Northern Ireland Family Business Forum Marks 10 Years

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Northern Ireland's very own Family Business Forum has been celebrating its first 10 years. To mark the anniversary, organisers HM Chartered Accountants in association with Business Eye, hosted a round table discussion at The Ivy in Belfast city centre. Leaders of a range of family-owned businesses from across the region were invited to talk about the last 10 years of their businesses, and what the next ten years are likely to hold.

The Participants


Bridgene McKeever
Marketing Director, McKeever Hotels


Darren McKinstry
Managing Director, McKinstry Waste Group


John McAreavey
Director, Clearhill Group


William McColgan
Director, McColgans Quality Foods


Jane Allen
Managing Director, Magheramorne Estate


Philippa McShane
Director, McShane Packaging


Andrew Vaughan
Managing Director, Vaughan Engineering


Tim Monroe
CMO & Sustainability Lead, Smiley Monroe

RB - I'm going to ask each of you now to look back, reflect if you like, on the last 10 years of your businesses. The highs and lows, the achievements and the challenges. Let's start with you, Bridgene.

B McK - 10 years ago, we had four properties. We had Corr's Corner Hotel in Newtownabbey, which is where my dad started his working life as a chef. We had the Dunsilly Hotel in Antrim, the Adair Arms Hotel in Ballymena and Dillons Hotel in Letterkenny

Roll on to 2016 (nine years ago) and we were just about to acquire the Dunadry Hotel & Gardens and spend quite few millions to bring it back up and re-develop it. Nowadays, we also have the Lodge Hotel in Coleraine and we've recently bought the Armagh City Hotel.

So we've grown by about 273% over the last 10 years, mostly through acquisition. We've also changed our corporate structure and corporate governance. Back in the day, we would have sat around the kitchen table. But now we actually have a structure board, we have an executive team and we've hired really, really good people who specialise in finance, HR, marketing, and other roles.

TM - I'm Tim Monroe, Chief Marketing Officer and Sustainability Lead at Smiley Monroe– the Giants of Belting! Our products are trusted by the biggest names in quarrying, recycling, and road construction equipment. Mum and dad started the business from a shed in 1979, supplying conveyor belting to local quarries and mines. Fast forward 46 years, and dad's now Chairman. I work alongside my brother Chris, our Group CEO, who moved to Northern Ireland in 2013 to grow export sales.

In 2015, we'd been in India for three years, supporting a major global customer. It was tough–Hosur's a long way from Lisburn! Today, Smiley Monroe India is thriving, with a new purpose-built facility underway. Another big milestone came in 2020–setting up Smiley Monroe Inc in Kentucky, now our fastest-growing division. The pandemic delayed things, but we've focused on what makes us unique–like being one of the first manufacturers here to adopt a four-day week. It's helped us attract and retain top talent.

A personal highlight is our net zero journey. We're the first SME in our industry with a 2030 emissions reduction target approved by the Science-Based Targets Initiative. The next decade is about scaling sustainably. As Chris says, 'Judge everything by what my kids would think of what I've done.

W McC - 10 years ago I was nowhere near the business. I was in America doing an AI startup in the ed tech space. The business at that time was in its second generation. My father just retired and my uncle, 10 years ago, had a debilitating stroke. And so it brought succession very suddenly into focus. My sister stepped up as MD, but she needed help. Five years ago, I came back to help her out and that was that.

We've changed how we do things. We brought in non-executive directors, people from bigger food companies. So the last five years have been that. They have been all about change through lean transformation, transforming technology with IoT implementation and cloud analytics, a new manufacturing execution system, all that kind of stuff. But also transforming the culture.

AV - We're a mechanical and electrical subcontracting business based in Mallusk. We've got offices in Manchester, Newcastle and Scotland. A bit like William, 10 years ago I had no intentions to join the business, I was living in New Zealand working for EY, quite happily. I came back in 2019, quite a difficult time for the business, to help with the restructuring. I thought it would just be for a couple of months, and here I am six years later.

What we've always had is fantastic people, really strong engineers, I was able to bring a different perspective being a chartered accountant and was more focused initially on commercials and financials of the business. Over the past six years, we've grown the business back up from £15mn to £55 million turnover and are now looking at opportunities to get back into the Scottish market. We've also had a massive digital transformation. We've really looked at technologies and how we can modernise the business to enhance productivity and margins. So I think it's been a really interesting period and I'm looking forward to what the next 10 years holds.

JA - My name's Jane Allen. I started a catering business in 1988 and we now have an estate which we took over in 2020. Ten years ago, I was running a small business. I was the baker, the chef, the manager, the HR person, the marketeer, everything. We had three children who had been brought up in the business and suddenly they all seemed to want to work in the business. In 2015, James, our son, became our logistics guy. Catherine is now sales and marketing manager. She joined the business. And then finally, Sarah came in to relieve me from some of the manual work. So we trundled along nicely and then in 2019 we started to realise, this is all very nice but it's not going to sustain one, two, three, four households. So I started to look for a venue, we found Magheramorne Estate, and, ten days before lockdown, we signed on the dotted line. Then we all watched the Prime Minister sending us all into lockdown. It was out and out despair.

But we've created a great business out of nothing, and we wouldn't have created it if it hadn't been locked down. So we're looking at that as a very strong model that we feel we could roll out in other parts of Northern Ireland. So that's where we are. We are maybe still sitting around the kitchen table, to some extent, but we want to develop our business and to keep on developing it.

J McA - My name is John McAreavey, and I am a Director at Clearhill. The company was established by my father approximately thirty-three years ago. Clearhill operates a diverse portfolio of leisure vending products and Private Label Gift Card Solutions across the United Kingdom and Ireland, managing around 1,850 machines in 420 customer locations. As a chartered accountant by profession, I joined the business about thirteen years ago and currently oversee operations with my brother, Brian, who entered Clearhill directly after completing his education. My father remains actively involved in the business, continuing to contribute passionately to various projects. Reflecting on the past decade, our development can be divided into two phases: 2015 to 2020, and 2020 to the present. In 2015, we made significant investments in new products to pursue opportunities in Great Britain, including servicing 190 Asda stores with our Kiddy Ride offerings. Coupled with expansion in shopping centres, this period placed considerable pressure on our cash flow due to the capital-intensive nature of our business model, which requires substantial upfront investment before generating revenue. Nevertheless, we successfully navigated these challenges. Around 2020, we initiated a digital transformation project. Like many organisations, COVID-19 had a substantial impact on our operations, with a noticeable decline in cash transactions. In response, we retrofitted all our products with contactless payment technology and telemetry systems, enabling remote performance monitoring and improved service infrastructure. During this time, we also expanded our service offering to include providing gift card solutions to shopping centres. We are currently eight months into a new three-year strategic vision for the company. We are optimistic about the prospects ahead and anticipate that the coming decade will represent a significant phase in the ongoing Clearhill journey.

D McK - Darren McKinstry of McKinstry Group. We've got four businesses within that group. We've got skip hire, which is the largest part of what we do. We've got waste, biomass and metal recycling. My father brought me straight into the skip business from school. He worked hard and he expected us to work hard too.

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10 years ago the business was only a skip hire business. But we've seen opportunities coming in from biomass, waste services and and our business has continued to grow. My brother exited from the business and that allowed me to invest and to try and take the business forward into where we want to be. We've just signed a large contract for a new automated recycling facility.

We even hard a new generation. My son, Bradley, has come into the business, and he's been a real great help to me. So we'll see where we go next.

P McS - We're a family-run business based in Armagh and we make plastic packaging for the food sector, mainly the mushroom sector and the poultry sector. The business started in 1996, and we're actually a husband and wife team.

Right from the start, we had to take risks. When we bought our site in Armagh, we struggled to get finance and we also struggled to get planning permission. We borrowed £3,500 from the credit union and that's how it started. We bought a van and Paddy started to move the thing forward. By 2005, we were manufacturing polystyrene trays. By 2008, we were into the bank for about £850,000, and then we were told that we had to maker the transition to polypropylene. That meant more costs.

But, by 2011, we were debt free. But, in 2015, we lost a major mushroom customer. Paddy, who could talk for Ireland, couldn't talk for about a month. But it forced us to diversify. COVID wasn't easy either. I was very jealous of people who were making banana bread and doing workouts, and I had to go to work every day. But we managed to navigate the business through that very difficult stage. In 2021, we decided then to build a new warehouse and office block.

RB - I'm going to ask you this time to look forward, at the targets, objectives, challenges along the way, where you want to be, where you want to get to. Let's start with you this time. Philippa.

P McS - We have three children, our eldest daughter Jordan is 26. She's a chartered accountant who has worked in practice. She's been in the business for about a year and she's taken a lot of pressure off me in terms of financials and other work I was dealing with. Our second daughter is working with a company here in Belfast, and has no real interest in the business. Our son, Conor, is 20 and at university. It's an old problem. We are looking at maybe taking people in to try and run the business. But it has its challenges. Nobody will run the business the way you want to run the business.

The transition in our business is a move away from plastics to cardboard, and that has a serious amount of challenges for the product we make. Our trays hold mushrooms and they are 70% moisture. So cardboard isn't a runner.

Meanwhile, at the management level, we do realise we do need to take in a management group, even a board, and we haven't got a board in our business. We're at that stage where we do need a board to come in to drive and scale the business.

D McK - We have put a board structure in place. Previously it was really me who was making all the decisions. In recent years, I have invested, so I suppose now I'm committed. I can't go anywhere in the not too distant future, but I do want out of the business. But maybe I don't want to be there every day.

I don't want to put any pressure on my children, I'd like them to try it and understand it a bit and make their own decisions. Bradley, my oldest, he's 26, he does very successfully run one part of my business. Do I believe that I would wish to give him the whole thing or let him in the whole thing? I don't know.

But as I say I don't plan to go anywhere yet. We've invested, it's about a £16 to £20 million pound project. It probably took me 15 years to decide to do it. Let's see what the next few years bring.

J McA - We are highly optimistic about the coming decade. As previously stated, we are eight months into a three-year strategic vision for the company, with our primary objective being to scale the business. We believe there is significant potential to achieve this within our existing markets in the UK and Ireland. The market has shown an increasing demand for experiences beyond traditional retail in shopping centres, with more consumers seeking leisure destinations. Our organisation aims to address this trend.

Recently, we introduced a new premium amusement concept that is currently operational in a Birmingham shopping centre. Should this model prove successful, we see substantial opportunity to expand it throughout the UK and Ireland. While there are ongoing challenges, the most critical pertains to identifying the right growth opportunities as we continuously seek to scale. It is imperative that we make informed decisions over the next several years to ensure sustainable progress. As both my brother and I are relatively young and have young families, exiting the business is not presently a priority for us; rather, our focus remains on the long-term operations of the company. We follow lean management principles, prioritising continuous improvement and cultivating a positive organisational culture, both of which are core to our values.

JA – Unlike John, I do need to find an exit strategy personally, but to do that, you need to be a bit more professional in how you steer the business. We need to look seriously at our governance and our leadership. We're feeling now we have the right people to take the business forward, and hopefully we can do that in a professional manner. We've done well in the wedding business, but there's more and more competition for weddings. We have 42 acres, we have a beautiful building. But a lot of people still don't know that we're here.

The typical wedding customer has changed so dramatically since COVID. Do you know, as I say, you used to ring up and book the wedding. Everything needs to be Instagrammable. But business means challenges. Tt's about facing up to them and working through them as best you can. So that's where we are. It's all good stuff. Still excited to be in business.

AV – A bit like John, I'm a long way from the exit plan stage. Myself and my cousin have stepped up in the managing director role and we now need to drive the business forward for the next 10 years. The key challenge for our business is the people.

An article recently said that 41% of the people will retire from the construction sector by 2031 and only 3% are going into it year on year. So there's a big problem coming down the line. So we're really focused on our apprenticeship scheme and training people within it. 20 years ago, we had the one of the best apprenticeship programme in the market. We want to get back there again and train internally. We want to harness the changes in technology to help improve efficiencies and margin growth. So it's exciting but there are lots of challenges ahead.

W McG - Much the same as Andrew, we're going to succeed or fail on talent. We haven't got the people that we need to run all the lines that we have, so we're having to think of innovative ways to draw people in, to find productivity improvements, to automate processes. The cost of labour just keeps going up by leaps and bounds every single year. But we have new skill sets. We need data scientists, we need software developers, we need automation engineers, things that we've never had before.

The market for talent is competitive. We're upping our game in offering and developing the talented people already in our ranks. That will be the theme for the next 10 years. Find the productivity so we can compete in new markets.

TM - Part of my role has been working with the talent team to build the employer brand. We're very clear about the distinction between our employer branding and what that means and what our value proposition is, not just as an employer but also for our customers. So I think apprenticeships, are absolutely key.

We've doubled down on automation where we can, but we're still essentially a heavy industry, and that brings its challenges when it comes to attracting talent.

As for the future, it's about digital transformation, it's about driving efficiencies in our business, right down to how quickly we get a quote back and how quickly we answer the phone. We want to provide the best service.

Last year we launched our business strategy, growth strategy, to triple the company size in terms of turnover by 2028. We're still on track. It's an aggressive target, especially when we're trying to decarbonize the business.

B McK - We have to keep on reinvesting in the product. With seven hotel properties, it's always a big spend. It's not like a lick of paint, re-investment in hotel means a lot more than that. So re-investment is the big one, but I suppose for us the other big things are technology, streamlining, and labour. Hospitality is massively labour intensive, some 40% of our turnover is wages. We've been successful in recruitment, and we've developed some of our people to get them to management level. My Dad is a great believer in investing in people. His old mentor, John Corr, put him through his chef exams. If he hadn't done that, he would never have become a chef in the business.

My brother Eddie is on a personal mission to have hospitality seen as a viable career option. But that's what it is and it is highly paid in senior levels.

So Eddie and I are second generation. Dad is still very involved. He's very, very passionate. But we're sort of driving it forward. And we do want to grow and develop. And we want to spread our wings outside Northern Ireland.

Darren McDowell - This roundtable exemplifies so much of what we have seen over the last ten years. Family businesses across multiple sectors, establishing board structures, dealing with challenges like Covid, investing for the future, and exporting globally. It's inspiring to listen to the business leaders here today, many of whom are second generation and looking to the next 10 years, building on the foundations of the family business.

Dr Ian Smyth - I think what's interesting from a research perspective is the similar themes we see reoccurring across the past 10 years and looking forward to the next 10 years - growth, cost of business, family and non-family relationships, succession, impact of technology, access to talent. Part of why we love partnering on the Family Business Forum with HM is being able to bring research insights to help support family firms across the province. It has been our privilege to be part of the Forum over the past decade.

Our next event celebrating 10 years of the Family Business Forum is in Belfast on 17th October. Scan for more information

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