



Senior Editor **Jacob Ambrose Willson** talks to members of Criticaleye's global Community who have taken on the CEO role for the first time and made a success of it, despite facing a unique array of challenges



Stepping up into the CEO hot seat for the first time can be daunting. Whether it's a divisional role or the group leadership position, it's rarely as one imagines.

If the individual is an internal appointment, there is the matter of adjusting to becoming the single point of influence within the company and subsequently having to be much more considered in terms of communication with the executive and broader team.

Meanwhile, an externally recruited first-time CEO will be tasked with getting to grips with the company culture, assessing whether the current strategy is fit for purpose and getting to know key stakeholders, all the while having minimal experience of how to handle the pressure associated with leading a business.

**Jon Jayal**, CEO of AIM-listed Nexteq, was handed the reins of the B2B technology company in 2018, having been COO since 2011 and, prior to that, a key member of the design team which developed Nexteq's first product.

"It's a job that's rewarding and onerous in equal measure," said **Jon**. "You think you are the boss [prior to becoming a CEO], but actually all of your staff are your boss, because they watch your behaviour and working patterns. Suddenly you are accountable to all of them, alongside the Board and the stakeholders."

Establishing the requisite level of confidence in one's own ability to make key decisions is crucial for a first-time CEO. **Mark Scanlon**, Advisory Board Member at Dittolo and most recently CEO of Tenet Group, first took on

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**Jon Jayal**

the chief exec gig in 2011 with FMG Support, and not long after with AIM-listed Personal Group.

"I think particularly as a first-time CEO, you might be second guessing yourself at the beginning. There's a lot of people you need to get to know in terms of stakeholders and a lot to consider. But ultimately, you've been elected and you're there to do the job," he stressed.

It remains imperative for any CEO to act quickly when faced with a pressing issue, but maintaining a collaborative and analytical approach to long-term strategy will also hold a first-time chief exec in good stead. It's a balancing act between the two.

**Matthew Blagg**, CEO of Criticaleye, said: "The key thing as a CEO is that you have

strong convictions, stand by them, but then deliver against those promises. The reality is that your remit is driven by your ability to execute against the plan that you dictate," he underlined.

For **Brittany Harris**, co-founder and CEO of Qflow – a sustainability-driven data provider to the construction industry – the challenge of becoming a first-time CEO was overlaid with establishing an entirely new start-up business.

"I think particularly when you're in an early-stage company, like Qflow, the CEO has a different job every six months," she said. "You start very much leading on product and commercial, then you hire some engineers, then you're starting to manage a few people. And then you're looking at broader strategies, and you're also raising capital. All of those things were new to me." A civil engineer by trade, **Brittany** found herself "learning on the go, drawing on the experience of others, reading some good books and figuring it out" as time went on in the role.

## Sounding Boards

Gaining insight and support from the people around a first-time chief exec is clearly a huge benefit, according to **Jon**: "Having a good support network around you – family, friends – is key and then more professionally, the CFO and Chair are important people that you can lean upon."

"The CFO is usually your immediate partner in crime. They will pretty much know everything you know, and if you have got a good relationship with your CFO, that can take a huge amount of burden off you." >



The Board can be another effective avenue of support and guidance for a CEO, but only if an atmosphere of openness is nurtured. “You don’t want to be second guessing your Board of directors,” **Mark** said. “You want to know that they’re on your side and they get it. That comes down to communication and explaining what you want to do, making sure people understand that, while allowing room for discussion.”

With burnout and isolation still regularly reported by CEOs (48 percent of attendees polled at Criticleye’s 2023 CEO Sustainability Retreat said they felt isolated to some extent), the importance of leaning on these support networks cannot be stressed enough for those individuals that are new to the role, as well as those that aren’t.

**Jon** advised: “You have to look after your personal wellbeing and health, because that is ultimately going to be the right thing for the company. It’s really important that you know going into the role what pushes your buttons—so what makes you angry, what makes you stressed. All of those characteristics are amplified when you take on a first-time CEO role.”

Building on this, **Matthew** said: “The CEO has to inject energy into others. If you’re running on low energy, you generally are going to be putting negative energy into the people around you. If you put negative energy into the team around you, it becomes self-fulfilling, particularly in a tighter and more difficult landscape.”

While the current economic environment will certainly be another worry to many business leaders, **Matthew** sees opportunity. “Now is a brilliant time to

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**Brittany Harris**

be a first-time CEO, but from a difficult perspective. The reality is, in an easy marketplace, it’s quite easy to think you’re a good CEO. In a much more difficult landscape, you really have to be on top of everything.

“And so it’s a great moment to develop your skills and to thrive. For me, this is an environment where good leadership differentiates much more than in an easy market.”

Fast approaching six years in the chief executive position at Qflow, **Brittany** had the following advice to first-time CEOs: “You’re mostly figuring it out as you go. As long as you’re diligent, open minded and ultimately seeking out the wisdom of others, but taking everything with a pinch of salt and being sensible about the way you process and leverage that information, you’re giving yourself the best chance at success.” ■

## UPCOMING CEO EVENTS

26 MARCH 2024  
08:30 - 10:00

**CEO**  
VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE  
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OPERATING MODEL

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PENNYHILL PARK HOTEL, SURREY

**CEO**  
RETREAT 2024  
LEADING IN  
A WORLD OF  
MIXED SIGNALS

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### Featuring commentary from:

**Jon Jayal**  
CEO  
Nexteq



**Mark Scanlon**  
Advisory Board Member  
Dittolo and former CEO  
Tenet Group



**Matthew Blagg**  
CEO  
Criticleye



**Brittany Harris**  
Co-founder and CEO  
Qflow



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