAND is a director of The Host's Pantry, a family business based at Marchamley Wood which delivers luxury recipe boxes – including premium Shropshire ingredients – for hosting the perfect dinner party

WHAT DOES YOUR JOB INVOLVE?

My role includes refining our processes, working a lot in Excel, and making sure as many people as possible know about our business.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN YOUR CURRENT JOB?

Three and a half years.

HOW IS YOUR JOB IMPACTED BY UNCERTAINTIES IN THE ECONOMY?

It places a higher importance on selling the value of our recipe boxes and premium produce compared with standard ingredients or recipe services. Our produce is carefully selected from trusted, quality suppliers – so it's about creating an understanding of why that matters.

WHAT'S YOUR VIEW OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – AN OPPORTUNITY, THREAT, OR BIT OF BOTH?

From our perspective it is definitely a bit of both. It has already helped streamline parts of our business, but there is a lot of learning to understand how it could help change and improve our business for the future.

HOW DO YOU HOPE YOUR COLLEAGUES WOULD DESCRIBE YOU?

A competent leader, always seeking to make the right decision for our business and team.

YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN THE WORKPLACE?

Being able to problem solve situations and devise a solution.

BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN YOUR JOB?

Driving people into our sales funnels.

YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENTS?

Starting a business in the pandemic – and the fact we're still going when a number of direct competitors have closed or changed their main business offering.

PET HATES?

Bad customer service or blunt knives.

IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND GIVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF SOME WISE ADVICE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Read and listen more, and focus on what I can control... not what I can't.

HOW DO YOU RELAX AWAY FROM WORK?

The pub or a long lunch. My love of great food and drink is where the business started!



Scott with his wife Jess – the duo are the owners of The Host's Pantry



Casino Royale is Scott's favourite movie



Anthony Bourdain



People probably don't know that Scott is a qualified ski instructor

FAVOURITE THING ABOUT SHROPSHIRE?

The community, countryside and of course its fantastic produce!

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM OF CHOICE?

Instagram

FAVOURITE MOVIE?

Casino Royale

EARLY BIRD, OR NIGHT OWL?

Early bird

DREAM DINNER PARTY GUEST, DEAD OR ALIVE?

Anthony Bourdain, the celebrity chef, author and travel documentarian

WHAT WOULD YOU COOK FOR THEM?

Blood pudding and fried egg on toast a la Restaurant St John, wood roasted turbot, roast pork belly in Vietnamese noodle broth, and crème caramel

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT YOU THAT MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY WOULDN'T KNOW.

I am a qualified ski instructor.

AND FINALLY... WHAT DO YOU THINK THE NEXT 12 MONTHS HAS IN STORE FOR YOU, AND YOUR BUSINESS?

The biggest challenge facing every individual and every business are the costs associated with living, but our recipe boxes and ingredients offer a cost-effective way of enjoying food and drink with friends and family in the comfort of your own home.

Our business in the next 12 months is focusing on spreading the word, and showing people the quality we offer and the value that it gives them from a monetary perspective, and from a people and time perspective as well.

We will be attending many more local events and farmers markets, hosting outdoor cooking events and so on, to spread the word about the fun that can be had and the memories that can be made over some food and around your own dining room table.

We will also be working on expanding our offering to include more incredible produce from Shropshire and further afield, and working with local suppliers to create our own label products and expand our gifting option. It's going to be a busy 2024.

Our People, Your Team.

Here to help you.

We can hold meetings via telephone and video and, of course, we are also able to offer meetings in person. Please contact us and a member of our team will be happy to help.

Find Us:

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