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Recruiter

Steve Thompson, MD at the recruiter-incubator on how the firm is backing start-ups in the North-West

ON A FORWARD ROLE



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Recruitment start-ups are nothing new, but a recruiter helping non-recruitment businesses start up and flourish is a radical concept. Colin Cottell met the directors in Manchester to find out more

Business incubators have become a familiar part of the recruitment industry landscape in recent years. Take a fledgling recruitment business and its ambitious founders, provide it with funding, back office and other types of expertise and support, take a stake in the business, and watch that business take off. Then,

after a few years, make a profitable exit.

However, a Manchester-based marketing, digital, e-commerce and technology recruiter is tearing up this well-established blueprint by offering something radically different.

Not only does the office space provided by Forward Role Recruitment's incubator come completely free, but also there is no funding involved or equity taken in the start-up. ▶



“Gone are the days when as a recruitment business you can take-take-take from customers. These days, you have to give back”

And whereas recruitment businesses invariably provide an incubator service purely to recruitment start-ups, Forward Role's incubator is aimed fairly and squarely at technology and e-commerce start-ups in the North-West.

Steve Thompson, who founded Forward Role in 2008, and fellow director Brian Johnson have doubled the company to 36 staff in the last couple of years. On top of the rent-free office space, they are both on hand to offer their expertise and advice based on serving companies in the North-West's burgeoning technology sector.

"We saw AO.com [online home appliance company] grow from a tiny company to a massive business, so when a small business is in the same situation, we can use that experience and knowledge to advise them," explains Johnson.

An incubating idea

Thompson says the idea for a business incubator for tech start-ups came to him after Forward Role moved into its new Manchester offices in April 2017. "I realised we had a bit of extra office space, and rather than just let it sit idle or fill it with a ping pong table, we thought it would be nice to use it to help the next generation of small tech companies that might need it," he explains.

"I want to give back to the sector we are part of and that gives us so much. This is a way for our guys to interact with cool technology start-ups. They will regularly chat with them in the kitchen and realise that their CEOs are not untouchable personalities but nice people who are making their way in business.

"Everybody has got to start somewhere and these people have got exceptional pedigree," continues Thompson. "We identified that there is a real opportunity not just to gravitate to the big brands in the region but to give back and help to develop some of the smaller high-growth e-commerce

"I want to give back to the sector we are part of"

and technology businesses in the region, and to be seen to be part of the digital and technology ecosystem."

Giving back

Thompson says the idea for the business incubator fits in with the company's other CSR-type activities, which include talking to students about the job market, as well as supporting charities. It also ties in with the priorities of the company's younger employees for whom giving back "is much more important than to previous generations".

"Gone are the days when as a recruitment business you can take-take from customers. These days, you have to give back," says Thompson.

Forward Role's incubator operates alongside its marketing lounge, a space where contractors and anyone else from outside the Manchester city centre can come. "They can come in and do a bit of work, and want a space that is quieter than a coffee shop," says Thompson.

Max Hopkinson is COO of Tootoot, an online platform that allows students to report bullying and other student welfare concerns, and is among the North-West tech start-up companies that have benefitted from Forward Role's incubator. Hopkinson, who in his career has been placed by Thompson several times, says that after he approached Thompson and mentioned that Tootoot "needed some meeting space and some hot desks", he was surprised to be offered what amounted to a freebie for six months.

"Recruitment agencies are usually transactional, focused on the short term, and are sales organisations at the end of the day ... It does not make Steve any money today or tomorrow. That's a rare thing for a recruitment business in particular, given the short-term pressure of sales that most of them are under."

Lucy Harvey, marketing manager at Tootoot, says that being able to use Forward Role's office in central Manchester was a big advantage. Not only was being based in Wigan



Steve Thompson (seated centre left) with fellow director Brian Johnson (seated centre right) and some of the start-ups who share the office space with Forward Role

"not ideal" for a tech company in the Manchester area, but "the light, attractive offices with sandwiches, tea and coffee all laid on" was a far more attractive environment for doing business than the company's former warehouse-like premises, and particularly when they were looking for money from potential investors.

Experience helps

Hopkinson says he has benefitted from Thompson's experience of supporting tech start-ups such as AO.com and online fashion retailer boohoo.com: "Steve has a good ear, and we have had a lot of growing pains like many businesses our size."

Though not 'mentoring' in a formal sense, their many informal half-hour conversations over coffee have given Hopkinson important strategic insights into how to develop Tootoot's business. Among the most valuable was Thompson's insight into the importance for investors in pure tech companies of investing in their people. There was also practical advice about company culture, how to set it, and how leaders "must almost exaggerate the behaviours that they want to see in their organisation".

Business benefits

Although Thompson clearly had altruistic reasons in mind in offering this incubator service, he is realistic enough to acknowledge that having already placed two people into



L-r: Brian Johnson and Steve Thompson

Forward Role's spare office space made a huge difference. Not only did it save them almost £5k in rent over the six months, but they were also able to benefit from the business experience of Thompson and fellow Forward Role director Johnson.

By way of example, McCardle says Thompson provided valuable advice on how to get the £500k of seed funding they need to fund the next stage of the business. "Steve has got a lot of contacts in the investment world and he put us in touch with people, including someone who had successfully raised investment. Neither of us had done anything like that before."

Not being isolated at home but in a shared office environment also meant that McCardle and Buckley were able to tap into a wider support and advice network provided by Forward Role's employees that developed naturally during the six months they were there. This ranged from the CFO advising on their accountancy software to "some of the younger members of staff giving advice on how we should approach social media".

Alongside the practical support, McCardle goes on to say, Thompson has been able to give them something slightly more intangible but just as important for entrepreneurs making their way in the business world.

"The biggest thing he has helped us with is to think big and believe in ourselves, and just get on with it." After six months under Thompson and Johnson's wing, McCardle says Thompson encouraged them to take the plunge and move to bigger premises at the WeWork building in nearby Spinningfields.

"It helped us with our mindset to go from being two young women with young babies working from our home office to a business looking for £500k. We have been on a huge journey in a really fast amount of time, and it was accelerated by meeting Steve [Thompson] and Brian [Johnson].

"If we had been working from home, I don't think we would be where we are now. They have been pivotal in our journey," says Buckley. ●

Tootoot's technology team, there could be benefits for the business. Having Tootoot and fellow start-up Dr Fertility in and around the building and helping them in practical ways has helped to deepen those relationships. "They trust us and know that we have their best interest at heart."

That said, Thompson says there is no expectation that either Tootoot or other start-ups to benefit from Forward Role's largesse will use their recruitment services. "If they want to recruit themselves or use someone else that is fine," he says.

However, Hopkinson says the combined effect of the free office space, mentoring, advice and support would appear to make use of any of Forward Role's competitors unlikely: "What it does do is build incredible goodwill with me for the future, and I am emotionally attached to Forward Role."

Forget home start

Tootoot is not the only start-up tech company that has taken advantage of



FORWARD ROLE RECRUITMENT

- ▶ **Founded 2008**
- ▶ **36 staff**
- ▶ **Opened Manchester office 2017**

Forward Role's incubator. Dr Fertility, a web-based service providing advice, information and products related to human fertility, has also enjoyed the benefits, says Kobi McCardle, one of its founders. McCardle has known Thompson for about five years, and was placed by him into the role of e-commerce director at AO.com. After setting up Dr Fertility with co-founder Lucy Buckley, McCardle and Buckley found that attempting to run the business from home wasn't working.

"You need to separate work from home to get into work mode, and not be thinking about all the washing that needs to be done, and start thinking that you are not just a mum," she explains. As a result, being able to use