

# PATHWAYS INTO SCHOOL BUSINESS LEADERSHIP



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I never thought about working in education, partly because I'd never considered the breadth of professional roles required in the sector beyond teaching. I would say I fell into it rather than it being an intentional transition, but I can't express how invested I am in the work that I do and, even after 20 years in the sector, I love meeting the new challenges every day still brings.

My working journey began with the second largest insurance company in Europe, working as a management account assistant. Here, I was able to put my financial services degree to use as well as learn about the basics of risk management. Unfortunately, as I was ready to progress, the firm was restructuring and put a freeze on any promotion activity. I knew I needed more of a challenge and managed to secure a similar role, with a wider scope in a property management company. My portfolio here consisted of office and retail developments, as well as the Church Commissioner's land stock.

Eventually, I worked up to being a team leader in the management accounts department and was also involved in new client acquisition and sat on the project team for shopping centre redevelopments, as well as being invited to support wellbeing across the wider staff. I travelled a lot - one day being in Edinburgh, the next in Birmingham, and then London for a client meeting.

I didn't realise it at the time but the skills I had been developing during these seven years, in finance, HR, H&S and risk management, estates and change/project management, were all incredibly useful in the world of education business leadership.

The turning point for my career was the arrival of my first daughter. After returning to work I realised how difficult it was to balance the ability to travel at short notice with the regime of nursery drop off/pick-ups. So, I decided I needed to look for something different. Some of my family members were Headteachers and suggested I looked at an advert for a local school who had just created a post for a School Business Manager.

Without understanding too much, I applied and started doing a little research into the sector, including visiting an existing school business manager in my old school and talking through what his daily routine looked like, what his main challenges were, and any top tips he had. What I realised through this due diligence was the fact that an education setting would benefit from the same basic skills as any other role out there in the commercial sector, and the professional disciplines and people skills, and ability to multi-task and focus on good business operations, would provide the subsidiarity to the teaching profession that would enable me to make a positive impact in this role.

I stayed in that role for eleven years, during which time the school federated, de-federated, academised (twice), went from a deficit to surplus budget (within my first year – leveraging the financial acumen from previous experience), and underwent a £23.5 million rebuild. I was able to draw on past projects to ensure that changes were planned (and executed) well, teams 'worked', and changes were impactful on the daily life of students and staff.

At one point I thought I would be there until retirement, but I then realised that I needed a fresh challenge. I secured a position in a large academy trust central team, initially focusing on finance and

estates, but quickly developing to incorporate HR, marketing, and IT. I progressed to Chief Operating Officer, then Deputy Chief Executive Officer, before taking up the role of Chief Executive Officer in a small Trust. This has been an amazing opportunity to shape the vision, values, structure, and strategic direction of a Trust, utilising all of that knowledge I have garnered during my professional journey.

Overall, my diverse background in industry has not only contributed to my success in the sector but has also enabled me to bring a unique perspective and skill set to the table, benefitting students, staff and the communities I serve.

One of the great things about working in education is the fact that they are learning institutions and place a true value on staff development. Whilst my professional skills gave me a great foundation to take on the challenge of school business leadership, I have been able to hone my skills and knowledge over the years through many development opportunities, including the school business management diploma and a Masters' in Education Leadership – funded through the apprenticeship levy.

The best thing about working in education is the ability to create your own destiny – the academy sector (in particular) is still developing and, with that, comes the opportunity to shape new roles and really have the chance to utilise your skills to generate the greatest impact for our future workers.

If anyone thinks this might be a route for them, the most valuable preparation I can suggest is to volunteer your time to become a school governor/trustee. At this table, you will hear the breadth, challenges and successes of daily life in education and be able to consider how your own expertise could support school leaders.