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Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026

Featuring:



Redstart



Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026

SME News is thrilled to announce the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026 — now in its fifth year, this prestigious programme celebrates the UK's most inspiring, visionary, and high-impact managing directors. Whether you're leading a dynamic start-up, an ambitious scale-up, or a well-established SME, this is your chance to showcase your leadership, strategy, and achievements on a national stage.

In today's fast-moving business world, the role of the Managing Director has never been more important. This award recognises leaders who drive growth, inspire teams, deliver results, and set new standards of excellence across their industries.



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Contents

4. Hale Place Care Solutions: Dementia Care MD of the Year 2026: Kevin Hewlett MBE
6. Redstart Northwest Ltd: Environmental Services MD of the Year 2026:
Stephen England & Business Performance & Development Excellence Award 2026
8. Southbourne Rubber Co Ltd: British Manufacturing Leader of the Year 2026: Stephen Wilde
9. Kinver Business Solutions Ltd: Project & Programme Management MD of the Year 2026: Darowen Jones
10. Eat IT Drink IT Ltd: Transformational MD of the Year 2026:
Cliff Gurdin & Responsible AI & Automation Leadership Award 2026
11. Everpool Recruitment: Recruitment Solutions MD of the Year 2026 (North West England): Ged Walsh
12. Abril Industrial Waxes Ltd: Industrial Waxes MD of the Year 2026:
Hugh McAulay & Best Specialist Industrial Wax Manufacturer 2026
13. Arthur Edward Recruitment: Cosmetic Industry Recruitment MD of the Year 2026:
Heidi Bannister & Talent & Recruitment Leadership Excellence Award 2026
14. Efficientiv LTD: Online Management Consulting MD of the Year 2026:
Giorgio Gabba & Democratised Strategic Insight Innovation Award 2026
15. Optio Systems Limited: Tech Business Transformation MD of the Year 2026: Josh Chilton
& Control Systems & Automation Solutions Company of the Year 2026: Optio Systems
16. Steel River Quay: Offshore Wind Industry MD of the Year 2026: Ally Cameron
17. Ace Elevators: Elevator Installation & Maintenance MD of the Year 2026: Kal Shergill
18. Rufus Wren Ltd: Executive Leadership Support MD of the Year 2026 (Midlands): Kate Davies
19. Buoyant Upholstery: Furniture Manufacturing MD of the Year 2026:
Mike Aramayo & Best Upholstery Manufacturer 2026
20. Turnbull Infrastructure & Utilities Ltd: Utilities Construction MD of the Year 2026:
James Dryden & Most People-Centric Construction Company 2026
21. Strategic UK Group LTD: Business Strategy MD of the Year 2026 (South East England):
Naim Rahman & SME News Leadership Excellence Award 2026



Dementia Care MD of the Year 2026: Kevin Hewlett MBE

Dementia care is everyone's business. From families and professionals to communities, we all have a role to play in reducing the stigma around dementia and supporting people as they seek to remain connected. Kevin Hewlett MBE takes on a great deal of responsibility when it comes to improving the lives of people facing dementia, creating Hale Place Care Solutions almost 40 years ago to support him in this aim. With Kevin being recognised here in our Managing Director Awards 2026, we spoke with him for more on his career and Hale Place itself.

Too often, people living with dementia are shackled by unnecessary restrictions and over-medication, both of which limit their lives. Instead, these individuals should be allowed to experience joy, purpose, connection, opportunity, and freedom, and this is where Hale Place Care Solutions, with its specialist dementia care homes in the heart of Kent, comes in.

Founded by Kevin Hewlett MBE, who also serves as its managing director, Hale Place is best known for Hale Place Farmhouse, which has been one of the most outstanding dementia care environments in the UK since the late 1980s. Small, personal, and loving, Hale Place Farmhouse has just ten beds, and has been showing for years that people battling dementia do not need to be put in large institutions to receive care. What they actually need is a real home, freedom, purpose, and people who care around them.

"People living with dementia deserve far more than the current systems provide",

Kevin told us. "They deserve the opportunity to enjoy moments of real joy every single day. They deserve to live, not merely exist."

Operating according to this belief, Hale Place's dementia care model, which has been in place now for 38 years, is delivered in small, personalised, family-style environments, like the one at Hale Place Farmhouse. This model has been recognised by the people it supports, their families, and health professionals as exemplary, and it is always rated as outstanding.

Kevin and his team have received more than 20 regional and national awards over the years as a result, but what they believe really defines their work are the smiles they return to people's faces. Whether of the family who have their loved one back or the person who is no longer defined by risk, routine, or diagnosis and is instead recognised for who they are what they love, putting these smiles on faces is what keeps Hale Place motivated to succeed.

Guided by the values of kindness, honesty, inclusion, and respect, Kevin's belief that good dementia care is about stepping closer to the person, understanding their life story, protecting their personhood, and recognising what matters to them sees him offer true person-centred care, unlike what many companies are delivering.

Kevin explained: "Many providers and policymakers talk about person-centred care. Too few truly deliver it. My legacy will not feel complete until I have reached the widest possible audience and made the strongest possible case for a real person-centred model of dementia care — one that does not simply sound compassionate but actively transforms lives."

This ethos is reflected in Kevin's approach to leadership, and he manages Hale Place with absolute clarity, deep humanity, and uncompromising standards. However, this does not mean he sees himself as standing above his people. Rather, for this dementia veteran, leadership is about standing beside his team, coaching them, instilling belief, and creating an environment where they can achieve more than they thought possible.

The secret to success in providing outstanding dementia care is for everything to work in synergy. This includes the person living with dementia, their family, and the team around them. Time and again across his career, Kevin has seen the best outcomes happen because everyone has been travelling in the same direction. Families feel reassured, staff feel proud, and people with dementia feel safe, known, and cherished.

Kevin's understanding of successful care is something that has been shaped over the course of his career in this space, which began with weekend night work and has progressed from there. Kevin's impact in this field is so great because he started on the floor, working with people during the quietest and most vulnerable hours of the day. The lessons learned here have stayed with him as he progressed throughout his career, taking on every role residential care could ever throw at him.

Just some of the responsibilities Kevin has taken on over the years include cooking meals, cleaning rooms, maintaining gardens, leading HR, delivering training, developing teams, and building systems from the ground up. Kevin is also a qualified trainer, assessor, and verifier, all of which have allowed him to support and develop the careers of others, without ever losing sight of the human reality of dementia care.

All of this makes Kevin an exceptional managing director, one who stands for person-centred dementia care and governs according to his lived experiences of all of the roles his team are expected to complete. Although his job has now pivoted to leading, challenging, inspiring, and protecting a culture where extraordinary staff support people living with dementia, Kevin's early days remain a crucial part of Hale Place's continued success.

More recently, the company's continuing commitment to raising the standard of dementia care has seen it work on a second home, Buston Manor. The project is being driven by Kevin's sons, Barney and Dudley, who have grown up within Hale Place and absorbed its values, culture and approach to care over many years. Having identified the building themselves, they are now creating Buston Manor from the ground up, shaping every aspect of the project around wellbeing, quality of life and meaningful living rather than profit alone.

For Kevin, effective leadership has always meant having confidence in the people around him, delegating with trust and giving others the freedom to evolve, challenge established thinking and drive change. He remains closely involved as the project's Executive Chairman, offering guidance, experience and mentorship while allowing Barney and Dudley to develop and lead the project in their own right.

Building on everything learned at Hale Place Farmhouse, Buston Manor will retain the same small, personal ten-bed model while offering greater space, flexibility and potential than the original farmhouse setting allows.

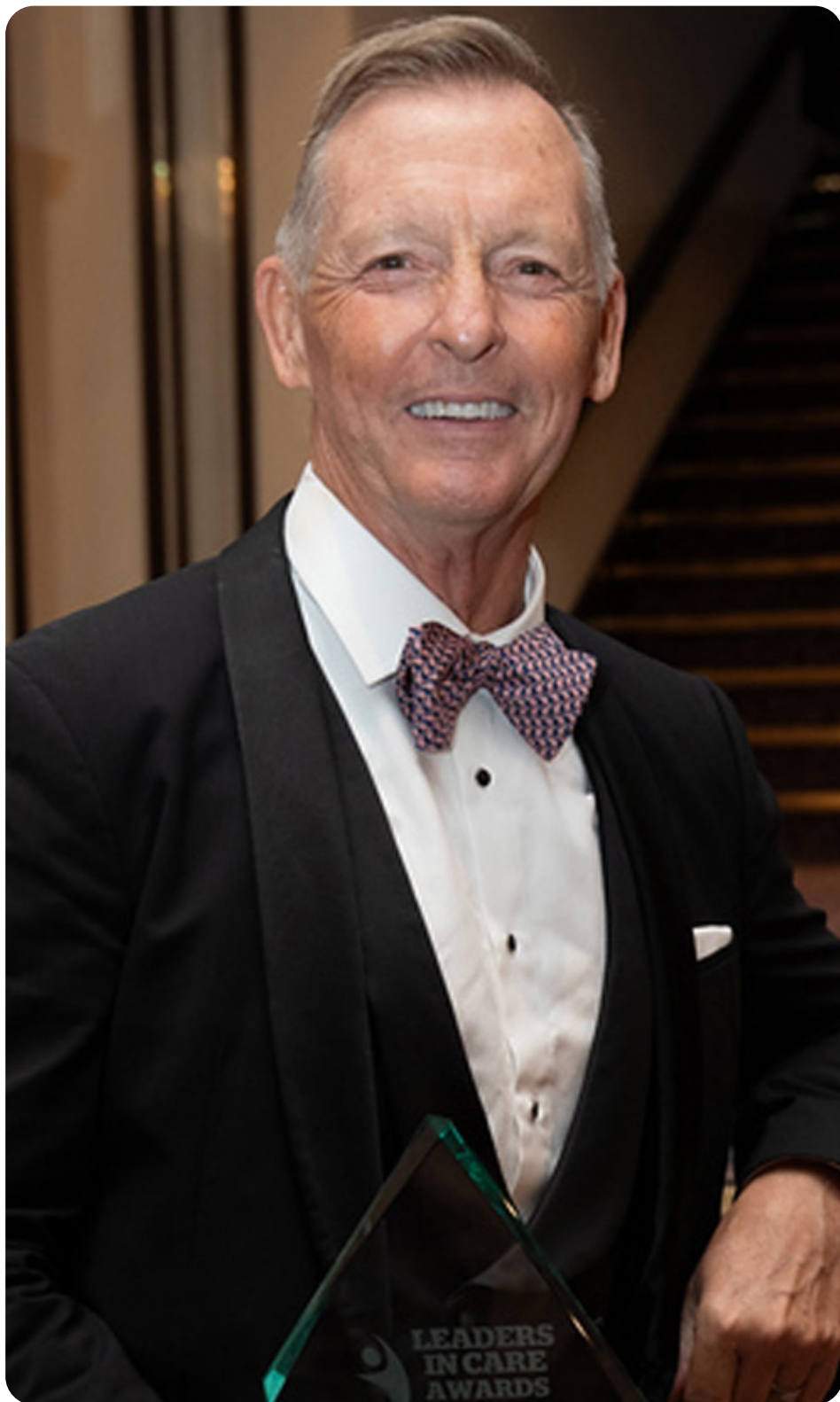
Kevin commented: "I want Buston Manor to become a home where people living with mid- to late-stage dementia can experience a higher standard of living, greater enjoyment, more interaction, more curiosity, and more freedom within a safe and beautifully considered environment. It will be a unique, living, breathing home, full of warmth, movement, conversation, laughter, and meaningful moments."

"We have already shown, through Hale Place Farmhouse, that outstanding dementia care can transform lives. With Buston Manor, I want to go even further and set the next national benchmark for small, personalised, life-enhancing dementia care."

Outside of Kevin's responsibilities as the managing director of Hale Place's locations in Kent, he also works with care providers, care homes, social care professionals, families, charities, and other such organisations who are serious about actually improving the lives of people living with dementia. These clients also strive for developments that go beyond policy and language and which are instead present in their everyday practice.

To this end, he personally offers a dementia care consultancy, as well as specialist dementia training for care homes, service development support, and practical guidance for organisations that look to move beyond task-based care and create meaningful, person-centred care for the most vulnerable older people living in society today.

This work is an equally important part of Kevin's future, and he aims to continue to support care providers in moving away from overly medicalised or task-led care models,



using a non-pharmacological care model to help them adopt an approach where identity, relationships, emotional wellbeing, and meaningful activities in dementia care are all commonplace.

Building a brighter future for dementia care in Kent and across the UK, social care dementia specialist Kevin Hewlett MBE is fitting of the title of Dementia Care MD of the Year 2026. More on his work at Hale Place Care Solutions can be found at the website link below. He is always happy to answer questions and welcomes serious

enquiries from care providers who share his commitment to improving dementia care and wish to take the quality of their provision to the next level.



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Environmental Services MD of the Year 2026: Steve England & Business Performance & Development Excellence Award 2026

Redstart Northwest Ltd

Based in Stockport, Redstart Northwest is an employee-owned company providing ground remediation services to clients nationwide. Its professional team is headed by experienced Managing Director Steve England, who has steered the company through diversification and expansion with great success. We spoke with Steve to learn more about his journey below, following his recent recognition in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Since its inception in 2010, Redstart Northwest has delivered land remediation projects and site preparatory services to clients spanning the construction, commercial, and energy sectors across the UK. In less than two decades, the company has evolved to stand as the go-to remediation contractor of choice for the UK's housebuilders and main contractors.

The company is driven by a team of experienced plant operators, SMSTS qualified site managers, construction personnel, and chartered professionals, all possessing a substantial shared knowledge base. These individuals boast expertise in a wide range of specialisms, spanning remediation, earthworks, demolition, and civil engineering, positioning Redstart Northwest as one of the most recognised and trusted remediation companies in the sector.

Within the field, Redstart Northwest provides geotechnical consultancy to clients and their businesses, as well as undertaking contracting works such as demolition, earthworks, and remediation. The company works hard to mitigate the risks often associated with building on previously developed sites, such as soil and groundwater contamination, ensuring that construction projects can proceed unencumbered.

This is a stellar service steered by Steve England, the Managing Director of Redstart Northwest. An experienced Director of Construction with a demonstrated history of working in the construction and remediation industry, Steve is highly skilled in value engineering, cost management, project management, highways, earthworks, remediation, and bid preparation.

Steve entered the workforce immediately after completing his A-Levels and leaving sixth form college. He worked his way up the managerial ladder, first beginning as a Junior Engineer and working his way up to the roles of Engineer, Senior Engineer, Site Agent, Contracts Manager, Operations Manager, Operations Director, Deputy Managing Director, and, finally, Managing Director at Redstart Northwest in 2023.



Throughout this journey, Steve has worked hard to realise his dreams. In 1992, having been in the workforce for only six years, the young leader was already undertaking three roles: Site Engineer, Site Agent, and Quality Surveyor. In 1996, Steve recognised that he needed a higher qualification than his A-Levels to effectively fulfil his duties. He undertook a distance-learning four-year degree, obtaining a Bachelor of Science in Building and Construction Management in 2000.

The course of Steve's professional career has been defined by its upward trajectory, which has been made possible by his unrivalled work ethic. "I worked hard and made myself stand out from the rest, so I was noticed," Steve told us. "I volunteered to do additional duties, which would make me a better all-rounder. I always had ambition, so it wasn't a chore for me to do more. I enjoyed challenges to better myself and look forward to whatever the next challenge may bring."

Today, Steve is the Managing Director of the dedicated team behind Redstart Northwest. At the head of this company, Steve engages in all aspects of the business, including finance, business development, marketing, estimating, commercial, and operations, with regular site visits to ensure the team are performing well. He prioritises total transparency and communication, offering the staff feedback surrounding Redstart Northwest's progress, achievements, and areas for improvements.

Redstart Northwest is a 100% Employee-Owned Trust Company, positioning its talented staff as key stakeholders in the business and its success. With this status, Redstart Northwest understands the importance of recognising every employee as a vital part of the company and works tirelessly to provide each of them with a voice. The Senior Management team meets monthly with encouragement to share any ideas, innovations, or problems with the rest of the team.

Furthermore, Senior Managers are briefed after the management accounts are produced each month, maintaining complete awareness



of the business's financial status. Project review meetings are held onsite fortnightly to ensure the site teams are also aligned with project targets and performance. Steve also provides quarterly business updates, disclosing to the team where they are against their targets and whether any new strategies have been investigated or instigated.

Over the past 12 months, the Redstart Northwest team has introduced a salary sacrifice pension scheme, introduced a Group Critical Illness cover, replaced all of its old car fleet with new vehicles, upgraded its private medical insurance, introduced and paid the first "Profit Share" scheme in February 2026, and, in April 2026, introduced a "Matched Pension" scheme, where the company matches the employee contribution for their grade.

These recent achievements have been made possible by Redstart Northwest's exceptional structure. "Culture is so important to us as a business," said Steve. "Being a true EOT now is key to driving everyone in the same direction, for the benefit of the business and to the employees. This year has been quite significant for the team. Nobody hesitates to help and support each other, and people go above and beyond for the business. It doesn't matter what rank you are; our people don't hesitate to offer help."

Recruitment is a two-person responsibility at Redstart Northwest. Its management seeks compatibility to integrate with the business first and competency second, learning from experience that if there is a willingness to work with others and a can-do attitude, all training provided will cover any shortfalls in competency. Once onboard, staff are consistently praised and recognised for doing a good job, with key milestones and birthdays celebrated across the team.

Driven by its standout team, Redstart Northwest has become a recognised name for clients across the North West, a position amplified by its team being comprised primarily of local residents. With the aim of pursuing expansion and making Redstart Northwest more resilient to the

industry, area, and sectors, however, the company is exploring alternate avenues in which to diversify its offerings.

Whilst Redstart Northwest has primarily served housebuilders since its inception, the team has made significant efforts to reach out to companies occupying different sectors, areas, and client bases. It has made great progress in receiving tenders and contractors in different regions and, what's more, 86% of tenders priced to date have not been from housebuilders, proving to the team that there is strong power behind diversification.

Looking further to the future, Redstart Northwest is targeting a continued growth plan over the next five years, with the vision of growing at least 20% year on year. The team will continue to diversify, with its sights set on the Midlands and the South. Redstart Northwest will look to set up regional offices on the back of growth in these areas, with the eventual goal of owning and operating its own head office within the next 12 months.

Steve has a number of key strategic targets for the short-term future of Redstart Northwest, each geared towards expansion and enhancement. These targets include increasing operating profit via value engineering and a greater level of efficiency; increasing the win ratio of tenders submitted to won; purchasing new, larger excavators to support its diversification of work; and continuing to recruit staff who can support Redstart Northwest's growth.

At the same time, the Managing Director will continue to regularly review Redstart Northwest's benefits packages for his staff, with the aim of establishing the business as a "Best In Class" provider for its employees. Ultimately, he aspires to position Redstart Northwest as a leading contender on The Times and The Sunday Times 100 Best Places to Work. With an unwavering passion for his field, his team, and the sustained success of Redstart Northwest, Steve England has been recognised as the Environmental Services MD of the Year 2026.

In reflection of his ambitions, and the success Redstart Northwest has achieved so far, Steve shared some advice for budding Managing Directors: "You must be prepared to put the hard yards in and set the level that you are prepared to accept from others. Be strong and decisive in your decision-making and remember that you can only make decisions on the information you are given. It was right at the time, even if it proves to be wrong later; learn from your mistakes."

This advice has proven incredibly impactful for Steve's own professional career, empowering the Managing Director to successfully lead his team at Redstart Northwest from strength to strength. Redstart Northwest has achieved substantial growth, fruitfully pursued diversification from housebuilders, and empowered its employees through its transition into an Employee-Owned Trust. For its remarkable combination of commercial growth, staff investment, and strategic expansion, we at SME News Magazine are delighted to recognise Redstart Northwest with the Business Performance and Development Excellence Award 2026.

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British Manufacturing Leader of the Year 2026: Stephen Wilde

Southbourne Rubber (SBR) is a UK-based advanced manufacturer of precision-engineered elastomeric components including seals, gaskets, O-rings, and complex mouldings used in safety critical environments. The company's upward trajectory has been steered by Stephen Wilde, a seasoned Managing Director who has demonstrated an unrivalled ability to transform businesses and drive sustainable growth. We spoke with Stephen himself to learn more, following his recent recognition in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Over the course of his remarkable career, Stephen Wilde has learned that the right mindset, strong leadership, and investment in people can transform any business for the better. He spent the first ten working years of his life on a farm, an experience that shaped much of who he is today. Stephen developed a strong work ethic, unwavering resilience, and a practical hands-on approach to problem solving. He shared, "It taught me early on that if something needs doing, you get on and do it."

Stephen went on from there to build a career across both large corporates and smaller entrepreneurial businesses. He worked for organisations such as BT, where he gained a solid grounding in structure, process, and accountability. Then, he moved into start-ups and growth businesses, where adaptability and pace were critical.

"The biggest lesson for me is that success comes down to people and leadership. Products and markets matter, but without the right culture, direction, and accountability, businesses struggle to perform. I have learned the importance of resilience, honesty, and leading from the front, especially when things are not going to plan."



When Stephen joined SBR in 2016, the company was effectively a stage two start-up that had lost its direction. "I was originally brought in to support closure," he recalled. "Instead, we chose to rebuild. Ten years later, the business is a high-performing, award-winning manufacturer recognised nationally for both its growth and commitment to apprenticeships."



Today, this commitment is precisely what enables SBR to stand out in a competitive market. The company runs an apprenticeship programme whereby it invests heavily in developing talent and future leaders from within, with clear progression pathways and a 100% completion rate. Over half the team are current or former apprentices and several have progressed into senior roles, including director levels, which reflects the strength of positioning their development at the core of the workforce strategy.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Stephen's professional career has been watching these young people grow and develop into future leaders. Through SBR's focus on apprenticeships and development, he has witnessed many individuals join the business and go on to build successful careers.

"There is a real sense that the next generation will take the business even further," he told us. "They bring energy, new ideas, different perspectives, and I am confident that they will do an even better job than I have. For me, that is a key measure of success: building a business that will continue to grow and thrive long after I step away."

Moving forward, the focus for SBR is to continue growing and developing a successful, sustainable business. The next few years will see the team scaling its operations, investing in new facilities and equipment, and strengthening SBR's position within aerospace, defence, and other high-performance sectors. An upcoming move to a new larger facility will play a key role in this journey, providing the company capacity to expand both its output and its team.

Under Stephen's expert guidance, SBR will continue to invest heavily in people, particularly through apprenticeships, to ensure it develops the next generation of skilled engineers and leaders from within. This strategic direction, paired with a steadfast commitment to people and progression, has earned Stephen Wilde his title of British Manufacturing Leader of the Year 2026.

As he looks to the future, Stephen shared: "Having successfully turned the company around from near closure, we remain driven to build a resilient, scalable manufacturing business that can compete globally while developing the next generation of talent."

"Personally, my goal is to build a business that is not only high performing but also resilient, with strong foundations, clear leadership, and a culture that can sustain long-term success. Ultimately, it is about leaving the business in a stronger position than I found it, with a clear platform for continued growth well into the future."

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Project & Programme Management MD of the Year 2026: Darowen Jones

From regenerating town centres to refurbishing high-rise housing, Kinver Business Solutions Ltd brings skill, knowledge, and the experience of both its managing director and a Prince 2-accredited team to the table to support across projects and programmes relating to the UK's built environment. We caught up with its MD, Darowen Jones, following his recognition in our Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Before setting up Kinver Business Solutions more than a decade ago, Darowen Jones held a number of positions relating to housing and property services across the Midlands, roles he secured in the wake of graduating from the University of Wolverhampton with a degree in building surveying, and, in the years since, completing internationally recognised qualifications in project management.

In founding Kinver Business Solutions, Darowen made the difficult decision to step out of employed work and go into business for himself, aiming to provide focused project and programme management services to the UK's public and private sectors. In the 12 years since, he has certainly achieved this goal, with his company today offering a solutions-based approach and delivering meaningful change across housing, regeneration, leisure, heritage, and property compliance.

Just a taste of the projects this MD and his team have worked on since 2014 include as a regeneration project manager for One Manchester Housing, a programme manager for a number of initiatives spearheaded by the Wolverhampton City Council, and even leading the Oxford City Council project that looked to respond to the Grenfell Tower fire. In this last instance, Darowen and the team encouraged the council to be one of the first to strip dangerous cladding from its five high-rise residential blocks.

Due to the diversity of this work, every project is approached in its own way, complete with individual, detailed plans and delivery focused on achieving the client's objective. This method is detailed through Kinver Business Solutions' core values: honesty, integrity, professionalism, and client satisfaction. These principles also reflect the social value brought to areas where the company works, with it often forming relationships with charities and other support services, like the local Wicksteed Charitable Trust.

The man at the helm of Kinver Business Solutions, Darowen is responsible for upholding these values and delivering quality service to customers, all whilst hitting targets. Since having a productive team capable of thriving in challenging, high-pressure environments is fundamental to this, Darowen puts a great deal of time and effort into managing, motivating, training, and developing his people — leading by example, offering an optimistic outlook, and nurturing collaboration and mentorship.

Because his role encompasses a number of different tasks over the course of the day, with time left over to touch base with the team, Darowen's wife has likened his diary to a work of art, with everything in different colours. This diary is the first port of call when it comes to Darowen's management tools, and is crucial in him being an effective MD and consultant

to his clients. Crucially, however, it leaves him time for himself and his family.

Darowen explained: "Over the last 12 years, I've come to understand about listening to my own body, and this is something that I ask the team to do also. It really is life first, work second at Kinver Business Solutions. That's not to say that the service we offer is anything less than exemplar, but it does allow the team to feel free to work at hours that suit them rather than complying to a uniform 9—5 just because that's the way it has always been!"

This reflects the trust Darowen has in his team, which comprises a small and highly specialist group whose experience in areas like public sector governance, funding, procurement, projects, and programmes is unrivalled. The team always strive to improve, setting improvement goals and assessing what went well and what could be improved. It is thanks in part to this that the company has enjoyed significant growth from 2025 into the first half of 2026, with its team set to double in size.

"This growth is the result of methodical planning and the addition to the business of further structures, processes, and procedures which will assist our new colleagues to hit the ground running."

Having recently started to work with a business mentor to help him shape the future of the company and acquire more work, Darowen is also looking ahead to expanding the company's provisions through new services like cost management and property compliance, all delivered by a stellar in-house team and overseen by this award-winning MD.

More on Darowen Jones and Kinver Business Solutions can be found at the link below.

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Transformational MD of the Year 2026: Cliff Gurdin & Responsible AI & Automation Leadership Award 2026

Based in Leeds, Eat IT Drink IT was born from the mission to help hospitality businesses embrace technology that improves both operational efficiency and customer experience. Over the years, the business has evolved to stand at the forefront of AI, automation, and robotics within the hospitality sector. This is a mission steered by Founder and Managing Director Cliff Gurdin, a determined IT professional who was driven by his own experiences consulting hospitality entrepreneurs. We heard more from Cliff below.

Having worked at senior levels across the public and private sectors, varying between frontline IT support management and technical implementation management, Cliff Gurdin knew that creating his own company was the most logical next step in his professional career. Consulting entrepreneurs within hospitality had opened his eyes to a glaring gap in the market: while many businesses provided critical hospitality services across the UK, these services were offered in a standalone format, with no interest in how the end client affordably utilised and supported their services.

Cliff established Eat IT Drink IT in 2015, striving to provide independent expert consultation services to the hospitality industry, supported by around-the-clock, affordable, and knowledgeable tech support. The company works with hospitality venues, hotel groups, restaurants, bars, and leisure operators across the UK, empowering them to solve some of the industry's biggest challenges, including staffing shortages, rising costs, and increasing customer expectations.

To these clients, Eat IT Drink IT offers a comprehensive suite of solutions that range from managed IT services and cybersecurity through to autonomous service robots, cleaning robots, digital transformation consultancy, and AI-driven automation. These services are delivered with an overarching belief that the hospitality industry is built on human interaction, and that AI and robotics should never replace that, instead removing repetitive, time-consuming tasks so that teams can focus on delivering superlative guest experiences.

"I am especially passionate about changing the perception of robotics within service industries," said Cliff. "There is often an assumption that automation exists to replace people, whereas my experience has consistently shown the opposite. The most successful deployments are those that allow employees to spend less time on repetitive tasks and more time delivering exceptional service, building relationships, and creating memorable customer experiences. This philosophy underpins the solutions we provide and the advice we give clients."

Cliff's passion has shaped the trajectory of his professional journey, calling him to bridge the gap between innovation and practical application to ensure that businesses can adopt new technologies in a way that delivers genuine value. From the outset, he was fascinated by how technology could improve operational efficiency and create better experiences for businesses and their customers. This fascination led Cliff to hold a variety of technical and customer-facing roles over the years, across IT infrastructure, support, communications, and business operations.

Along the way, Cliff discovered that success is rarely about technology alone. The most important lesson he has learned is that people come first; success depends on understanding people's needs, earning trust, and bringing them along on the journey. This perspective has become particularly important when introducing AI and robotics, where education and communication are often just as important as the technology itself, and has shaped the ways in which Cliff leads his team.

"Our industry is evolving rapidly, particularly with the growth of AI, automation, and robotics," he told us. "Rather than waiting for change to happen, I encourage my team to embrace innovation and challenge conventional thinking. I foster a culture where new ideas are welcomed, calculated risks are supported, and continuous learning is part of everyday business. This approach has enabled us to evolve from a traditional hospitality provider into a recognised specialist in AI-driven automation and robotics solution for the hospitality sector."

Under Cliff's expert leadership, Eat IT Drink IT has played an instrumental role in positioning Yorkshire as a region capable of leading the charge in technological innovation. While many businesses look to major technology hubs for inspiration, Eat IT Drink IT has demonstrated that forward-thinking AI, automation, and robotics solutions can be successfully developed, deployed, and supported from its base in Leeds, Yorkshire.

Reflecting on the significant accomplishments of his team throughout the years, Cliff



shared with us, "My ambition extends beyond growing a successful company. I want to help shape the future of hospitality, healthcare, and service industries by making advanced technology accessible, practical, and beneficial to organisations of all sizes. By combining innovation with strong relationships, exceptional service, and a people-first approach, I believe that we can create lasting positive change for businesses, employees, and customers alike."

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Recruitment Solutions MD of the Year 2026 (North West England): Ged Walsh

Based in Liverpool, Everpool Recruitment leads the industry with tailored recruitment solutions that support clients at every stage of their hiring journey. The company is led by Managing Director Ged Walsh, a seasoned recruitment partner who leverages a true understanding of his clients' markets to deliver meaningful results. We spoke with Ged to learn more, as he is named in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Everpool Recruitment is a multi-sector recruitment company providing tailored temporary and permanent recruitment solutions to clients across the UK. The company works primarily with clients within healthcare and retail, and also undertakes office and commercial work, digital marketing, and tech recruitment.

Operating across an array of industries, the team at Everpool Recruitment delivers bespoke solutions that are designed around each client's specific needs. Every member of the Everpool Recruitment team prides themselves on providing a high-quality, consultative service backed by unrivalled industry knowledge that supports long-term business success.

"What motivates us is the opportunities to give to people in their careers and help to grow companies' businesses," Ged told us. "We understand that every successful placement makes a fundamental difference to their organisations."

Ged Walsh is an experienced Recruitment Director with a proven track record across multiple industries, specialising in healthcare, legal, office and commercial, property, marketing, engineering, IT, and telecommunications. Whilst working in senior retail management, Ged developed a strong passion for leading people and building high-performing teams.

Now, Ged draws upon his experiences to lead with a true understanding of what motivates individuals, communication, and decision-making. "There is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership," he said. "Every person is different, and the key is adaptability."

As Managing Director, Ged believes that effective communication is fundamental to Everpool Recruitment's operations. The company is run with clear processes and regular touchpoints that ensure everyone across the board is on the same page. What's more, the team holds frequent meetings to discuss different areas of the business, client requirements, candidate activity, marketing insights and updates, new business campaigns, and ongoing projects.

Within the business, Ged encourages an open and collaborative culture, whereby his team feels comfortable sharing their knowledge, challenges, and ideas. The company holds regular one-to-ones and performance reviews that ensure accountability, while also keeping up to date with priorities and maintaining proactive communication with clients and candidates throughout the recruitment process.

Ged steers his team with the belief that work should feel supportive, uplifting, and enjoyable. "Whether we're celebrating holidays, getting stuck into team activities, sharing a laugh in the office, or representing the business at local events," said Ged, "these moments reflect who we are at our core: a team that cares about each other, shows up for one another, and genuinely enjoys what we do together!"



With such exceptional operations driven by a strong internal culture, Everpool Recruitment has gone from strength to strength since its inception in 2021. Looking to the future, the team intends to double the size of the business, whilst continuing to deliver the high-quality service and people-first approach for which Everpool Recruitment is renowned.

Under the expert guidance of Ged Walsh, named North West England's Recruitment Solutions MD of the Year 2026, we at SME News have no doubt that Everpool Recruitment will continue to excel.

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Industrial Waxes MD of the Year 2026: Hugh McAulay & Best Specialist Industrial Wax Manufacturer 2026

Abril Industrial Waxes Ltd

Graduating from the University of Glasgow with a degree in chemistry, Hugh McAulay began his career in sales for the chemical industry, before progressing through the industry and trying his hand at every element of it. Following a stint as the MD of a company producing tin foil and cling film, he returned to the world of chemicals in 2016, joining Abril Industrial Waxes Ltd as its managing director. Ten years later, we caught up with Hugh following his recognition in this programme.

A niche manufacturer with a solid base in amide wax technology, Abril Industrial Waxes Ltd is based in South Wales, an area reported to once be the heart of the UK's wax industry. The company is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Höganäs AB, which purchased Abril in 2015. The restructuring that followed saw the company retain some independence due to the specialist areas it serves, especially through its main product, synthetic amide wax.

Roughly 50% of Abril's business comes from this, which the company makes at home in Wales, before processing it further in-house to ensure that the final product lives up to the high standards the company is known for. Hugh told us: "That is ultimately where the value lies."

The other half of Abril's business comes from specialised tolling, where the team produce specific blends and combinations of waxes that are unique, confidential, and sold to individual customers. Höganäs is one of the customers making the most of this, using Abril's modified amide wax as an external lubricant in the powered metal technologies it produces, mostly for the automotive industry.

Outside of the world of automotive solutions, other areas where Abril's products get extensive use include surface coatings, adhesives and sealants, and plastic masterbatch, highlighting the balance of flexibility and niche solutions it offers. Behind every solution is the drive to do more than just offer something nobody else does, with Abril striving to make the process as efficient as possible.

For Abril, the only thing above efficiency is safety. "We work safely or not at all", added Hugh. "This is the number one priority throughout Höganäs and something we fully appreciate and take on board at Abril. We must always ensure that we follow safety systems, adopt safe systems of work, train the workforce, and make sure everyone contributes to safety."

Investment in safety has been particularly high over the past three years, with new safety systems and safety features introduced. However, we all appreciate that safety at work goes beyond the physical, and psychological safety is something Hugh makes sure defines the culture at Abril, which is a place where everyone is invited to speak up and offer their opinion. After all, Hugh asked: "Why employ good people and then ignore them?"



The collaboration this encourages, alongside the independence afforded to it by Höganäs, means Hugh is in a very strong position to drive innovation and help Abril set its own priorities. The team are free to trust their judgement and use their knowledge and experience across their roles, and as long as they operate within the boundaries of Abril's safe-working procedures, plant capabilities, and the quality it aspires to, Hugh helps them thrive.

He does this in a number of ways, including through the Go4Great health initiative. Last year, this saw the team take part in geocaching sessions around the village, with staff given the opportunity to work in small groups with people they do not usually work with. Free fruit has also been introduced into the office every week, a simple touch but one that has proven popular.

On a practical level, the environment the team work in is also undergoing maintenance in the second half of this year, with new changing rooms and showers being installed. This follows the previous introduction of air conditioning into all the office and lab areas, which helps a lot, especially given the recent heatwaves the UK has been going through!

These changes are all small parts of Hugh's legacy at the helm of Abril, and given his plans to retire next summer, this is something he has been thinking a lot about lately. His recent tasks have involved a lot of succession planning, but he remains committed to his long-time duties, which include hitting environmental targets and supporting his team.

Named Industrial Waxes MD of the Year 2026 (alongside Abril's recognition as the Best Specialist Industrial Wax Manufacturer 2026), Hugh McAulay's impact on Abril Industrial Waxes Ltd has been undeniable. We wish him all the best with his retirement and Abril all the best as it enters an exciting new chapter under someone else's leadership.

More on Abril and its products can be found below.

abril®
Industrial Waxes Limited

Contact: Hugh McAulay
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Cosmetic Industry Recruitment MD of the Year 2026: Heidi Bannister & Talent & Recruitment Leadership Excellence Award 2026

Arthur Edward Recruitment

Established in 2002, Arthur Edward is a global recruitment and search company working in the niche area of beauty, cosmetics, and personal care. The company is steered by Founder and Managing Director Heidi Bannister, a spirited entrepreneur who has earned recognition in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026. We heard more about Heidi's journey to success below.

Arthur Edward works with companies positioned along the lifecycle of a product, from chemical and raw material suppliers to product manufacturers, brands, and retailers. The company finds talent to innovate, launch, and market beauty, cosmetic, and personal care products, with searches that cover all disciplines and roles involved in this work, including technical, sales, operations, and marketing. Its clients range in all shapes and sizes, from indie startups and private investment companies to some of the largest beauty brands in the world.

Since founding the company 24 years ago, Heidi Bannister has built an impressive team of industry specialists. She has been in employment since the age of 13, spending her evenings, weekends, and holidays working at a grocer, a garden centre, a hair salon, and restaurants. Through this work, Heidi learned early on that she had a passion for customer service. She shared, "I always enjoyed chatting to people, spotting when someone needed a refill, and I was never afraid of hard work or long hours."

On leaving school, driven by a lifelong love for hair and beauty products, Heidi trained at the London College of Fashion. She won the Student of the Year Award in 1984 whilst on a hairdressing, wig making, and cosmetic science course, and went on to continue her studies with beauty therapy and aromatherapy at Champneys College.

Heidi worked as a therapist for a time, before taking a job at a recruitment company. There, she catered to office roles but quickly learned that recruiting secretaries was not her true passion. She pivoted and tapped into her creativity, creating and selling products to her friends and family. At craft and trade fairs, she had the opportunity to meet agents and international distributors to grow her business further.

In 1988, Heidi won the London Livewire Entrepreneur competition and secured 3i investment for a small manufacturing operation. She learned a lot about grassroots manufacturing, purchasing, supply chain, and sales, but cashflow remained tight. The business collapsed in the recession of 1990. "Although

I was devastated the business failed," she said, "I learned the hard way that you really need to spend as much, if not more, time focused on the business, margins, and profits than on the creative fun of product development."

While she searched for a new job, Heidi worked at McDonalds, taught Keep Fit and worked in a nightclub. She then spent a decade in sales and marketing roles, gaining a truly in-depth understanding of product development, sales, and marketing for different manufacturers and brands, before setting up a brand business of her own called Body Mode.

After having a baby, however, Heidi realised that she needed to work in a role with less travel and returned to recruitment for a specialist sales agency. Here, she learned more about the partnership approach to recruitment: really understanding the market, doing a deep search, and finding the best candidate for the company.

While she enjoyed recruitment this time around, Heidi found that she missed the cosmetics industry. Upon the realisation that she could combine her two passions, Heidi established Arthur Edward in 2002, with her first job being the search for a Marketing Manager for Goldwell Haircare.

Now, Heidi leads a remote team from her home office, demonstrating how flexible working can benefit both people and business performance. Together, they are dedicated to driving Arthur Edward forward with the core values of passion, knowledge, and success.

The cosmetics industry is shaped by innovation and dedication, and Heidi believes in the continued learning and development of her entire team. She works hard to ensure everyone is trusted and listened to, promoting her belief that any idea is worth exploring.

Since first stepping into the workforce, Heidi Bannister has led a professional career defined by determination, perseverance, and unwavering passion for her craft. She has learned many lessons, and now uses all that she has learned to drive her team to success. We at SME News are delighted to award Heidi with the title of Cosmetic Industry Recruitment MD of the Year 2026.

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Efficientivity LTD

Even if they possess exceptional ideas, many companies around the world struggle to succeed due to poor management tools and insufficient knowledge. Without the budgets to invest in expensive management programmes, these underserved companies often settle for falling short of their potential. Enter Efficientivity, a London-based management consultant company providing client companies with the tools and systems they need to unlock their full potential. At the helm of this groundbreaking work is Founder and Managing Director Giorgio Gabba, an industry-leading expert who has earned recent recognition in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026. We heard more below from Giorgio.

“Most consulting firms still rely on long, expensive, consultant-driven processes, weeks of interviews, data collection, and analysis. We’ve transformed that model.”

Efficientivity was established in 2025, with a vision to democratise access to top-tier management expertise. The company is on a mission to make the world a better place, empowering businesses of any location, sector, and size with the tools and methods they need to realise their improvement potential and deliver superior products and services.

This service is delivered through a structured methodology called AIS: Assess, Improve,

Sustain. Developed through hundreds of projects over more than 20 years, this comprehensive methodology is designed to help companies from any sector identify their improvement potential and realise it through a structured, proven approach. AIS methodology can be used entirely online through self-guided tools or supported by consultants onsite, depending on the company’s unique specifications.

In the first stage, Assess, Efficientivity identifies the clients’ improvement potential in monetary terms. It analyses their management systems, processes, and financials, highlighting the clear strengths, weaknesses, and any required actions. This stage can be completed either via an online assessment or through a deeper onsite diagnostic with process observations and management-level interviews.

Then comes the Improve stage. The client will follow a systematic, guided approach based on their company’s assessment results. With Efficientivity, they work through AIS Core Modules: Strategy Development, Management System, Process Improvement, Roles and Skills, and Sustain and Compliance. Here, Efficientivity will apply practical tools, training, and targeted support aligned with the client’s priorities to drive meaningful, sustained progress.

Finally, comes Sustain. Efficientivity helps the client to maintain the new improvements through structured systems, regular audits, and ongoing compliance checks. They learn to reinforce key processes and management practices to ensure long-term performance across the organisation. With this final stage, Efficientivity empowers the client to build a culture of continuous improvement, supported by consistent monitoring and unwavering accountability.

This service has been developed by Giorgio Gabba and Gerhard Peschina, who each bring over two decades of management consulting experience across Europe, North America, and Asia. In his previous roles with other consulting companies, Founder Giorgio realised that so many companies had the

potential for significant improvement when applying a specific method. However, he also observed that hiring managers with that expertise, or hiring management consulting companies, is something that only large companies can afford.

This discovery sparked the beginning of Efficientivity, driving the company on its mission to democratise access to top-tier management expertise. “Our main motivation is to allow any company to identify and realise their improvement potential,” Giorgio told us. “Previously, this type of knowledge was only available to large companies with big budgets. Now, it’s available to any organisation.”

Giorgio leads his team with the aim of creating a transparent, value-based, vision- and mission-oriented culture. He follows a structured management system allied with his overarching vision, aligning all goals, plans, assignments, reports, reviews, and feedback loops across the board. With every member of the Efficientivity team united by the shared goal of industry-wide democratisation, it is no wonder that Giorgio Gabba has been honoured with the Democratised Strategic Insight Innovation Award 2026, in addition to being named Online Management Consulting MD of the Year 2026.

Under Giorgio’s leadership, Efficientivity looks to the future with the long-term goal of making its methodology a present force in all corners of the world. “For me, this company is all about our vision and mission,” Giorgio concluded. “Companies have a lot of improvement potential. Our methodology allows them to identify it, quantify it, and realise it. Even if only some companies start to realise it, their improvements will lead to better products and services that benefit everyone.”



efficientivity

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Tech Business Transformation MD of the Year 2026: Josh Chilton & Control Systems & Automation Solutions Company of the Year 2026: Optio Systems

Optio Systems Limited

In the high-pressure environments of manufacturing animal feed, paints, and specialty chemicals, an effective operating system is essential. No company understands this more than Optio Systems, a leading global provider of process control systems that help manufacturers across a wide range of industries to streamline operations, reduce downtime, and maintain consistent product quality with full traceability. We spoke with Managing Director Josh Chilton for more information, as both he and his team are recognised in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Optio Systems was formed through the combination of two market-leading companies, DSL and Datastor, each with almost 50 years of experience producing process control systems for manufacturing customers in the animal feed, paints, and specialist chemicals sectors. The company is trusted by some of the largest companies within its industries, supporting more than 200 installations of its software around the world with a particular focus on the UK, Ireland, and North America.

Many factories operate with PLC and SCADA, which shows its user a screen and logs data. This technology, however, does not manage batching logic, enforce cross-contamination rules, handle traceability, run production planning, or integrate with an ERP without months of custom engineering that must be reinvented from scratch for every site. This means that, while usable, these processes do not offer the efficiency, supportability, and scalability that such high-pressure environments demand.

This is a challenge that Optio Systems, named the Control Systems and Automation Solutions Company of the Year 2026, has met head-on. "Our latest control system, Imperium⁴, does all of this, already built in," Josh told us. "Designed specifically for animal feed, paint, and speciality chemical manufacturers within one platform. It's 50 years of innovation in a single product, and we are continuing to develop it!"

Imperium⁴ is an innovative, browser-based, process control system developed by Optio Systems. Simple and intuitive, Imperium⁴ offers users end-to-end control, with API-based integrations to all their other business systems. The system is scalable and expandable, works with all plant and major PLCs, and provides the user with reliable software for life, complete with a comprehensive suite of integrated, add-on modules for complete process control.

This solution is paired with an engineering mindset that shapes Optio Systems' approach to client service. "We are engineers first," Josh explained. "Too many vendors treat commissioning as the finish line, but we treat it as the beginning. We understand feed mills, paint manufacturing, and chemical processes, and we are still there when things change with round-the-clock support that keeps our customers running. We are motivated by the efficiency, production, and success of our customers."

Responsible for steering Optio Systems, Josh Chilton has been interested in the factors that make a business successful from a very young age. After graduating from the University of Leeds with a first-class honours degree in economics and finance, he stepped into the industry with a job at the global investment bank Holihan Lokey, helping companies of all sizes across Europe to complete acquisitions and raise capital.

After two years, Josh took a role at a mid-market private equity fund based in London, focusing on UK-based companies with the scope for significant operational improvement. During this time, Josh was involved in ten acquisitions, five financing processes, and sat on the boards of



three companies. Despite this, however, he felt that he remained too far removed from the real value creation of business.

"So, after five years and reaching the role of Investment Director, I spent two years studying for my MBA at London Business School," he shared. "As I was coming to the end of this programme, I was approached with the exciting opportunity to manage, integrate, and grow the two UK-based software companies, DSL and Datastor, that would later become Optio Systems. This felt like the perfect opportunity to deploy the business learnings acquired over years of working with many different companies in many different industries with many different leaders."

Today, Josh leads Optio Systems with a clear direction, strategic vision, and a focus on the things that truly matter. In the twelve months since he started, Josh has completely transformed the businesses that he inherited, improving customer service, project delivery, and the company's go-to-market approach, culminating in the rebranding of the business as Optio Systems in January 2026. In recognition of this, he has earned the Tech Business Transformation MD of the Year 2026 award and shows no signs of slowing this upward trajectory down now; over the next three years, he aims to continue improving the business and to grow revenues by 40%. This is a significant jump that Optio Systems will earn by continuing to deliver excellence to its existing customers, whilst attracting new customers from new industries around the world.



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Offshore Wind Industry MD of the Year 2026: Ally Cameron

Although Steel River Quay is a relatively new offshore wind logistics business it is a mighty one. The young renewable energy business was born off the back of significant infrastructure investments, and has been fully operational when the River Tees' South Bank quayside completed its deep-water port build phase. Providing world-class infrastructure for large installation vessels and heavy components, the company is becoming a major player in the offshore wind industry, and its leader Ally Cameron is proud to stand at the helm. We spoke with Ally to learn more as we recently awarded him with his title in our Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Ally Cameron's professional journey has taken many twists and turns since it began. From the moment he left school at 16 years old, Ally has taken on many different roles and worked tirelessly to give his all to each one.

At first, Ally joined the Navy to experience the world and gain valuable skills that have since contributed to his leadership skills and roles. He shared that he grew up with family who had served in various segments of the forces, which influenced his choice to spend 4.5 years with the Navy where he travelled the world and experienced different cultures, all influencing the way he sees the working environment and teamwork as a whole.

From then, he joined the police force in Aberdeen for 2.5 years. He told us that, during this time, he had a lot of friends in the ever-growing oil and gas industry who inevitably influenced his next step in his career. After working in such structured and disciplined roles, Ally took a step into the world of offshore wind infrastructure with rich experience that has allowed him to utilise what he learned of collaborative working, excellent timekeeping, accountability, and respect at the forefront.

Over the years, Ally has held various roles in the UK and abroad. His ongoing experience of how different people approach work around the world, in tandem with his evolving skillset, has given him a broad perspective and ability to finetune operations in his own career. He said: "I have garnered lots of experience and knowledge and I have learned by doing. I take learnings from others, experience, and past team members, and my advice to others would be this: you don't have to have it all worked out. Life will throw you curve balls, professionally and personally, and you ride the wave of highs and lows to come out the other side.

"The sun does come up tomorrow, just keep going and good things will happen if you've got the right work ethic and attitude and treat people how you want to be treated."

Ally is immensely proud of the entire team at Steel River Quay and he believes that his success would not be possible without the efforts of each and every person with whom he works. He has made it his mission to lead by example and guide the business seamlessly by setting expectations and holding everyone, including himself, accountable, but also empowering people every step of the way. Ally

Image credit: Sarah Caldecott, BUSINESSiQ



commented: "People are hired for a reason: they are experienced and knowledgeable. This is not just an individual award, this is a team effort stemming from mutual respect, empowerment, and support."

As a few examples of how Ally sees his leadership role, he explained that he prioritises an 'open door policy', encourages weekly meetings to get everyone together, and treats people well while also communicating why things are happening as opposed to just informing people of what is happening. By remaining transparent on a daily basis, sharing key information and updates without delay or a lack of detail, Ally's team are always on the same page and working towards the same goals.

Steel River Quay's next phase of quayside storage development is bringing the industry full-circle as the company's most recent junior member represents the fourth generation within a family closely linked to the quayside. This is a significant time of growth for the quayside which will not only fuel the industry's development but also nurture and influence generations to come.

Built on the core values of integrity, transparency, trust, and safety, Steel River Quay has swiftly become a valuable player in the offshore wind industry. We are firm believers that Ally's dedication to the offshore wind supply chain industry and his team will continue to push Steel River Quay to higher levels of success, especially as his growing team work towards creating more jobs and opportunities for local people in the future to come.

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Elevator Installation & Maintenance MD of the Year 2026: Kal Shergill

Whether creating a service agreement, installing a new lift, or repairing existing lift or escalator equipment, Ace Elevators offers a standard of service and expertise trusted by clients from all corners of the UK. At the helm of the company's outstanding operations is Managing Director Kal Shergill, who leads his team with an unwavering focus on compassion, communication, and consistency. We sat down with Kal for more information, as he is recognised in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.



Operating nationally across the UK, Ace Elevators is an accredited lift and escalator company based in Keighley, West Yorkshire. The company enjoys a first-class reputation for providing the high quality service, repair, and installation of lifts and associated equipment, as well as the design and manufacture of new lifts and the modernisation and refurbishment of existing lifts and elevators.

Ace Elevators offers nationwide service support, delivered by a team of highly trained engineers who serve as a single point of contact for customers. This team maintains, services, repairs, modernises, and refurbishes a wide variety of lifts, stairlifts, public access equipment, and escalators, not only those from its own product range but also other lift manufacturer's equipment.

"We use our experience and expertise in the lift industry to provide our customers with the highest quality service," Kal told us, "offering outstanding 24-hour emergency cover, nationwide, 365 days a year. The wealth of knowledge acquired from over centuries of experience has enabled us to be a leading independent lift company."

Kal Shergill has been the Managing Director of Ace Elevators since 2019 and has spent each year guiding his team from strength to strength. Kal was the previous Owner and Director Express Elevators, until its sale to industry giant KONE in 2015. The time spent at Express Elevators was essential to Kal's development, teaching the Managing Director the important nuances of leadership.

Drawing from his past experience, Kal works hard to lead his team by example. He has learned the importance of interacting with employees of all levels and strives to bring empathy and transparency to every aspect of his work. Every member of the team is an essential part of the Ace Elevators family, and Kal understands that he must support their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing in order to prioritise their growth and development.

"The main lesson that I've learned from previous roles is that employees are the lifeline of the company," he told us. "By prioritising a work-life balance and ensuring that our employees' families understand and meet the Ace management team in a social environment, we ensure that our team grows stronger."

Effective communication is maintained across the team through a clear operational structure, allowing Kal to ensure that each individual understands the importance of their role and how they contribute towards the company's overarching success. Kal implements an open-door policy across the entire organisation, encouraging his team to work in close collaboration with one another to achieve their goals.

Since taking on the role of Managing Director at Ace Elevators, Kal has made significant strides in uniting his team and ensuring their wellbeing across the board. The Managing Director has fostered an exceptional internal culture within Ace Elevators, whilst simultaneously maintaining the unrivalled standards of service that have come to define its work. For his instrumental role in establishing and maintaining Ace Elevators' position at the forefront of the industry, Kal Shergill has been deservedly named the Elevator Installation and Maintenance MD of the Year 2026.

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Executive Leadership Support MD of the Year 2026 (Midlands): Kate Davies

Arrive with Noise. Leave with Grip.

Grip is the difference between a business that runs on its structure and one that runs on its chief executive. Kate Davies, Founder and CEO of Rufus Wren has been awarded in our Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026, for the Midlands. Kate has spent two decades inside Britain's most complex engineering, infrastructure and energy businesses. She works alongside leadership teams to restore Grip when complexity begins to outpace their organisations

By the time most chief executives can put words to what is wrong in their business it has been living inside it for months. Decisions slow and meetings multiply. Leaders find themselves controlling conversations they should never have been in. Nothing looks like a crisis, which is exactly why it goes unnamed. But the person running the business usually feels the shift long before anyone can describe it.

Davies has watched this pattern repeat across sectors, ownership models and leadership teams. The businesses struggling with it were hardly the least capable. More often they were the most experienced. "The issue is rarely capability," she says. "It is usually Grip."

Grip is the difference between a business that runs on its structure and one that runs on its chief executive. When it holds, decisions travel through the organisation intact, accountability sits where it belongs, and leaders build momentum instead of managing exceptions. When it slips, the signals are quiet and consistent. A managing director sits in every escalation. Commercial conversations happen in fragments. The same numbers carry two different versions of the truth. Everyone can describe the strategy and nobody is working from it.

Few businesses call this a Grip problem. They call it a people issue, a succession concern, a governance challenge. The label changes. The mechanism rarely does.

Rufus Wren starts by building an honest picture of the business, through confidential conversations across the leadership team, before the chief executive is in the room. What surfaces is never the reported version of events. It is the lived one: the risks discussed privately, the concerns that never reach the board pack, the conversations that happen once the meeting ends.

That picture becomes the foundation for a Boundary Session. Leaders spend two days with the right people, away from the ordinary rhythm of the business. The first day establishes reality. The second builds the response, a practical plan with ownership attached to each part of it.

Most advisers stop there. Rufus Wren does not. Plans rarely fail on design. They fail because nobody holds them long enough for new habits to settle. So the practice stays close, supporting leadership teams, holding workstreams, chairing steering groups and bringing in specialists where they are needed. It never sets out to replace the

organisation. The aim is to help it carry its own weight again.

"We work alongside leadership teams, never ahead of them," Davies explains. "We co-design what needs to happen, then help them carry it until Grip holds."

The confidentiality that protects clients also keeps the work out of the conversations where those clients talk about their wins. Most arrive by referral, sent by someone who has already been in the room. It was never meant as a marketing strategy. It is simply what the work produces.

Alongside client work, Davies is building something she believes leadership currently lacks: a practical, evidence-based account of how organisational Grip is lost, recognised and restored. The Grip Research Project sets out to make legible what has long sat as practitioner instinct. Its first public output is the Grip Audit, a free six-minute diagnostic that measures seven branches of Grip: decisions, information, cash and commercials, people and accountability, customer, risk and governance, and strategic cadence. Leaders receive a personalised report at once, and their anonymised answers feed a national benchmark of how British organisations are holding up under pressure.

Davies has no ambition to build a large consultancy. She wants Rufus Wren to remain the most precise intervention available when complexity begins to outpace an organisation's structure. "If there is one thing I would ask leaders to do, it is to take the Grip Audit," she says. "You might uncover something worth discussing. More importantly, you will help build a clearer understanding of how British organisations actually perform."

Her experience points to one quiet truth. The question is rarely whether Grip slips. It is how quickly a leader notices when it does.

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The Grip Audit is free at:
rufuswren.com/restore-your-grip



Furniture Manufacturing MD of the Year 2026: Mike Aramayo & Best Upholstery Manufacturer 2026

Buoyant Upholstery is a leading supplier of upholstered furniture, pouring over a century of experience, knowledge, and quality into every piece of furniture it creates. The company is helmed by Managing Director Mike Aramayo, a seasoned professional whose strong leadership and business development capabilities have earned applause in the Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026. Join us as we caught up with Mike to find out more.

Specialising in the design and manufacture of high-quality upholstery furniture, Buoyant Upholstery works with a diverse range of clients that value exceptional craftsmanship and accountability, including hospitality venues, commercial businesses, and interior designers. The business is driven by a simple mission: creating furniture that combines comfort, functionality, and longevity whilst exceeding expectations, whether delivering a single bespoke chair or a large-scale commercial fitout.

Buoyant Upholstery is steered by Managing Director Mike Aramayo, who was appointed the position in 2008 following an eight-year stint as its Sales Director. This was an opportunity offered to Mike by the late Charles Wade, one of the best-known entrepreneurs in Britain's furniture industry, who acquired Buoyant Upholstery in 2000. Rather than looking at his career as the result of a single opportunity, however, Mike views it as a series of experiences that have taught him the importance of resilience, adaptability, and accountability.

"My career journey has been built on a combination of hands-on experience, continuous learning, and a genuine passion for delivering quality outcomes," he reflected. "From my early days as a representative at Silentnight, to climbing the management ladder throughout my career, I have worked across various operational and leadership roles, each providing valuable insight into different aspects of business management, customer service, and commercial growth."

One of the biggest lessons Mike has learned is that success is always a team effort. He recognises that no leader succeeds alone, and has discovered that sustainable growth is best achieved by building the right culture, investing in people, and being surrounded by individuals who share the same vision. With this informed understanding, Mike has built a fantastic team at Buoyant Upholstery of people he considered to be friends.

As the Managing Director of Buoyant Upholstery, Mike is responsible for creating an environment within the company wherein talented individuals can thrive, develop, and contribute to the company's long-term success. He leads through visibility, accountability, and trust, spending his time to understand the challenges faced by different teams, encouraging open dialogue, and ensuring that everyone understands how their work contributes to the company's wider objectives.

The team at Buoyant Upholstery maintain regular team meetings, project reviews, and operational updates to ensure information flows effectively throughout the organisation. Beyond formal communication channels, Mike places significant importance on accessibility. He encourages his team to raise ideas, concerns, and suggestions directly, fostering an internal culture at Buoyant Upholstery where people feel heard and valued in their roles.

At his core, Mike believes that strong leadership requires continuous learning. "Markets evolve, customer expectations change, and businesses must adapt," he told us. "I strive to remain forward-thinking while staying grounded in the practical realities of running a growing



company. Ultimately, my goal is to build a resilient business that delivers outstanding results for clients while providing meaningful opportunities for our people; that goal is a never-ending process."

The next few years represent an exciting period for Buoyant Upholstery. Looking ahead, the company will focus on strengthening its market position, expanding its service capabilities, and investing in both its people and its operational infrastructure. Throughout these endeavours, the team will embrace innovation whilst preserving the unrivalled craftsmanship and quality that have established Buoyant Upholstery as the Best Upholstery Manufacturer 2026.

Personally, Mike aims to continue developing a business that is recognised not only for the quality of its products and services but also for its culture, customer relationships, and long-term impact. Ultimately, he aims to build a legacy that combines commercial success with genuine value for his employees, clients, and community. With such strong ambitions and a clear understanding of his team, his craft, and the industry's needs, we at SME News Magazine are proud to name Mike Aramayo the Furniture Manufacturing MD of the Year 2026.

He shared: "Receiving recognition within the Managing Director of the Year Awards is a tremendous honour, because it reflects the collective efforts of our entire team. While leadership often receives the spotlight, our success is the result of talented individuals who consistently demonstrate dedication, craftsmanship, and a commitment to excellence."

"I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved together, and excited about what lies ahead."

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Utilities Construction MD of the Year 2026: James Dryden & Most People-Centric Construction Company 2026

Turnbull Infrastructure & Utilities Ltd

From design and build to management and maintenance, Turnbull Infrastructure & Utilities Ltd offers a single, sustainable, end-to-end solution for engineering projects across the UK. James Dryden is the managing director behind the company, which today employs over 300 people and achieves more than £40M annually. We caught up with James following both his and the company's recognition in these awards.

Helping businesses to save money, reduce waste, and add long-term value to communities and the wider economy, Turnbull's drive is to help clients build better, smarter, and right. Turnbull works primarily with clients in the nuclear and renewables sector and has recently expanded into decommissioning. Guided by the values of professionalism, trust, safety, and expertise, their teams consistently deliver projects on time and within budget. These projects include providing construction utilities services to Hinkley Point C nuclear power station.

Turnbull is part of the YTL Group, which comprises nine companies across sectors including utilities, construction, renewable energies, entertainment, and business services. James has spent more than 15 years in this group, coming up through the business and working in different areas, including in senior roles for Wessex Water. He has been supported academically (securing an MBA from the University of Northampton) and professionally across this journey, which has also been shaped by his previous military experience.

This means James recognises the value in working as a collective and understands just how important people are in Turnbull's success. He believes people should be protected the same as an asset, and this is seen through the numerous development opportunities the team here are afforded, from apprenticeships and a robust graduate programme to a range of working groups. These include AI Champions, Women@Work, Mental Health First Aiders, Working Parents Network, CID, Sustainability and Safety Champions.

James explained: "Our selection of working groups allows for colleagues to get involved with team members they may not necessarily interact with during their day-to-day roles and also allows them multiple platforms to voice ideas which can lead to real change." The strength of these initiatives is seen through Turnbull being named the Most People-Centric Construction Company 2026 as part of our Managing Director of the Year Awards.

In his role as Turnbull's MD, James is also very much all about people, seen through some of the strategies he told us about that are in place across key areas like communication, both internally and externally. This includes prioritising accessible storytelling in its branding, holding bi-monthly briefs across the company and running the iSay survey, where colleagues can simply and easily share feedback with the company's leadership.



Many leaders simply read through their employees' thoughts and file them away somewhere, but Turnbull instead takes the feedback in and creates 'people promises', a set of pledges shared with the team so that staff can understand what the focuses are and where they can expect to see changes across the business. These promises are reviewed and refreshed with each survey completion, ensuring the desired changes are implemented.

James also makes sure that leadership is present across departments, and that staff feel able to talk to them about the business and the things they want to see done differently. The result is an open and friendly culture, and an environment where people can be their best. Their dedication is why Turnbull has an incredibly exciting future ahead of it, particularly over the next few years, where its ambitious five-year plan is being deployed.

This plan will see Turnbull expand into new markets within the nuclear and renewable sectors, including nuclear defence and sustainable solutions for waste (covering biomethane, food waste, waste management, and more), is something else James is incredibly proud of, and running a business that makes a real difference in some of the most crucial sectors of utilities and construction brings him real joy.

Reflecting on his journey since joining Turnbull in 2018, and after more than 15 years within the wider YTL Group, James commented: "I've reached the academic heights I've wanted to and become the professional MD of a multi-million pound business, which allows me to focus on the staff and management team to ensure that, like myself, they can also achieve the goals they have set themselves."

The true measure of a great MD is how they support the people around them, and for everything Turnbull Infrastructure & Utilities Ltd has done in this vein over the last eight years, we are delighted to celebrate it with these two well-deserved awards.

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Business Strategy MD of the Year 2026 (South East England): Naim Rahman & SME News Leadership Excellence Award 2026

Strategic UK Group LTD

Strategic UK Group is committed to disrupting the broad structure of UK consultancy. Conventional consultancy is losing traction. A disruptive movement is required to take a bold move to enable a different methodology and thinking to strategy and management. We hear more below directly from the company's own Naim Rahman, who was recently awarded two prestigious titles in our Managing Director of the Year Awards 2026.

Strategic UK Group's powerful ethos: to disrupt and speak truth to power is fuelling its ambitions to challenge conventional consultancy by transforming change through the firm's enabling services.

Strategic UK Group uses "disruptor" and "disruptive" constantly to reiterate that strategy and management consultancy is losing traction in the UK market as it is sometimes viewed as a "show and tell" and a "presentation of ideas", it should form a structure of military precision that relates to military shock and awe. In practice, this involves a concentrated strategy review using a methodology created by our firm "Operation Deep Dive".

Deep dive is often carried out in companies to deeply understand fundamental operations. A deep dive gives an opportunity to evaluate a business's — capability and how efficiently the firm's resources adapt to changing economic and social environments internal and external. This is where five forces focuses a business to look at rivalry among competing seller, firm in other industries offer substitute products, and potential new entrants.

Operation Deep Dive is not a new way of think in many business or companies. Strategic UK Group devised operation deep dive to concentrate of operational excellence a fundamental to strategy success. Deep dives are a valuable tool to transforming resources that are allocated to various activities in various parts of a business operation.

"Strategy is the execution and development of resource, capabilities, that support the achievement of organisational intentions that achieve superior operational expansion."

Operation deep dive is to deconstruct strategy which often sits in the head of the CEO, often does not translate in clear writing. A critical dive into strategy should look at a firm's capabilities, resource to enable better insight to operational effectiveness, a firm's strategy context, content, and process. As a Chief Executive, they need to take a hands-on approach to setting strategy for their company not taking a back seat by just saying word that have no meaning to their leadership team and other staff members. This may be the consequence of why so many businesses are not keeping up with their market competition and may be too reliant on others to set a strategic view.

Creation of One Strategy Vision is to be a UK first standard to establish a fundamental grounding that is needed in a changing business environment enabling leaders, and teams to have better context of seven concepts encapsulated within One Strategy Vision: Operational Effectiveness, Competitive Advantage, Five Forces, Core Competence, Game Theory, Diversification Strategy. These concepts have existed for a long time but there is no proper use of these concepts in setting strategy direction and vision by many businesses today.

Companies frequently encounter strategy as a series of isolated tools: a growth model here, a competitive analysis there, an operational review conducted separately. One Strategy Vision seeks to consolidate these domains into a unified standard, ensuring that operational effectiveness aligns with competitive positioning and long-term growth.

As the Chief Executive of Strategic UK Group, I constantly see material and social media post on strategic thinking, strategy that is hyped up with words like objectives, goal, vision, and direction that at times is easy to say but has no substance to back how a business should apply these words correctly to make sense to form part of their strategic thinking. The other bug bear that I have is hearing the word "strategy" written or spoken by companies and teams as a show & tell as an idea with words written down in point form which on many instances has no meaning or bearing to set clear strategic vision to help the company delivery incremental improvements and meaningful performance change.

There must be scope for real meaning full rethink of what business, people understand by strategy. Is it for Strategic UK Group to take bold step in re-educating businesses and people on their think, understanding of strategy through a series of papers on the basics of strategy understanding.

As part of a re-educating to understand strategy there will be a series of paper available on Strategic UK Group website: <https://strategicukgroup.com/future-context>. As part of these series of strategy paper, a welcome to all sectors of business to take part and collaborate with re-educating our understanding of strategy.

A welcome to be involved with our Re-Educating Series Papers: The Context — Strategy: thecontext@strategicukgroup.co.uk.



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