

ANDREW PENTON

Someone on your side

Andrew Penton, former MD of logistics company Pentons, says: 'This industry has given me so much, I'd really like this chance to give something back.' Louise Cole reports

If you want a consultant to help your business you can choose someone with an MBA in logistics management and a black belt in Six Sigma – or you can rope in a fellow traveller who has transport in his blood and knows the backside of every problem and challenge facing road transport because he's lived them.

Mentoring role

Andrew Penton, former MD of Shropshire-based logistics company Pentons, is the latter. His new enterprise Business Advocate aims to give RHA members exclusive access to his wisdom and experience. 'One of the hardest things about running a transport operation is the loneliness,' he says. 'There often isn't anyone who understands with whom you can share concerns and strategies, talk through problems or seek solutions.' Penton is prepared to offer a mentoring role to companies as well as focus on specific commercial or operational concerns.

Exclusive to RHA

As an introductory offer, Penton is offering members a one-hour telephone consultation for £195 plus VAT. 'It's not an amount that will dent any bottom line,' says Penton, 'nor is it much time for an MD to give up. The idea is to give members some idea of the benefits of discussing your strategy or issues with an independent, experienced and non-competitive equal.'

He will, of course, take on longer and more detailed projects with clients as well, looking at managing growth, emerging from recession, people

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management, market placement or improving margins.

Penton feels uniquely qualified to help the haulage industry because he is not just familiar with the commercial rigours of the business but also the challenges presented by its culture. He believes the family nature of many businesses gives a unique set of problems and opportunities to road hauliers not experienced in many other sectors. 'Succession and the way you organise a family firm's management structure is of crucial importance,' he says.

Pentons was founded by his father in the 1970s, and his three boys were raised on trucks and yard work. While Steven and Gary loved the trucks and the operation, youngest lad Andrew

was drawn to the business. In the late 80s the firm moved into warehousing. 'It grew fairly fast after that. There was lots of industry consolidation and we picked up lots of new business but there were also lots of opportunities to be explored within the existing customer base.'

Leadership

When Penton senior retired, he divided the firm equally between his three boys and they each gravitated towards their strength, with Andrew taking on the leadership and commercial role of MD. Between them they grew the firm from £1m to around £12m, with a blue-chip client base. The company is still one of Oswestry's biggest

employers, with over 150 staff.

'Ultimately my brothers and I grew the business together to the point where we had a major multi-million offer from a 3PL. We chose not to sell. But we also gained a huge insight into the difficulties of family firm culture and of second-generation inheritance in particular. I think I could help many firms avoid those kinds of challenges,' he says.

That each brother had skills and a great contribution to make was never in doubt. However, Penton believes that his family, like many in transport, fell into the trap of informal decision-making, splitting the board too equally to ensure commitment to a single vision, and of family politics sometimes getting in the

way of commercial progress. 'You cannot underestimate the impact of family dynamics on business. Having a clear vision, where each member's strength is properly assessed and recognised and you ensure buy-in in the same way you would from any other team member, is really important.'

Penton has lived in transport his whole life and has taken his family firm through major growth and strategic change. But he is candid about having also made mistakes from which he has learned. 'Success always sounds easy, afterwards and on paper, but it isn't. There are lots of obstacles along the way, lots of hazards and you inevitably bear the scars of a few,' he says. 'But it also means when you look at someone else's business you can recognise the landscape very quickly.'

Passionate

One thing Penton is passionate about is having a clear commercial vision for all businesses. It is more difficult, he says, in family businesses where the firm comes to represent something of the identity and values of the family itself, to impose change without threatening that identity. 'The transport industry must understand the separation of management and ownership,' he says. And there are indeed some very successful family firms which have taken this

How can Business Advocate help?

Penton describes the benefits to his service:

- **Mentoring:** 'Everyone needs someone they can talk to and being at the top of a firm is a lonely position. You often don't have anyone qualified to understand the issues, to use a sounding board or help find solutions. You also need someone you can call any time, as issues occur or thoughts strike you. So I don't keep 9-5 hours.'
- **Apply general commercial rules to your specific business:** 'We all know that strategy has to reflect your firm and your ambitions and values. There isn't a one-size-fits-all formula. But there are principles and techniques which you can use as they fit your business.'
- **Company health checks:** 'It has never been more important to know all your figures and to base your ongoing strategy on getting those figures where you

want them. I have extensive experience with balance and P and L sheets and can help firms steer toward higher-margin, efficient work rather than busy foolishness.'

■ **Clearing obstacles and opening communication channels within the business:** 'Sometimes it's not only the top guy who needs to talk. But gathering frank and honest opinions within your own workforce and senior management team is not always as easy as it should be. Having a knowledgeable outsider who can talk to people in a candid, structured way can provide invaluable insights and clear internal obstacles to change.'

■ If you would like to book a consultancy session with Andrew Penton email: p.sketchley@rha.uk.net giving your company name, your position and the subjects you would like to discuss.

to its logical extreme, such as The Potter Group or Bibby Distribution – family-owned firms which do not hesitate to hire the best managers to run them.

So why consultancy? Why not remain in the family firm or start a new business enterprise? Penton is thoughtful. 'I would say I was a mentor rather than a consultant. Someone with genuine empathy for this industry. And I wanted a new challenge.'

He continues: 'I had some times running Penton's when everything seemed stacked against me – when it was tough to keep going. And I'm sure there are lots of other transport operators out

there who, over the last year or two, have found it really hard to get up and go in every day unsure how to protect their business. I would have loved, in the depth of some of my problems, to have a "me" – someone I could explain the situation to who was qualified to help me find a solution and implement it.

'We're living in prudent times. But I come from this industry and I am the same as the people I want to help. I grew up washing trucks on a Saturday morning. I don't foresee someone calling me and presenting me with a problem I can't understand and offer a solution to,' he says. 'I also know

that when someone presents you with a problem it's often just a symptom of something deeper and less obvious.'

Development

Penton clearly sees Business Advocate as a natural extension of the development work he did at Pentons. 'My role is to identify the actions that are needed and hold hands with these companies during that process. But that's just the job. The truth is, I'm passionate about transport, I always have been. And this industry has given me so much – I'd really like this chance to give something back.'

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