



TALKING TO... JOHN BLACKBURN

With a well-established background in the building products industry and a passion for an empowered culture it seemed a natural progression for John to join the Shawston team. But what exactly attracted John to join the Shawston family and what are his plans for the business now that he's taken over the reins? Angela Wilkins talks to newcomer John about his previous roles and experience and the impact these will have on his role in creating a sustainable, forever Shawston.

John Blackburn
Group Managing Director

John on John

I am good at process. I understand process. It's a bold statement I know but it's true. I genuinely believe that it is this understanding and self-awareness regarding process and its many elements that has driven my career so far.

Starting out my working journey in IT I quickly moved through the ranks and gained experience in many different areas within several businesses.

My degree focused on Business IT and was very much about bridging the gap between IT people and business people, so I soon became quite well versed in many



different areas of business such as law, marketing, finance etc, whilst also keeping my foot in the door with my technical IT skills.

Having spent my placement year at a company in Irlam, Manchester I was offered the opportunity to go and work there full time after I graduated. My role there was to implement a new computer system to suit the business and allow it to run more efficiently. In order to do this, I needed to ensure that I fully understood how the business ran and implement the IT system around it to make the process as smooth as possible. I implemented a SAP system (a business management platform) and the company never looked back.

I became a SAP Consultant and soon joined Caradon – Twyford Bathrooms where I stayed for 15 years gaining experience in both sales and operations.



It was at the point when I was offered the chance to run the Customer Service function for the whole company that I became acutely aware that I had become a generalist. Very good at lots of things as a whole but lacking a specialism in one specific area.

I found this quite worrying, what would I become? What would be a suitable role for me? However, my boss at the time, and a wise man at that, said to me "What's wrong with being a generalist? That's an important skill to have, to understand all the bits of a business and to have an input on each separate part." Those wise words I have never forgotten because that is essentially what an MD is and that's where my journey towards my first MD role began.

I have always been eager to understand the challenges of a team and find a way to help them out, to be the overarching person to offer support and direction. Sitting in the middle of a business, the guts of a business and having an influence is definitely the place I like to be. After running the Customer Service team in my previous business, I started a new role at Caradon Twyford as part of a big European group, rolling out products into the newly acquired businesses.

I truly believe this job changed my career path; it most certainly changed my thinking from operational to strategic. Thinking strategically – planning and managing rather than doing the doing. Here was my first step into an MD role and it made sense. I had all the strategic knowledge to do the role, so it really was a no brainer. Thus, I became the MD for the big European group, but when the group started to centralise certain aspects of the business, I found I was losing control of some of



my departments. I had wanted to be a hands-on MD, someone who knows what was going on in all aspects of the business, so I started to think about looking for a new role...

I soon joined the Coram Group, a family business. I liked the fact that it had scale but was inherently a family business. I ran the UK arm of the organisation, but I also liaised with my European counterparts and we began to work on a 5-year strategic business plan. The final years of this plan involved simplifying the business and moving the HQ to its Southern office. As I had become settled with my family in the North West, I knew that this would be the end of the line for me, so I started to search for a new role, but I knew I wanted a new MD role in a similar vein.

Searching for Shawston

I knew what I wanted, and I was quite specific about it in terms of searching for my next role. I wanted a forever role, so my brief was quite simple. A £20m ish company, 100 ish people similar to my last role, I wanted to remain in the building industry, but this time I wanted to get some ownership.

I wanted to work in a business where I can know everybody, and I can talk about an individual and actually know who I'm talking about to really have an input into their development.

A company with a real family orientated culture that has a closeness and a rapport with its fellow business colleagues. I wanted to know where my branches were, how they run and who actually runs them. It really mattered to me that I had a personal involvement in the development of the next business via my MD position.

Enter Shawston. The scale at Shawston was right for me, plus the idea of having a stake in the form of equity in the business too was a real benefit that I couldn't overlook. In some ways Coram and Shawston are nearly identical businesses. The process, the way people think and what people like are very similar.

It was almost as if Rob started his business with Graham and the guys 20 years ago, I started my career path 20 years ago, in which time I've learnt how to become an MD and Shawston has now got to a scale where it needs my MD skills and the point met. Shawston needed me and I really needed Shawston.

Even though Rob, Graham and I are a similar age, we're all at different stages in what we want and need from our careers. Rob and Graham are looking to concentrate on the strategy of taking Shawston to the next level, looking at new and exciting projects to move the business forward. They are very much still involved in the business but were exploring the angle that someone new would handle the day-to-day running of the company.

Speaking for myself, I definitely feel that there is something I haven't done yet, there is a bit of my career that I haven't done yet. That's a deeper ownership – having some skin in the game. It was really interesting that this point aligned. When I met Rob, we instantly hit it off, but then when I met the rest of the guys on the call, Graham, James, and Tom, I thought "Wow!" and I said to Rob, "I haven't started yet, but I feel like I've been here ages already." The conversations were so natural, the rapport with the guys was so natural. I didn't feel like I'd ever been anywhere else other than Shawston. It was the right fit. A really, really strong fit.

The look and feel of the business were really appealing too. Take the Shawston website for instance and what it tells you about the organisation, it's so slick and informative, you think yeah, I want to work for that business. It's a good quality, honest company and that definitely came across via the people I spoke to and the comms that I read. I can honestly say there is nothing negative about Shawston, it's all about growth, and I really wanted my next challenge to be about growing. So again, it's as if the stars aligned.

More than anything I wanted to be part of this family. It became more than just a new job. Shawston have a culture where people like each other, they hang out with each other outside of work. Not because they have to but because they want to.



Who doesn't want to be part of that? There is a real community feel to Shawston, it has brilliant DNA. I have learnt more about the Shawston people in the first few weeks of my role than I ever have before in previous roles.

So here I am. I was chosen to help steer and guide Shawston to the next stage, and I sincerely believe we choose each other. I am excited as there is lots to do. It's a very balanced company, and we have a very positive place in the market.

My job as I see it is to sharpen it up in certain areas, I like to call it marginal gains. Half a percent here, half a percent there. That's all it needs. It has all the building blocks already to be brilliant, my plan is to re-organise ourselves post covid, gain clarity on the future, improve comms, build on unrivalled customer service, and identify key projects that will have a direct impact on our future and continue the build of a forever Shawston.

The timing of my joining the team is perfect, I manage and lead in a way that needs to be managed and lead. It's time for us to rise up and lead Shawston into the future, we are re-energised post covid, we have all the right people in the right places, the A-teams are in place and ready to get going, and I know from my last role how important it is to have the right people in the right roles. It's now simply a case of moving together as the

strong family unit that we are to propel Shawston to the next level.

Shawston is an employee owned business. This means Shawston is wholly owned by its employees who have purchased shares in the company through investing their own hard earned money. Our co-owners are empowered, valued, committed and full of motivation to take ownership of their various roles and responsibilities within our business. And that's the essence of Employee Ownership. We encourage a freedom of expression rarely seen in business, we push people to be better versions of themselves, and we give them the space to make choices.

So, if you're interested in a career with Shawston, make the choice to email us your CV and a covering letter to hr@shawston.co.uk or [visit our website](#) to read more about choosing to hop on board to a new career.

