

Alton Towers owner Merlin Entertainments lures former NBA chief as boss

The owner of Madame Tussauds and Alton Towers has lured a former boss of the Philadelphia 76ers NBA team as its next chief executive.

Sky News has learnt that Merlin Entertainments will announce later on Monday that Scott O'Neil will replace veteran CEO Nick Varney.

Mr O'Neil's appointment will place him in charge of one of the world's biggest operators of theme parks and visitor attractions.

Merlin, which is now privately owned, counts the London Eye and Thorpe Park among its other prime assets in the UK.

Mr O'Neil resigned last year from the 76ers' owner, Harris Blitzer Sports and Entertainment (HBSE).

Dave Blitzer, a co-founder of HBSE, is a top executive at Blackstone, the private equity giant which is one of Merlin's controlling shareholders.

Its other investors are a vehicle owned by the family behind the Lego empire and Canada's largest pension fund.

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Mr Varney announced in April that he would step down as Merlin's CEO after nearly a quarter of a century in charge of the company in its various guises.

In total, Merlin operates 140 attractions, 23 hotels and six holiday villages in 24 countries and across four continents.

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A Merlin spokesperson declined to comment.