


# THE NORTH'S FASTEST GROWING TECH COMPANIES

THE NORTHERN TECH 100  
POWERED BY GP BULLHOUND

TECH   
NATION





# INTRO- DUCTION

If you've ever wondered who the top 100 tech companies in the North of England are, look no further. This publication showcases and celebrates the fastest-growing businesses in the region.

It marks the second Northern Tech 100 league table, a list produced by our partner GP Bullhound, and it's great to see so many companies remain on the table, as well as seeing so many new faces join the ranks.

The Car Buying Group topped the table in 2017, and it's impressive to see them take third position in 2018 having doubled staff numbers in the past year and grown 191% in three years.

New entries this year include the social media influencer agency Social Chain and we were delighted to see data analytics firm Peak make it onto this year's table – a company that's been on both our Northern Stars and Upscale growth programmes.

The league table was born out of GP Bullhound's annual Northern Tech Awards. We saw an opportunity to work together to shine an even bigger spotlight on as many companies as possible, and that's what this publication aims to do.

We want to celebrate the growth of the sector in the North of England, challenge the perception that most tech startups are based in London, share insights from the companies that are blazing a trail, and openly discuss some of the challenges the sector faces.

We'd love to hear your views on this year's league table and the growth of the tech scene in the North – let us know on Twitter using #NorthernTech100 and we'll see you there.

**VICKI SHIEL**  
EDITOR IN CHIEF  
Head of Content & Learning, Tech Nation  
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+ NEW ENTRY

▲ MOVED UP SINCE 2017

— SAME POSITION

▼ MOVED DOWN SINCE 2017



### 1. IN TOUCH NETWORKS +

MANCHESTER, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

A Deloitte Fast 50 regional winner two years running and the 86th Fastest Growing Company in Europe according to the *Financial Times*, In Touch Networks has transformed the way companies hire board members and senior freelance professionals.

In Touch Networks is made up of an expert group of online networks, removing costs from the recruitment process and bringing elite professionals and employers together. The networks enable organisations like KPMG, Santander and the NHS to gain access to candidates of the highest calibre.

### 2. CHAMELEON TECHNOLOGY +

HARROGATE, HARDWARE

Harrogate-based Chameleon Technology is one of Europe's leading providers of connected home solutions – winning the European Energy Monitor of the Year award at the Smart Energy Summit in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Energy retailers across the UK and abroad rely on Chameleon's accurate, easy-to-use in-home energy monitors. A focus on innovation and user-centred design underpins the company's approach.

### 3. THE CAR BUYING GROUP ▼

WAKEFIELD, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

Since topping the Northern Tech 100 league table in 2017, The Car Buying Group has almost tripled its turnover, surpassing £50m within just four years of the company being founded.

The company started when its founders recognised the opportunity to disrupt the monopoly held by one company in the online car purchasing and selling industry.

By making customer convenience the firm's primary focus, The Car Buying Group succeeded in grabbing a significant market share and enjoyed 191 per cent growth over three years. Since 2017, the company's staff has doubled in size but the firm has remained loyal to the North, retaining its headquarters in Wakefield.

**4. FRUUGO.COM +**

ULVERSTON, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

Fruugo has made it possible for people in 32 countries to access its transactional marketplace, offering retail services in 17 languages and 21 currencies – all from its base in Ulverston, Cumbria.

With a mission to “provide great choice and the freedom to shop safely wherever you are”, Fruugo has attracted retailers by offering its services on a no sale, no fee basis. The company handles transactions, payments and the vast majority of customer service issues, making it exceptionally easy for retailers to sell their products through Fruugo’s global checkout.

Year-on-year growth of 141 per cent has helped Fruugo to forge partnerships with e-commerce firms like Visualsoft, whose client, online footwear retailer Charles Clinkard, reported an extra £40,000 of monthly revenue from having its products available on Fruugo.

**5. THE LEAD AGENCY +**

LIVERPOOL, DIGITAL AGENCY

Anton Hanley was 19-years-old when he founded The Lead Agency. Just 16 years later, he is at the helm of the largest new car lead generation business in the UK.

The Lead Agency supports more than 25 UK automotive manufacturers, helping them to grow their customer base through lead technology and a multi-channel contact centre. The firm names Audi, BMW and Volkswagen among its clients and, on the back of its proven track record in the automotive industry, has expanded its offering into property and higher education.

With a £10m turnover expected this year and new offices already open in London and New York, the Liverpool-based firm has doubled its workforce in the last 18 months.

**6. SOCIAL CHAIN +**

MANCHESTER, DIGITAL AGENCY

Steven Bartlett, the 25-year-old CEO and co-founder of Social Chain, has become a sought-after public speaker and widely followed internet personality after the rapid success of his marketing agency.

The company formed in 2014 and quickly attracted huge global brands to its client list by taking a “social first” approach to marketing, tailoring content for particular platforms and engaging audiences with remarkable success.

The growth of Social Chain prompted Bartlett to establish Media Chain, which aims, in his own words, “to own big social media properties”.

**7. ORIGIN BROADBAND +**

ROTHERHAM, IT SERVICES

Origin Broadband is the UK’s sixth largest broadband company and is on target to surpass 250,000 customers by 2020.

The company’s growth since its launch in 2011 attracted £5m investment from Calculus Capital in 2017, which allowed Origin to move its head office from two sites in Doncaster to a single, larger base in Rotherham.

The award-winning ISP has made staff welfare a priority and the company’s team of 149 were offered shorter working hours and increased holiday allowances.

**8. GIACOM ▲**

HESSLE, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

Winner of Distributor of the Year (sub £100m) at the 2017 CRN Channel awards, East Yorkshire-based service provider Giacom is enjoying unprecedented growth.

Ranked 24th in last year's Northern Tech 100, Giacom World Networks has been operating since 1991 and recently partnered with world-leading cyber security company Symantec to enhance the email and web protection it offers to tens of thousands of consumers and businesses.

Giacom is the largest cloud marketplace in Europe for IT support professionals, providing customers with Office 365, Hosted Exchange, Acronis Cloud Backup, BitDefender Hosted Backup and Anti-Virus.





GERARD GRECH, CEO, TECH NATION LONDON

# GERARD GRECH

## CEO OF TECH NATION

In April this year, Tech North and Tech City UK merged to become Tech Nation. The new organisation will take its growth programmes and initiatives to startups and scaleups across the UK. Here the organisation's CEO Gerard Grech talks about what this expanded remit means for companies in the North of England.

### WHAT DOES TECH NATION OFFER TECH COMPANIES IN THE NORTH OF ENGLAND?

The digital tech sector in the North has expanded rapidly in the last few years, with many new companies, more jobs and more investment attracted to companies based in the region. We're excited about this growth and are encouraging more companies to join our programmes and activities this year.

The Northern Tech 100 league table shows just how many fast-growth companies there are and we'd like to see more of them enter our growth programmes including Founders' Network, Upscale and Future Fifty, depending on which growth stage. The Digital Business Academy also offers free online courses on everything from developing a digital product to running a social media campaign.

### WHY THE MOVE FROM TECH NORTH AND TECH CITY UK TO TECH NATION?

We're bringing together the resources of Tech City UK and Tech North to help us spread the lessons learned from the vibrant ecosystems in London and the North to other parts of the country. We aim to build a strong national network that is capable of helping businesses compete on the world stage.

**“Pulling together the resources of Tech City UK and Tech North, Tech Nation will provide new momentum to the acceleration of the digital tech sector in the North.”**

– GERARD GRECH, TECH NATION

### **WHAT'S THE BIG VISION?**

We believe the UK is the best place in the world to start and grow a digital business. We demonstrate this through our data, insights and storytelling. We're also facilitating this by building a national network of ambitious entrepreneurs, all of whom will benefit from improved access to knowledge and connections across the country.

### **HOW WILL YOU ACHIEVE THAT?**

We focus on four main areas - growth programmes tailored to each stage of the business lifecycle, sharing digital entrepreneurship skills through the Digital Business Academy, providing access to Tier 1 visas to bring exceptional talent from overseas to the UK, and championing the UK's digital sector through data, case studies and outreach. To carry on the work we have started in the North we want as many Northern companies as possible to join our growth programmes and other initiatives.

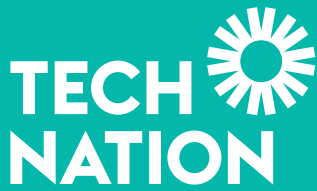
### **HOW DOES THAT LOOK ON THE GROUND?**

Our team is spread out across the country, including Liverpool and Manchester in the North West, Leeds and Sheffield in Yorkshire, and Newcastle in the North East. This includes our National Entrepreneur Engagement Managers in Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle, whose role it is to work with companies in their wider regions to help them get involved in the programmes and networks that are right for them and their business.

### **WHAT CAN COMPANIES GET INVOLVED WITH NEXT?**

Tech Nation is going on tour across the UK. There are events scheduled from May to October in 11 cities, and we hope to see a strong turnout from members of the UK's digital tech community. I'd encourage companies to check out our new website [technation.io](https://technation.io) for details on our events, programmes and initiatives that might benefit them, and to get involved in Tech Nation's powerful network.

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**THE UK NETWORK FOR AMBITIOUS ENTREPRENEURS**

We empower ambitious tech entrepreneurs to grow faster through growth programmes for early, mid and late-stage businesses, digital entrepreneurship skills, a visa scheme for exceptional talent, and by using data to champion the UK's digital sector.

Find out how we can help your business at [technation.io](https://technation.io)

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HUGH CAMPBELL, CO-FOUNDER, GP BULLHOUND  
MANCHESTER

# HUGH CAMPBELL

## MANAGING PARTNER & CO-FOUNDER OF GP BULLHOUND

**Hugh has worked with all the leading growth equity funds in Europe and has sold businesses to Google, Facebook, Disney, Accenture and Experian amongst others. Here he reviews highlights from the GP Bullhound Northern Tech 100 league table and current challenges for the North.**

2018 marks the first year in which we have taken the Northern Tech Awards outside of England, in an effort which we hope will strengthen ties across the border. Scotland is already famous for delivering world-famous technology companies such as Skyscanner and FanDuel, however we are also excited by the long list of fast-growing businesses such as TVSquared, Outplay and Aquila Insights, which we hope will enjoy similar success.

2017 proved to be a prosperous year with stock markets finishing the year at all-time highs. The UK technology sector continued to demonstrate its prominence across Europe, securing over \$5.4bn in VC funding – more than twice its nearest rivals in Germany and France. Such investment is coupled with strong competition to secure the best talent from around the world.

The technology industry's focus is shifting away from China and the USA towards Europe, where the UK is in pole position for investment. This has created an unprecedented opportunity for the North. Capital is being pushed to Europe by the high valuations of Chinese and American tech businesses. That capital is looking for better value, which is exactly what the North has to offer.

The Northern Tech 100 league table shows that it's not just about Manchester; it's about the whole region. It demonstrates that successful technology businesses can be built outside of the core tech clusters in the UK. Never before have we so consistently created billion-dollar technology companies, and the likes of Blue Prism, Radius Payments and The Hut Group are breaking through the Unicorn level.

Institutional funds have huge amounts of capital to invest and they are looking at the region for the first time and they are seeing the success stories that they have missed out on. The recent acquisitions of CallCredit and Sky Bet, both with headquarters in Leeds and previously in the Northern Tech 100 League Table, for £1bn and £3.4bn respectively are testament to the value being created by businesses in the Northern tech ecosystem.

We ran analysis on public-quoted technology companies and found there are 13 based in the North with a market cap of over £500m pounds. Public companies in this region are massively outperforming the general benchmarks, and underneath them are a whole bunch of firms that are growing quickly, some of which will remain independent while others go public.

E-commerce remains a very strong sector across the whole region, particularly in Manchester where we have a history of trading that goes back to the industrial revolution. The success of businesses like Currentbody and Music Magpie underline the region's prowess in e-commerce.

Gaming continues to be another huge success story for the region. The stand-out deal in this space was the sale to Warner Brothers of Playdemic, whose game Golf Clash hit the App Store's top five and is grossing somewhere between \$1m - \$2m dollars a day. Other notable recent successes in the gaming sector include Dundee's Outplay, whose revenues are doubling year-on-year, and Sheffield-based Sumo, which acquired its fourth studio.

Current challenges for the North centre around access to talent. The advent of Brexit means we have a reduced inflow of skills from the EU. The resulting uncertainty means a promising Polish software engineer might choose to go to Berlin rather than the UK. Hopefully that's going to be temporary and, when there's a clarification around freedom of movement, it might not be too restrictive.

The second challenge is to build public recognition that this region is home to many great technology businesses. People look at the UK and still think about London alone. The PR challenge for the region is to change perceptions until the North is known less for football and more for tech.

The graduate talent across all of these wonderful universities in the region continues to be strong. The big challenge is to make sure it doesn't leave and go to London or overseas, thinking very carefully about how you get that and make sure that talent finds work locally. Here in the North we can offer much better, much lower costs of living and a much higher quality of life; local success stories provide the evidence that those who are thriving here, should stay.

**“Here in the North we can offer much better, much lower costs of living and a much higher quality of life; local success stories provide the evidence that those who are thriving here, should stay.”**

– HUGH CAMPBELL, GP BULLHOUND



EMMA RAWLINSON, CEO, IN TOUCH NETWORKS  
MANCHESTER

# EMMA RAWLINSON

## CEO OF IN TOUCH NETWORKS

We met with Emma Rawlinson of In Touch Networks to talk about the Manchester-based company's development, international expansion and what comes next.

### HOW DID IN TOUCH NETWORKS BEGIN?

It was originally set up to turn the industry on its head, in a way. Our founder was an executive headhunter who had a lot of clients wanting non-exec roles, and a lot of clients on the other side who wanted non-execs but didn't want to pay the fees for them.

He said: 'You know what, I'm going to put you guys together and we will charge the people who want a job, but not charge the people that are looking for non-execs.' That was the initial concept and the business has just grown from there.

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE A NON-EXECUTIVE?

Our business helps people transition from being an executive, for example from being a CEO, to being a non-executive. When you're a CEO you're used to being the loudest voice; you delegate, you're in the detail and the day-to-day running of that business. When you switch into the role of a non-executive it's very, very different. You're there to influence, to add a different perspective, to look at the long-term strategy of the business and give an overview.

That's quite a transition for people. And that's where we realised that just putting two groups of people together isn't necessarily the best for either party. We developed a course called 'Ahead of the Curve', which is a seven-week webinar program taking people through that shift in mindset, including what will be expected of them in the boardroom, how they will add value, and how people will perceive them.

### HOW HAS THE BUSINESS DEVELOPED?

It has been very fast-paced, but crucially we have developed a culture that allows us to recognise the gaps in how customers' needs are served. When customers say: 'Does your membership do this?' and our answer is no, we find out whether there is any reason why it can't. We listen to what our customers want and try to offer them everything they need along the journey to achieving their goals.

**“When customers say: ‘Does your membership do this?’ and our answer is no, we find out whether there is any reason why it can’t.”**

– EMMA RAWLINSON, IN TOUCH NETWORKS



IN TOUCH NETWORKS,  
MANCHESTER

#### **HOW HAS THE COMPANY GROWN?**

Our membership expanded; revenue growth has also come from the addition of products, such as Ahead of the Curve, our CV writer service, and the one-to-one executive coaching we offer people who want to achieve specific goals.

We also run a suite of events, because ultimately people need to network. There tends to be a speaker covering a specific topic at those events, but then there's also the opportunity for candidates to speak to each other.

Attendees tend to be people who are all at the same level, at the same stage of their career, and they all have similar questions, so it's a good forum where they can bounce ideas off each other.

#### **HOW DO YOU KEEP UP WITH GROWTH?**

Our biggest recruitment drive is in sales. On average, we take on six people a fortnight in sales and trying to bring people in can be tough. You have to interview a lot of candidates to find people who fit with the culture and who want to be here.

When a business grows very quickly, departments sprout up and you get to a pivotal point where you need a leader for each of those teams. We've just been on a recruitment drive for new directors in each of our different departments to make sure that each has its own leader.

We have created a really fun culture and it's all about people enjoying being at work. Everyone is on this growth train; they know where the business wants to get to and everybody has bought into that. When you're all trying to achieve the same thing and you all believe in the business, that's a happy place to be.

**HOW DID YOU BECOME CEO?**

I joined about six months ago. My background is predominantly private equity and finance, so I'd say my role here is to look at the business with a financial set of eyes and say: 'Okay, how can I work alongside our sales and marketing director to make sure the core of this business is strong?'

**CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT BEING IN MANCHESTER?**

It's brilliant, and it's really exciting. It means it's hard to recruit developers, because there's a number of tech businesses based in Manchester all going for the same pool of people, but it's exciting that Manchester has got so many of those businesses here. There's more acceptance in the market that tech businesses are expanding and that they are going to be the growth of the future.

**WHAT'S NEXT FOR IN TOUCH NETWORKS?**

We're moving into the US imminently, which is a big step for us. There's a huge shift in the US towards people having a freelance career rather than a full-time career.

International growth is one way that we can expand, and the other way is through our networks. We take a network and we grow it and build it and look at what is the best product for our customer. We've also got our eye on future networks; we are looking at what is working for various groups of people so that we can establish the most useful areas to build products around.

**9. HEDGEHOG LAB ▲**

NEWCASTLE UPTON TYNE, IT SERVICES

With offices in the UK, USA, Denmark and India, Hedgehog Lab has grown rapidly since Sarat Pediredla and Mark Forster founded the technology consultancy in 2007.

Having built its reputation on exceptional digital applications for smartphones, tablets, desktops and wearables, the Newcastle firm's expanding team is now exploring how mobile, immersive and AI technologies can influence sectors such as retail, energy and utilities.

Hedgehog Labs' mission is "to be the best post-PC technology consultancy in the world" and the company's clients include Santander, Mitusbushi, EDF Energy and Channel 4 among others.

10.

**10. MATILLION +**

ALTRINCHAM, IT SERVICES

Altrincham-based firm Matillion was founded in 2011 and hit the headlines three years later when it achieved revenues of £1m for the first time.

The foundations of Matillion's success were built on business intelligence and analytics software, which quickly became popular in the UK and abroad, helping the firm to achieve at least 50 per cent year-on-year growth in its first three years.

The company's focus is now on delivering modern, cloud-native data integration technology, providing simple, scalable, cost-effective cloud integration tools.

Having launched in Knutsford, Matillion moved to its Altrincham office in 2017 following the launch of two flagship products: Matillion ETL for BigQuery and Matillion ETL for Snowflake.

**11. BIGCHANGE ▲**

LEEDS, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Leeds-based app development firm BigChange celebrated its fifth birthday in January, and has achieved remarkable growth since its launch on New Year's Day 2013.

While helping more than 600 SME and corporate clients to manage their business operations using mobile apps, BigChange doubled its turnover every year following its launch. The company specialises in providing management solutions for local and multinational logistics firms, such as Nixon Hire, Jet Aire, Silentnight and Komatsu.

As well as helping businesses to go paperless through the use of BigChange apps, the company is launching an on-demand service app that allows firms to configure the service to their own requirements and apply their own branding to the tool.

**12. OUTPLAY ENTERTAINMENT +**

DUNDEE, BETTING &amp; GAMING

After acquiring Eight Pixels Square in 2016, Outplay Entertainment co-founder Douglas Hare set his sights on a larger share of the independent mobile games market.

The vast popularity of Outplay's free-to-play games, such as Crafty Candy and Mystery Match, have helped the company race towards its goals. In 2018, the Dundee-based company reported a 1,904 per cent growth in revenue since 2013, with revenues almost doubling year-on-year.

The firm's latest game, Angry Birds Pop, is its first venture into branded titles and the company remains focussed on user acquisition and running games as a service.

**13. HYPERDRIVE INNOVATION —**

SUNDERLAND, HARDWARE

Electrification partner Hyperdrive Innovation has been recognised for its contributions to electric vehicle development with a number of industry awards.

The Sunderland developer and manufacturer of lithium-ion battery technology was the first to secure the supply of battery modules for the trailblazing Nissan LEAF. The firm also supports customers in defining and integrating systems for homes and businesses.

Over the course of six years since the company launched it has helped to establish the North East as a global battery hub and recent projects include the government-backed High Energy Density Battery (HEDB) project, which allowed the company to triple its staff and grow its manufacturing capabilities.

**14. CASTLIGHT FINANCIAL +**

GLASGOW, DATA ANALYTICS

Glasgow-based fintech company Castlight won the Deloitte ‘Kick Start a Start Up’ award in 2017, enabling chief executive and co-founder Phil Grady to grow his team and plan expansion into the US.

Castlight developed the innovative Affordability Passport, which aims to change the way financial retailers make credit and lending decisions. By aggregating transactional data and providing real-time affordability analysis, Castlight is disrupting the traditional credit scoring and underwriting methodology.

Founded in 2014 by Grady, along with Creditfix chief executive Pearse Flynn, Castlight is engaged with 10 high-street banks and is receiving significant interest from international banks. The company’s platform is used by 60 per cent of the UK’s personal insolvency market.

**15. ACCESSPAY ▼**

MANCHESTER, FINTECH

After six years of growth, Manchester-based tech firm AccessPay received a £1m boost through the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund (NPIF).

The company had already been named the fastest growing fintech company outside of London in the 2017 Deloitte UK Technology Fast 50, following a hugely successful period for the company, which works with businesses and banks to adopt next generation payment services.

Founded by Ali Moiyed in 2012 to help remove unnecessary cost and complexity from online payments processing, the firm is focused on driving next-generation financial services, tearing up the bricks and mortar concept associated with finance.

**16. TVSQUARED ▼**

EDINBURGH, DATA ANALYTICS

Edinburgh's TVSquared has developed the capability to track the digital impact of broadcast TV advertisements across devices, having partnered with data onboarder LiveRamp and its IdentityLink service.

The six-year-old company, founded by former Sumerian CEO Calum Smeaton in 2012, had already established itself as the gold standard for TV analytics and was working with more than 360 brands, agencies and networks across 48 countries to measure and optimize TV.

Now, through its linkup with LiveRamp, the company has added the 'who' to the 'what, when and how' of its TV advertising analytics. This exciting development follows TVSquared's acquisition of Germany's wywy in November 2017, to bring real-time, accurate spot detection to TVSquared's trademark product, Advantage TV.

Headquartered in Edinburgh, TVSquared has opened offices in London, New York and Los Angeles.



@TechNation



@TechNationHQ



@TechNationHQ



SKY,  
LEEDS

## 17. RESULTING ▲ MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Resulting is a highly specialised SAP Consultancy, which works with companies like Nationwide, HMRC and Manchester Airport to assess IT operating models and help build self-sufficiency.

Based in Warrington, Resulting provides advisory and consulting services to large enterprise businesses. Resulting's consulting approach, Resultology, is based on 20 years of experience and research and addresses the factors that influence SAP success.

Planned 2018 innovations include an AI powered SAP knowledge auditing tool.

## 18. REDU — COUNTY DURHAM, DIGITAL AGENCY

Redu partners with some of the UK's biggest brands to drive high volume sales through social, mobile and data-driven affiliate marketing.

Founded in 2014 by Darren Williams, Sam Morton and Gary Hunter, the Seaham-based company has been winning awards throughout its history. In 2017 the firm was named Small Business of the Year at the NE Business Awards and runner-up in the Digital and Social category.

Redu reaches over 33 million active buyers per month, driving more than 10 million post clicks and over £3m in retailer sales for brands like John Lewis, TK Maxx and Asda.

## 19. LADBIBLE ▼ MANCHESTER, DIGITAL AGENCY

Founded in 2012 after Alexander Solomou won £5,000 in a student competition, LADbible Group has grown to become one of the world's biggest social publishers. The company grew through the immense popularity of its content on Facebook and Solomou, along with childhood friend and co-founder Arian Kalantari, monetised the site through its brand partnerships licensing arm.

While continuing to produce content the company provides marketing consultancy services to the likes of Netflix and the NFL. In 2017, the company posted revenues of £9.2m, following a 200 per cent increase in sales over three years.

# 20.

## 20. LOOKING4.COM + LEEDS, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

Since launching its airport parking and transfer comparison service in 2009, Looking4.com has expanded into 28 countries and now covers 198 airports. Headquartered in Leeds and originally called Looking4Parking.com, the firm was renamed after a management buy-back of the business from Purple Parking in a seven-figure deal in 2017.

Managing director Martin Mansell is guiding the company's growth, which has included expansion into Australia, France, Portugal and Japan in the last 12 months, and there are plans to extend its services into flights and hotels in the future.

## 21. CURRENTBODY.COM ▲ CHEADLE, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

The exceptional sales growth of CurrentBody in 2017 led to a £5m growth capital minority investment from NVM Private Equity in 2018 to support the next phase of the company's expansion.

Manchester-based CurrentBody carved out a position for itself by specialising in beauty devices for home use, recognising the fastest growing niche in the beauty industry.

CurrentBody cofounders Laurence Newman and Andrew Showman aim to provide the largest selection of clinically proven, at-home health and beauty technology, partnering with brands such as L'Oreal and Unilever.

**22. CLOUD TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS ▼**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

With more than 7 million users in 74 different countries, Cloud Technology Solutions (CTS) was founded in 2008 and has become one of the fastest-growing Google for Work Premier Partners in the world.

The Manchester-based company's migration tools and expertise help organisations to reduce costs and maintain efficiencies when moving to the cloud. CTS is trusted by clients including Manchester City Council, the RSPCA and HE Simm and achieved growth of 83 per cent between 2015 and 2018.

An investment deal with Northedge Capital, signed in 2018, will underpin the continued growth of CTS.

**23. PEAK +**

MANCHESTER, DATA ANALYTICS

With offices in Manchester, Jaipur and Edinburgh, pioneering data analytics firm Peak has grown rapidly since its launch in 2014. Using artificial intelligence and machine learning, the company analyses data at scale to provide clients such as Morrisons, AstraZeneca and *The Economist* with clearly defined insights and recommendations that improve performance and drive growth.

The company's development centre opened in 2016. Peak then partnered with cloud engineering firm Cloudit before securing £2.5m in Series A capital in 2017 to fund the company's growth.

The company's Edinburgh office opened in 2018, to enable the growth of Peak's development and sales teams and to improve the service provided to Scottish and Northern-based clients.

**24. ZEROLIGHT ▼**

NEWCASTLE, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

ZeroLight has been disrupting the automotive retail sector since 2014, having created a multi-award winning car configurator solution. The Newcastle-based company uses advanced rendering techniques to create a live scene of a product that offers unparalleled customer engagement.

By working with ZeroLight, clients such as Audi, Pagani and VW have changed the way their cars are specified and purchased, and the company's agile, customer-centric model ensures their customers are engaged throughout the purchasing journey.

ZeroLight's omnichannel platform empowers OEMs and partners to create and deliver compelling experiences that drive customer engagement across all touchpoints, leading to higher specification sales in-store and online.

**25. EVOLUTION FUNDING ▲**

CHESTERFIELD, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Established in 2002 in Chesterfield, Evolution Funding employs 270 people UK-wide and provides market-leading motor finance products to consumers through a network of more than 4,000 approved dealer partnerships and groups.

CEO Jeremy Levine is committed to reinvesting the company's profits to drive growth across the group, optimising operating efficiencies and customer journeys across the firm's main brand, Evolution Motor Finance, as well as its vehicle loans business, vehicle rentals brand and vehicle retail arm.



DARREN JOBLING, CEO, ZEROLIGHT  
NEWCASTLE

# DARREN JOBLING

## CEO OF ZERO LIGHT

**We met with Darren Jobling from ZeroLight to talk about the company's creation and the software that's taking the automotive industry to new levels.**

Darren Jobling has got a difficult job on his hands. In his own words, he is on a mission to bring the automotive industry “kicking and screaming” from the 1950s and propel it into the future.

Fortunately, he is already well on the way to doing just that.

Four years ago, Darren led the creation of ZeroLight as a separate business from computer games company Eutechnyx, which developed a pioneering piece of car visualisation software.

Today, Darren leads a team of 100 people who are using 3D graphics to transform the way people choose and purchase vehicles.

“We see games as highly engaging consumer experiences – that’s all they are,” says Darren, sitting by a window at ZeroLight’s riverside offices in Newcastle.

“Buying a car is one of the most expensive things you can do after buying a house, so why shouldn’t that be an engaging consumer experience? It should be a pleasurable experience to buy a car, and that’s what we set out to achieve.”

With the Tyne Bridge visible behind him, downriver from the glistening roof of The Sage, Darren reflects on the moment that he stepped away from game development after 20 years in the industry.

He recalls: “IBM approached us and said: ‘We’ve sold a Jaguar F-Type configurator to Jaguar and it’s the Paris Motor Show in three months’ time. Sony recommended you - could you help us?’

“That’s how we got started in the industry and it just gathered tremendous momentum.”

Darren and the ZeroLight team took a bold step into the world of motoring, but they were armed with hard-earned experience.

“We had dealt with the automotive industry over a number of years,” says Darren, whose easy-going demeanour belies the furiously innovative spirit of his company.

“But we were on the other side of the table, licensing their intellectual property to go into games like NASCAR, Formula 1, and Ferrari Challenge. We were familiar with automotive but we weren’t experts in the people we were dealing with.

“It was an evolution of our relationship but not a revolution.”

At the heart of that evolution was ZeroLight - a piece of software that made perfect sense to Darren and his team but was completely alien to some of the world’s biggest car manufacturers.

“Sometimes it can seem like your solutions are coming from another planet,” Darren says. “It can be hard for them to think that something that was a manual process can be totally automated by software.

“They’re a little bit suspicious of how we can do this.”

Despite meeting with suspicion from automotive traditionalists, the impact of ZeroLight’s immersive visualisations quickly delivered results for firms like Audi, Volkswagen and Toyota.

The software’s performance now speaks for itself, and Darren’s job is to ascertain who will listen.

He explains: “Audi has been public in saying that if you use ZeroLight, people spend more on a car. The data is there and manufacturers have got an appetite for it, but it is quite a mindset change for those who are used to doing everything manually.

“It’s like the way Henry Ford used to build cars versus the production line, and car manufacturers are going through that evolution. They are getting that from all areas at the moment - every part of their business is being disrupted.”

He adds: “Some people aren’t quite there yet. They say: ‘Look at our beautiful static images’. To me, it’s a bit like the Mona Lisa versus the Shawshank Redemption. The Mona Lisa is a beautiful image but it can’t hold your interest for two hours.”

ZeroLight’s rapid success and growth has been fuelled in no small part by the ambition of its leader (“Whatever your forecasts are, you should multiply them by 10”), but also by an unswerving commitment to innovation – even when it fails.

“We give people a lot of time to be innovative and we don’t try and prescribe or say: ‘This is where we are going,’” says Darren. “What we always say is: try and build trust. If there’s a circle and you’re innovating at the edge of the circle, you need to make sure that people are there behind you and have got your back, because innovation works sometimes but not always.

“If the innovation doesn’t work you’ve got to celebrate that lack of success as much as you’d celebrate the success, because it means we learned it didn’t work and we’re going to do something about it nice and early.”

With four years under its belt, ZeroLight is gearing up for expansion into new territories in 2018, having signed its first deals in Japan and the USA.

While cars remain the focus for now, other markets are opening up as the software becomes more flexible, versatile and user-friendly.

Darren’s confidence in the product is obvious and well-founded, and he has a tendency to bring discussions about its strengths back around to a team he rightly feels proud of.

“Augmented reality will deliver on the hype of virtual reality,” he states, assuredly. “It’s easily accessible - you don’t need to wear a headset to see what a car would look like sitting on your drive. It’s going to be huge. The team here is brilliant and it’s all down to them - I just see myself as the conductor, not the key driver. They’re driving it forward.

“We’re definitely not complacent but we’re definitely optimistic.”

**“If the innovation doesn’t work you’ve got to celebrate that lack of success as much as you’d celebrate the success, because it means we learned it didn’t work and we’re going to do something about it.”**

– DARREN JOBLING, ZEROLIGHT



**26. CUBIC MOTION +**

MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Founded in Manchester in 2009, Cubic Motion creates facial animation for hit games like Call Of Duty, Spiderman and Hellblade. The company's real-time capture allows game developers to create lifelike characters in a vastly reduced timeframe when compared to traditional approaches to CGI, and Cubic Motion delivered facial animation for three of the five nominees for Best Performance at The Game Awards 2017.

Cubic Motion's pioneering method of capturing eye and lip movement has transformed the games development process and it has enabled actors to control virtual characters in real-time, opening up applications beyond the gaming world.

The company's production team is more than 50-strong and is complemented by a growing research and development team at the Cubic Motion offices in Manchester Science Park.

**27. IDHL GROUP +**

HARROGATE, DIGITAL AGENCY

Founded in 2000 by CEO Dennis Engel, Harrogate's IDHL Group comprises WMG, Ingenuity Digital, NetConstruct and, following a buyout in late 2017, Pinpoint Designs.

IDHL Group employs more than 130 people across the four companies and its senior management team completed a £30m management buyout of the business in June 2017. The buyout followed IDHL's record financial performance and move to new headquarters in 2016 and the company is among the UK's largest full service digital agencies.

**28. PERFORMANCE HORIZON ▼**

NEWCASTLE, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

In the eight years since its launch, Performance Horizon has grown its digital marketing business to a point where more than 100 employees are delivering more than \$3bn in top line advertising revenues.

The firm's headquarters are in Newcastle, and with marketing partners in more than 183 countries, Performance Horizon offices have opened in the U.S., Japan and Australia. Clients include Nike, Emirates, Google, Sainsbury's and TripAdvisor, and the success of core product Performance Horizon Enterprise has led to the company becoming the leading provider of SaaS software for partner marketing.

**29. GODEL TECHNOLOGIES GROUP ▲**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Placed at number one in the 2018 Megabyte Emerging Stars Awards rankings, Godel Technologies provides agile development services to clients including Jet2, Experian and First Utility.

The company, which is headquartered in Manchester and employs around 500 staff, is recognised by Microsoft as a Gold partner and has offices in London, Minsk, Brest and Grodno.

Godel was recognised by Megabyte for its ability to provide services in high demand areas where there are skill shortages, winning the Best Performing Company award and the Best Performing Consulting & Systems Integration Company award.

## 30.

### 30. SHIELD SAFETY GROUP — MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Shield Safety CTO and co-owner Richard Jordan was named Business Person of the Year at the 2018 Greater Manchester Business Awards, in recognition for his contribution to the company's continued growth and success.

Jordan bought into the company in 2004 – one year after its launch – and joined Mark Flanagan in building Shield Safety's reputation around food, fire, and health and safety services and software for multi-location businesses within the hospitality industry.

The company's award-winning SaaS risk and safety management system uses a unique algorithm to calculate risk, and its proven track record is leading to increased growth across retail, manufacturing and SMEs.

### 31. ECOMETRICA + EDINBURGH, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Working with leading organisations from private, public and non-profit sectors, Ecometrica helps businesses meet challenges around sustainability while reducing costs and boosting performance.

Founded in Edinburgh in 2008, the company was placed on the Deloitte 2017 Technology Fast 500 EMEA list after a year in which it posted record sales and profits and partnered with NASA and the UK Space Agency.

The Ecometrica Platform is used to tackle a variety of operational and environmental challenges facing businesses and has won awards for its outstanding environmental accounting capabilities and satellite mapping technology.

### 32. PROOFID + MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Founded in 2008, Manchester-based ProofID delivers identity management systems to organisations in 73 countries around the world.

ProofID's identity and access management platform helps the company's clients to secure enterprise data, manage hybrid cloud environments, secure mobile apps and provide access to services. ProofID manages more than 750,000 identities, with clients reporting benefits to their security, productivity, compliance and revenues.

In 2017, ProofID merged with Colorado-based PEGRight in a £4m transaction, increasing the group turnover to more than £6m and growing its staff from 32 to 48. The company now operates across Europe and North America.

### 33. CONVERGE TECHNOLOGY SPECIALISTS + DARESBUURY, IT SERVICES

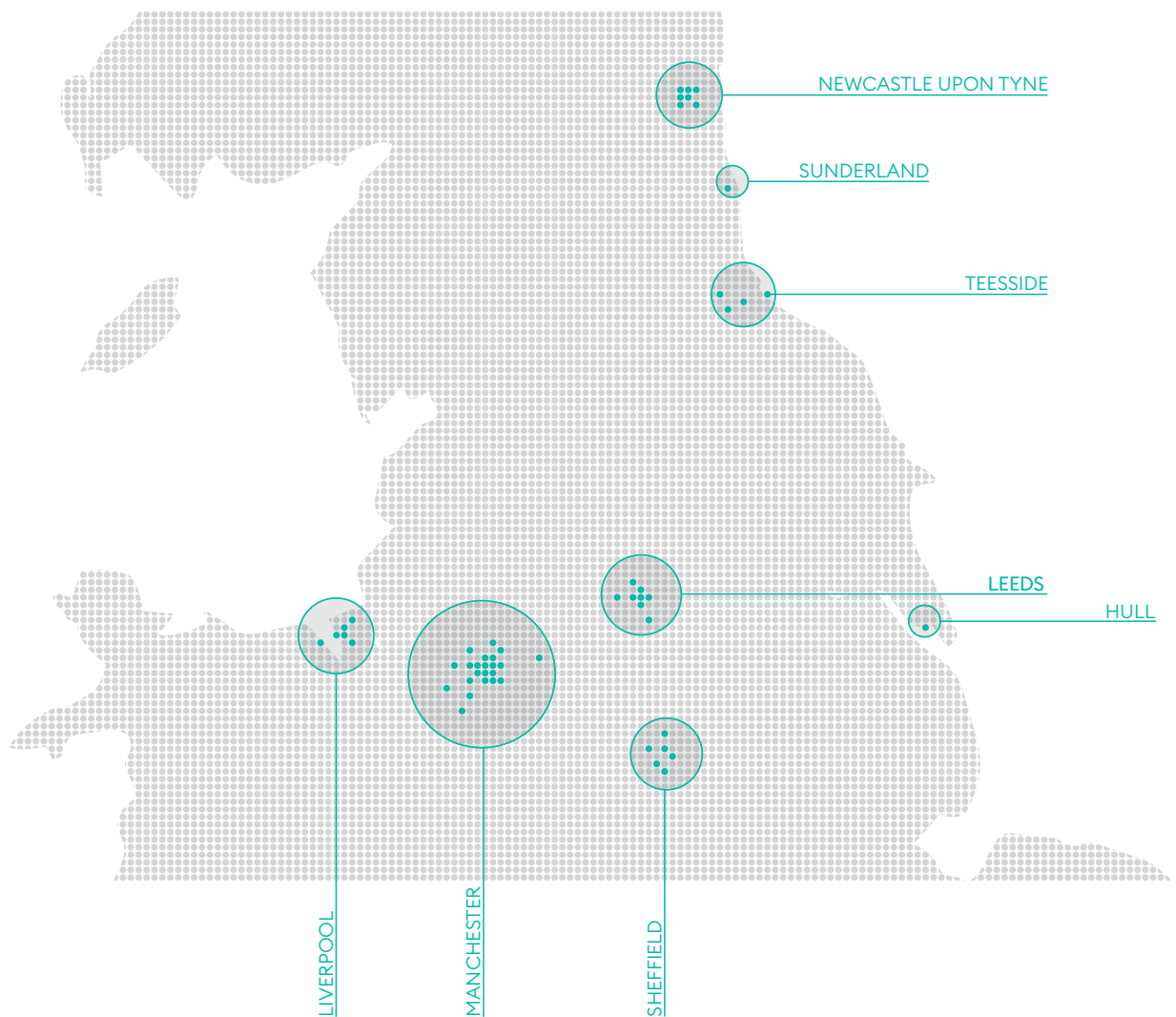
Converge Technology Specialists (CTS) provides hosted and managed IT services through private cloud to more than 6,000 law firms across the UK.

The firm was founded in Daresbury, Cheshire, in 2006 by CEO Nigel Wright and opened a London office in 2016 after exceptional organic growth. CTS has achieved 50 per cent revenue growth year-on-year for the last three years, and is on course to hit £10m turnover by 2019.

New clients and an increased demand for CTS services led to investment from private equity firm Tenzing in early 2018 and the company also signed a new partnership to deliver enhanced cloud solutions, disaster recovery functionality and hosted infrastructure to Thomson Reuters Elite.

# COWORKING SPACES

## OF THE NORTH



# YORKSHIRE & HUMBER



AMAZING LOCATION



BEAUTIFULLY DESIGNED



INDOOR SLIDE



RIVER VIEWS

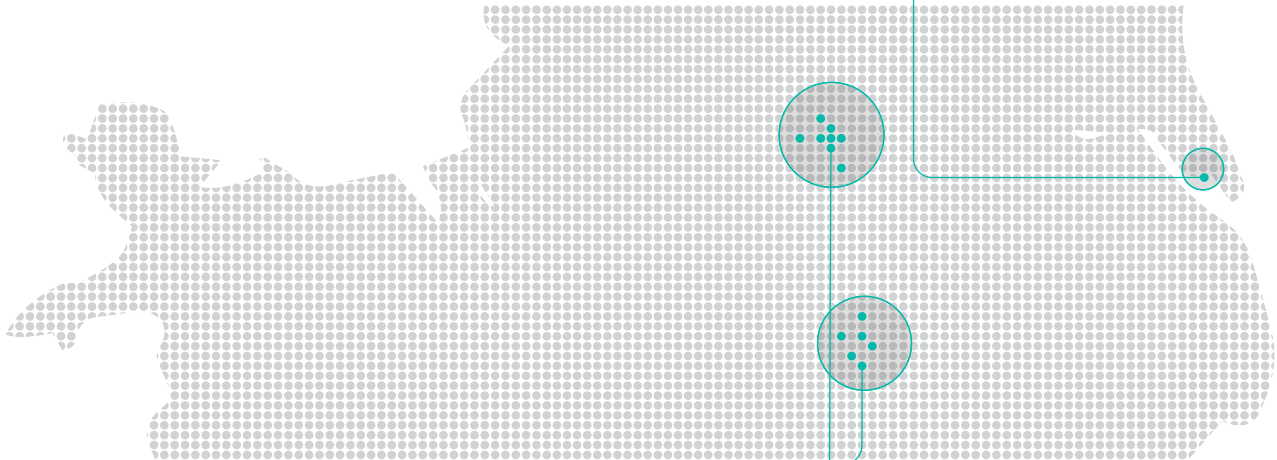


NET-WINE-ING



**C4DI**  
31-38 QUEEN STREET, HULL

A workspace and incubator located at the Fruit Market in Hull. Tenancy comes with a variety of perks from companies like AWS, FreeAgent, PwC, FreshDesk, Cloud App and WP Engine.



**ELECTRIC WORKS**  
SHEFFIELD DIGITAL CAMPUS, SHEFFIELD

Home of a three story helter skelter, the only one in a UK office; tenants can ride from the top floor to reception in seven seconds. The space is furnished with pieces from designers like Vitra, Bouroullec, Jasper Morrison, Ray and Charles Eames and George Nelson.



**PLATFORM**  
NEW STATION ST, LEEDS

Based in a former British Railways building, Platform is a new office space and home of a tech hub. Tenants have access to 410 desks, meetup areas and events, including Leeds Digital Coffee Morning, Cereal Networking and netWINEing.



# NORTH WEST

## WEWORK

**WEWORK**  
QUAY ST, MANCHESTER

WeWork has 253 coworking and office spaces in 74 cities internationally, with two locations in Manchester. Known for their beautifully designed interiors. Amenities include bike storage, craft beer on draft and micro-roasted coffee.



OUTSIDE CITY CENTRE



INTERNATIONAL



CYCLING CLUB



CRAFT BEER ON DRAUGHT



PAY PER MINUTE

## ZIFERBLAT

**ZIFERBLAT**  
4 ST PAUL'S SQUARE, LIVERPOOL L3

Established in 2011, Ziferblat is the first pay per minute coworking space in the world. With an international presence, Ziferblat has several editions in the north including Manchester and Liverpool. All amenities - which include coffees, cakes and wifi - are free.



## ALTSPACE

**ALTSPACE**  
31 STAMFORD STREET, ALTRINCHAM

altspace is defying the traditional city centre location of coworking spaces. The success of the venture and demand for space required a move to a larger building in January 2018.



# NORTH EAST

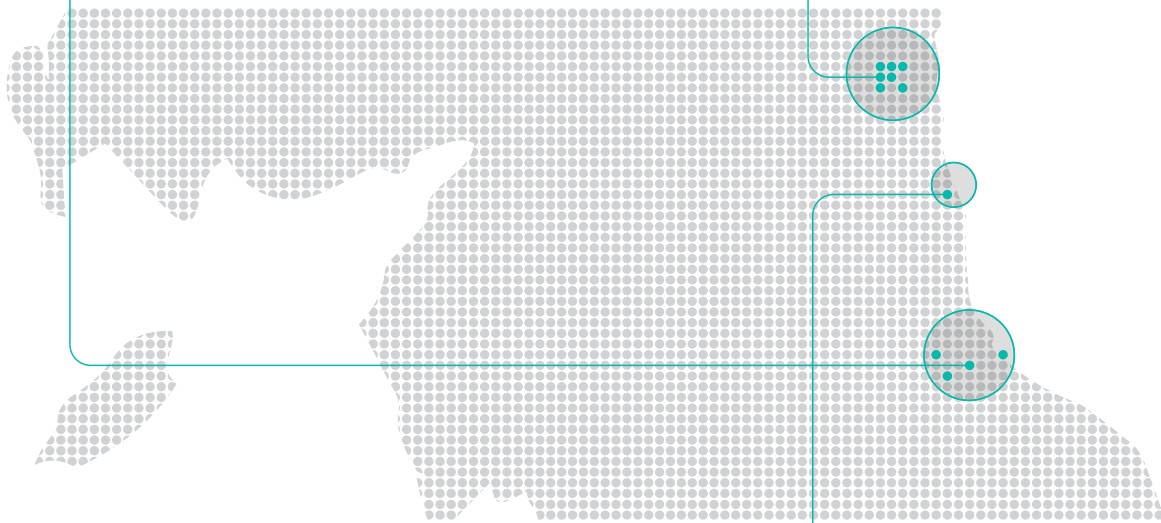

**BOHO ZONE**  
**BOHO ONE @ BRIDGE ST W, MIDDLESBROUGH**




A series of six buildings; its flagship building Boho One is environmentally friendly, with heating and cooling using a groundwater heat pump, heat retaining concrete ceilings, computer modelled natural lighting, solar shading and wind turbines.



**CAMPUS NORTH**  
**5 CARLIOL SQUARE, NEWCASTLE**

A coworking space and the home of accelerator Ignite. The organisation recently announced it will close its doors in December 2018, but will carry on its legacy as Tech For Life – an education initiative that introduces people of all ages and skill sets to tech.



-  ACCELERATOR
-  ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY
-  EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

**SOFTWARE CITY**  
**SUNDERLAND SOFTWARE CITY  
TAVISTOCK PLACE, SUNDERLAND**

The home of more than 60 businesses, Sunderland Software City offer business support, skills and education as well as training in the region. Known for their Go Reboot programme, introducing people from any educational or employment background onto a pathway into a career in digital industries.



**34. TRAK GLOBAL GROUP ▼**

CREWE, IT SERVICES

The continued success of Trak Global Group was recognised in December 2017, when the telematics solutions firm won the Amazon Growing Business Award for Mid-Sized Business, having claimed the gong for smaller companies the previous year.

Since its launch in 2009, the group has grown to become one of the world's largest telematics companies, gathering and interpreting data from connected devices to help organisations manage driver and vehicle risk. The Crewe-based company received the Prince Michael International Road Safety Award in 2015 for its work in reducing young driver accident frequency.

In 2017, Trak Global developed an app-based solution called Apply Fleet, which enables employers to promote and monitor workplace driver safety and reduce operating costs.

**35. QUINT GROUP +**

MACCLESFIELD, FINTECH

Named the UK's 40th best small company to work for by the Sunday Times in 2017, Macclesfield-based fintech firm Quint Group services over 50,000 international consumers a day and originates over £1.5bn of consumer lending per year in the UK alone.

The company's portfolio of businesses includes MoneyGuru.com, Monevo, Monevo Data Services and Credit Angel, and in 2017 the firm secured a £10m financing deal with Manchester's Tosca Debt Capital to fund its recapitalisation. Quint Group, which was founded in 2009 by CEO Greg Cox, is growing its international presence and currently has operations in the U.S., China, Australia, South Africa and Poland.

**36. PLANIXS GRP +**

MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Manchester-based provider of big data analytics Planixs was founded in 2011 with the aim of helping companies optimise their critical decision-making. The Planixs Graphite Platform offers predictive analytics and decision automation among a suite of tools that have enabled clients such as Vodafone, BBC, Barclays and HMRC to develop real-time, intelligent solutions through cloud architectures.

In 2017, the company announced the release of Enterprise Workforce, which further enhances its Human Capital Management capabilities.

**37. INVENTORY LTD ▼**

LEEDS, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

InVentry's sign-in and visitor management system is used by more than 4,000 schools, from primaries all the way through to sixth form colleges, and handles 49 sign-ins every second.

The company was established in 2010 in Leeds with the aim of helping schools to streamline their sign-in processes and transition away from paper records. InVentry enables schools to stay fully abreast of who is on site and ensures the security of identity information. The system includes a stylish touchscreen for visitors to use, and staff can use InVentry to sign-in via barcode or mobile app.

After seven years of organic growth, with the number of schools using the system rising from 100 in 2012 to 4,000 in 2017, InVentry was named in Deloitte's Fast 500 list of companies.



@TechNation



@TechNationHQ



@TechNationHQ

**38. THE HUT GROUP ▲**

MANCHESTER, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

The Hut Group has gone from strength to strength since being named the winner of the overall judges award at the Northern Tech Awards in 2017. That award came on the back of a spectacular 2016 for the UK's leading multi-website online retailer, in which sales rose by 50 per cent to £501m and investment of £252m fuelled the company's international and domestic expansion.

The company focused on acquisitions in 2017, bringing international beauty box leader GLOSSYBOX and spa and skincare brand ESPA into its growing portfolio of brands.

Headquartered in Cheshire, The Hut Group receives more than 400 million website visitors each year and ships to 192 countries.

**39. VOLCANIC +**

MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Stockport's Volcanic has opened offices on four continents since it was founded back in 2010 and has become known for consistently bringing new technologies to the online recruitment and staffing market.

The firm has created innovative websites and enterprise level content management systems for companies in 35 countries and in 15 languages, proudly delivering more than 20 million visitors and two million candidate registrations for its clients.

Commercial success in recent years led to the opening of offices in Malaysia, Australia and Mexico, and in 2018 Volcanic was recognised as one of Manchester's most innovative companies after being named in the Innovation100 Report, produced by BQ and the Business Growth Hub.

40.

**40. SKY BETTING & GAMING ▲**

LEEDS, BETTING &amp; GAMING

Sky Betting & Gaming was formed in 2001 and now has a team of more than 1,000 employees. The company is led by CEO Richard Flint, with headquarters in Leeds and offices in Sheffield, Solihull, London, Munich and Rome.

Sky Betting & Gaming was named the UK's 53rd best company to work for at Best Companies 2018. In April 2018 the company was acquired by Canadian-owned company The Stars Group for £3.4bn.

**41. M24SEVEN +**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

When Metronet acquired M24Seven for £46.5m in October 2016, the company began its transformation from successful wireless-based ISP to a business that delivers full LAN and WAN connectivity as well as managed cloud services internationally.

The last 12 months have seen the company adopt the M24Seven branding, refresh its systems and establish a presence in London. This was aided by the company's acquisition of London-focused network operator Venus Business Communications in March 2017.

Led by CEO Lee Perkins, M24Seven has more than doubled in size over the last 18 months.

#### 42. UINSURE + MANCHESTER, FINTECH

Manchester-based general insurance provider Uinsure was the first company of its kind to offer advisers a panel of leading insurers with a common policy wording when it was founded by CEO Simon Taylor in 2007.

Uinsure offers five-star-rated insurance via trusted brands and provides customers with a Defaqto compare tool to help them quickly find home insurance products.

The company built on a successful year in 2017, when it was named Best General Insurance Provider at the Paradigm Lender & Provider Awards, by winning the GI Provider of the Year gong at the 2018 Personal Touch Live Awards.

#### 43. RRADAR ▼ HULL, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Leeds-based law firm rradar has enjoyed a year of exceptional growth, winning a number of awards and completing a move to new premises along the way.

Originally launched in Hull in 2012, rradar moved to Leeds in 2016 but quickly outgrew its offices and moved to the Bruntwood building Platform in January 2018. Having started out as a company with just 10 employees and a turnover of £0.8m, rradar now employs more than 100 people and its turnover is estimated at £5m.

The company, which focuses on delivering a modern, proactive, positive client experience of the law, was recognised for its groundbreaking legal virtual assistant, rradarGrace, when it was awarded the Innovation of the Year prize at the Modern Law Awards in 2018.

#### 44. OPENCAST SOFTWARE EUROPE LTD ▲ NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, IT SERVICES

Newcastle's burgeoning tech sector provided the ideal setting for Opencast Software's 2012 launch and founder Mike O'Brien has successfully grown his technology and software services company from a team of one – himself – to a highly respected firm of more than 65 people.

Opencast specialises in the design, build, maintenance and operation of business-critical systems, providing software development, technology consultancy and staff augmentation services to help organisations work better.

The company has established offices in Newcastle, London and New York and attracted clients like Barclays, Betfair, Sage and NHS.

#### 45. PURPLE WIFI LTD ▼ OLDHAM, DATA ANALYTICS

Global leaders in guest WiFi analytics, Oldham-based Purple WiFi has been disrupting the market since Gavin Wheeldon founded the company in May 2012.

Purple Wifi's software allows businesses to monitor their physical spaces and promote their brand, while providing insights into customer behaviour. Growth in the hospitality, retail, healthcare and communication sectors in the last four years was boosted by investments of \$13m into the company, whose global partner network has expanded significantly in recent months with NLT Networks and Shopronics both becoming Purple Wifi resellers.

In February 2018 Purple Wifi announced a huge shake-up in their free and licensed WiFi solutions by offering their enhanced solution, Purple SMB, free of charge to businesses with five access points or fewer.

**46. EVOKE CREATIVE ▲**  
WIRRAL, DIGITAL AGENCY

Evoke Creative's move to a purpose-built HQ in January 2018 followed an outstanding period of growth and success during the previous few years.

The company was founded in 2003 by Dean Ward, Neil Clark, Graham Boyd and Iain Quayle, and quickly established itself as a market-leading designer of interactive digital products including self-service kiosks, video walls, digital signage, information points, payment terminals and interactive experiences. The company supplies major blue-chip clients such as JD Sports, Debenhams, Google and McDonald's.

Wirral-based Evoke now operates from its own 60,000 square foot premises and was named 2017 Manufacturer of the Year (under £25m) at Insider's Made in the UK Awards after a number of notable successes, including a contract with Vue cinemas to provide state-of-the-art ticket machines.

**47. BEDE GAMING ▼**  
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, BETTING & GAMING

Bede Gaming is an award-winning supplier of software to the online gaming industry. With headquarters in Newcastle and offices in London and Sofia, Bulgaria, Bede processes over 200 million transactions and handles more than £550m of wagers per month, powering some of the largest online gambling operators and lotteries worldwide.

The company started 2018 hot on the heels of the announcement of its expansion into South Africa through a partnership with Sun International, and soon followed up that news by announcing deals with Kiron Interactive, Genii, Gamevy and Playson.

Bede is working with leading operators to make advances in platform level compliance, providing its customers with its most robust and fair gaming platform to date.

**48. E-DAYS ABSENCE MANAGEMENT +**  
NOTTINGHAM, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Nottingham-based e-days provides more than 1,000 clients around the world with a cloud-based absence management solution.

e-days helps organisations in more than 80 countries to combat absenteeism, reduce staff administration time and gain insights into attendance through detailed reports, and the company's clients include Canon Europe, Sony Music, Standard Bank and NBCUniversal.

The 13-year-old company has enjoyed a successful growth period in recent years, culminating in an investment from private equity firm Palatine in November 2017.

**49. CONNEX ONE +**  
MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Cloud-based, omnichannel engagement platform Connex One allows organisations to interface with customers using voice, SMS, email, live chat and social media and has a track record of success, delivering a sales uplift of 25 per cent within four weeks to new clients.

The Manchester company was founded in 2013 and has since worked with clients in finance, retail, government, education, recruitment and media, helping businesses to increase the amount of time they spend communicating with customers to boost sales and retention.

50.

**50. SYKES COTTAGES ▲**

CHESTER, E-COMMERCE & MARKETPLACES

Sykes Cottages has been at the forefront of the holiday lettings industry for over 25 years; in November 2017 the company won the British Travel Awards prize for Best Large UK Holiday Cottage Booking Company for the fifth consecutive year.

The company was founded in 1991 when Clive Sykes and his mother formed a family business letting their own holiday cottages and those of their friends. Sykes Cottages now provides booking and management services to over 8,000 cottages in the UK and Ireland.



PLATFORM,  
LEEDS



LAURENCE NEWMAN, CEO, CURRENTBODY  
MANCHESTER

# LAURENCE NEWMAN

## CEO OF CURRENTBODY

**We sat down with Laurence Newman to talk about the foundations of CurrentBody and maintaining startup culture alongside international expansion.**

According to Laurence Newman, one in five people would recognise the home-use beauty device that has broken records by selling 15 million units worldwide.

That device is the Clarisonic cleansing face brush, Manchester entrepreneur Laurence first encountered, more than 10 years ago when he was the marketing director for a chain of clinics and salons.

The product's popularity was yet to take off outside of professional settings but, recognising the potential for the Clarisonic to lead a new market of home-use products, Laurence contacted its distributor with an idea.

"My idea was a website as a pure play in home-use beauty devices, which is all very well if you've got lots of products to sell but we didn't really have much to sell at the time," Laurence explains.

It was then that he met Andrew Showman, who had a track record of success in e-commerce for digital cameras.

Laurence describes their conversation at that time, saying: "Digital cameras were wavering a little due to the influx of camera-phones, so it was quite a good time for him and I to meet.

"I said: 'Look, my e-commerce experience is very limited. I've been told that this is something you're very proficient in. I've got a very good background in professional beauty products. This is my idea.'"

The pair launched CurrentBody.com, which has since emerged as a leading online retail destination for a beauty devices market estimated to be worth \$94.4bn by 2023.

The company's rapid success led to a £5m investment of growth capital from NVM Private Equity earlier this year, but Laurence has not forgotten the hurdles he and Andrew had to overcome to arrive at this point.

Back in 2009, he had to convince the beauty industry that e-commerce really was the way forward.

"Most beauty companies and manufacturers at the time wanted to see their products in Harrods, Selfridges, Space NK and the like," says Laurence, sitting in the mezzanine meeting room that overlooks CurrentBody's open-plan offices in Cheadle, Greater Manchester.

"Doing it through bricks and mortar is very difficult. You need someone on a stand who knows enough about these products and there's a big turnover of staff in stores.

"I was out there saying look, you need to be on our website. This is the future of it, this is where you need to showcase your product. It might be that we're not selling thousands of them but we'll give you content, videos, experienced customer service, and we can do surveys with our customers.

"All the things that they weren't able to focus on, we could do."

Laurence's confidence in his idea was well placed: online now represents 51 per cent of all sales of beauty devices and his firm has grown from a staff of two in a small office outside Wilmslow to a dynamic team of 30 experienced marketers and product specialists.

That growth was fuelled by a combination of intelligent business strategy and, Laurence admits, the odd stroke of good fortune.

"The first product that we were fortunate enough to start selling was Clarisonic," he says. "You have the odd break and that was our break. Clarisonic was acquired by L'Oreal, and L'Oreal becoming a key partner was a major success for us as a very small business.

"We've now gone from a point where we would buy and sell these products, to full marketing plans with 12-month or 18-month pipelines of new products and touchpoints throughout the year for discounting, product launches, exclusive content and so on.

“The most important thing we did in this business was put in a board and a chairman to help put a specific plan together. You might think to yourself that in a small business you don’t need board meetings, you don’t need strategy, you don’t need to revisit the strategy and the budget, but actually the more you stick to those disciplines the more you have a chance of success.”

As sales of beauty devices continue to dwindle in stores and grow rapidly online, the prospects for CurrentBody are of international growth and a global reach.

That will likely mean expansion for Laurence’s team, but he is keen to retain the small business mentality that has helped him forge a strong bond with his staff.

“I’ve been very transparent with the team all the way through,” he says. “I believe it’s the right way to be. I owe a lot to this team for getting us to this point.

“There were times when we’d be short-staffed in the warehouse and people from my marketing team would go and help. That’s how it should be. I’m trying to keep a startup feel to the business because, even though we’re bigger than a startup, in some respects we’re still in ‘startup mode’. I think that’s an important part of the culture.

“It’s still a bit chaotic and a little bit all-hands-to-the-pump, but that’s exciting.”

**51. MOBYSOFT ▲**

MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

During its 15-year history, Mobysoft has become an important part of the social housing landscape by delivering efficiencies to landlords through its award-winning software.

The company was founded in 2003 by Derek Steele and built its foundations by providing SMS solutions across various verticals through its SMS solution, MobileLogic. Now, its cloud-based analytic rent arrears software helps to tackle welfare reform, providing landlords with a 15.8 per cent arrears reduction on average in the first year as well as an average efficiency saving of 25 per cent.

Mobysoft's easy-to-install RentSense software picked up a Queen's Award for Enterprise in Innovation and the Housing Excellence Best IT system in 2016.

**52. CONTRACTHIREANDLEASING.COM ▲**

STOCKPORT, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

Founded in 2000, ContractHireAndLeasing.com offered car leasing companies an alternative to traditional offline advertising and quickly emerged as the leading website in the car leasing industry.

Now the largest dedicated new car, contract hire and vehicle leasing website in the UK, ContractHireAndLeasing.com has more than four million live deals available at any one time.

The company is based in purpose-built office in Hazel Grove, Stockport, and works with the UK's main dealers, independent dealerships and brokers.

**53. AZZURE IT ▼**

SHEFFIELD, IT SERVICES

Winner of the Yorkshire Post Fastest 50 Award for two years running in 2015 and 2016, and a two-time Deloitte Fast UK tech company, Azzure IT has continued its trajectory of growth to become the leading provider of Microsoft Dynamics.

From its headquarters in Sheffield and its offices in Reading and Newcastle, the company helps businesses to realise the full potential of the Microsoft Dynamics suite, working across sectors including manufacturing, distribution, professional services and not-for-profit.

Managing director Craig Such successfully built several ERP businesses before founding Assure IT in 2011.

**54. THE FLOW ▼**

SHEFFIELD, HARDWARE

Telematics company The Floop announced the opening of its first North American office in September 2017 following an outstanding year of growth and success in which the Sheffield-based firm won Red Herring's Top 100 Europe award.

As well as expanding into America, the company is partnering with an ever-increasing number of European firms such as Portuguese insurance market leader Fidelidade, who appointed The Floop to work on its first telematics pilot using smartphone app technology.

**55. R2C ONLINE +**

SHEFFIELD, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

R2C's market-leading vehicle management platform is used by more than 20,000 fleets and 800 workshops worldwide. The company's reputation has been built around specialist knowledge of the automotive space, along with its proven track record of low-cost accelerated deployment model and rapid ROI.

The world's leading vehicle manufacturers and operators, including Iveco, Scania, Renault Trucks, Isuzu and Tesco.com are turning to R2C's SaaS platform, which was used to detect more than 3.5m safety-related vehicle defects in 2017.

The company was founded in 2003 and continues to grow the business internationally from its headquarters in Sheffield.

**56. MTECH IT SOLUTIONS ▲**

LEEDS, IT SERVICES

With companies across the UK working hard to become GDPR compliant, Leeds-based firm MTech enjoyed a busy year. The 10-year-old company is a Microsoft Gold partner in cloud solutions and works with more than 60 companies, providing IT support and management advice.

GDPR legislation forced many businesses to review their security and data recovery protocols, and MTech has worked closely with clients like Leeds Rugby, Yorkshire Cricket, Springfield Healthcare and Proper Music throughout the process, providing strategic IT support to ensure they remain productive and prosperous into the future.

**57. BETTER2KNOW ▲**

MORECAMBE, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

Better2Know revolutionised access to sexual health testing services with the launch of its round-the-clock appointment service in 2008. Over the course of the last decade, the Lancashire-based company has become the UK's largest private provider of these services, delivering thousands of tests to patients who can remain anonymous and receive test results extremely quickly – often within minutes.

Company CEO Mike Asher, previously Chief Executive at the Centre of Excellence for Life Sciences, has 20 years' experience in biotechnology and he worked with regional government to negotiate funding, regional development strategies and growth plans for the business.

**58. ASPIRE TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS ▲**

GATESHEAD, IT SERVICES

Aspire Technology Solutions achieved record levels of customer engagement and a net promoter score of 64 in 2017, having made a trio of key appointments earlier in the year. The managed services company, which improves organisations' existing IT systems, appointed a new chief technical architect along with new heads of services management and delivery following a sustained period of growth.

Following its launch in 2006, Aspire grew to a staff of 40 by 2013 and surpassed 100 staff in 2017. The company works with organisations of all sizes and across sectors including health, retail, construction, utilities, pharmaceuticals, fashion, the motor industry, and education.

**59. PRAESTO CONSULTING +**

DARLINGTON, IT SERVICES

Praesto Consulting is widening access to its unique cloud-based IT solutions, unlocking game-changing business analytics systems for a growing network of clients across Europe and North America.

In March 2018, the company celebrated nine years since its launch by opening a new office in Rotterdam, having amplified its growth in North America with the acquisition of CRM and business intelligence consultancy Accelsior Corporation only five months earlier.

Managing director Jem Ranson founded the company in 2009 and has since grown Praesto into a market-leading IT consultancy specialising in the implementation of business intelligence, enterprise performance and CRM systems.

[@TechNation](#)[@TechNationHQ](#)[@TechNationHQ](#)



## 60.

**60. MUSICMAGPIE +**

MANCHESTER, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

After 10 years of sustained growth, musicMagpie moved to new headquarters at Stockport's Exchange office development in 2017 having become the first business in the world to achieve a feedback score of 5m on eBay.

The company was founded in 2007 and run from Steve Oliver's garage in Stockport, where he and co-founder Walter Gleeson recognised the huge demand for hard-to-find films, novels and music. The launch of an eBay store in 2011 accelerated the company's growth and musicMagpie now employs more than 1,000 people in Stockport.

**61. PARCEL2GO ▲**

BOLTON, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

Bolton-based Parcel2Go has gone from strength to strength since being ranked in the Sunday Times Tech Track 100 in 2011, running websites and customer services for Europe's leading courier firms. Parcel2Go.com is the country's leading parcel delivery comparison website and the company is also the UK's leading parcel broker, offering a full range of national and international destinations with same-day, next-day and economy services.

The company was founded by Fil Adams-Mercer in 2004 and works with couriers including TNT, Hermes, DPD and UPS throughout Europe.

**62. PROVU ▲**

HUDDERSFIELD, IT SERVICES

With headquarters in Huddersfield, ProVu are distributors of voice over IP hardware. The company's award-winning ProSys reseller portal has empowered resellers to take control of their orders and the system's popularity has fuelled ProVu's ongoing growth and success.

In November 2017 the company announced that it is part of Sennheiser UK's selective distribution system, providing its customers with some of the most sought-after office and contact centre headsets on the market.

**63. VIRTUAL COLLEGE +**

ILKLEY, EDTECH

Based in Ilkley, West Yorkshire, Virtual College has been helping people in the public and private sectors to reach their potential since 1995 and now has a growing user base of over 3m registered learners, growing at a rate of 1,500 per day.

Virtual College's learning management system provides access to more than 300 online courses, and the company's commitment to helping enhance traditional learning through the careful integration of technology has earned it several accolades. Named Supplier of the Year by Learning Technologies in 2016, the company aims to reach 20m learners by 2020.

**64. RIPE THINKING +**

MANCHESTER, FINTECH

With an annual turnover of £11m, Ripe Thinking was named the UK's Best Specialist Insurance Provider at the 2018 Insurance Choice Awards. The company's strategy involves using data and machine learning to drive growth and more than 190,000 policyholders are registered with the firm.

Ripe Thinking secured funding from the government's innovation agency, Innovate UK, to develop a knowledge-sharing partnership with the University of Salford that will investigate the use of AI and machine learning to improve customer experience.

**65. DIGITAL NEXT +**

MANCHESTER, DIGITAL AGENCY

Digital Next achieved a turnover of £1m within two years of its 2009 launch and now operates as a full service digital agency with 80 staff in five countries around the world. The company was founded by brothers Mark and Justin Blackhurst and joined the Federation of Small Businesses in its second year. In 2017 the company won the FSB's Business of the Year award for Manchester and North Cheshire.

Specialising in SEO, SEM, PPC and paid social media services, Digital Next is a Google Premier Partner and is on course to achieve a £4m turnover in 2018.

**66. AIRANGEL ▼**

WARRINGTON, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Warrington-based provider of guest WiFi solutions Airangel expanded its operations throughout 2017, acquiring numerous European brands and securing significant investment.

The company, which was founded by Chris Airey and Dean Wilkinson in 2005, has more than 50 million registered users of its WiFi products at apartment buildings and large public venues, which cover over 360,000 rooms and units in 42 different countries.

Their clients include Mercedes-Benz, Malmaison, Hotel du Vin and the NHS, and the company has opened an office in Dubai to cover its Middle East and Africa operations.

**67. SONOCENT ▲**

LEEDS, EDTECH

Sonocent's Audio Notetaker tool is transforming learning by making audio as easy to access and manipulate as text. The tool gained more than 52,000 new users in 2017, while nearly 27,000 new users utilised Sonocent's Recorder and Link apps for note-taking on the go, and in a company survey 72 per cent of students said the products had contributed to grade improvements.

Roger Tucker founded Sonocent in Leeds in 2007; the company is planning to move to new offices in 2018 while continuing to develop products in conjunction with prestigious learning institutions such as Vision West Nottinghamshire College, The University of Bath, University College Cork and the University of the District of Columbia.

**68. MANDO ▼**

LIVERPOOL, DIGITAL AGENCY

Mando has been helping to shape the digital strategies of global brands in the utilities, manufacturing, financial services, and telecoms sectors for over 20 years, winning numerous awards along the way.

Ian Finch, who founded the company in Liverpool back in 1997, picked up the Agency Leader of the Year prize at The Drum's 2015 Network Awards, and Mando has since continued to strengthen its reputation for delivering simple, efficient digital experiences, helping organisations such as Warburtons, Thomas Cook Group, TalkTalk and Transport for London achieve success.



SARAT PEDIREDLA, CEO, HEDGEHOG LAB  
NEWCASTLE

# SARAT PEDIREDLA

## CEO OF HEDGEHOG LAB

**We met with Sarat Pediredla at Hedgehog Lab's flagship office in Newcastle to talk about the company's development.**

Founded in 2007, Newcastle-based Hedgehog Lab has built its reputation on exceptional digital applications for smartphones, tablets, desktops and wearables. With offices across North America and India, Hedgehog Lab's expanding team is now exploring how mobile, immersive and AI technologies can influence sectors such as retail, energy and utilities.

We met with Sarat Pediredla, CEO of Hedgehog Lab at their headquarters in Newcastle to talk about the company's evolution.

### **HOW DID HEDGEHOG LAB BEGIN?**

I used to be a software developer. I was working for a company before I formed Hedgehog Lab with my co-founder Mark. It did really well and it grew massively. But there was no where else for me to go in the organisation; I wanted to progress. In 2007, Mark and I left our jobs and set up the company.

In the early days, we didn't really have a business plan. We created a software business in the financial services sector, because we had experience with that. Originally we were just doing financial software on browsers. Then in 2008 the financial crisis happened and the whole industry went from spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on software to locking their wallets up. We had a bit of software we had spent six months creating that no one wanted to use. So we had to pivot the company very quickly and we did the next best thing we could do, which was to become a digital agency.

**“There were people ringing up from Los Angeles, New York. And we were just baffled. I used to remember going on the phone and saying, ‘you do realise we’re in Newcastle, right?’”**

– SARAT PEDIREDLA, HEDGEHOG LAB



**WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE PROGRESSION?**

I became really excited by what the iPhone was doing. We started experimenting with building apps. I remember saying to Mark, 'this is going to be big'. But the problem was, even in 2008, 2009 there wasn't really a market for it.

We kept doing what we were doing, and we grew slowly. Then in 2010 I suffered from a serious illness and was out of work for about 6-9 months of that year. We had a really tough year with the business, and when I came back, everyone seemed to be doing websites. The business wasn't going anywhere. We were still playing around with mobile apps and we thought: why don't we reposition ourselves as a post-pc tech consultancy and just focus on apps? We've been growing year by year everP since then.

**WHY DID YOU MAKE THE DECISION TO EXPAND INTERNATIONALLY?**

By 2014, the business was really starting to scale out. And we were really struggling. Because we were considered a micro business we couldn't attract people; we didn't have a brand, we didn't have a presence. No one really knew about us. At the same time, we had to constantly turn down work because of it. It didn't seem like there was a lot of people that did apps, and those that do are out of reach in terms of the size of the market.

I'm originally from India, and I was talking to one of my cousins there. He was telling me about the skills of people there, and it just kind of dawned on me if we set up an India office we could access a talent pool; that was our first foray into international business. We set up a team there, went and recruited people.

As the business grew, we started to see a lot more interest from America. There were people ringing up from Los Angeles, New York. And we were just baffled. I used to remember going on the phone and saying, 'you do realise we're in Newcastle, right?'

We started scouting, went on some R&D missions looking for locations. And then fate just connected us with Pat, who runs our US office. In 2016 we formally set up the US company.

**HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN YOUR WORKING CULTURE AS THE BUSINESS GROWS?**

In 2016, we were named one of the best places to work in Newcastle by Glassdoor. When we doubled our team last year, there was a real challenge of maintaining the culture, especially in a global team. We didn't have a template for culture, we did things that we wanted to do. It's common sense stuff. Treat people fairly, be transparent. There's no secret.

Fundamentally I think all businesses have good culture, because they start with that. Our challenge was not to get in the way of that, with roadblocks and processes. As long as we're aware of that, and we're learning, then it will be fine.



**69. LEAD TECH +**

LEEDS, DATA ANALYTICS

Customer generation business Lead Tech spends more than £3m on marketing its clients to consumers each year, and by the end of 2018 aims to have returned at least £1bn in revenue for brands in the financial services, legal and clean energy sectors.

Lead Tech was founded in Otley in 2008 by Nigel Borwell and Paul Walsh, and the company moved to new offices in nearby Pool-in-Wharfedale in late 2016, creating 70 new jobs as part of a business plan that includes a target turnover of £16.7m by the end of FY2019.





JAMES HALL, DIRECTOR, PARALLAX  
LEEDS

# JAMES HALL

## DIRECTOR OF PARALLAX

**In their airy offices in Leeds, Director James Hall tells us about Parallax's journey from four friends drinking afternoon beers to a burgeoning digital media agency working with adidas and the NHS.**

"I don't suppose there was really any grand vision. It was just: this could be cool. We didn't really know if it was going to work or not."

James Hall sits under a skylight in a 150-year-old building – originally a brewing and bottling warehouse – a stone's throw from the River Aire in Leeds and home to his digital media company, Parallax.

There is a hushed air of focus around their airy office, which James puts down to the Parallax team being "quite devvy".

But it wasn't always like this.

"In the beginning it was us four playing really loud music and trying to shout over each other, but now it's quite quiet and relaxing," he says.

"We've still got a bit of that culture; we've got a beer vending machine. We used to have beer on tap but we don't drink as much as we used to, which is a good thing I guess. We sometimes play video games on an afternoon."

Parallax originally consisted of James and Lawrence Dudley handling "the techie side of things", while Andy Fitch and Dario Grandich specialised in development and design, respectively.

"We had a good mix of different kinds of development skills, design, and being able to go out and sell it, and we thought: there's enough difference in all of us to go and make a well-rounded company from this," says James.

The four friends quickly discovered that their particular blend of talents would set them apart from other digital agencies.

"We started off doing some quite technical projects involving LED billboards, which is why we've got that techie streak throughout the agency," he says. "Quite early on we managed to bag British Airways as a client."

**“We’re pioneers of Amazon’s tech in this part of the world and off the back of that they say: ‘Do you know anyone?’ And they’ll point to us.”**

– JAMES HALL, PARALLAX

We started doing all their business lounge stuff and off the back of that we got Eurostar.

“We’re half development, half traditional marketing agency, and we’ve had an Internet Of Things streak running through us. We’ll often find that other agencies nearby pick up a lot of web jobs but when they’ve got something more involved to do, they’ll come to us.”

The company’s capability to produce software for connected devices along with core online marketing assets put them in contention to win flagship projects for global brands.

When adidas needed interactive displays for their Kate Moss Originals campaign in 2016 they turned to Parallax, whose track record of successful public engagement has led them onto pioneering projects with city councils and the NHS.

“We’ve taken on two large NHS projects, one of which is coming to an end and has been really successful,” says James. “We’ve built them a minimum viable product to improve the way they spend their money on management training.

“We’ve moved onto doing street lighting. We’re trying to save councils money on their electricity bills by putting radios in the streetlights themselves so that they can control them over time. It’s a really cool project.

“I know air pollution is a big thing – there was a report this morning about how pollution in Yorkshire affected childhood asthma and there’s a direct link there. It’ll be interesting to see how tech can help with that problem and what councils are looking to do with it.”

James received personal recognition for his work when he was named as an Amazon Community Hero – one of only 13 expert developers in Europe and the Middle East to be given the title for their outstanding knowledge of Amazon Web Services (AWS).

“I didn’t even get a cape or anything,” says James. “We’re pioneers of their tech in this part of the world and off the back of that people go to Amazon and say: ‘Do you know anyone?’ And they’ll point to us.

“We’ve been running an AWS meetup, originally at our offices but we’ve outgrown it in the last couple of years. It is getting to the size of about 80 or 90 people so we’re thinking about moving it.”

You get the feeling Parallax may need to move its team to larger premises in the coming years as the company continues to flourish, but James has no plans to uproot from a Northern tech scene he believes is thriving.

“We have a satellite office in London,” he says. “We’ll often go down and meet clients in London but they’re keen to meet with agencies up North because the cost of living in London is so great, developers are expensive, so London companies are moving their resource to Leeds and Manchester.

“Leeds and Manchester is where it’s at, I think.”

70.

**WAX DIGITAL ▲**

HYDE, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Spend Management and eProcurement firm Wax Digital is the UK's number one source-to-pay vendor and among the top five globally. The company powers procurement and sourcing processes for 260,000 users in 103 countries, and 18 per cent of Wax Digital's turnover is reinvested in project development.

Founded in Manchester in 2001 by Daniel Ball and Paul Ellis, Wax Digital's web3 for Healthcare product is helping NHS Trusts to maintain service levels while delivering on cost-cutting and savings directives from central government. The company also provides eProcurement products to Nissan, Xerox, Durham University and ITV.

**71. UNIFORM ▲**

LIVERPOOL, DIGITAL AGENCY

Over the last 20 years, Uniform has grown from the startup project of three design students at Liverpool John Moores University, to a team of 54 creatives who provide innovative solutions for clients like Gatorade, Arsenal FC and Canary Wharf.

The company was featured in the *The Guardian* in 2017 after creating Solo, the 'emotional radio' that selects music based on listeners' emotional state, and it is this playful approach to design that has made Uniform one of the country's most sought-after agencies.

**72. WATERSTONS +**

DURHAM, IT SERVICES

Following financial growth of close to 30 per cent in 2017, creative IT consultancy Waterstons announced a move to new premises as the company aims to continue its upward trajectory.

Founded in 1994, and with a client list including Shell, Leeds Beckett University, and the University of York, Waterstons works with businesses to define and develop technology, process and governance architectures, helping them to improve performance.

The company has offices in London and Glasgow, employing 133 staff, and is planning expansion into the Asia-Pacific region in the near future.

**73. MOBICA ▼**

WILMSLOW, IT SERVICES

Featured in the Sunday Times Tech Track 100 five times since its launch in 2004, Mobica brings next-generation, time-critical products to life for the connected device market.

The company was founded by Nick Stammers and Jon Clayton and has earned a stellar reputation for its software services and technology solutions. Mobica has 11 research and development hubs around the world, pushing the company forward in the creation of cutting edge products for sectors including fintech, automotive and semiconductor.

In 2017, the Wilmslow-based company announced key appointments to bolster its senior leadership team, who are working towards a target of 3,000 employees by 2020.

**74. FIREFISH SOFTWARE +**

GLASGOW, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Glasgow recruitment software company Firefish began in 2006 when a team of recruiters decided to address the limitations of existing solutions by developing their own. Within four years of successfully growing an agency using their own award-winning in-house software, the Firefish team were in a position to offer their platform out to other companies.

The success of Firefish resides in its ability to revive 'dead' data and engage candidates who would otherwise remain hidden. The company won the ScotlandIS Digital Technology Award for Best Newcomer in 2012, and the company is a finalist in the 2018 Digital Tech Awards for Best B2B Tech.

**75. VISUALSOFT ▲**

TEESSIDE, DIGITAL AGENCY

Visualsoft boasts a hugely successful e-commerce platform with a proven track record of helping retailers such as TJ Hughes, Charles Clinkard and Shoetique grow and sustain their businesses online.

Named one of Econsultancy's Top 100 Digital Agencies in 2017, Visualsoft works with more than 1,000 retailers and over the course of two decades since its launch in Stockton-on-Tees the company has added offices in Manchester, Newcastle and London and signed partnerships with industry heavyweights like Google, PayPal, Barclaycard and Trustpilot.

**76. VAIONI GROUP ▲**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Vaioni is a Ethernet and cloud solutions company, creating bespoke networks to put customers in control of their connectivity. Since launching in Manchester in 2008, the company has developed a carrier grade infrastructure, the Vaioni Ethernet Network, which connects London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Newcastle.

Following a successful year of growth, the company was named Best Fixed Line Network Provider of the Year at the 2017 Comms National Awards and Connectivity Provider of the Year at the 2017 Comms Business Awards.

**77. PARALLAX ▼**

LEEDS, DIGITAL AGENCY

Having started out as four friends working out of their bedrooms in York back in 2009, Parallax is now firmly established as a major player in the thriving Leeds tech scene and has worked with clients as prestigious and diverse as British Airways, Nespresso, Hisense, American Express, Dyson, and The Sunday Times.

As well as being one of the most trusted digital agencies in the north for design, development, online marketing and PR, Parallax gives back to the Leeds community through its work with local charities such as homeless shelter St George's Crypt.

**78. CABOODLE TECHNOLOGY +**

CREWE, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Formerly Salary Exchange, employee benefit and engagement firm Caboodle changed its name in 2017 to reflect the breadth of its offering.

Since 2009, the company has been developing a market-leading employee benefits platform, Salary Extras, which can be tailored to the specific programme and needs of every client. Caboodle is now one of the UK's leading independent companies of its kind, servicing more than 8,000 UK organisations, and was named Business of the Year (11 to 50 employees) in the NatWest Cheshire Business Awards 2017.

**79. ELEMENTARY TECHNOLOGY ▼**

LEEDS, HARDWARE

The opening of a Customer Experience Centre at Elementary Technology's Leeds headquarters has helped the 15-year-old company provide a number of new services to its customers around the country. Visitors can now experience the very latest interactive audio-visual technology for education for themselves, under the guidance of Elementary's experienced staff members.

Working across education and enterprise marketplaces, the company supports thousands of UK schools, helping them to implement education technology to improve teaching and learning.

80.

**80. ANS +**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Ranked at number 18 in The Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For in 2018, Manchester's ANS offers public, private and hybrid cloud services, helping more than 300 customers to become cloud enabled. Founded in 1996, the company has partnered with Cisco, NetApp, Microsoft and AWS to develop successful cloud migration solutions for its customers, becoming the country's leading cloud services provider.

ANS has been given 3-star accreditation by The Sunday Times to denote its 'extraordinary' rating as an employer, and the company has nurtured 65 apprentices in the last five years, as well as raising more than £400,000 through charitable activities.

**81. OPENCRM ▲**

RICHMOND, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Graham Anderson founded OpenCRM in Richmond in 2005. Graham, who was part of Apple's UK Mac launch team before establishing the company, is now system architect and managing director and he works alongside many of the firm's original staff members.

OpenCRM provides a cloud-based CRM solution along with flexible consultancy, training and support to customers such as Gresham Books, Launchpad Research and Waterlogic.

**82. UKFAST ▲**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Manchester cloud management and hosting specialists UKFast are renowned for servicing some of the world's biggest brands and providing its growing workforce with an exceptional working environment.

Having achieved a turnover of £40m in 2016, the company went on to feature in the Financial Times 1000 Europe's Fastest Growing Companies and won Cloud Services Provider of the Year at the CRN Channel Awards 2016-17.

UKFast has offices in Manchester, London and Glasgow, and provides employees with sleeping pods, on-site crèche services, yoga classes and office dogs, so it is little surprise the company featured in The Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2017.

**83. ZUTO ▼**

MACCLESFIELD, FINTECH

Winner of the Feefo Gold Trusted Service award in 2018, Zuto has helped more than 2m people in the UK find and finance vehicles since the company launched in 2006.

Founded in Macclesfield by James Wilkinson and Ryan Dignan, the company expanded into Manchester in 2015 and went on to rank 18th in The Sunday Times Top 100 Best Medium Companies to work for in 2016.

Zuto employs over 300 people and has provided more than £1.1 bn in finance to a customer base with a 98 per cent satisfaction rating.

**84. NGC NETWORK SERVICES +**

WAKEFIELD, IT SERVICES

NGC Networks, which provides cost-effective connectivity solutions for businesses, partnered with alternative infrastructure provider CityFibre in 2017 to deliver ultra-fast fibre broadband to local businesses.

Wakefield-based NGC was founded in 2002 and is committed to helping organisations across the north enhance their communications through bespoke solutions, using industry-leading technology from brands including BT Openreach, VirginMedia, TalkTalk and EE.

NGC is working with CityFibre to ensure organisations in Bradford and Huddersfield benefit from gigabit internet speeds, providing a major boost to the region's productivity.

**85. INTECHNICA ▼**

MANCHESTER, DIGITAL AGENCY

Working across retail, B2B commerce, online gaming, media and insurance, Intechnica has been pushing the frontiers of digital performance and web traffic management for 12 years.

The Manchester firm is on a huge recruitment drive in 2018 as the company grows on the back of the continued success of its digital traffic management tool, TrafficDefender, and its Digital Blueprint technology benchmarking service.

Intechnica was founded by Jeremy Gidlow and Andy Still after the pair successfully optimised and implemented the system that sold tickets for Glastonbury Festival in 2005 and embarked upon a shared career in scalable technology.

**86. BLUE LOGIC ▲**

LEEDS, IT SERVICES

Leeds-based IT solutions firm Blue Logic was recognised for outstanding service to clients and staff in 2017, picking up the regional prize at the National Apprenticeship Awards and being shortlisted for Service Provider of the Year in the Network Computing Awards.

The company's achievements marked the culmination of 10 years' growth and investment, led by directors Mark and Dave Helm who employ more than 70 people at their offices in north-east Leeds. Blue Logic is committed to knowledge-sharing, running regular workshops, seminars and webinars for clients and partners.

**87. HIRING HUB ▼**

MANCHESTER, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Launched in 2011, Hiring Hub brought a new approach to the recruitment industry by creating a transparent platform where firms can set the fee they are willing to pay an agency to fill a role. For the last eight years, agencies have been using that platform to bid for work and companies like Schuh, Morrisons, Jaguar Land Rover and Iceland have bought into the risk-free process, helping to make Hiring Hub a success.

Fragmentation of larger recruitment firms and growth in the industry as a whole have contributed to an exciting period for Hiring Hub, which now employs 22 staff and will grow to a team of 30 by the end of 2018.

**88. APADMI ▼**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

When Apadmi was named Large Digital Agency of the Year at the Northern Digital Awards 2018, judges hailed the firm's reputation for "doing things that nobody else is capable of". That reputation has propelled the Manchester-based company to the forefront of the northern digital scene over the last nine years, with brands like BBC, The X Factor, The Guardian, BT, Aviva, Skyscanner, EE, AstraZeneca and Lexus choosing Apadmi for mobile application development and technology solutions.

With a team of more than 60 working across their Manchester and London offices, Apadmi specialises in full server systems, artificial intelligence, internet of things, big data and analytics.

**89. THE WEBINAR VET +**

LIVERPOOL, EDTECH

More than 21,000 veterinary surgeons and nurses in 95 countries use The Webinar Vet to access continuous professional development at a time and in a location that suits them.

The company was founded in Liverpool in 2010, with the aim of providing vets everywhere with up-to-date veterinary knowledge, eliminating the need for practitioners to find cover while they travel to attend lectures. The website features courses and webinars for nurses, surgeons, managers and student vets, around which the largest online veterinary community has grown.

90.

**90. RADIUS PAYMENT SOLUTIONS +**

CREWE, FINTECH

Radius Payment Solutions provides international fleet market solutions in 14 countries around the world from its headquarters in Crewe. The company has grown steadily since its launch in 1990 and now employs more than 1,000 staff globally.

Ranked 31st in The Sunday Times Top Track companies in 2016, Radius welcomed a £150m minority investment from UK-based private equity firm Inflexion in 2018 to bolster the company's growth strategy.

Following the opening of a US office in November 2017, the firm is moving to a new, purpose-built global HQ in Crewe, which is due for completion in late spring 2018.

**91. TRIBEPAD ▼**

SHEFFIELD, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Recruitment management firm TribePad has created an applicant tracking system that is used in more than 120 countries, processing in excess of 9m job applications each year. The Sheffield-based firm also supplies the most configurable video interviewing platforms on the market, used by clients such as Tesco, Bupa, Skipton Building Society and KFC.

The company enjoyed a successful 2017 with revenues up by 29 per cent and new contracts signed with Warner Bros., Beaverbrooks and The Church of England. Tribepad offers its staff flexible working as well as unlimited holidays, and is growing its team in 2018.

**92. NEXUS VEHICLE RENTAL +**

LEEDS, E-COMMERCE &amp; MARKETPLACES

Having been given 'One to Watch' status in 2017, Nexus Vehicle Retail has progressed to achieve one star accreditation from the Best Companies programme, which evaluates the strength of connection between a company's employees and the broader aims of their organisation.

Founded in 2000, Nexus has built its success on a commitment to being able to provide temporary vehicles to businesses anytime, anywhere, along with the tools required to manage a fleet. Shortlisted in the Fast Growth category of the Business Desk Yorkshire Business Masters for its innovation and customer service, Nexus retains 98 per cent of its customers year-on-year.

**+ 93. MAGINUS**

MANCHESTER, IT SERVICES

Winner of the Commerce Partner of the Year in the Episerver UK & Ireland Website Awards in 2017, Maginus is a leading provider of omnichannel software solutions for wholesale, retail, B2B and B2C e-commerce.

Founded in Manchester in 1991, the company has established long standing relationships with its clients, and brands like the Co-Operative Group and The Wine Society have been relying upon Maginus' solution-driven approach for more than 16 years.

Maginus COO Mark Thornton has over 30 years' experience in the software industry and is one of the leading industry speakers on the critical issues of cloud technology.

**94. TPP ▼**

LEEDS, IT SERVICES

The Phoenix Partnership (TPP) employs more than 200 people at its headquarters in Leeds and was placed first in The Sunday Times 100 Best Small Companies to Work For in 2014 and 2015. Since then, the company has been focusing on exporting its innovative healthcare software products to Asia and the Middle East, building on the outstanding successes achieved with the NHS.

TPP's SystemOne platform is used by 7,000 NHS organisations and 200,000 staff across 24 different health settings, and the company has been supporting healthcare professionals to deliver electronic patient records for two decades.

**95. SITS GROUP +**

CRAMLINGTON, IT SERVICES

Significant growth in 2017 led Cramlington-based SITS Group to expand its team of virtualisation specialists, making a number of new hires in 2018 to celebrate the firm's 10-year anniversary.

The company, which was formed in 2008 and incorporated Pivotal Networks into the group in 2011, achieved an overall turnover close to £10m in its 10th year of trading. The firm has won a number of awards for its flexible and versatile cloud solutions, picking up the VMware Small Business Partner of the Year in 2012 and 2013, as well as being presented the Centre of Excellence Award from Liquidware Labs UK.

## 96. ELITE GROUP +

CHORLEY, IT SERVICES

In January 2018, Elitetele.com became Elite Group, following the acquisition of Support Span Group – a specialist provider of telephony system solutions. The acquisition was Elite’s 16th since 2008 and reflected the continued organic growth taking place at the UK’s leading provider of unified communications solutions.

Elite was founded in 2000 and now delivers best-in-class, future-proof communications and IT services to over 7,000 clients including Yo! Sushi, Omega World Travel and Destinology, and the company boasts an annual turnover in excess of £57m.



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# TECH NATION REPORT 2018: A NORTHERN VIEW

We know the number of tech companies is growing across the North of England, but where are the hotspots? We delve into a number of measures in each of the four biggest tech clusters, from the combined turnover of digital tech businesses, to turnover by employee, as well as looking at some the strengths and challenges in each, according to its community. This data was gathered for the Tech Nation Report 2018, published in May.

Find out more at [technation.io/report2018](http://technation.io/report2018)

## LEEDS

Digital tech business turnover

**£1.01 billion**

Digital tech turnover by employee

**£83K**

GVA

**£1.28 billion**

Strengths  
[According to its community]

1. HELPFUL TECH COMMUNITY
2. APPEALING AREA
3. PROXIMITY OF A UNIVERSITY

Challenges  
[According to its community]

1. ACCESS TO FUNDING
2. ACCESS TO TALENT
3. LACK OF TECH TRAINING

SOURCE: ONS: BUSINESS STRUCTURE DATABASE 2017  
SOURCE: ONS: ANNUAL BUSINESS SURVEY 2017  
SOURCE: TECH NATION: TECH NATION SURVEY 2018

**MANCHESTER**

Digital tech business turnover

**£3.21 billion**

Digital tech turnover by employee

**£105K**

GVA

**£3.36 billion**

Strengths  
[According to its community]

1. HELPFUL TECH COMMUNITY
2. APPEALING AREA
3. PROXIMITY OF A UNIVERSITY

Challenges  
[According to its community]

1. ACCESS TO FUNDING
2. ACCESS TO TALENT
3. LACK OF TECH TRAINING

**NEWCASTLE**

Digital tech business turnover

**£1 billion**

Digital tech turnover by employee

**£97K**

GVA

**£1.34 billion**

Strengths  
[According to its community]

1. HELPFUL TECH COMMUNITY
2. ACCESS TO RESOURCES
3. PROXIMITY OF A UNIVERSITY

Challenges  
[According to its community]

1. ACCESS TO FUNDING
2. ACCESS TO TALENT
3. REMOTE AREA

**SHEFFIELD**

Digital tech business turnover

**£0.74 billion**

Digital tech turnover by employee

**£120K**

GVA

**£0.68 billion**

Strengths  
[According to its community]

1. PROXIMITY OF A UNIVERSITY
2. HELPFUL TECH COMMUNITY
3. APPEALING AREA

Challenges  
[According to its community]

1. ACCESS TO FUNDING
2. ACCESS TO TALENT
3. LACK OF AWARENESS OF LOCAL TECH COMMUNITY



NATASHA SAYCE-ZELEM, HEAD OF TECHNOLOGY, SKY  
LEEDS

# NATASHA SAYCE-ZELEM

## HEAD OF TECHNOLOGY AT SKY

**Natasha Sayce-Zelem tells us how she sidestepped into tech and how a new approach to recruitment can help to diversify the industry.**

One day, somewhat unexpectedly, Natasha Sayce-Zelem became a photographer for Melody Maker. She was shooting a gig for her fanzine when it happened. Melody Maker were shooting the gig too – at least, they were supposed to be shooting. Their photographer couldn't attend, and so they asked Natasha if she could send them the photos. 'If they're any good,' they said to her, 'we might print them.' So, after they were developed (remember when we did that?) Natasha sent them the photos – it was Melody Maker, after all.

They published the photos, and so Natasha sidestepped into a career as a freelance music photographer. She was studying BA 'Moving Image Production' at the Northern Film School, but she was also photographing for the NME, Melody Maker and local and national newspapers. She shot at festivals and gigs. She photographed David Bowie, Rage Against the Machine, Blur. She got to know the band Muse "pretty well". She learned so many things; like, how to judge the lighting of a space; how to get a print-worthy photo in the course of three songs; how to capture the feeling of a gig, so that it was exactly how the people who were there, remembered it.

She got good at all that, and then she sidestepped again. This time, into film and TV, working behind the scenes on shows like Emmerdale and Last of Summer Wine. She learned how broadcast and production worked. How to work with teams of people to develop shows, fast. She learned great communication, multi-tasking and team work skills. And then, she sidestepped again.

This time, she moved into a role at Yorkshire Forward working with local businesses, helping them to collaborate with universities and invest in R&D. She had learned how to code at University, and helped manage the building of websites for the department. She calls it her “sliding moment” into technology. From there, she took the leap into tech, working as a Senior Account Manager and Project Manager for agencies; and then as a Senior Technical Project Manager for the BBC. Now she is Head of Technology at Sky, a Festival Director for Leeds International Festival and the founder of the Empowering Women with Tech conference.

“I sidestepped into tech,” she says to me one morning, when we meet for coffee in Leeds-based coworking and office space Platform. “I had transferable delivery and softer skills from my time working in broadcast and local government. I knew how to code. I understood digital development and the technology behind it. I had a genuine passion, genuine interest and was keen to learn. But somebody had to take a leap in faith in me and know that all my previous transferable experience would work in a tech role.

“I was a rough diamond in the making,” she says laughing. “Or a cubic zirconium, maybe.”

Having such a varied career makes for an interesting story. But, Natasha thinks, it might also be the key to resolving issues in the tech community; especially when it comes to gender diversity in the pipeline.

“The stats for women in tech aren’t shifting,” she says. “There are a lot of companies that will go, ‘we want more females working in tech but they just don’t exist, they’re just not out there’. And you can look at stats and see the pipeline issue. My argument is that everybody’s looking for the perfect diamond, people with a specific amount of direct tech experience. You’ve got to be really careful if you do that, because you’ll not going to get new people entering into the industry. It shouldn’t be about the years of experience but about the quality of the candidate, their attitude and aptitude.”

#### **AND WHAT CAN COMPANIES TO DO ABOUT IT?**

“I think as an industry we need to be much more open about allowing people to sidestep into it and cross-train into roles,” she says. “We’ve done it a lot at Sky. I’ve hired people who have shown a strong interest in stepping into a tech role, shown how much self-learning they’ve done and while they don’t have much demonstrable day-to-day experience, they’ve shown that they have the motivation and enthusiasm to do the role with great communication, creativity and interpersonal skills.”

**“I think the Northern tech scene, specifically the Leeds tech scene, is really vibrant. At its core is this amazing sense of community. There are so many people that are really invested in keeping this tech scene flourishing; it has a really vibrant heart beat.”**

– NATASHA SAYCE-ZELEM, SKY





“It’s my job to identify these diamonds in the rough, look out for great candidates that we can internally develop and be the person to give them that opportunity and in my experience, everyone I’ve done that for has absolutely excelled. I think that more organisations need to do that and they need to look at how they phrase their job descriptions to really question which skills are essential and which are desirable and give more people, like I was given, an opportunity.

“As an employer now, I don’t want people to have a linear journey,” she adds. “It’s great if people have done ICT or computer science and just gone straight into a tech career. But I also think it’s equally great when people have got applicable experience from different sectors that they can bring into tech. My background in broadcast was really useful in tech as I ended up working on a lot of digital projects for broadcasters including the BBC, ITV and obviously Sky. I can help bridge the gaps between broadcasters and technologists as I understand both domains and the challenges both sides may have. This is a massive benefit of non-linear career paths”

For two years now, Natasha has acted as a festival director of Leeds International Festival, responsible for curating the science/tech strand of the festival. She’s also the founder of Empowering Women with Science & Tech; an annual conference that’s held as a part of Leeds International Festival.

“I was really fed up with not being able to see female role models in the sector,” she says. “There’s loads out there, but if you go to a number of tech conferences, they tend to be both skewed to quite a lot of coding practices and quite male-dominated.

“I wanted to create a conference where we showcased really awesome female role models that people could empathise with, be inspired by and could learn from.”

The inaugural conference included speakers like CEO of Stemettes Anne-Marie Imafidon, fashion blogger Susie Bubble and radio DJ and presenter Lauren Laverne. In 2018, the event featured speakers and panelists including TV presenter Sarah Beeny, Dr. Suze Kunu, Belinda Parmar OBE and was hosted by June Sarpong MBE. Her intention, she says, is to curate the lineup with individuals who aren’t traditionally associated with tech.

“There’s this unfortunate perception that a woman in tech is a coder,” she says. “I wanted to show that a woman in tech is anybody who works in technology and to show the sheer variety of roles available.

“I think the Northern tech scene, specifically the Leeds tech scene, is really vibrant,” she adds. “I think at its core is this amazing sense of community. There are so many people that are really invested in keeping this tech scene flourishing; it has a really vibrant heart beat. Diversity and inclusion is so important; it’s great to feel like we’re leading the pack on this in the Leeds tech scene.”



**97. EBECs ▼**

CHESTERFIELD, IT SERVICES

Headquartered in Chesterfield, eBECs has established itself as one of the UK's leading suppliers of Total Microsoft Business Solutions and Managed Services, helping businesses to cut their costs and complexity since 2009.

In November 2016, eBECs became a strategic alliance partner of IT services giant CSC, becoming its channel delivery partner for Microsoft Dynamics business solutions across the UK. The company's success in designing and delivering lean and agile solutions for businesses in the finance, insurance, manufacturing and retail sectors helped eBECs win the Microsoft Dynamics Services UK Partner of the Year award every year from 2010 to 2015, and again in 2017.

**98. EVERYTHING DIFFERENT ▼**

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, DIGITAL AGENCY

What started out in 1999 as an advertising and design agency founded by four Newcastle entrepreneurs has grown into Everything Different – an award-winning, full-service digital agency with more than 60 employees and offices in Newcastle and London.

The company has three departments: d.fferentology, covering research, insight and strategy; d.fferent, covering brand and creative; and d.fferentstory, optimising user journeys. The company's work for clients like L'Oreal, Sky, O2 and P&G has helped Everything Different become a Campaign Top 100 agency and a Market Research Society company partner.

**99. CASCADEGO +**

LEEDS, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Formerly known as Octopus HR, CascadeGo pioneered its award-winning, purpose-built, flexible HR software that helps SME businesses to reduce admin, increase efficiency and drive a successful strategy.

The company was founded in Leeds in 2002 and enjoyed well over a decade of success at the forefront of the HR industry's micro-to-SME business segment before it was acquired by Cascade HR in 2016. Now, the rebranded system continues to drive success for longstanding clients and new adopters who benefit from its minimal set-up costs and scalable resources.

100.

**100. DEGREE 53 ▼**

MANCHESTER, DIGITAL AGENCY

In the five years since it was founded, Degree 53 has become an award-winning digital agency and leading technology provider, specialising in the development of bespoke gambling and betting platforms.

Founder Andrew Daniels was the head of mobile development at Betfred before he launched Degree 53 in 2013. The Manchester-based firm celebrated a successful first few years when it moved to new headquarters at Steam Packet House on Cross Street in Manchester city centre. The company recruited 30 new staff in 2017, expanding the team to more than 75 members, with the success of Degree 53's gaming division helping to accelerate that growth.

**100. = MITREFINCH +**

YORK, ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

With L'Oreal and Nestle among its clients, York-based employee management firm Mitrefinch has enjoyed a period of sustained growth that culminated in the acquisition of Advance Systems America in March 2018.

Mitrefinch's history stretches all the way back to 1979, when it launched the world's piece of first time and attendance software; the company remained at the forefront of the industry right through to 2016 when it was a finalist in the IT Europa European IT & Software Excellence Awards.

Mitrefinch's software is used by more than 3,500 organisations globally and its recent acquisition will help to make the company a major player in the US market.





ROD KNOX, CEO, VIRTUAL COLLEGE  
ILKLEY

# ROD KNOX

## CEO OF VIRTUAL COLLEGE

**When Rod Knox established Virtual College in 1995, e-learning didn't exist. We met him at Virtual College's headquarters in Ilkley to talk about how his company is helping to change the world.**

Ilkley is known for many things, like a brewery and a Betty's Tea Room. And also, a Moor, which rises 1,319 feet above sea level, and upon which was there was once (apparently) an alien, and also two rock formations known as the Cow and Calf. And every morning, when Rod Knox, Chief Executive of Virtual College, heads to work he thinks about the Moor and the Cow and Calf, and how throughout the day there will be enough virtual learners coming through his website to form a queue all the way up. And he thinks: How can we make their lives better? How can we get them to learn, for life?

"We're up to 577 learners so far today," says Rod, at our interview at the Virtual College headquarters, which spans two offices in Ilkley. "A couple of weeks ago we celebrated our 3 millionth learner. We've gone from 1.5m in 2014, to 3m in 2017. We've got an ambition to get to 25m learners by 2025."

When Rod Knox established Virtual College in 1995, he couldn't have imagined those 25m learners queuing virtually on the Moor, as he does now. The internet was hardly conceivable; online learning simply did not exist.

"My background is as a production engineer," says Rod. "I joined a company back in 1980 which was involved in making colour monitors to support the BBC." "Eventually we got into other areas. We installed the UK's first laserdisc cutting facility. Yorkshire TV used to film the TV news every day, and they'd come there to cut it onto this laserdisc, take the laserdisc back to Yorkshire TV and do a rapid editing of that laserdisc."

The company was Bradford-based Microvitec. The businesses evolved, and so did Rod. He became a quality director, and was responsible for staff development and training. He began to come up with ideas of how laserdiscs could be used for training and recruitment. When he left the company it was to take these ideas into practice. In 1995, he set up Virtual College with Dr. Robert Gomersall – an expert in assessment systems and founder of BTL Learning & Assessment.

“We were real pioneers,” he says. “If you imagine the internet was taking off, the concept of putting learning online was a bit bizarre to most people; it was a hard sell. Now, the whole environment has changed. Everyone who does their driving test, for example, does it online.”

They began by working with electronics manufacturers and local schools, providing training through CDs and video footage. As the internet grew, so did Rod’s ambition; in 2000, the company created an online learning solution for NHS Bradford, one of the first learning management systems to use the internet. Since then, Rod has introduced countless new markets to the benefits of e-learning, partnering with both businesses and public-sector organisations. In 2002 Virtual College produced the first online course for the Food Hygiene and Safety Certificate. The company has grown to employ more than 150 people with over 300 online courses, covering everything from Equality and Diversity training to Business courses as well as Safeguarding.

“It’s been an exciting journey,” he says. “As a business we’ve grown organically. We started off in Bradford and came to Ilkley to expand.

“While we’re an online learning business, the core of it is the people,” he adds. “Our team are first class individuals; if you meet any of them, it’s the passion that really comes through. We all want to make a difference in the world.”

Part of that difference is Rod’s commitment to the community. Over the years, Virtual College has donated over £200,000 to support small charities and fund local projects. His vision, he says, is to continue to disrupt the sector and create new technologies and courses to integrate learning into all aspects of a person’s life.

“I’ve got four boys,” says Rod. “Two went to college, the other two to university. None of those colleges or universities have been back in touch with my sons about how they’re progressing. One of my sons is a plumber; he’s got to do his VAT returns. The college could have provided a short course on how to do that.

“I want to come up with personalised learning that meets an individual where they are on their life’s journey. Maybe they’re looking for another job; maybe they want to progress in their career; maybe they’re thinking about starting a family. We can provide tools and courses for whatever they need for wherever they’re at in their journey. Part of our ambition is to capture a learner for life.”

By the end of our interview, more than 1000 people have accessed the Virtual College website. By the end of the day, it will have doubled. To Rod, they’re more than numbers. On the Moor, across the world – wherever they are, whatever they’re experiencing – Rod wants his company to be there to help them.

**“Our team are first class individuals; if you meet any of them, it’s the passion that really comes through. We all want to make a difference in the world.”**

– ROD KNOX, VIRTUAL COLLEGE



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## **NORTHERN TECH** *Awards*

The Northern Tech Awards have been running since 2011 and are part of the events portfolio of GP Bullhound, the technology advisory and investment firm. Once a year The Northern Tech Awards recognise the Top 100 Fastest Growing Technology Companies in the North.

GP Bullhound in partnership with Tech Nation, the government backed tech sector initiative, jointly find, recognise and celebrate the region's biggest tech success stories by publishing the Northern Tech 100 League Table.

The Awards provide a unique way of celebrating the innovative technologies and businesses developed in the region, and recognise those who have contributed to their success.

This year The Northern Tech Awards were held in Edinburgh, supported and sponsored by Barclays, OBI Property, Scottish Equity Partners, Squire Patton Boggs, Aquiline Capital Partners, Berenberg, BGF Ventures, Frazer John Recruitment, Inflexion Private Equity, London Stock Exchange, Mercia Technologies and Tech Nation.

Next year the Northern Tech Awards returns to Manchester on 28 March.  
**[www.northerntechawards.com](http://www.northerntechawards.com)**



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