

Money & Jobs

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL
Pallet Network expands
with €10m hub: 3



HOTEL BOOKINGS
Domestic visitors represent
hefty 44% of market: 5



Business Editor: Conor Keane

Your guide to investments, personal finance, tax and recruitment

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My job

Financial services provider with a difference

WHEN Ricky Walsh set up his business in 1999, he knew there were many providers of financial services — many providers of financial solutions known as wealth managers. He wanted to go further, to deliver something that was not there before.

He wanted to be a wealth creator. Walsh Group as it stands today is made up of four components, each dedicated to that purpose. "I did have a definite vision of what I wanted the company to be, right from the start," he recalls of the early days. "I had come from a structured background during my time with Standard Life and my essential aim was not to become just another broker. I wanted to operate in a more bespoke mode for clients."

"I started my life in civil engineering, so property was an area that always interested me. Even during my days with Standard Life, I had done a certain amount of development as a sideline and it helped me to evolve into what I wanted to do in terms of delivering independent financial advice. At that time, I could see property was going to become a major entity in the country's progress."

He lists Irish Life, Eagle Star, New Ireland, Standard Life, Friends First, Hibernian, BCP, Canada Life, Wealth Options and Caledonian among the companies with whom Walsh Group continue to invest funds.

Walsh Consulting is the company's core business, covering activities from pensions to investment opportunities. "Walsh Consulting is where it all started — and it is still very much the engine of our business. Even though we enjoy excellent relationships with all of the providers, we are tied to no one and this independence means we can use our experience and expertise to examine all options to getting the best deal. We now have four individual operating entities — consulting, development, private and property."

In terms of where his clients come from, Walsh quotes the 80/20 rule: "Eighty per cent of our business comes from 20% of our clients. We have a client list of 1,500, a fair jump from zero clients in 1999," he smiles. "I am a salesman at heart, and try to encourage everyone who works at Walsh Group to bring their own enthusiasm to the table. They may not all contribute in a similar fashion, but they are all important to the overall picture. I tend to spend increasing amounts of my time involved in the development and private equity side, very exciting areas that I believe offer great opportunities for the future."

The company is involved in the food, telecommunications, leisure, hospitality and property arenas in Europe and the USA.

At a time when the spectre of the sub-prime fallout, rising energy prices and an international credit crunch dominate the headlines, Walsh takes a realistic view of how to chart a passage through turbulent economic waters. "In my 25 years involved in business, I

Interview:
John Daly

Name:
Ricky Walsh

Occupation:
Managing director,
Walsh Group

Background:
Worked with
Standard Life for
15 years, before
leaving to set up
Walsh Consulting, in
1999. As managing
director, he is still
involved in the
day-to-day activities
of the business, but is
increasingly spending
more time developing
opportunities for the
group and its
stakeholders.

have seen many stock market collapses and corrections, but none quite like this. We are in a unique place because for the first time ever we have many sectors of the world's commercial activity in a downward spiral. From an Irish perspective, we had to come down to a sustainable level — there was no way we could continue to build 80,000 houses every year."

Regardless of the present firm stance by the ECB on interest rate cuts, Walsh believes cuts will have to come before the end of the year. "I believe it's fundamentally about confidence, something that is lacking at present."

Involved in a round of substantial fundraising at present, he sees no shortage of interest for the right kind of projects. "We do find that the funds are coming from the more astute investor, whereas those people not taking an overview of the economic environment are doing nothing because it seems the right thing to do."

Quoting Warren Buffett's famous dictum to be "fearful when others are greedy and greedy only when others are fearful", Walsh looks beyond today's headlines as the inspiration for

current investment: "My instinct tells me now is the time, and I am certainly not alone in this attitude. The problem at present is that banks themselves are less inclined to see these opportunities in terms of their support."

Walsh Development is the section of the group dedicated to the pursuit of development opportunities across all sectors, both in Ireland and overseas. Some are wholly owned by Walsh Group, others in partnership with others. The company currently has approximately 20 projects at various stages of completion, with a combined potential market value close to €1 billion. Five such projects are in Cork — one in east Cork, two in west Cork and two in the city centre — and have a combined potential market value of close to €200 million.

Walsh Group, in conjunction with Jaguar Capital, last year completed the purchase, for £146.25m (€191m), of 10 Queen Street Place. Located in the heart of the City of London, the building will be home until 2030 to one of the world's largest law firms. Also last year, the company sold the neighbouring Thames Court in a deal which netted 127% profit to investors over a 27-month term.

"London has been very good for us, and our relationship with Jaguar Capital, built up over the past four years, has yielded us substantial profits. That came from our connection to Quinlan Private. Property has been an integral part of the growth of Walsh Group, and that will continue to be the case. The deals are still out there, it just requires a more focused approach in the times we currently live in."

With the company's offices located in Cork's City Quarter, right on the edge of the proposed massive development of the Docklands, Walsh takes an enthusiastic if cautious view of this potentially huge economic injection for the southern capital.

"We would be extremely excited by the opportunity this project presents, but at the same time frustrated by some of the potential planning difficulties that seem likely to emerge," he says. "I am a great supporter and admirer of the Howard Holdings plan, and the effort it has taken to get the project to this stage. There are huge challenges facing the people who will pioneer this and, in an ideal world, they would receive the required support from the appropriate political and administrative bodies to do something very special. I think what might happen in Cork's Docklands could be very special, but, hand on heart, do I see it happening in the next five years? No."

And while the Docklands have garnered a deserved amount of media coverage, Walsh cautions the powers that be to realise it is "not the only game in town" in terms of potential to transform Cork. "There are many brown-field sites that could well have an equally beneficial effect on the city in the years ahead, and there needs to be a balance in terms of viewing all of them on a similar level."

Ricky Walsh



Ricky Walsh, above left, with Niall Mellon, says there is no shortage of astute investors, despite predictions of a downturn.
 Picture: John Sheehan

JOB of the week

Job: You are cleared for take off! Kerry Airport wants to appoint an air traffic control (ATC) officer.

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Applications: Write to Peter Moore, Airport Manager, Kerry Airport, Farranfore, Killarney, Co Kerry, or email petermoore@kerryairport.ie by Friday March 21. More details on www.kerryairport.ie

jobmarket

See inside for five pages of Ireland's top jobs: 7 to 11

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