

FOR MANY bankers, as for other professionals, the fairways leading to the 19th hole are as familiar as the corridors of power of the institutions in which they work. It may be a cliché, but "fore!" can be as much a part of the language of business as "forecast".

More than a few, therefore, may cast envious eyes towards the developing career of Ian Johnston. The language of business he learned in more than 30 years at the Clydesdale, latterly as Divisional Manager of Business Banking, is proving invaluable, as he now sits on the other side of the fence and runs a small company in West Lothian.

Johnston is now Managing Director of Livingston-based Tartan Golf, a company which works with golf club professionals to negotiate good rates for the purchase of equipment and clothing for their club shops. And the banking experience and training he has built up since beginning his career at the Clydesdale's Hamilton branch is being put to good use.

He spent three years in Hamilton, during which he sat his Institute exams. Three years in the Bothwell branch then led to a move to Head Office, Superintendent's Department, where he stayed for four years, before joining the Inspection Department. "It was almost the classic pattern of all banks at the time," says Johnston. "If you wanted to make a career out of it you needed to

He's out on the fairway earlier than expected – but former senior banker Ian Johnston is not there to relax. He's putting his banking experience to use in his own enterprise, he tells Robin Mathison

have been through lending, inspection and London. My first major breakthrough was to go down to London in 1978."

His move to London – to be Assistant Manager at Piccadilly – proved to be an invaluable experience. And it was followed by another one... a three-year stint working in New York, as the bank's North American Representative.

He moved back to Scotland in 1987, to help establish Clydesdale's Corporate Banking office in Edinburgh, and when the bank split further into different divisions he transferred to Business Banking, latterly as Divisional Manager.

Johnston's banking career was broad and varied, and he was sorry when the banks all began splitting their own operations into different divisions. "I don't know if it is as possible to have such a broad career now," he says. "People specialise much more, within Corporate Banking, Retail Banking, Business Banking and so on."

What this does do, however, is increase the importance of always looking to progress through training. The transferability of the skills learned on Institute courses helps with movement between banking divisions and into other spheres of business.

His own move into another sphere of business came when the opportunity arose to take on the reins of its incumbent Managing Director. But Johnston has no regrets about staying in banking for so long. "Could I have moved sooner? The answer is no, I enjoyed my experience and had a varied career."

And since leaving the industry, he is clear about the value of what he has learned. "If people are competent at what they're doing in the bank then they've nothing to fear outwith the bank," he says. "First, the personal competencies will come through anyway. Secondly, the thing that many of us don't perhaps realise is actually how much experience and knowledge we have

acquired, and how it could be applied in other areas of banking or other businesses.

"For example, you gain negotiating skills and you become used to dealing with professionals from different disciplines, whether that's lawyers, accountancy firms, finance directors or managing directors.

"You become used to the language of business and what the drivers are within that."

Now, though, the drivers are of a different sort. Tartan Golf is made up of more than 200 professionals across the UK and Ireland. They have accredited suppliers and secure the best possible deals for the professionals to stock their club shops. There had never been any real profit retention in the company, and a major challenge has been to



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make it profitable and retain the revenue to build a platform for the future.

That's just one challenge Johnston is facing – and relishing – since taking over as Managing Director of Tartan Golf in 1999.

"The joy of coming here and running a small business is that I can just get on with it," he says. "Because banks tend to be driven from the top, with a definite command structure, even if you have a position with a fair degree of responsibility you can never really manage entirely as you wish.

"I've tried to bring in some professionalism in the way deals are done with suppliers, how we run board meetings, and how it is structured financially."

The job involves negotiating and making financial deals, but other practical things have been picked up over the years, which Johnston uses in his new position. "One thing I recall is when Fred Goodwin was Chief Executive at the Clydesdale – he didn't believe in using long minutes of meetings, just making decisions and setting actions. You always remember such things."

Johnston had to bring in accounting and database packages to enable the business to grow, and it's here that he got a real feeling for being on the other side of fence.

"We had to install a Sage accounting package," he says. "And it's only when you have to work through the intricacies of it all that you realise just what's involved in running a business.

"In that respect I learned more about profit and loss and balance sheets in the first couple of years at Tartan Golf than I did in more than 30 years in banking!" Said tongue in cheek, but Johnston believes it could be a message for all younger bankers – to become closer to their small business customers, and learn how their accounting systems are run and what they regard as key business drivers.

CHANGING BANKERS FOR BUNKERS

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