

# Career spotlight: Mark Thickbroom

In this interview, Mark Thickbroom shares his career path and advice on successfully managing risk and making an impact at work to inspire those up and coming in their careers.



## How did you get into risk management as a career?

I didn't really start to think that I was in a risk management career until the last 8 or so years, as risk as a function has become more talked about, accepted as a discipline, and embraced more maturely by organisations.

I've often described my role as FD as someone who looks after the financial health of a business and risk is something I've been managing all my working life. The risk of not getting paid, the risk of a supplier failing, the risk of a product failing, the risk of an employee being negligent, the risk that the business runs out of money - it's there, every day!

### Name:

Mark Thickbroom

### Position:

Finance &  
Commercial  
Director

### Organisation:

Network Rail  
Certification Body  
Ltd

### Industry/Sector:

Transport

## What qualifications do you have and which are most valuable?

I am a FCCA (qualified Certified Accountant), holder of a BSc in Accounting and Law and have an MBA from Manchester Business School.

The FCCA has been most financially valuable for myself as it has allowed me to rise to the role of Director. However, in terms of personal development, the MBA was undoubtedly the best qualification as it widened my perspective for wider business processes and functions.

## What are the benefits of joining professional organisations such as the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management (IIRSM)?

Access to a community of like-minded risk professionals from a huge range of industries, each with their own perspective and experiences as well as access to courses and materials that keep you up to speed with current issues and thought leadership.

## What advice would you give to build a strong professional network and how important is this for someone starting out on their health, safety and risk management career?

No magic recipe, just connect and stay

## BRIEF BIO/ KEY CAREER MILESTONES:

A career that spans over 35 years in a variety of sectors, ranging from sport and leisure to heavy engineering, from technology to distribution, in large multinational corporations to SMEs and latterly into the public sector.

My roles have increased in breadth and responsibility as I've progressed, operating as a business unit FD for 3 decades and, on 2 occasions have been the MD/CEO for those businesses.

Out of work I am passionate about sport, an avid football and rugby fan and for fitness, I cycle around 3,000 miles pa.

connected with everyone you meet – you never know when you might need them and vice versa. This requires some effort, but you will get the payback.

### **What does a typical week look like for you?**

No such thing, each one is different. Yes, there are repeating tasks like month end reporting but each one is different in terms of results and narrative. Each day presents different challenges or different perspectives, different nuances, different personnel, different risks.

### **What is your approach to leadership and what advice you would give to those wanting to develop their leadership skills?**

Lead by example, always. Be truthful and preserve your integrity, even if the messages are hard. If you are authentic then people will follow you and support your “ask”. I was brought up to treat others as you wish to be treated yourself, so please and thank you go a long way in my book.

### **What is the biggest career challenge you have faced, how did you approach the challenge, what was the outcome and would you approach it differently with hindsight?**

My time at a VC backed technology automotive business was, as the Chinese curse goes, “interesting”. It was in a technology space that was being dominated by two huge global players. It had once been prolifically profitable but was now in a slow decline with no visible way out. The staff were incredibly loyal to the business and fought with me, by my side to save the company, which we did after a really aggressive and risky strategy which saw us buy two competitors simultaneously, and this enticed a buyer to acquire the whole lot before we ran out of cash – giving the VC a credible exit and a way forward. It was very risky and very nearly failed, but it didn't. We

“

**connect and stay connected with everyone you meet – you never know when you might need them and vice versa.**

”

were constantly evaluating risk, every hour of every day, with almost every transaction – would it work commercially, did we have enough resources, could we survive a bit longer? Being honest and open with my team bought them in and kept them engaged.

With hindsight could we have done things better or been more risk averse? I genuinely don't think so. I do believe we got the best result possible. It was risk versus reward in action.

### **How do you manage client/stakeholder expectations whilst encouraging commitment to continuous improvement in risk management?**

A tricky subject. I do try very hard to identify all the pertinent risks to the business and calibrate them appropriately, then identify mitigations. I'm very keen to keep people focussed on the flip side of risk, which is of course reward. So, my task is made easier then because we get into what we might do, how we might improve our position as well as discuss risks management and therefore a fully rounded discussion.

### **What is your proudest achievement so far?**

Again, hard to pick, I've enjoyed a career with a lot of challenges but a lot of opportunity to achieve things. If I had to pick one it would be turning around an Engineering business in the Midlands. I stepped in as an interim and was then offered the MD role. We turned it around and made it viable (out of a prepacked administration) and sold it two years later to an Italian competitor. Academically I wasn't the highest achiever so getting my Master's degree was a big thing for me. I finally felt comfortable at senior manager level intellectually.

### **Who inspires you and why?**

Several people to spring to mind. Early on I worked into a very energetic and intelligent Divisional FD. She was great at developing



me and wanting me to do better, for her. Later, I had another Divisional FD who taught me the value of bringing problems to light as early as possible AND bringing at least 3 options for a solution, not just tabling the problem. He was also the coolest character I've worked with in a crisis, never being anything other than calm and reassuring.

In terms of well-known people, those characters who have strong convictions and hold their nerve inspire me, people such as Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela. In business Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos are massively inspirational for their vision and drive.

Finally, my wife - she holds down a professional career, is our household's 'Director of Operations and Procurement' as well as 'Director of Child Education and Welfare' as well as being great partner. I don't know how she does it.

### **What are your most important tips for someone starting out on their health, safety, risk management career?**

Educate yourself as much as you can. Gather as much knowledge as you can about as many things as you can and, as noted above, connect with as many people as you can and work at those relationships. Be brave and try different roles but also try to plan your career as much as you can. If you want to be a CEO of a large automotive business, then you need to sensibly figure out what roles you need to do well in to give yourself the best chance of getting there.

### **What are your career aspirations now?**

I was very ambitious when I was younger but I'm comfortable with where I am and what I've accomplished, so for now it's about consolidating my knowledge and passing some of that on, mentoring people coming up and through and helping to create the right culture and environment for people to grow and take calculated risks.

“

**Be brave and try different roles but also try to plan your career as much as you can.**

”

“

**Educate yourself as much as you can. Gather as much knowledge as you can about as many things as you can and, as noted above, connect with as many people as you can and work at those relationships.**

”

## **About IIRSM's Emerging Risk Leaders Network**

The IIRSM Emerging Risk Leader Network (ERLN) is a working group of ambitious professionals who are proactively looking to get ahead in their careers or support others to do so. The purpose of the Network is to:

- Support its members in developing their influence and profile within their place of work and the wider risk community.

- Empower members to build career success by learning from and supporting others from different industries, risk disciplines and geographical locations to cross-pollinate ideas, knowledge, best practice and lessons learned.
- Facilitate opportunities to showcase member capabilities through delivering informative and novel

ideas and solutions through different channels.

- Promote the importance of developing risk and leadership skills early on in careers.

**To find out more and for sponsorship opportunities, visit:**

[www.iirsm.org/iirsm-emerging-risk-leaders-network](http://www.iirsm.org/iirsm-emerging-risk-leaders-network).