

Darien Jay shares his thoughts on the management of his business and supporting those of others in the FM sector

Mastery of work/ life balance improves business management



Similar to many senior managers and directors working within the FM industry, Vixus Property Group chief executive officer Darien Jay had no thoughts of a career within the sector while studying for his degree between 2006 and 2010.

"I fell into it because I didn't know what I wanted to do after university and discussed it with my father, who said 'Go and speak to these guys'," Mr Jay continues.

His father introduced him to Balfour Beatty Workplace and he was subsequently invited to an interview for an under-graduate placement.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do after university, but I did know I needed to find a job. My father had spent the latter part of his career in FM, and offered to put me in touch with a former colleague at Balfour Beatty WorkPlace where I was fortunate to be offered the under-graduate position".

After completing his placement, Mr Jay was invited to join the Balfour Beatty graduate scheme. "The trouble was, by this point the financial crisis had really shown its teeth and the grad scheme had been postponed indefinitely."

Having made some useful contacts during his initial spell, Darien was able to get a temporary admin job at the company, before landing a position in the procurement department that led into his first graduate placement.

"So I found myself in a role with next to no experience, learning about supplier management on the job", he explains. However, within six months of formally joining the company scheme, and before having the opportunity to experience other parts of the business, Mr Jay's line manager made him an offer to make his position in procurement a permanent one.

Making the right connections

After four years at Balfour Beatty he joined the GVA UK real estate consultancy practice and continued to enhance his procurement. "If you're going to do anything well you need to get the relationships right and we find in our business today that a lot of work comes from our supplier network recommending us," he explains.

"My time with GVA certainly helped to move me further toward consultancy and I learned a lot about the value of having honest conversations."

Having been promoted to the company's head of procurement, there followed a period of rapid expansion, leading to GVA becoming a much larger corporate organisation.

"In terms of my own development, I knew that I wanted to be a decision maker, and GVA couldn't fulfil that ambition. So at the age of 30 I thought it was a 'now or never' moment to start my own business."

Mr Jay set up his first company in November 2017, which he ran on his own for the next 18 months. This involved "the 70-hour working weeks, countless sleepless nights, a very understanding wife and all the other trappings that come as part of being a new business owner".

There followed a period of consolidation, including changing the name of the company to Vixus.

"We were getting more of our own work and less as a sub-consultant, but it was still mainly me and still a lot of hard work," he recalls. "My first employee, Mark Weston is an absolute rock and he kept me sane during those hard times. Mark's now part of the senior management team and an integral part of our long term vision."

Coaching

"It was during those challenging times that I first spoke with Dan Stanley, a men's health coach. I can still remember that first conversation; I told him about the stress and pressure of starting and running a business," he says.

"Over the course of a year Dan gave me a sense of purpose and vision. He got me to a position where I was able to focus on growing the business without burning out. No doubt reaching out to Dan was one of the best decisions I've ever made," he continues.

With a newfound appreciation for the value that a coach could bring, Mr Jay went on to work with Tom Allchurch, a specialist business coach under the ActionCoach organisation. "Working with Tom was the next major stepping-stone for Vixus. He gave me the tools to see the potential with Vixus, that we could grow it to become something pretty special. Perhaps most importantly, Tom helped me plot out a very clear 5-year plan for the business. This started with me taking more responsibility for running the business and building a team around me that managed the fee earning work."

Mr Jay states that he is now in a much better position from both personal and professional perspectives and attributes much of this to working with coaches and mentors. "Life and business are intrinsically linked and there's no getting away from that, so working with a business coach helps me focus on putting forward the best version of myself," he claims.

Having rediscovered his enthusiasm for the business, the next major milestone came when Darren Pickering joined Vixus in February 2022. "Darren's background is in property management and he came to the table with a few ideas for how we might look to diversify our service offering.

"We'd been asked by a few of our consultancy clients whether we could provide them with property management services, but had turned them down in the past. There were only a certain amount of times that we could keep declining this work before we had to take it seriously; I remember Darren and I were sat in the boardroom and I asked him 'are you up for this?'. And that's the moment Vixus Property Management was born."

The attraction of entering the market for delivering residential property management services was clear to everyone in the business, says Mr Jay: "This is an established sector where, quite frankly, there's a distinct lack of high performing companies operating in it," he claims. "We knew that we could do things differently, to improve the reputation of the property management industry".

Mr Jay further states that the next step was to examine the market for potential M&A targets. "I've built businesses from scratch and know how painful and time consuming this can be," he states. >>

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“The acquisition route was the obvious solution for Vixus Property Management as it provided a decent client book that we could use as the foundation for growth.”

Vixus ultimately entered into negotiations to acquire FMS Estate Management in Q4 2022, and completed the deal in February this year. Vixus Group effectively grew by 35% overnight, and in the last few months its headcount has doubled.

“We’re continuing to refine our long-term business strategy and ensure that everything we do, from our processes to our client communication to our website, are all in the top 10% in our industry,” he continues. “We’re all much happier with the way that the business is progressing, and the whole team is fully aware of the 5-year plan and their individual responsibilities towards achieving this.”

A long-term growth

One of the main aims is to avoid the temptation to make short-term gains and instead continue the high level of effort being devoted to the delivery of long-term and sustainable growth. Rather than increasing the time and effort devoted to the company, Mr Jay states his aim is now to continue to reduce his involvement in day-to-day activities.

“We grew the consultancy business by 51% last year, and we’ve taken on more work and grown our team significantly. This means I’m now able to take more time away to switch off and think about other things, but then come back feeling fully refreshed and ready to push on,” he says.

“Our current position sees me having regular discussions with the senior management team about how we grow the business over the next few years. In the longer term, I’d like to step back a little further from the CEO role and move more toward the company chair or similar,” he continues.

“Over the last couple of years I’ve found myself becoming less integral to the business – but in a good way. For the first few years it was all about me bringing in the work, but this is now changing and it’s very noticeable that things are being delivered to a high standard even when I’m away. This fuels my confidence in moving to the next stage and each step forward, whilst the stakes are higher, feels noticeably less scary.

“So for me personally, I can now focus on the things that I enjoy doing rather than the work that I had to do over the first three or four years to pay the bills. Now it’s more about marketing the company, getting the strategy right for the business and making sure we have a clear growth plan,” says Darien.

He explains that this includes celebrating the Vixus team’s successes, while avoiding any feelings of complacency. This includes holding regular team building trips where ‘work-talk’ is strictly forbidden.

“The intention is to get everyone together, as we’re all scattered around the country and now there’s the two strands of property management and consultancy to the business, it’s more important to get everyone in a setting that allows them to speak about everything apart from work,” he continues.

As the business thrives, Darien is in a position to reflect on his journey so far.



“Few people understand the pressure and loneliness that goes with running a business, because regardless of how supportive your colleagues are, it’s all down to you to make the right decisions,” he says. “It’s really important to recognise that and avoid working too hard just to make more money. If you find that your mental health and wellbeing is being adversely affected, it’s probably a sign that you need to do things differently; realising that was certainly a lightbulb moment for me.”

This has led to Mr Jay’s determination to “give something back” in the form of devoting time to coach other business owners. His role is to help them get through the common issues experienced by the majority of new company owners and move them to a position of positive growth and development.

“The satisfaction of seeing the penny drop much earlier than would otherwise be the case is tremendous,” he continues, “My only regret is that I didn’t have that realisation myself sooner.”

Mr Jay is also a strong advocate of taking regular time out of the business to allow him to return feeling refreshed. “I seem to have an inherent need to push my mind and body to its limits” he claims. I’ve run marathons, Tough Mudders and completed the Fan Dance [a 14-mile SAS selection march over the Brecon Beacons] with 20 kilos on my back, but it wasn’t until Everest when I started asking myself why I did these things.”

Whilst trekking to Everest Base Camp in March this year, surrounded by nature, he came to a realisation: “I was suffering from the effects of lack of sleep, lack of nutrients and altitude sickness. We’d been hiking for days and I was feeling pretty miserable truth be told.

“I then lifted my head up and looked around me. The mountains looked magnificent, I was in the company of good friends, and I hadn’t thought about work all week.”

He felt the business was in safe hands, but regardless, there was nothing he could do to influence things at this moment in time.

“I realised at that point that I could either start worrying about these things that were out of my control, or I could use the time to mentally switch off and reset.

“I’ve been doing this for years, albeit without realising why,” he says. Whether it is taking an hour to go to the gym, or a week to climb a mountain, he states it is all about giving himself the toolkit to perform at the highest level in all aspects of his life.

“I find I can then return and be the best husband, father and CEO I can possibly be. I’m not going to climb Everest every year and may just decide to sit on a beach somewhere for two weeks, but the aim is to make sure that I keep making the right decisions to support my family, colleagues and clients,” he says.

“Climbing Everest might not be for everybody, but I strongly encourage all business leaders to find their own Everest. We should all prioritise ourselves every once in a while and regard it as fundamental to our growth and happiness. Those closest to us will see the benefits and be glad we did,” Mr Jay concludes.

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