

ACHIEVING YOUR AMBITION

Interview with
RICHARD CRAWLEY
CHAIRMAN
STR GROUP

In a series of interviews with the directors of Avonglen, owner-managers talk about their ambitions and reveal the issues which are mission-critical for them to address in achieving their goals.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

EARLY ON in his career, when asked to define his ambition, Richard Crawley plucked a number out of the air. What did success look like? £50million, he decided. "I planned to build something special and £50 million seemed like something special."

He'd worked in recruitment for just a year and a half when he set up his own specialist technical recruitment company, STR Ltd, with three people, in September 2000.

At the time, he had no clear idea how he would achieve the that £50million target, but the big number provided the motivation to work hard. "I used to work eighteen hours a day," he recalls. "I would have worked twenty-four if I hadn't fallen asleep at my desk." This drive and ambition, coupled with clear strategic thinking, paid off straight away.

"We made money in the first week," says Crawley. "That was the pilot light lit and it's continued to burn. We have grown year on year and I don't believe there are many recruitment companies which can say that."

This growth has been achieved through the creation of niche companies, each specialising in a different technical sector. Crawley is now chairman of the STR Group, made up of twelve

niche recruitment companies, each with its own expert teams focused on specific sectors, operating both in the UK and internationally. The group has one hundred and sixty six permanent staff and 1200 contract, working from multiple offices across the UK and one in the US (40% of business is overseas).

Each company has a head of business who reports into the MD, who in turn reports to Crawley. Each of the companies is its own distinct brand and skill-set. "In the recruitment industry you need to be niche, you need to be an expert," says Crawley. "If we're supplying people to repair aircraft, I need staff who understand the sector, its language."

Essential because that enables them to firm up the relationship by address more than human resourcing issues. Meeting a recruitment requirement for a car manufacturer might start with assisting in the design of the production line.

And Crawley cites the example of a client that had a "major challenge" with health and safety. The nature of their product meant that manufacturing was more hazardous, yet they didn't actually have a robust enough system in place to record who had received the necessary training. "As part of our solution for them, we developed a cloud-based system so they were no longer struggling to be compliant," Crawley explains.

"We listen, and we ask questions – it's a simple thing, but when we have feedback from clients it's something that differentiates us. We go in deep to understand the challenges our clients face – because the people we place will have to deal with those challenges. And because we listen, when we present our solution to the client, they can see immediately that we have dealt with those challenges rather than put forward a stock response."

"The strategy," continues Crawley, "was to develop the brands, and give them gravitas in their marketplaces. Their growth is natural, organic, and in terms of potential, I don't think we have even scratched the surface."

And the day-to-day challenges for the owner-manager once a company is in such a position? "Not being drawn into the minutiae is number one," says Crawley. "Trying to be too perfect. The lack of time to stop to reflect. And sometimes not being there to influence people's thinking – it's hard to make the time."

Crawley tries to strike the right balance between being a hands-on, problem-solving CEO and giving his managers the autonomy to make their own success. This isn't always easy. "Every founder of a business has to get over the hurdle of

thinking 'who can do it better?' because no-one, in their head, is ever going to do a better job than they are. But you have to let go, and coach and train people. Ten people giving 90% will get a lot more done than one guy giving 200% – as much as that crazy guy who set up the business doesn't want to admit it. I think most business owners are control freaks."

That said, seeing people develop is clearly something in which Crawley takes pride. "Developing your own talent is vital," he says. "Four of our first ten employees are still here. Our first graduate trainee is now one of our directors. I think that kind of epitomises what I see as a measure of success."

By 2015, it was clear that his initial target was in sight, and turnover hit £56million in the 2016 financial year. Yet Crawley found the achievement of this long-held business goal strangely unexciting. He describes the feeling as "like Christmas morning, when I can see my presents under the tree, but I know what they are as I wrapped them myself."

And in any case, by then he was already looking ahead to the next target. "When the 2015 result confirmed the goal was near, it was time to set a new ambition. "I spoke to the management team about the next stage and we decided

the challenge was £100million." And he wants to get there in four years – which he sees as feasible if they keep focussed on the important things. "To run a big business you need process, structure, simplicity. People need to understand the story and want to join in," Crawley says.

"It's also important to try and enjoy the journey a bit more. Don't fret over small setbacks, though they can be soul-destroying. It's about appreciating the little wins – and giving yourself a pat on the back. Small improvements will lead to success. If your business can be a little bit better every day it will be huge success."

Crawley already has a vision of what his £100 million business will look like – and it will be based round great staff. "It's all well and good having a USP for your clients, but it is going to be the down to your people to actually deliver it," he stresses.

Which is why STR is actively creating the kind of working environment which will attract the best talent. "I want to try to make it a better place to be than being at home!" says Crawley. "There's the best technology to work with, free breakfast for those who are here before eight o'clock." Flexible working patterns are on the agenda. Crawley himself

prioritises spending time with his own young children rather than working the "crazy hours" of the early years of his career.

"I've never regretted the years when I worked every day of the week," he explains, "but now I don't have to do that. There are other people here who do really good work. The business has outgrown me; it's not about me now."



Avonglen provide the services of experienced finance directors on a flexible basis, giving businesses of any size affordable access to first-class strategic, commercial, and operational advice.

Avonglen Limited
2 Venture Road
Southampton Science Park
Southampton
SO16 7NP
Tel:: +44 (0) 23 8076 2570
Email: enquiries@Avonglen.com
Website: www.avonglen.com

Researched and published by
DECISION magazine
www.decisionmagazine.co.uk