

## Be Proactive, Not Reactive

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Bidvest Noonan CEO, Declan Doyle, shares his secrets to success

When Declan Doyle was studying Theoretical Physics back in 1998, the prospect of becoming a CEO was nowhere to be seen on his radar.

Fast forward 26 years, and Declan now leads [Bidvest Noonan](#), one of the most successful FM services businesses operating across the UK & Ireland.

Declan's natural talent for working with numbers led him to theoretical physics. However, after spending some time during university working part-time in retail, he quickly developed a strong passion for business. This passion led him to head back to the classroom to study accountancy and finance, and eventually pursue a career in business.

Having qualified, Declan served three years with a well-established forensic accountancy firm. In 2005, Noonan – a growing facilities services company – recruited Declan to be their Financial Controller.

Within just three years he was promoted to Chief Financial Officer at the age of 28.

In 2008, as part of Noonan's executive team, Declan led a management buy-out of the organisation. In the years that followed, he oversaw strong growth for the business which would see the company treble in size by 2015. During this busy period, Declan, who is a strong advocate for continuous development, completed an MBA.

In 2017, Declan supported the sale of the now much larger Noonan business to Bidvest Plc. In June 2019 Declan Doyle was named Chief Executive Officer for the business.

Since becoming CEO, Declan has delivered substantial organic growth, rebranded the business to Bidvest Noonan and delivered strong expansion which saw the business double in size (again!) by 2021.

As CEO, Declan has entirely transformed Bidvest Noonan, investing heavily in innovation, sustainability and talent. Today, Declan leads a dynamic business which employs more than 27,000 people and has a client portfolio which includes many of the UK and Ireland's best-known organisations.

FM Director spoke exclusively with Declan recently to find out about his strategies for growth, how he feels about his achievements, and the future of Bidvest Noonan.

How did your experience in retail shape your approach to understanding customer needs?

One of the reasons I fell in love with this industry is that it's very similar to retail. You've got to get it right with your team, you've got to get it right with your customers, and you've got to deliver a top-notch service every single day. Retail is really fascinating because of the real-time feedback you get from customers with regards to what's working and what's not. You learn how good the service levels are and what the demand is, and then you can adjust accordingly.

That's something we're passionate about here at Bidvest Noonan; we put a lot of work into our customer engagement and try to have open dialogues at multiple levels. We always try to make sure we're adjusting and pivoting, always meeting and exceeding the expectations of our clients. The ability to look out for that real-time feedback and listen to it, rather than just wait for a quarterly or end-of-year review is much more effective for retaining customers and maintaining client satisfaction.

You must listen and learn all the time and be proactive rather than reactive.

You became CFO at a young age and now you're CEO. To what do you attribute such a swift progression?

The leadership of this business has always been quite long-term in its focus. When I was interviewed for a role in finance at 25, they told me in the very first interview that they were in fact hiring the next CFO. They said that it could take three years, five years, or even more, but whoever they hired, they were looking at making them the next CFO eventually. That really excited me!

After just three years, I took the CFO seat. John O'Donoghue was appointed as our CEO at the same time, and we worked closely together, along with our senior leadership team, for the next 11 years. We worked hard on growing the business and during those 11 years we quadrupled the business.

There was always an understanding that when John retired, I would step into his shoes, and that happened when I was in my 30s.

What are the core principles at the heart of Bidvest Noonan's success?

First and foremost, we encourage a culture of care. If we look out for each other, care for each other and treat each other with respect at all levels, we'll keep this success going far into the future. If there's one thing that I remain ultra-focused on, it's doing everything we can to maintain that caring culture. It can get harder as the business grows but it always remains the right thing to do.

We're also very clear about why we're here. The reality of what we do every day is about keeping the communities in which we work safer and healthier. Our people are out there on the front line every day,

making a difference. We've always understood that, but I think the general public got a real sense of that during the COVID pandemic. During all the lockdowns, our people were out there making sure the hospitals were kept clean and secure so they could stay open, and we were critical in terms of keeping the transport infrastructure and essential retail going.

Bidvest Noonan are always out there delivering frontline services and so we have a very strong sense of purpose around that concept. We're here to create safer and healthier communities today, for tomorrow.

We're also very competitive and very results orientated. If we set ourselves a target – for example, like we did when we decided to slash our emissions – then we want to beat it. That competitiveness, that focus on the numbers, is what helps to make this business grow.

You like to be hands-on with the company, spending time on customer sites both large and small. How important is this hands-on approach to you?

We do like to get out there as much as we can. I'm certainly out there a few times a month, spending time with our frontline teams. I like to talk to them to find out what's working for them, what's not, and to gather a sense of how engaged they are.

We can then ask whether we're doing the right things, if we're supporting them in the right way, and if there's anything else we can do to help them. I find that interaction with our people hugely valuable in terms of keeping myself educated and informed around what's really going on at the frontline of our business.

We do the same with our customers. We have a fantastic senior management team across the UK and Ireland and managing directors who really know their customers. They know their business and they work hard to develop long-term plans for customers to really drive our offering and expand and deepen the relationships that we have.

Quite often my key question for customers is: What more could we be doing for you today and what more do you expect from us in the future? I try to anticipate and focus on what is coming next and how we can support that customer in terms of what lies ahead.

Being so hands-on with our customers also allows us the opportunity to share with them how we see the industry and our offering evolving. It also gives us a sense of which of our customers are really aligned with our culture. I think that's really important; some of our most successful and long-term relationships have been with customers who are truly aligned with us in terms of values and culture. Once we know who those customers are, we can then look at how we can invest more with them and how we can work with them more long-term. But you don't get that from sitting in an office or reading a report; you've got to get out and talk to people.

What does the future look like for Bidvest Noonan? More growth? Investment in AI?

We want to be the best FM business around, and we want to double our size again in the next five years. We define 'the best' as having exceptional people, sustainable solutions, and disruptive innovation. The way technology is advancing will lead to a transformation of our industry but we're never going to be a tech led business; we'll always be people led. But technology can help us deliver this in a way that's far better for the customer, our people and our business.

We have a fantastic technology and innovation team led by our tech and Innovation Director, Peter Smyth, who has taken this business on an incredible journey over the last number of years, matching customers – based on their specific pain points – with a large portfolio of innovation. This is really helping us to deepen the relationship with our customers and offer them an improved service based on their needs.

We're also looking to step up our investment in AI, with some resources allocated specifically for that purpose. We believe that AI will lead to a major transformation in how we how we do business; leading to a quicker, simpler and more efficient experience for our people and our customers.

For more information about Bidvest Noonan, visit <https://bidvestnoonan.co.uk/>