

Returning to a city on the up

I HAVE recently returned to Taylor&Emmett and to Sheffield following a four-year sabbatical in the south and I have been astonished by the regeneration that has taken place in my absence.

Whilst I was away, I heard through friends, former colleagues and the occasional article in the national media, that Sheffield was going through something of a renaissance.

I am pleased to now see for myself how far the city has travelled in such a short time.

Sheffield has always been handsome, possessing many commanding buildings of great architectural, historic and cultural importance.

'This air of confidence has brought about a buzz the city has not seen for many years'

Although many of these have been shrouded in scaffolding of late, they play key roles in a city re-emerging as a modern, exciting and interesting place in which to work and play.

The latest business surveys conducted by MORI, the Financial Times and others sug-

By ANTHONY LONG
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gest that two thirds of businesses in our region are optimistic about their financial prospects.

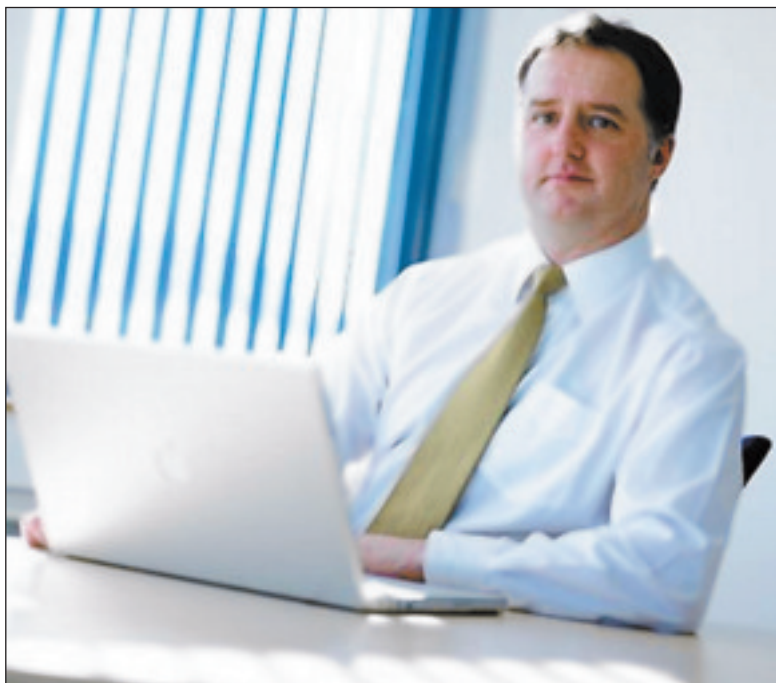
This new found confidence, coupled with an increasing number of national, blue chip companies moving to Sheffield, can only bode well for the future.

Not everything in our garden is rosy, however, and there remains some way to go before the regeneration is complete.

Large tracts of land in the city and its immediate surroundings are under-utilised, mass road works seem never ending and there remains concerns about red tape, rising utility bills and fuel costs.

Sheffield has all but shed the Full Monty image and firms like Taylor&Emmett, who value their roots, are proud of the part they have played consigning it to the history books.

Taylor&Emmett, like others, has proved it is possible to build a national reputation for excellence from a base in the north and this air of confidence has brought about a general buzz that the city has not seen for many years.



Anthony Long says that firms which value their roots have helped Sheffield get ride of the Full Monty image

Standing still and doing nothing is not an option

INDUSTRY in Britain today, particularly the type of manufacturing industry that makes up a goodly part of our regional industrial base, has never had it so bad.

In terms of the levels of competition, that is.

In today's marketplace, your product and your price is under threat, not just from the usual sources in the UK, Germany and Japan, but also from a new hungry breed of competitors in India and China, the so-called tiger economies.

Now you can, of course, shrug off such competition, insisting that it is a 'blip on the economic landscape' and that they are too far away to upset your business here in South Yorkshire. After all, some of your customers have been with you for many years. Perhaps you would go as far as to describe them as 'personal friends'. They won't source their requirements elsewhere – will they?

Consider this - As your customer faces intense competition, they may well decide, probably regretfully, that they have to act to keep their customers from going elsewhere. And if that means abandoning their regular supplier for a new one from overseas then, so be it.

What can we do to combat this competitive threat? What is the alternative to simply waiting for the end? One thing is for certain – standing still and doing nothing, is not a viable option.

We have worked with some of Sheffield's most successful companies; companies who have faced up



By STEVEN DAVIES
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to such intense competition and managed to overcome it.

Obviously, there is no 'magic formula'. Each one has adopted slightly differing techniques and approaches. However, one thing is common to all; they make innovation a constant principal factor in their business thinking.

I can almost sense some MD's switching off at this point and shaking their heads. "Innovation", they grumble, "is not relevant to my company, it is the domain of the high tech companies, who can summon up the benefits of the latest microchip technology. It's not for run of the mill businesses making run of the mill products".

I beg to differ. That is exactly the sort of business that can benefit most from innovation. Innovation is – well, let's take the formal definition in the reliable old Oxford

English Dictionary: "...the alteration of what is established by the introduction of new elements or forms.."

A perfect, succinct description of what I am trying to describe. In other words, you must examine your products and services - in totality, from every angle. Start with raw materials all the way to the finished goods.

A task which is easier said than done when 100% of your management effort is going into getting next week's order out of the door.

Strategic planning often falls well down the priority scale at times like these.

Lateral thinking is required to examine if you can replace any of the various stages with a more efficient, more cost effective technique. Can you shave pence off your best price, perhaps by sub-contracting or joining forces with a specialist partner, here in the UK or overseas?

Look at your potential markets – can you appeal, for instance, to a wider range of customers by changing existing specifications, in other words, turning one product into a family of inter-linked products.

This is what I meant when I said that innovation involved different approaches, different techniques.

It's about scrutinising every aspect of your business and improving as much of it as possible in a structured manner. If that involves cutting costs by techniques not normally considered – so be it.

You have to keep re-inventing your products and services if you want to stay ahead of the ever growing competition.

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