

Tony Goodwin

Antal International

Sector: Executive search

Founded 1993

First offices: London; Warsaw, Poland; Budapest, Hungary

Previous employer: Harrison Willis

Initial capital £10k

Start-up essential: Absolute determination



It was back in 1993 that Tony Goodwin, founder of international professional recruiter Antal International, left financial recruitment consultancy Harrison Willis to plough his own furrow in the uncertain world of recruitment, emboldened by his belief in the opportunities for professional recruiters in developing overseas markets. Not only did Goodwin face the usual anxieties experienced during a start-up, he also faced the challenge of launching a new business in Eastern Europe — at the time very much a new frontier for UK recruiters.

“Someone said to me at the time that he looked forward to seeing my ads in the *Financial Times* in Bulgarian, Russian and Polish, but I couldn’t even speak any of the languages,” he says. Clearly undeterred, Goodwin’s early foray into Eastern Europe meant paying for apartments in Budapest and Warsaw that were used as offices by a Hungarian and a Pole who he had trained as recruitment consultants in London.

Within two years, however, the new company was sufficiently established to

have proper offices, not only in these cities, but in Moscow as well. And since then, Antal has grown into a global network of 120 offices in 30 countries.

In the company’s early days, Goodwin himself was based in London, where he operated from a serviced office near Putney, equipped only with a telephone, “a computer I couldn’t turn on, a fax machine and a lot of self-belief”, he said.

The most difficult thing was learning to trust people that were working 2,000 miles away from him. “Most people set up their business where they are based, where they can see what is going on 9-5,” he says. In the early days, he spent a lot of his time both on the telephone and in person explaining to his new staff “in simple language” what his business model was. Had he done this a year after the business had been started it would have been too late and the business would never have taken off, he says.

The new company faced other challenges too, not least when competitors keen to enter this developing market headhunted its staff. “This caused us some pain as we lost some good people,” Goodwin admits. “We were the victim of our own success,” he adds.

On the positive side, however, he says that starting Antal freed him from the constraints of being employed by someone else and the frustrations of the corporate environment. Goodwin says he relished the freedom that starting and running his own company gave, in particular not having to attend “interminable meetings”. “I did consider going in with a partner, but I thought we would end up arguing too much,” he adds.

Goodwin started the business with £10k in savings, but after billing £357k in his first year, he found it wasn’t necessary to use all of it, and he was able to draw £15k in salary. Goodwin bemoans those who start up a recruitment business, expecting to draw only a reduced salary compared to what they previously enjoyed in the corporate world. “They are just giving it a go with other people’s money, they aren’t really entrepreneurs; they don’t really get it,” he says.

