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## Proof that big is not always best

Not only are family businesses the vibrant backbone of the UK economy, they could also be the perfect place to find work and develop a career, writes **Peter Crush**

HERE are nearly one million family firms in London and the South-East and while bigger businesses are reluctant to hire, these family businesses are desperate to woo bright, skilled talent, according to the Institute for Family Businesses.

The career prospects are also often better than at large corporates, as many owner-managers are looking for talented individuals with the potential to take over the family firm one day.

"Friends who went into banking and insurance are all facing redundancy," says Lemarc Thomas, who graduated from Birkbeck College with a business degree in 2006 and has found success with smaller companies. Last year he joined family firm Seventy Thirty – the executive matchmaker – and he is now its head of operations. "I'm very ambitious. I could have done the whole graduate pathway, but I knew if I did, my career would take much longer."

Instead Thomas says he has far more exposure to different elements of a business (finance, recruitment, marketing and more) than he ever would stuck in a vertical silo. "I know I'm valued for bringing neutrality into the decision-making process because I don't have the family sentiment," he adds.

UK family businesses are responsible for around 30 per cent of GDP, not an insignificant part of the economy. But as well as becoming a better option for career acceleration, the inclusivity that family businesses create is also beginning to tempt young staff away from larger organisations.

Two years ago Sian Jones, 26, swapped working in merchandising at Habitat and Arcadia for London-based fifth-generation firm Angels the Costumiers – supplier of costumes to films including *Moulin Rouge* and *Gladiator*.

"I'm largely doing the same job," she says. "The difference is that I feel more trusted here; I feel my ideas are listened to and acted on much faster, and I'm able to communicate in a warmer environment. I'm not just a number."

Dr Allan Discua Cruz, researcher at Lancaster University



**Making it to the top:**  
Dave Ribbons, of  
Havells Sylvania



**Proving one's worth:**  
(left) Ewan McDonald started his career as a waiter at Pho restaurant, run by Juliette Wall; (below) Kate Cawley had to work her way up in her family's business

## Working your way up within a friendly setting

EWAN McDonald, 34, joined Pho, London's Vietnamese street food restaurant, as a waiter in 2008, and has risen through the ranks to become the company's customer experience manager, responsible for quality standards and recruitment across the whole group, which has seven outlets.

He says: "As soon as I saw the company, I could just tell the passion they had."

Owner Juliette Wall adds: "Because my husband and I started the

business, we really care about it, and because we care, our staff care. We are now getting people jumping the corporate ship to join us.

"My advice to jobseekers is not to ignore family businesses. We are all out there trying to make a difference. We need skilled people, and if we believe in someone, we will move the earth for them.

"The role Ewan has was one we created because we know he is a great asset to us."

Cawleys, the third-generation

waste management firm, with clients including Westfield in Stratford, has been home to 28-year-old Mandy Jacob, who works in its marketing department, for the past five years.

"I started here as a temp, but my boss was so impressed I was quickly offered a full-time role," she says.

Like many young graduates Mandy says she followed the herd, joining a large organisation because it was the done thing. But she admits she soon realised it "wasn't for her", and believes that she has

been lucky to get a second chance. "Family firms were not on my radar, but since being here, I feel I have got much more experience."

Cawleys, which appointed its first non-family boss in 2010, prides itself on being a meritocracy.

Even Kate Cawley, who originally worked for Reuters, has had to work her way up. "I've not been given any favours," she says. "I purposely worked outside the business first, because I did not want to join just because of who I was."

Management School's Centre for Family Business, says: "The development plans larger companies have traditionally offered have started to fall away. Flatter business structures mean fewer promotional opportunities and this is encouraging people to look into the family business model where ambition is not curtailed."

Family businesses accept more still needs to be done to appeal to top talent. Kate

Cawley, a third-generation member of waste management firm Cawleys, is now sponsoring a graduate through an environmental masters degree at Cranfield

Business School, but says "family businesses are not promoting themselves enough". However, family business owners say that once recruited, staff quickly realise what they have been missing out on and stay. As a 2010 study by Birmingham University found, staff at family businesses had more loyalty, were happier, and even put in an extra six hours a week.

"I have been here six years, but that is because I feel I am developing a much broader set of skills," says Sherry Reiss, office manager at Chancey, the family-run sustainable wood flooring company that supplies the British Museum and Not Savile Row. "It is more enjoyable, and there is a profit share here too, so any extra work is rewarded."

PwC research into family business found that benefits like these are increasingly common, with 27 per cent of family businesses now offering deferred bonus plans, compared with

15 per cent in 2007. But it is not just recent graduates family businesses need. Those with established careers are also prized. They provide the corporate experience family firms need. In return they offer a fresh challenge.

"After 14 years at General Electric,

### Family businesses are a great, untapped opportunity for those wishing to make a mark

including having to reboot my career every time a new set of European managers would rotate around, I knew I needed to look elsewhere," recalls Dave Ribbons, 40, who after joining family lighting firm Havells Sylvania, in 2007, has risen to head its entire

European operation from its London HQ. "It is daunting moving somewhere where you cannot hide, and that might not suit everyone, but my career has been reinvigorated."

Ribbons says he's proof "outsiders" can reach the very top of family firms.

As Simon Rickatson, HR director at Wimbledon-based healthcare products firm Nelsons (winner of 2008/9 Best UK Family Business, £25m+ turnover firms), says, family businesses like his are professional outfits. "We have 268 staff worldwide. Talent is talent. Our COO is non-family, and there is opportunity for anyone to move up."

Charlie Lawson, national director of Business Network International, concludes: "Family businesses are a great, untapped opportunity for those wishing to make a mark. External recruiters are realising that those with small, family business experience have improved themselves much faster."

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