

Featured Family Business: RealTime Recruitment



RealTime Recruitment is a family owned business, founded in 2005 by leading Irish IT recruiters Declan and Niall McNiff with the aim of being the No.1 IT Recruitment company in Ireland. Declan and Niall quickly established RealTime as the IT recruitment partner of choice for numerous clients and candidates throughout Ireland. In the last 10 years the RealTime team has helped secure quality employment for 1000+ candidates and helped Start-ups, SMEs, Government Bodies and Multinationals secure the best IT talent available in Ireland. With offices in both Belfast and Dublin, RealTime are able to service clients and candidates throughout Ireland while keeping their finger directly on the pulse in both jurisdictions.

In this interview we speak to co-founders and Directors of RealTime, Declan and Niall McNiff

Declan: I worked in banking with AIB in London in international trade after graduating in England. Niall had been working in IT recruitment with a big multinational for a year and had done very well. On a night out with Niall and his workmates, his manager asked me would I consider a job in IT recruitment, and I said yes and so began my career within this sector. At the time it was busy in Ireland but nothing like today's market. Using daily rate IT Contractors was still a relatively new process for many employers The company we worked for did permanent and contract recruitment, with Niall and I focusing purely on contracting. Pitching the benefits of hiring IT contractors was challenging at that time but as the IT market matured over the years, Niall and I both thrived in the role. The company around 2005 were moving in a different direction pre-IPO and it was at this stage we had decided that we could do it ourselves. We didn't try to reinvent the wheel or anything - we just thought we could do it better. We set up in 2005 and now we're the largest independent tech recruiter in Ireland, with 31 employees and offices in Dublin and Belfast.

Yvonne: What are the qualities that someone needs to be successful as a recruiter?

Niall: Resilience is always important, but it has even more relevance given today's market. I could have a recruiter who has had a fantastic month in terms of their activity. They could have seven different candidates, each with a job offer with seven different companies, and in every case the individual could either take another offer elsewhere because there's so much choice, or they might accept a counter offer from their current employer. Which means at the end of the month they have nothing to show for all their efforts.



While there is no magic formula for a good recruiter, a personable and resilient character are important attributes to have in a constantly evolving market.

Things like tenacity, to stick at it despite the knockbacks. As like most jobs there are many highs and lows and whilst this isn't unique to recruitment, no two days in this business are the same, which requires flexibility. Coachability is also vital as you can coach a skills gap but it's very hard to coach a bad attitude. It's about putting yourself out of your comfort zone because there's everything from meetings, setting up interviews, candidates letting you down at the 11th hour, clients pulling the plug on a role.

So many things can go right or wrong in any given day. You can train people, coach them, mentor them and show them all the things you should be doing and when they should be doing it, but it is down largely to the individual and how motivated they are to do a great job every time. There is no prototype trainee recruiter. A large part of it is down to attitude, going the extra mile and wanting to learn. Having an insatiable appetite and a growth mind-set.

D: Our staff work in verticals. They specialise in an area within the tech space, so they just look after Java or they just look after project managers or they just look after support people, and they become specialists in that area. It's inch wide mile deep knowledge so that they can become subject matter experts in the market. When you're creating subject matter experts, it's about building up knowledge for the individual to know enough about what the client might want.

We don't hire people with previous recruitment experience; we train them up. We decided to hire people based on personality - you have to like them. They also need an aptitude for sales and customer service. They have to be solution focused and always looking to help the customer where possible. We've helped many start ups along the way as well as SMEs and

multinationals across all sectors. We've helped one start up grow from zero of to half a billion in five, six years by supplying them with the best people.

Y: Thinking back to 2005, what were the key decisions that brought the idea of starting a business and doing it together, into reality?

D: A new director came in from England and had ideas of what he wanted to do with the business and where it was headed. It ultimately gave us the push to go out on our own and provide a service that we thought worked for the Irish Market. We went on leave for three months and played a lot of golf!

N: It was a chance to get some downtime, get our heads straight. We pretty much knew what we were going to do then and how we were going to do it. We wanted to do it better and we wanted to create something that we felt would really add value to our clients and candidates. That's the risk we took but it was it was an educated risk.

Y: Do you have values within your business that you know and recognize? Do they add value to your business and in terms of the bottom line?

D: I think the biggest one will always be integrity, in everything you do with the running of the business. Clients and candidates will always appreciate the upfront approach where your intentions are right, and that you'll always do your very best, then they will come back to you. It's through having those discussions and becoming an adviser to clients, as opposed to just a recruiter, giving them regular market insights and perhaps letting them know what their competitors are looking for. Integrity is also key with your staff, attracting and retaining staff as well as being approachable is hugely beneficial to fostering loyalty.

Y: And within the company how are your roles defined? You're brothers, you're also founders and working together. Do you feel that the family is in the business on a day-to-day basis? Is it a benefit?

D: It's definitely a benefit. He's my best mate. We do have disagreements, differences in opinion. But building a business with somebody that you trust implicitly and that you know

"I should give our mum a mention here. Our mum has had a ladies fashion shop in Newcastle, County Down for 33 years. She's the best sales person I ever met and she's very entrepreneurial. She would have bought next season's stock for all her regular customers that wouldn't have even asked for them yet, because she knew them. That sort of proactive lesson has stood to us"

has your back is massive. Trust - if it's wrong, it can bring a business down. And having somebody to bounce ideas off. Niall would be very analytical whereas I'd be a bit more spontaneous. So, we work well that way, a good duo. We're very proud of what we've done because we've helped so many people improve their careers, both internally and externally and it's very rewarding. We did some stats there recently; we get 92 percent repeat business year on year. I think that speaks for itself. Clients trust us, they re-use us, in an unbelievably competitive market.



Cultivating an open, positive environment where trust can grow amongst staff has played a role in the company's success.

N: We're very similar but we're also different, and we work very well as a combination in terms of winning new clients. Declan would have more of an emphasis on the Client side whilst I would also cover day to day operations within the business. Like Declan said, having a mutual desire to better the business year on year helps us ensure decisions are made for the betterment of the company, regardless of whose idea it was. We would talk to many C

level people, and we would often hear that they're tip toeing around people in the boardroom, there's disagreements and it's all bubbling underneath the surface. And it goes on for months and months. Here, if there's an issue, we talk about it and it gets resolved quickly.

“In an ever evolving market we're always trying to bring the best products to our clients. And that means having constantly better tools for the staff here”

We attend a lot of events and seminars to keep abreast of the market changes, network and look for ways to improve RealTime. But we can't do that unless we're improving it for the staff and creating an environment where people want to come and work for a company that gives them access to the best systems and processes to do the job.

D: It is open plan office. We don't sit on top of them, but we're all in the same room and we're on hand to advise, train and coach in any specific areas on the job. I think that sort of openness between us transcends into the business. The staff get to see the two of us and what we both stand for.

N: We had our tenth anniversary in 2015, it was at Leopardstown racecourse. We invited Joe Schmidt, all our family, 160 clients and all the staff. It was shortly before the Rugby World Cup so it was a great day out for everyone, including Joe who backed a few winners! But, more importantly, it was a wonderful occasion to say thanks to everyone who had supported us over the years.

Y: Looking at big changes happening in tech, do you see yourself being affected by automation?

D: Automation is definitely a good thing and something to be embraced. There are so many AI products out there at the moment. I was at an AI summit recently in Croke Park and saw many examples, and specific to our industry there are various chatbots and robo recruiters trying to take on the manual tasks within the job. But there's no perfect product out there.



Significant inroads are being made in AI in many areas however the human element continues to play a pivotal role in B2C experiences.

Y: There's a lot of it happening obviously within customer service, within banking, within medicine as well. It can be a positive thing because you're freeing up tasks, maybe even upskilling your employees.

N: We've trialled some products which basically take the legwork out of all the initial screening calls. Chatbots, products like that are brilliant for companies that might do 100 hires in a very short space of time - you're getting through seriously high volumes in double quick time. To date, the lack of emotional intelligence within the AI space has meant there will always be a need for somebody, 'John' at the end of the phone who is a person, as opposed to John the chatbot. But yes, some of the initial screening questions can be replaced with a chatbot like many other sectors.

D: There was an article I read six months ago, by one of the big wigs in Google in the AI space, and he listed the top 10 roles that he feels are pretty safe, and recruiter was in at number nine.

N: You have to embrace it though. It's exactly what you said there. See how you can take the good stuff and implement it in your business, and not necessarily to the detriment of hiring staff because I think if you get the mix right you can have an even slicker company. You could conceivably come in each day and part of the job's already done for you, and you're two hours ahead of yourself each morning.

Y: What kind of tool within AI would hit the spot for you guys?

D: If you press a button and it brought up the exact match, of someone who's definitely looking and already in the market.

N: One of the biggest game changers in the last number of years is LinkedIn. LinkedIn is the biggest database in the world. That's the market right there for everyone. The skill in recruitment now given what LinkedIn has given us access to is getting the best person for the job that the client wants, to accept the job and ultimately start. And it's not as easy as it sounds.

Y: There was an article in The Irish Times last November and it spoke about how the talent pool in Ireland is being squeezed and people are being priced out, that it's becoming more difficult for recruiters. Do you agree or do you disagree?

N: I would agree. For one thing, there's not enough indigenous workers to fill the roles, therefore, you need to attract skilled workers from overseas. I think it's healthy anyway to have a multinational workforce. Many people talk about diversity simply saying, we'll have more women. Whilst that's part of it and more and more women are entering and thriving in the sector, another key part is having different minds and different perspectives who come from different countries and studied at various universities around the world. You're going to get a much more diverse and richer working culture as a result.



Dublin has become a major tech hub with a growing workforce. Yet due to the unaffordability of the housing sector, recruiters face another challenge in attracting

D: You have to be aware though if you have a multicultural, multinational workforce, it's going to be a transient workforce. So many people will only stay for a certain amount of time, whether they leave the country or move to another role. That's just the nature of it.

Y: That article was written in 2018. Do you think that things are going to change in terms of the talent pool in Ireland, with things that are happening politically and with Brexit?

N: There is a school of thought that contracting might change. There are a lot of contractors in the Irish market that travel over Monday to Friday from the U.K. and depending on a hard or soft Brexit, the question is whether they'll be able to continue doing that. Because it is a significant bit of business for Ireland; these people are coming in, they're paying big rents,

hotels, a lot of spending in the local economy as well as filling vital specialised roles in companies that want to be based in Ireland. If that market is closed off, that could be a big issue. I don't see it happening, personally, but I've heard mentioned as a possibility along with many other negative impacts.

With regard to accommodation, it's like a broken record at this stage. Dublin is not a cheap place to live, and it does account for a large amount of the placements in the IT sector. We're upfront about the living costs because we want this person to come in and actually thrive, fully aware of their monthly overheads. A happy candidate ensures that the client will be

“With regard to Brexit, people need to look beyond our neighbour as another market. It's about going global as opposed to just thinking about the UK”

delighted, highly productive, and there will potentially be referrals off the back of it. It comes back to the integrity piece we spoke about earlier.

D: And that's why the regions are getting busy. The likes of Limerick and Cork are now paying about 90 percent of the salaries that you get in Dublin. They're all under pressure but the cost of living is

less. The cost of living in Limerick is about 35 percent less than Dublin. What we're seeing is hubs being created. Out by the university, LIT is now becoming a bit of a Java hub, whereas before there would have been only one or two clients there. And there are companies here in Dublin, because of the cost of commercial rents, that are looking at second sites down the country, so that trend is happening as well. We have an office in Belfast and that gives us good access to talent across the island of Ireland.

N: Even if very little changes post Brexit, but companies have been open to looking at new markets, they're likely to end up doing more business as a result, and hiring more people.

D: If you speak to non-Irish candidates, they'll say Ireland's like a lighthouse in Europe for tech. People want to come here. They want to be here. We take it for granted that it's free, safe and Democratic et cetera. There's some people that we place who don't have that on a daily basis. Ireland is a brand, it's known for quality. Whether it's exports, meat, drink, tech. From a professional services perspective it is absolutely fantastic.

Y: We have a lot of people at DCU who are either studying for an MBA, an undergraduate degree in business, they're either involved in a business or they're thinking about it. Do you have any advice for them?

D: If you're going to get into something, make sure it's something that you believe in and are passionate about because that makes it so much easier. And if you want to hire people, first of all make sure you look after the people that you have. Because if you look after them, that will attract more of the best to you.

N: The opportunities in the current market are huge, especially for someone with an MBA who likely has reasonable commercial experience in their career. The broader the business experience the better, as a good personality with solid business knowledge goes a long way to securing a desirable business role. For undergraduates, gaining any internships or semesters working in businesses you think would appeal to you can give great exposure to the inner workings of organisations and help guide you as to whether you want to work there in the longer term. Gaining business savvy despite a lack of experience can be hugely beneficial to getting on the ladder where it's then down to the individual to prove themselves. And to be constantly learning - that you're open minded to taking on new things. That passion should come across in the interview.

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Declan McNiff is the Managing Director of RealTime Recruitment. Declan has 20 years' experience in IT Recruitment, placing contract & permanent IT Consultants throughout Ireland, and holds a BA in Business and Finance.



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