

Winners reveal pride after Durham, Sunderland and South Tyneside Business Awards

Companies have spoken of their pride after winning big at the second heat of the North East Business Awards.

Around 250 people gathered at Ramside Hall to see nine companies scoop awards in the Durham, Sunderland and South Tyneside regional final, hosted by TV presenter Kirsten O'Brien.

All the winners of the hotly contested heat now go on to compete in the grand final at Hardwick Hall later this year, going head to head with winners from the Tyneside and Northumberland heat, which took place last month, and the Teesside final, which happens in two weeks.

Hebburn based eQuality Solutions was crowned Company of the Year, topping a stellar year for the business, which has been growing rapidly in recent years after a finance package paved the way for a number of acquisitions to drive its growth.

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The specialist educational training firm's CEO Andy Gough said: "I'm absolutely delighted. There's no better thing than getting awarded by your peers within the industry and across the North East, so to be recognised as Company of the Year is just amazing – and not just for me but for the whole team. We've got a fantastic team we've built from 30-40 staff to more than 100 in the last year. We're still North East headquartered but we've now got offices in Halifax, London, Devon and one of the real things for me was when you wrote the story about a North East business buying a London business, and it's usually the other way around.

“We’ve worked extremely hard over the last four years and everyone in the business believes in what we do. The thing that drives me is that I’ve got two children both with physical and what I call hidden disabilities, and also mental health issues as a result of that. It’s that lived experience of witnessing non-inclusive environments, that really drives me for a more inclusive world.”



Andy Gough of Company of the Year eQuality Solutions
(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)

The first winner on the night was Sunderland based Unipres UK Ltd, which took the Apprenticeships, Training and Skills award.

The firm, which has more than 1,000 employees, supplies steel pressings and sub assemblies to the automotive industry and has been tapping into the Government’s Kickstart initiative to

bring new starters through the door. In the last year it has taken on 12 maintenance apprentices and has used the Kickstart scheme to take on 67 learners.

Rob Dodds, controller, said: "This award means a lot for us, and shows what we have been trying to do – to give everyone a chance. You don't need to be a high flier, we believe everyone should get a chance to learn new skills and get into the career you want, and some of the people we've taken on have been long-term employed.

"It's really about getting into the local community and as a result we've evolved as a company, and the young people who have come through the programme have been fantastic."

AR Power, which designs and installs bespoke Solar PV and battery storage systems, has seen huge growth in the last 12 months, helping it to the High Growth & Ambition Award.

Mark Dunville, technical director, said: "The firm has been going for 11 years and over those years the struggle has been massive – it's been ups and downs. We went from 10 staff down to two staff, we've had to sell our own house in 2016 to keep the business going and run the business from home. A lot of our competitors went bankrupt but we stuck at it, and in the last year we've trebled our staff. We're at 28 and we're just recruiting more, so it's going really well for us.

"Clearly the energy sector is going crazy. We always knew this was going to come, and rather than give up six or seven years ago we knew solar was the future so we've stuck at it and now it's paid off. It's all finally paying off."

The Innovation and Technology Award was scooped by Evidence Based Education (EBE), a Sunderland organisation dedicated to improving learning outcomes by helping teachers themselves to learn and develop. Last year the business began developing the Great Teaching Toolkit (GTT), a web app that allows teachers and schools to access professional development services.

Managing director Jack Deverson said: “We’re absolutely delighted to have been announced as winners in the Technology & Innovation category – to be honest, it came as a real surprise!



Jack Deverson of Evidence Based Education with presenter Rupinder Thandi

(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)

“It’s a huge credit to the whole team at EBE. The way they have knuckled down in the last year has been a pleasure to be part of. To turn the mere idea of the Great Teaching Toolkit into a product used by more than 12,000 teachers already, within less than 12 months and under tough circumstances, is nothing short of incredible – their work inspires me every day.

“It’s the launch of the Great Teaching Toolkit which has

driven the doubling of our revenue in the most recent financial year, and we think this is just the start. It lays the foundation for strong growth and some really exciting times ahead.”

Linda Kirk, founder of Just For Women Centre CIC, was thrilled to take the Heart of the Community Award for the organisation, which works with women who struggle with a wide range of issues – from mental health, to poverty, to domestic violence.

She said: “This is amazing. We’ve had a fantastic week and I’m delighted to take this back to Stanley. We’re so proud of ourselves and this award is for everyone on the team – they have really worked hard for it.”

The Manufacturing Award was won by Durham based Artech Lighting, which designs and manufactures a range of indoor and outdoor lighting solutions. The firm, which has bases in London and Scotland, has created striking light installations for the likes of University of Strathclyde, Sunderland’s new City Hall and a host of exclusive office developments in the centre of London in the last year.



Liam Oudnie of Artech Lighting
(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)

Liam Oudnie, bid manager at Artech lighting said: “Artech is local company that operates globally but we are so very proud of our durham roots. We have spent the last few years disrupting an industry that has been dominated by huge global companies and it is fantastic to receive this award in our home city.”

Paul Parsons and Caroline Latta launched their public relations and communications agency, Stand – winner of the Newcomer of the Year award – on March 1 2020, yet their specialism in NHS and public health projects made them well placed to become involved in some of the year’s most vital health campaigns. Stand helped public health departments develop their Covid response programmes, and provide key information around vaccination. In two years, Stand has grown from a team of two to 11 and is already in the process of recruiting more staff.

Mr Parsons said: "This is for the team – they are so amazing. We've got a great group of people and we're lucky to work for people who really appreciate us and who keep coming back for more."

Services Award – Concept IT Services, winner of the Services Award, provides SMEs with IT services and support, and has been steadily growing since launching in 2003. Managing director Kevin Embleton puts the firm's success down to the fact that the team nurture strong relationships rather than chase after sales.

He said: "We've been around for a while and we've got some amazing clients, but we've only recently really started to do some PR. We've entered some awards but not got this far, so to win this is great. It's the quality of our work that counts, customers come first."

Small Business Award Winner, Caroline O'Grady of Coote O'Grady
(Image: Newcastle Chronicle)

Caroline O'Grady, co-founder of Small Business Award winner Coote O'Grady, said the firm launched in 2016 to provide legal spend solutions, technology and consulting, with its 10 staff working remotely. More than 80% of the staff are women and its flexible, remote-working policy lets working parents thrive even during the pandemic.

She said: "It's a huge team effort from everyone we work with. We have a great workforce. We're all remote – I work in East Boldon and the co-founder Stacy Coote is in Cambridge but we've always been a flexible company, and our firm proves that if you trust people they will do great things."

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