

Meet Kontor, the scaleup finding offices for the likes of Monzo, Deliveroo and Revolut

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to James Townsend, CEO of Kontor about the best real estate advice for unicorns, working with progressive landlords and the importance of stepping outside your own network for invaluable input.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Kontor acts in two ways - We help scaleups and unicorns find best-in-class offices by partnering as a real estate advisor, but we also work with the most progressive asset-owners (landlords), advising on strategy to lease and dispose of their office space, all predominantly in Central London.

What was the catalyst for launching the product?

Kontor was launched back in 2014 from the idea that scaleups within the tech and creative industries were often overlooked and underserved by big office brokers.

We wanted to create a platform where these fast-growing brands had access to the most inspiring office space at an affordable price, giving them an excellent level of service and the best solution possible to support their various stages of growth.

We were very much a tenant-focussed business to begin with, but we've

recently branched into working with asset-owners (landlords) to deliver a similar service, which was a hugely exciting milestone.

Tell me about the product - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers, USP and so on?

So we have those two very distinct service lines between the tenant (or occupier) side, and the asset-owner (or landlord) side.

On the tenant side, we help source offices where companies can really thrive. We handle all the searching, shortlisting and negotiating on their behalf to get the best possible deal, seeing everything through from start to finish and continuing to manage the relationship once they're in, all the way to when they need to renew, which is where the process resets and we go again.

We hit pretty much every point in their journey - anywhere from connecting them with top design & build companies to managing their workplace strategy, ultimately taking away their pain points and helping them achieve the best possible outcome.

On the asset-owner side, we work with those forward-thinking landlords who want to deliver office space to a particular target audience or business, but need help in how to get it in the best possible place to do so.

We help market their spaces across the right channels ensuring it reaches every potential occupier or tenant, and advise them on the type of office they should be creating to attract the right audience. We'll also negotiate on deals on their behalf to secure the best possible terms, too.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

Dramatically is probably the easiest answer!

We focussed on finding suitable, flexible solutions for scaleups to start with, predominantly revolving around sublet space.

Since then the market has evolved drastically - now there's many flexible office solutions to suit their needs, places like WeWork and The Office Group (also known as TOG) all offer workspaces on a flexible basis, as well as many bespoke managed solutions provided directly by landlords.

Evolving into the asset-owner sector felt like a natural next step for us, but I would say flexibility is an area that's really changed.

Historically real estate has been quite slow and focussed on longer-term commitments, whereas now it's grown into much more of a hospitality-focussed market and anyone looking for an office now wants that fully-engaged service.

We're talking about high quality amenities like wellness hubs, on-site gyms and cafés, as well as an attractive place to conduct their day jobs, and we help them get it.

What is your favourite thing about being a founder?

Witnessing the progression of the team around me, and that could be anyone from the brokers on the tenant side all the way through to the more core functions of the business like marketing.

Seeing their personal stamp on my original Kontor vision over almost ten

years is really fulfilling.

Which founders or businesses do you see as being the most inspirational?

We've been fortunate enough to work with some of the most exciting scaleups and unicorns in the business, and throughout our journey we've attracted many clients which have gone on to be huge household names - from Monzo to Deliveroo, Braze and Revolut.

Witnessing that progression - especially with some of the tech brands we've helped - has been really invigorating for me as a founder, and their drive and ambition to take that idea and keep it consistently growing and evolving despite whatever hurdles they encounter along the way is really inspiring in itself.

Which other figures in your life inspire you?

My dad, without a doubt.

When he lost his own father at a young age he took a really entrepreneurial approach to life. He took full responsibility for his family amongst other things, and instilled a work ethic in me which helped me become who I am today.

Ultimately he taught me that anything is possible when you put your mind to it, and demonstrated that hard work, dedication and a single focus can lead to great success.

What has been your biggest business fail?

We've been very fortunate in that we've had very few bumps in the road, but the biggest to date was the impact of Covid and how people work,

which subsequently led to a drop-off in the consumption of office space.

Clearly there were underlying trends which were accelerated because of that time, but we learnt people don't need to be sitting at a desk 24/7.

Within that, there's been the requirement to 'right-size' the business at points, and looking back I've probably been too eager to cost-save and make changes without fully understanding the human impact.

If I could do it again, I'd take longer to make those decisions and fully understand the impact on my team.

What are the things you're really good at as a leader?

Without sounding contradictory to the above, I pride myself on foreseeing challenges on the horizon and making quick decisions early enough to ensure consequences are minimal, so this trait has worked both for me and against me over the years.

I also have a really clear vision of what I want to create.

Which areas do you need to improve on?

Although I'm clear on the vision for the business, I need to improve on explaining changes and sharing information in the right way with the team.

Everyone has different learning styles and ways of consuming information, so it's about playing to people's strengths to get the best outcome, which I'm working on.

What's in store for the future of the business?

As we recently completed step 1 of our grand 5 year plan - acquiring the landlord/asset-owner side of the business - we're really excited about growing that and getting the team and our offering in front of as many landlords as we can to drive that awareness.

Next up is to get into the design, build, and project management side of things on behalf of our clients. We're not going for world domination from a design and build point of view, instead we want to provide Kontor-led space and client-led solutions with a consistent point of contact throughout our customer journey, making it easier for everyone.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Find outlets for discussing ideas.

Being able to find others who can act as a soundboard who aren't directly part of your business is always something I've found incredibly beneficial.

Pinpoint a selection of people you can go to, these could be mentors, fellow founders, or friends you trust and value the option of to bounce ideas off. Also don't be afraid to step outside of your own network and echo chamber - getting the input of those who have nothing to do with your industry is invaluable.

And finally, a more personal question! We like to ask everyone we interview about their

daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little more traditional?

I like to be in the gym for about 7am twice a week. I actually invested in a Personal Trainer after realising I was lacking in proper exercise outside of my day-to-day walking around with clients, so enjoying those industry perks of dinners and drinks would not be a good combination without doing this (!).

Outside of Kontor my passion is racing cars, so this requires me to keep a base level of fitness and enables me to compete at a standard I'm happy with.

Then I'll catch up with the senior team members once I'm in the office, helping me understand what's on their desks for the day and any blockers I can help remove. Quiet time is also essential to catch up on emails and other admin, as well as having time to actually think about things properly and avoid making rash decisions.

At the end of the working day I'll meet my wife to get the tube together and share dog duties of our Bedlington Whippet, Wilf, then once home it's time to decompress, usually by cooking dinner together and sticking Netflix on.

I'm not the type who will stay up all night reading 100 books planning my next move or my next investment, I need that down time to relax before it's all go-go-go the next day.

James Townsend is CEO of *Kontor*.
