In the Company of...



James Byrom, managing director, Environmental Technologies Group Ltd

The entrepreneur planning to boost exports through fluid growth



James Byrom formed Environmental Technologies Ltd by purchasing the assets and intellectual property of a local company during the 2008-09 recession.

Q: In a nutshell, what does your company do and how did it start?

A: We manufacture equipment to recycle and extend the life of industrial fluids (oils, metalworking fluids etc).

We also import and distribute high-performance metalworking fluids from Switzerland.

I formed the company by purchasing the assets and IP of a local company towards the end of the 2008-09 recession.

Q: What's the most surprising thing about it?

A: That a small company like ours can have such a positive impact on the working practices of manufacturing companies of all sizes.

There is a tendency to assume that these established firms, who invest millions in the latest equipment, will have everything nailed down when it comes to choosing the best fluids and managing them effectively.

Sadly, this is rarely the case, even if they are working with a large well-known oil company. Our approach is different, combining service, equipment and fluid.

Q: What do you do?

A: As well as responsibility for some key customers and suppliers, I have the usual mix of MD responsibilities, ranging from strategic to operational.

I am also involved in product development, and I am currently very heavily involved in sales and marketing.

Q: How did you end up here?

A: I took a part-time job in the industry as a teenager and haven't stopped working since.

I even carried on working whilst studying for my degree in Economics and Public Policy at Leeds.

Q: If you weren't doing this, what would you be doing?

A: Probably something relating to cars, motorbikes, hi-fi / home cinema, or watches. Whatever it was, it would certainly be something at the specialist / "geeky" end of the market!

Q: What motivates you?

A: Doing a great job and having some fun along the way.

It is important for me that we are seen as a company that does the right thing by our customers and our employees. Therefore, we measure our success in retaining staff and customers, as well as in growth.

Ultimately, this should all translate into profitability, but this is the by-product of our success rather than a prime motivator.

Q: What one thing do you wish you had known when you started out in business?

A: Finance, premises, suppliers, designing products, building products, are all easy. Or at least they are relative to the people component of any business.

Getting personnel decisions right more often is the key to faster business growth in my opinion.

We have recently invested additional resources in this direction, in order to make our business stronger and more capable of growth.

Q: What excites you about business?

A: By far the coolest thing about being in business is coming up with an idea for something around a meeting table, planning it all out, then eventually seeing that product or service become a reality.

The final payoff is when the customer reacts positively and tells us what they like about it.

What I love about having a relatively small business is our ability to change direction and react quickly to demand from the market.

Q: What is your pet hate in business?

A: People who speculatively contact you to offer services such as recruitment, insurance, accounting, corporate entertainment, business coaching etc, having read an article about you in the local press (I really hope that works).

More generally, anyone who overpromises or underdelivers.

Q: What advice would you give to people just starting their careers?

A: If you want an extraordinary career you must make extraordinary efforts. As far as I know I just made that quote up, but there is a chance that someone has already said it.

It's true though – there really are no short cuts and there is no substitute for hard graft.

Listen to those with experience, but don't be afraid to take your own path. No guts, no glory!

Q: Who in business do you most admire, and why?

A: Elon Musk (PayPal, Tesla, SpaceX). Anyone with the vision to turn an industry on its head, forcing the biggest companies in the world to play catch-up gets my respect.

Mr Musk is doing just that in several industries, one of which is literally rocket science. Does he ever sleep?

Q: What moments of your career so far stand out?

A: Moving out of our dilapidated rented premises, having designed and built our Knaresborough facility from the ground up.

Taking on the distributorship for MOTOREX metalworking fluids and smashing their year-one sales budget.

Q: What sets your company apart from the competition?

A: We are an oil supplier that makes it our business to actively reduce the amount of oil a customer buys every single day.

Our competition – oil companies with blending plants to keep running and only one product line to sell – aren't often as proactive in helping their customers use less oil, funnily enough!

Q: What is the most difficult challenge your company has faced...?

A: We lost supply of a product we had successfully distributed for many years. Our supplier set up their own UK business, taking our salespeople with them. The loss of turnover was devastating and the ensuing legal battle was energy-sapping.

Q: ...and what challenges are you experiencing at the moment?

A: Currently we have a new venture that is going very well but is capital-intense. We are balancing growth potential with funding requirements and will soon need to decide whether to accept external investment or manage within the constraints of self-financing the operation. A nice dilemma to have!

Q: Have you got a five-year goal for the company?

A: Absolutely. We have mapped the next five years out in serious detail – the mother of all spreadsheets plus a glossy summary document that we use to communicate with stakeholders.

We use the business plan as a tool to map out different scenarios and update the numbers regularly as the business changes.

Q: Why is it good to do business in Knaresborough?

A: We actually have very little business in the locality – 50 per cent of our turnover is export, and there is not a great concentration of manufacturing in the area, so we tend to travel to our customers and suppliers.

The location serves us well in this regard, with great access to the motorway and Leeds Bradford Airport.

The main reason I am happy that we have our business in the Harrogate District is that it is such a wonderful place to live, for our team and my family.



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James Byrom
managing director
Environmental Technologies Group

Factfile:

NAME: James Byrom
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COMPANY FOUNDED: 2008
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NUMBER OF STAFF: 25