

BGP Stories from the front-line

Soben Group Holdings Ltd

"I don't want a lifestyle business. I want a life-changing business!"
Scott Smyth, founder and CEO, Soben.

On Friday October 15th we were delighted to have Scott Smyth, founder of construction consultancy Soben, join us at Cranfield for our "bedtime story" slot. Scott took part in BGP in 2017. He was back to tell us what has happened in the four years since then, to share the highs and lows of his journey and to impart some hard-won lessons to other ambitious business founders.



Scott trained as a quantity surveyor and spent the early part of his career working for other people. Frustrated by being a small cog in a big machine, he ended up itching to start his own business so he could prove that his ideas of doing things differently were right. His break came in 2011. Following the financial crash of 2008 and

the ensuing recession, his employer went bust. "I came home with a smile on my face, which my wife couldn't understand. Suddenly it was easy – the decision to start up had been made for me." His initial goals were modest. He needed to make £2000 a month to cover his outgoings, and he confined their client base to his native Scotland. Scott was consciously cautious, conserving cash to reinvest in the company, and growing incrementally.

Six years later Soben had 24 employees, but Scott was dissatisfied. This modest success was not enough. He hadn't fulfilled a life-long ambition to work and travel internationally and he was convinced that both he and the company had a much greater potential to grow and develop. In his own words, "The business was stuck." Something had to change and so in September 2017 Scott enrolled on the Business Growth Programme.

It proved an eye-opener. Asked some tough questions on the programme about his approach to business development, it became clear to Scott that he would have

to make radical changes. "We were taking everything that came in through the door," he says. From 500-odd potential customers, he narrowed the focus to 50, where Soben would be properly rewarded for the value it could bring. He also realised that effective sales plans are built from the bottom up, with a laser-like focus on conversion rates. Previously he had scoffed at the idea of formal business planning. "My attitude was, I'm a surveyor. Give me a spreadsheet and I can fill it with numbers. Who needs to write a plan?" Since attending the programme, he's become a total convert to the virtues of planning. Today his motto is that sales solves everything and as a result of BGP he introduced a rigorous CRM system. Now his salesforce's bonuses are tied to the use of that system and everything is data-driven. "You don't know what you don't know," says Scott and BGP has made him a passionate advocate of lifelong learning and an avid reader of business books.

He talked at some length about the "the friendship zone", and the risk this can pose to B-to-B businesses like his. Too often, he believes, sales people who focus too much on building relationships get stuck in a place where difficult conversations just don't happen. Now he's developed processes that force sales people to close their prospects in or out at an early stage, saving time, money and scarce resources.

As of October this year Soben has some 160 employees and operations not just across the UK and Europe, but in North and South America, India, south-east Asia and Australia. How has he managed to increase his workforce

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sevenfold in four years? Recruitment has followed the growth in business with target clients, and the key to international expansion has been the concept of the anchor client: a big name that will justify the investment in new markets.

A leading data centre developer was the anchor client that took Soben to the USA. Scott had initially discounted Latin America as a growth opportunity, but a major client encouraged him to set up an operation and the business has performed strongly ever since. Anchor clients also create the opportunity to develop the case studies which build the firm's credentials and attract new clients.

By its very nature Soben is a people business. Now that he is playing in what he considers to be the big league, Scott needs to attract the best and brightest to achieve his

ambitions. In turn their drive pushes the business forward. He has openly shared his aspiration to build a business of 1,000 people by 2030, with an interim target of 500 by 2023. The Covid pandemic has set his plans back by a year, but he's now back on course.

What next, he was asked. Scott would like the opportunity to spend more time with his family, running the business remotely – a villa in Spain was mentioned – whilst empowering the senior leadership time to “proceed until apprehended”, and to continue to push their respective business units forward.

About the companies

Cranfield Executive Development

Cranfield Executive Development is consistently ranked as one of the top two providers of customised learning development in the UK, and among the top 10 in Europe. Its programmes draw on the expertise of faculty from Cranfield School of Management, which is one of an elite group of Schools worldwide to hold the triple accreditation of: AACSB International (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) and AMBA (the Association of MBAs).

W: www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/execdev

T: +44(0)1234 754500

Soben

Founded in 2011, Soben is an award winning, international consultancy providing 'cradle-to-grave' procurement, cost, contract, commercial, project and programme management services for blue chip national and international contracting organisations. Their purpose is to ensure that their clients are commercially successful whilst delivering large scale and complex construction, infrastructure, and energy projects. They integrate cutting edge technology into their solutions. From using the latest data analytics techniques to 7D BIM and carbon emission calculations, they've develop new solutions that solve clients' problems.

They have offices in the UK, Europe, Asia, Australia, the US and Latin America, delivering services to clients around the globe. With over 150 full-time directly employed professionals across key regions (EMEA, APAC, AMER and LATAM), they have the scale and critical mass to deliver.

W: www.sobencc.com

T: + 44 (0) 207 118 0767

E: general@sobencc.com