

## Company Spotlight: Ross Nicholls

# Friendship, family and a leap of faith...



*Ross Nicholls manages the UK operation of IR Global. He speaks with members on a daily basis, to ensure the network continues to deliver excellent service whilst meeting expectations.*

*Ross has spent his whole career in sales and marketing, focusing on brand development within a B2B environment. Significant time spent overseas, gives him a fantastic insight into different working cultures and a deep understanding of what international advisors want from their partners.*

Friendship is at the heart of many business relationships, with personal respect and understanding often leading to fulfilling professional partnerships.

The enduring friendship that exists between IR Global's Business Development Director, Ross Nicholls and its Founder, Tom Wheeler, is no different, providing the spark that continues to drive the professional network's success.

The pair first met in 2005, when Ross worked in industrial IT sales. Their friendship was initially purely social, but became more involved when Tom revealed an idea he was working on to develop a different kind of legal network. The timing was right for Ross and he decided to get involved, leveraging his existing skills in sales, international client relations and event management to develop the nascent business.

Ross says: 'I was working for a French company back then, based in Toulouse. I was spending most of my time in France, or elsewhere in mainland Europe at a time when I had just got married and was thinking about starting a family. I was quite unhappy and this opportunity came along at just the right time.'

The business was in its formative stages and meant giving up a lucrative corporate package, including salary, bonus, pension, healthcare and expense account. Despite this, Tom was able to

demonstrate enough potential to persuade Ross to make the switch and become a fellow entrepreneur. While it may have given him a few sleepless nights at the time, Ross describes it as a very good decision, despite all the hard work involved.

'It was a risk, but to make it attractive, Tom offered me a stake in the company. It wasn't worth anything at the time, but I believed the business could be successful, because of gut instinct and my understanding of Tom and his ideas. I didn't know much about professional services and the different specialisms and practice areas, but I did know that client relationships are all about sticking to promises, while providing clear information and good service. It's the same across all industries.'

The first conference Ross organised as a new member of the management team was in Brussels in early 2012. It was a free event for 45 professionals. Later that same year they organised a second conference for 150 people in London. The network now organises four global conferences every year with upwards of 400 attendees at their annual conference in the Autumn.

Much of this success is down to the ethos of engagement fostered by the IR Global team among its members. Ross's client managers draw up engagement strategies with members to help them understand that they must interact to get the most out of the network.

Ross says: 'Managing expectations is important, because we have got 950+ members who are all smart people who demand value. Whether they are boutique or mid-sized firms, they all want to see results from their membership. That value could be from referrals, forming relationships with other professionals, increasing their connections or perhaps a specific return on investment. We have to offer that value, or otherwise they won't stay with us.'

Ross believes his proudest achievement is getting the renewal rate among the membership up to be over 80 per cent. Despite this, IR Global has a strict membership review policy, designed to vet members on an annual basis against a set of protocols.

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'We have removed members because they aren't meeting our protocols, but when we do it, it's always for the right reasons. It's not a pleasant process, but sometimes there are members who don't handle referrals correctly, or spend more time moaning about the network than engaging with it. Our protocols have a clear two strike policy, because, in my view, lightning doesn't strike twice. If something negative happens repeatedly, we will remove that member.'

Despite this formulaic approach to successful membership, Ross has formed friendships with many long-serving and active members. Although it is a tough job constantly managing the expectations of a large group of successful,

ambitious professionals, there is still time to get to know members on a personal level.

He says: 'One of the nicest thing for me is that I am able to relax at times during the conferences, have a beer and a laugh with the members. It's led to some firm friendships. A lot of the members themselves have become really good friends as well, tagging each other in social media posts, visiting each other socially, and even going on holiday together. We have made a fundamental difference to some members' businesses and we are proud of that.'

One of the unique things about IR Global is the closeness of its senior management team, all of whom have been part of the business for five years or more. Ross says that members appreciate the continuity and familiarity this has created, while the staff appreciate the relaxed working environment fostered at IR Global headquarters near Birmingham.

'We have a relaxed attitude here in the office, which is on a farm, surrounded by green fields. We have three office dogs and a relatively casual dress code. We also try to have a team night out at least once a quarter, where we will go to the pub, or organise an activity.'

While it is friendship that continues to drive Ross's success on a professional level, it is family that provides that motivation from a personal perspective. He has twin six-year-old daughters who take up most of his time outside work and allow him to unwind following a hard day dealing with members. Ross is also able to be flexible with his working hours, often starting very early in order to get back home in reasonable time to see his girls when they finish school.

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He concludes: 'This is a wonderful time of my life and I am very grateful for it. I like to spend as much quality time as possible with my wife and daughters, so I often get to the office at 5am in order to get home by late-afternoon. Luckily, my brain works much better in the mornings!'



IR 'On the Road' Conference, Singapore

## IR Global

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IR Global is a multi-disciplinary professional services network that provides advice to companies and individuals in over 155+ jurisdictions.

The traditional role of the adviser has changed and today businesses require more from their lawyer, accountant or business adviser. The archaic 'professional service firm' model is dying due to it being insular, expensive and slow.

IR Global is at the forefront of this transition, focused on providing results in consideration of long-term strategic goals. In IR Global, forward-thinking clients now have a credible alternative which is open, cost effective and flexible.

