

By Rosie Simms

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Indicative reading time: **5 minutes**



**Matthew Collins, founder and managing director of Ascend Broking, targets growing from £14m to £50m gross written premiums in five years as the firm positions itself as a viable alternative to larger brokers.**

### **Ascend Broking**

**Offices:** Chelmsford Essex

**Staff:** 27

**GWP:** £14m

**Specialisms:** Transportation, construction, marine, property, commercial

## What was your career before Ascend?

I left school in 1988 and realised I wasn't going to be a professional football player, so I got a job as an underwriting trainee at the Royal Insurance in Chelmsford. I joined FMW in 1992, and in 1998, I was appointed broking director. In 2001, I was part of the team that did a management buyout. That business was acquired in 2008 by Oval Insurance Broking. I was promoted to national broking director, so I had oversight across the whole of the UK. I helped Oval along its journey for six years.

I was then part of the UK market management team when Gallagher bought Oval and Giles. Because the numbers were so big I just felt that personal touch from an insurance broker was missing a little bit and so I left in 2016.

## Why did you set up Ascend?

I had no plans to set up an insurance broker – far from it – because I didn't have any clients. I had never been an account executive as such. Actually, it was some quite high-level insurers who contacted me and actually encouraged me to set up. They said, 'You know what you're doing from a broking point of view, you're quite a marketing lead with your ideas and you'd build a really good insurance broker'.



**“All of our growth will be considered and controlled. We’re not going to be running around and opening offices everywhere.”**

Matthew Collins, Ascend Broking

Naturally, in life, I'm someone who would rather throw myself into something and have a go than just talk about it. I was 44 and at a crossroads; it was either now or never to do something a bit different. So, I ended up starting it in 2017.

### **How has the business changed since then?**

It, 2017, was a difficult year; we started from nothing. Now almost seven years on, we're in a place where we've got a fully functional claims department, marketing strategy, broking accounts department, we've got a healthcare division. But fundamentally, we offer privately owned businesses an independent advice-driven broking strategy and service.

### **How do you attract clients?**

We will always reach out to businesses. We built our own customer relationship management tool from scratch. We do all types of marketing from insights in the appropriate magazines, to sponsorship of certain events, to traditional marketing. We talk to people – really, that's the key. We pick the phone up and we just have a chat. And then we'll obviously use a little bit of social media and other marketing tools. Fundamentally, we like to try to handpick our clients that are actually fit for us rather than just a huge number.

### **How do you retain them?**

We provide a tiered service proposition to clients, very much bespoke to them – each of them. We offer a holistic service that they've got one office where they can access every bit of their insurance risk management.

### **What is your current headcount and are there any plans to add more?**

27 with more on the way!

I'm always looking to attract people who would like a slightly different lifestyle – maybe they don't want to commute to London anymore and they want to work a bit more locally. So, someone who's a returning mum who wants to come back to work for two or three days. We're looking at different sectors and different parts of the country where we may now start opening a regional presence.

### **Ascend has a training academy; how important is it to bring in new talent to the industry?**

It is really important and it's a challenge for any business in the insurance sector. We've got an ascend Academy, we get them CII-qualified as quickly as possible. In the mornings, they will be doing their exams and then their technical work; afternoons, they go and work in the real world, including marketing, claims, sales, and broking accounts.

### **You mentioned opening more regional presences. Where?**

All of our growth will be considered and controlled. We're not going to be running around and opening offices everywhere.

We're looking at maybe another area west of London, Reading, anything south of Birmingham would be the kind of area that I'd consider.

### **Have you made any acquisitions? Will you?**

We've been provided with some opportunities and for whatever reason, we just decided they weren't quite right for us. We have a very strong proposition and a strong organic growth plan. We are looking at books of business purchases, or some acquisitions, but fundamentally it has to match our culture.

### **Ascend engages with local charities and causes; why is this?**

I wanted to do more in the local community, and I wanted to have a business more than insurance. When you set up a plan, and you're trying to attract some people to join you on that journey, then you've got a very strong vision. Doing community work, and doing more than just insurance, actually does help.

You've got to set non-financial goals along with your business plan; it's not just about premium.

### **How has being a member of Willis Network benefitted Ascend?**

We've been a member from day one. It's a great opportunity to network, share ideas with like-minded insurance brokers and we share the same challenges in a changing marketplace. You have a good cross section of brokers and we're able to tap into the wider Willis network for global placements and so forth.

### **How important is it for Ascend to remain independent?**

Independence is at our heart. By being remaining independent, we are able to move quicker, we can see market opportunities faster, and we're closer to our clients on the ground to what's changing in the insurance.

## **How are you finding insurer service?**

There's no consistency. You could be dealing with a different individual or a different in-house claims handler, which means a relatively simple claim becomes very painful to deal with at times and the brokers are caught in the middle.

**“All insurers need to look at themselves in the mirror and improve the customer and the claims proposition.”**

**Matthew Collins, Ascend Broking**

We have to work a lot harder on a simple claims proposition to ensure that the customer is treated fairly. I think they haven't recovered from Covid, and working from home doesn't help. All insurers need to look at themselves in the mirror and improve the customer proposition and the claims proposition.

## **How is Ascend keeping up with regulation?**

It's challenge for all brokers. Regulation and the demands are becoming more demanding. We have a compliance officer, so that is dealt with in-house. We also use a third party for ongoing training for staff.

## **What are your goals for the next year?**

We are going to improve our healthcare proposition and we're going to begin to use our healthcare team to provide a really good proposition to our corporate clients. We are going to employ a few specialists in some really niche areas. We're going to launch a few schemes that will be sector-specific within those areas and put the foundations in place for our growth plans. That will happen whenever the right opportunity comes across.

## **Where do you see Ascend in five years?**

We have the potential to be one of the regional powerhouses in five years' time. There will be fewer brokers in the UK, as some of the consolidators will start buying each other or merging with each other. That will then leave a gap in the market for brokers like Ascend and others to fill.

I would like to see us place £50m-plus GWP business that is a viable alternative to larger organisations.

***“Success to me is more than just insurance; it is a positive impact to the community, our colleagues and customers.”***

**Matthew Collins, Ascend Broking**

This article featured in the Insurance Age Broker Success series 20<sup>th</sup> June 2024

<https://www.insuranceage.co.uk/insight/7955084/broking-success-right-opportunity>

More information on Ascend Broking Group can be accessed here <https://ascendbroking.co.uk/in-the-press>