

{ EMPLOYER STRATEGY: FIRSTFOLIO }

Smoothly tackling a growing challenge

A wave of acquisitions entails ensuring harmony between old and new staff

LOUIS WHITE

IT is appropriate that Firstfolio Limited has the word first in its title, as it is determined to be a leader in its field.

In just five years the firm has undergone a name change and acquired several other companies.

The financial services company, previously known as Affiance, is one of the fastest growing ASX-listed independent financial services companies, with more than \$20 billion in loans under management.

Lawfund, Capital First, LSA, eChoice, Domain, First Chartered Capital, LeaseChoice, Apple Home Loans and Club FS have all been acquired since 2006.

But it is not only in the field of acquisitions that the company is moving quickly. Within its own corridors Firstfolio has been working strategically and intelligently to engage employees in a direct and a meaningful way.

As a result of its endeavours and a program the company devised called Connect-Share-Thrive, Firstfolio last year won the gong for best HR strategic plan in last year's Australian Human Resources Awards.

"Connect-Share-Thrive is a grassroots program designed to be employee-driven," according to general manager human resources Linda Cooper.

"Many of the businesses we acquired were smaller suburban businesses that had a different culture to us. We realised that some people hadn't chosen to work for us and were also now city-based.

"We identified a need to connect all our staff with Firstfolio.

"The whole basis of Connect-Share-Thrive was to get everyone integrated into the business and understand the company's goals and how they could be applied on a daily basis."

Continuous yearly acquisitions have an impact on both existing and new staff. Trying to get new staff to function in harmony with old staff and shed some of their ways is never easy.

"The CST strategy is nice and simple. It engages everybody and links them with the strategy of the business," Cooper says. "The connect element is based on the concept that every staff member

should be connected with and understand how they can contribute to the success of the business and their own career progression.

"The share element is based on the company's belief in the value of human capital and understanding how much can be learned from sharing expertise, knowledge, experience, passion, innovation and ideas. In order to thrive, the CST concept had to become embedded into the corporate philosophy."

A development group named Connectors was formed comprising team leaders and senior staff members to ensure the CST principles were successful.

The Connector group ran two conferences in September 2010 and February 2011, identifying a number of projects to promote unity within the company such as monthly staff awards and cost savings competitions. It also introduced workplace mood monitors.

"We really wanted to establish an office with open accountability," Cooper says. "We wanted principles that were easy to use and would live within the business."

"This is an open-plan office with only two glass offices, so people can interact freely. It is a very dynamic place with regular change, and no one is pigeonholed into any one area.

"The company also established Firstfolio Dreams so that staff could connect with their dreams through a charity of their choice."

With 150 staff and growing, the company realises that attitude is the key to its future successes. Embracing a positive company culture is important.

"I started here in August 2010 after approaching the company," chief financial officer Dustine Pang says.

"I saw where the company was heading and I wanted to be a part of it. I had experience in mergers and acquisitions, and I knew I could contribute to the business."

Pang rang chief executive Mark Forsyth and, after a few meetings, was able to join the company.

"I can honestly say the company has a unique culture," Pang says. "It is very different to some of the big companies I have worked



From left, chief financial officer Dustine Pang, HR general manager Linda Cooper and Muneeza Mirza

for... it is fast-paced and there is a lot of continuous change.

"I am not saying it doesn't have its challenges, but it is really hands-on and there is a lot of personal ownership and accountability," he adds.

The majority of the organisation's income is derived from the residential mortgages sector, where it offers aggregation, wholesale lending and management services to a national network of brokers, partner firms and home loan consumers.

The company aims to generate long-term earnings growth by continuing to develop the largest independent distribution platform in Australia as well as expanding its range of products and services to include life insurance, mortgage protection, asset finance and financial planning.

It plans to add another \$10bn to its loans under mortgage and increase the number of mortgages settled per month to \$500 million, which would boost its market share to 5 per cent.

"It is a dynamic and developing company," Cooper says. "People can expand into different roles and there are leadership opportunities arising. There is plenty happening at Firstfolio."

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LINDA COOPER
HR GENERAL MANAGER,
FIRSTFOLIO

Dream opportunity

WORKING at Firstfolio gave Muneeza Mirza, 25, the opportunity to fulfil a dream by travelling to Romania to teach English.

The project manager was one of two lucky employees whose month-long trips the company funded, enabling them to get involved with a worthy charity under the Firstfolio Dreams initiative.

"That trip changed my life," Mirza says.

"I couldn't believe that I could go anywhere in the world.

"I had read about the oppressive conditions children in Brasov, Romania, were suffering, and I wanted to help out. I spent four weeks teaching English to children and working with Projects Abroad.

"It is a poor country struggling to keep up with its European neighbours and it is a underdeveloped, neglected nation."

Mirza, who has a master's degree in international business from the University of Sydney, says the trip allowed her to see

at first hand what children experience in poorer nations.

"Romania allowed me to develop personally and professionally as a person, and learn how to communicate with someone even if you don't speak their language," she says. "Gestures and sign language can help you a lot.

"Everyone should volunteer because the impact upon you is unparalleled.

"I stayed at an old Romanian place and everything was run by volunteers. I was there for all of May last year and I am still in touch with a lot of the children."

Back in the Firstfolio office, Mirza's tasks as a project manager keep her busy.

"This is my first job out of university; I have been here two years and still wake up every day excited about going to work.

"The basic strategy here so far has been acquisitions and that means there is always change. But it is exciting and I am enjoying it," she says.

"I definitely want to go back (to Romania)," she adds. "You don't forget the people or the experience, and it will be with me forever."

LOUIS WHITE

Creative engagement in an expanding sphere

DREAM JOB

GRAPHIC/WEB DESIGNER

Where: Adelaide
Advantages: Self-employed

JULIA STIRLING

CONNOR Tomas O'Brien is not at all fazed that his business is tied to something that is evolving rapidly. The web is constantly changing, and he finds that exciting. "It's likely that in a year's time I'll be taking on significantly different projects to those I'm working on right now. What will the web look like in 10 years? I've got no idea. In some respects that's terrifying, but that element of uncertainty appeals to me."

The Adelaide-based 23-year-old has been working as a graphic designer for over two years, and set up his web design business about a year ago.

He is now in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose the projects he believes in, working with publishing houses, small businesses and other organisations.

"It's also great to oversee every facet of the project you're working on, from inception to completion, instead of only being able to control a tiny sliver of the operation and never seeing how your work fits into the whole."

He recently designed the websites for Sleepers Publishing, The Readers literary podcast and VolunteerConnect, and is working with Pan Macmillan on its web design and branding for a digital-only imprint.

O'Brien is well-positioned to work with publishers as he is working on a PhD in literary fiction at Adelaide University, focusing on the intersection between technology, design and literary fiction.

But setting up his business has not been without its challenges. The trickiest aspect is establishing a portfolio of work and a network of contacts. "From my experience, taking on passion projects that are self-directed and aren't intended to make money is a great way to develop a profile.

"If you want to create an app or design a book, nobody's going to hire you unless you've already done that kind of work. I found that... situation extremely challenging early on."

O'Brien fell in love with design while editing *On Dit*, Adelaide University's student magazine. He now edits *The Bright Young*, a web journal that looks at the relationship between people and technology.

He describes his career path as a "bit of a winding road". He landed a job as a newspaper columnist while he was in high school, which led to some freelance work.

"From there, I got involved with editing *On Dit*. Because we

didn't have a dedicated designer on board, my co-editors and I had to madly scramble to learn as much as we could about publication design," he says.

"It was an amazing opportunity to be essentially given a (small) budget and told, 'Go make a magazine'."

He recalls the "print is dead" conversation gaining momentum in 2008. "Looking back, I remember feeling pretty anxious — my entire skill-set was either writing for print or designing for print."

He was undertaking an honours degree in creative writing at the time, and turned his dissertation (a series of short stories exploring how relationships are mediated by new technologies) into an ebook.

"That project wasn't incredibly successful in monetary terms... but I did manage to gain the attention of a number of writers and publishing houses, who were trying to navigate the shift toward digital publishing."

"Working on the PhD gives me the opportunity to step back a little and see how things fit together," he says. "For example, right now I'm looking at the idea of the book as a designed object, and thinking about that allows me to consider how to create better online reading environments."



"It's great to oversee every facet of the project you're working on, from inception to completion"

CONNOR TOMAS O'BRIEN
WEB DESIGNER

O'Brien usually has several projects on the go. Last week he spent a day working on a set of illustrations for a magazine and creating a poster design for a music festival. Another day was spent mocking up a layout for a city council publication, followed by a few days tapping out hundreds of lines of codes to build up the framework for a publisher's new website.

Working flexibly is important to O'Brien and he prefers working from home. "I like being able to really get into the zone and concentrate, and office environments I've worked in haven't really been conducive to that," he says.

"There are some weekdays when I'd rather just go cycling, or relax with my partner, and some weekends where I'd like nothing more than to hammer out the idea I've been thinking about."

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Eni is an integrated energy Company committed to growth in the activities of finding, producing, transporting, transforming and marketing oil and gas. The Company has global operations in around 70 countries and employs approximately 80,000 people.

Two outstanding career opportunities have arisen for an experienced Geologist and Explorationist/Geophysicist to join our Exploration team. These are both permanent staff positions located in our Perth office.

GEOLOGIST

The successful applicant must have the following professional skills and experience:

- Assist in the evaluation of the prospectivity of assigned area, through the interpretation of geological and geophysical data;
- Assist in the development of new play concepts and mature these to drilling candidates;
- Make recommendations for internal and external studies to mitigate risks before drilling;
- Report writing for both internal and external (Government) approvals;
- Prospect generation and well proposals, monitoring real-time geological information and assembling well sections for decision making purposes and post-well analysis;

- Basin analysis using the integration of palynology, petrology, facies analysis and geochemistry;
- Seismic interpretation and sequence stratigraphy using both log and seismic data;
- Participate in internal and JV/Government meetings;
- Available on call during drilling campaigns to make informed decisions to obtain the best geological information possible for projects;
- Participate in Exploration Team peer reviews, providing quality control assessments of peers work;
- Provide support in other Exploration Projects/Studies as required;
- Assist in preparation of budgets for project areas.

EXPLORATIONIST / GEOPHYSICIST

The successful applicant must have the following professional skills and experience:

- Interpret 2D and/or 3D geophysical data in a project area in order to achieve objectives;
- Assist in the development of new play concepts and in lead and prospect generation and mature these to drilling candidates;
- Evaluate previous geophysical interpretations, reports and literature relevant to project area, recommend further work regarding reprocessing or acquisition of new geophysical data or special studies to achieve project objectives
- Provide seismic amplitude modelling and quantitative interpretation support to other projects as required;
- Preparation of technical component of tender documents for reprocessing or acquisition of new geophysical data or special geophysical studies and prepare evaluation/recommendation of tenders;
- Assist in QC of seismic reprocessing and other geophysical studies.

The successful candidates will meet the following criteria:

- Degree in Geosciences (Honours/Masters preferable);
- 3-7+ years oil and gas industry experience;
- Literacy and ability in the use of associated PC applications and workstation software;
- Must have proficient geophysical/geological knowledge to be able to think laterally;
- Ability to work autonomously, combined with strong team participation;
- Strong communication skills, both written and verbal;
- Good analytical and presentation skills.

If you are interested in either role, please forward your CV and introductory letter no later than Friday, 17 February 2012 to recruitment@eni.australia.com.au. If applicable, relocation assistance will be considered for the successful applicant.