



Above: Steen Bali (l-r) Solicitor Advocate Michael McSherry, Managing Partner Ken Steen and Partner Depak Bali.

# Here's looking at you kid

DEPAK BALI IS IN A HURRY ... FOR EVERYTHING. IN JULY AT JUST 33-YEARS OLD THE GLASWEGIAN LAUNCHED HIS OWN LAW FIRM WITHIN A YEAR OF COMPLETING HIS TRAINEESHIP, A BUSINESS THAT NOW SITS COMFORTABLY ALONGSIDE HIS MANY OTHER DIVERSE BUSINESS INTERESTS. RICHARD DRAYCOTT MANAGED TO PIN DOWN THE SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR TO FIND OUT WHAT DRIVES HIM AND WHAT HE AIMS TO ACHIEVE WITH HIS BRAND OF LAW IN THE LEGAL SECTOR.

## COVER STORY: YOUNG & RESTLESS

It is not uncommon for lawyers to complain that there are just not enough hours in the day.

Chances are, as you leaf lazily through this issue of *The Firm* with your feet up on your desk and yelling at your trainee to make the coffee, one of your more flustered colleagues is making that very claim to one of their clients. But for one Scottish solicitor that all too common complaint certainly holds a lot more credence than for most.

In June 2006 immigration solicitor Depak Bali launched his own law firm in Glasgow alongside personal injury specialist Ken Steen. Since opening the doors of Steen Bali at offices at Cadogan Square earlier this year the firm has already attracted the considerable legal skills of Solicitor Advocate Michael McSherry who joined the team in September.

For many people owning, running and growing a law firm in the ferociously competitive Scottish legal arena would be more than enough to fill the average day, but not for serial entrepreneur Bali.

As well as enjoying a burgeoning legal career Bali also finds the time to run one of Glasgow's largest day care centres with wife Anita, manage a property portfolio of residential and commercial properties spread across Glasgow, co-ordinate a specialist whisky e-commerce website called [scotchwhiskyworld.com](http://scotchwhiskyworld.com) and also to develop a specialist crèche and child care facility aimed at city centre hotel guests. In fact as this issue of *The Firm* went to press Bali completed a deal for his second day care nursery in Glasgow, a move that, by February, will see Bali employing more than 60 child care staff. This is rapid growth and something he wishes to emulate in the legal sector.

Bali says: "Initially we set up Steen Bali for Ken to do personal injury work and for me to do immigration. We planned to remain boutique, but since we launched my entrepreneurial streak has kicked in and we have already moved into criminal work by bringing on Mike McSherry and we are also looking at offering a new conveyancing service and taking on commercial work as well once we have the correct people on board."

Bali and Steen got together through a mutual acquaintance. At the time they met Ken Steen was planning to take over a firm in Glasgow, but just an hour after meeting Bali they had agreed to establish their own law firm and the Steen Bali domain name was registered within the day.

To say Bali is a fast mover would certainly qualify for the Understatement of the Year category at the Understatement of the Year awards (if they exist). As a teenager he travelled to California's Silicon Valley and worked in the burgeoning computer industry for a year before returning to Scotland to set up his own IT business. Before selling this business he diversified it into mobile phones. Then he went into the off-licence trade with his father and built up a chain of off licences. This led to his diversification into online whisky sales and even the ownership of

a cider brand in association with Aston Manor Brewery in Birmingham. After completing a Masters in Entrepreneurial Studies in 2000 he completed the accelerated LLB course at Strathclyde University, followed by his Diploma.

He qualified in May 2005 after his traineeship with Maxwell MacLaurin in Glasgow. Current Law Society of Scotland guidelines, enacted in July 1997, do not allow for any lawyer less than three years qualified to be a sole practitioner so he took the drastic action and decided to go and find a Partner.

Already after just four months of operating Bali is on the acquisition trail and says he is currently in talks with a number of other Scottish law firms and solicitors to bring them into the Steen Bali organization or take Steen Bali there.

He says: "We want to take on existing lawyers, lawyers that are fed up with the firms that they are at. We have created a very relaxed firm that can offer solicitors a good work/life balance. Mergers

and succeed."

Clearly entrepreneurialism is in Bali's blood, but he also believes that the Law Society regulations on newly qualified solicitors becoming partners is too restrictive in this age of Clementi.

"The Law Society definitely restricts entrepreneurialism. They force lawyers to sit working for a law firm when many, such as myself, are more than able to take on a partnership role at an early stage. The rules were holding me back and I am sure that they hold others back too.

"I do not feel that there is enough entrepreneurialism in the legal profession these days and that is because I believe that too many lawyers are pigeon-holed too early in their careers. I had initially wanted to go to one of the big corporate firms like McGrigors or Maclay Murray & Spens to do my traineeship, but looking back I am pleased that I went to a medium sized firm as I had a broader traineeship and got experience in a lot of different areas. Too many

**"The law is the future, but I feel that too many law firm are stuck in the past. They don't look to the future and don't think about changing the way they work."**

allow faster growth and that is always a possibility with the right partners.

"My philosophy has always been to work with people that are as smart or preferably smarter than me. Ken and Mike know all there is to know about the law, they have been doing it for years, so we all compliment each other very well. Working with smart people means you can move faster and achieve more."

An entrepreneur since his teens, Bali is fearless not only in the business arena but also in what he says. He is candid about his views on the Scottish legal profession in general and believes that too many firms are living in the past.

"The law is the future," he says, "but I feel that too many law firms are stuck in the past. They don't look to the future and don't think about changing the way they work and what they offer clients. Also we have set up a wireless network and have already set up a feeder firm in India which acts as a feeder firm for Steen Bali in Glasgow.

"We have also appointed a consultant in Pakistan that is doing the same. They don't sign any documents, they are like clinics for people with immigration problems with all the work being passed to us via our wireless network. We are also currently looking into getting into China.

"I am an entrepreneurial guy and I am not afraid to fail. I am also not afraid to make a person a partner at this firm. I am not afraid of profit sharing. We would like to create a very large entrepreneurial law firm where people can come

lawyers get stuck in an area of the law that they do not feel passionately about and quickly become stale and lose the energy."

Bali is candid when he talks about what drives him to continue to work across a diverse cross section of sectors. He admits that he easily gets bored if he is doing just one thing, which, he says, is the reason behind his diverse business portfolio and another reason why he saw the law as another good business to get into.

"I suppose the reason I wanted to launch my own firm was so that I could expand it into other areas such as court work, civil work, conveyancing and so on. The law lets you diversify into many different areas, which is what I have always done in my business life.

"I suppose looking to the future as a business person I want to develop a decent, well respected law firm and if the business is doing well then that means I will be doing well as a lawyer. I thank my lucky stars that I have had the opportunity to work with guys like Ken, Mike, Alistair Cockburn, Peter Duff (both at Maxwell MacLaurin), Brian Grieg (Penmans) and Grace McGill (Wilson Terris) who know the law game back to front in their respective fields, this mentoring has been invaluable in my short legal Career.

"I think that with my business strategy Steen Bali can go far. We may upset some other law firms along the way, but that doesn't worry me. Clients only leave for a better service at a better cost and that is what business will always be about." 