



# DAVID JACKSON

## KEEPS GRINDING IT OUT

*CEO David Jackson discusses the “method behind his madness” and his journey to building, then co-owning, real estate giant, Colliers International Vietnam.*

By **Selene Alcock**

**A**s the Grab bike hurtles along Saigon's majestic Le Duan boulevard, grey storm clouds gather at the summit of the Deutsches Haus building that looms in the distance. After multiple checks through the Fort Knox-style security, I am ushered into a small meeting room at Colliers International in Vietnam, the commercial real estate company that was part of the consortium awarded project development by the German Government.

The building, managed by Colliers, is a first for Vietnam. The project has been accoladed with both LEED Platinum and DGNB Gold certificates, for its state-of-the-art energy-efficient technologies and sustainable solutions. "It's also one of the highest income-producing office buildings per square meter in Vietnam. The market and discerning tenants are now paying for and demanding quality," says Colliers CEO David Jackson, one of the orchestrators behind the project.

It seems a long way from David's origins as a biology student in the UK, where he once "fixed" problems in bars and nightclubs. But as Apple co-founder Steve Jobs famously said, "you can only connect the dots looking backwards."

Reflecting on his career trajectory, David says, "The job I do at the moment is the perfect culmination of that journey, and it took me a while to get there. There was a bit of method behind the madness, but I just didn't realise it at the time."

Studying biology helped David to learn about scientific method and reflective analysis, which was perfect for valuations and research in real estate. He also worked at Citibank across diverse roles where he learned about finance, trade, accounting, and compliance. Later, at Abbott Laboratories, in the pharmaceutical industry, he trained in sales and marketing and how "to not be afraid to ask for the business." He adds, "And I was very good at solving and fixing problems under pressure" in the London and Manchester nightlife

scenes, "where I was brought in to turn around troubled bars and nightclubs, sometimes afflicted with a criminal element."

David is a beguiling mix of stoic and street savvy with a kind, friendly and open disposition. He has a passion for "how things work," as well as reading people via DISC profiling. Generous with his time, David supports various causes, such as the Hope Charity School and is a fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). A mentor to many, he'll take a chance on anyone who "has a good head and a good heart" and is "willing to take meeting minutes." In fact, he thinks it's madness if you don't.

Born in "Cockney London" to an Irish Catholic father and a Protestant Scottish mother, David's character is a direct result of these influences. His father worked tirelessly as an accountant and rose to prominence exposing large-scale fraud and representing Prince Charles in the King's Fund, for which he received a knighthood. David's mother became the Chief Probation Officer of Surrey, "which is a seriously aggressive job," says David, "as she would decide whether you go to prison or not." In essence, these parental role models taught David to "keep grinding it out" as there was "always something to accomplish." Stamina, grit and determination, he claims, are what got him to the top.

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David sips a mug of black tea between stories. Drawings of rainbows cover the cup, and the top is smeared with what looks like red lipstick. David explains that his then 8-year-old niece painted it for him. It seems like the perfect metaphor for his journey from the somewhat unsavoury bars and clubs he once managed to the distant dream of finding his pot of gold at the end of the rainbow – in his newfound home, Vietnam.

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At the age of 25, in 1999, David journeyed to post-Doi Moi Vietnam as a backpacker. "Vietnam had just opened its borders and I loved the country. The people were so fascinating, the food was amazing. And it was always in the back of my mind that it was a great place and people, and they were so kind to me."

David didn't find any pots of gold and instead returned to the UK to work again in banking. Soon after, he became sick with a misdiagnosed illness in his stomach/esophagus, spending the better part of two years in and out of hospital undergoing operations. The lack of diagnosis caused him to quit banking to seek out his own answers with a job at Abbott Laboratories. There, he finally self-diagnosed and got proper treatment.

He later returned for another stint in bars and ended up founding his own award-winning hospitality company, LGR Taverns in London. He discovered he had a knack for maximising lease deals for breweries and that "the real money was in real estate."

He "grinded it out" once again, engaging in a second degree in real estate, and managing venues on the side. But one day, five years later, he decided it was time for a change.

"I told my dad, 'Look, I'm going to move to Vietnam.' I remember him looking at me and saying, 'Are you OK, are you having a breakdown?'"

He sold his business, his house ... everything. But when he found himself standing alone at Ton San Nhat airport, he thought to himself, "Oh my god, what have I done? I don't know anything."

Determined to work in real estate, David moved into a Pham Ngu Lao guest house and hunted out potential employment prospects. Without naming names, out of the big international consulting companies, one of them ignored his emails, another "ripped into him", and one was fruitless. Returning to the UK was not an option. That left Colliers as his last chance.



“And so, I have this interview with this guy called Jeffrey, who was head of property management, and it was similar to the other interviews.” It was 2008 and the effects of the global financial crisis were being felt. “He says to me, ‘David, I really like your spirit, I wish you the best of luck, but we’re not looking at hiring anyone.’” As David is being ushered out, he says, “Hey Jeff, I see you have security on the front door. Would you put the security on me if I walked into your office on Monday morning?”

When David strides into the office the following Monday and sets up at a desk, Jeff’s response is one of disbelief. David reminds Jeff that he didn’t technically say that he would put the security onto him, so he “assumed it was okay.”

They make a no strings attached deal – David will work for free in return for the opportunity to work at Colliers. Within two weeks, David restructures some proposals, shoots off emails via his Gmail account and wins a \$250,000 contract. Two weeks later, he wins another \$250,000 contract. He approaches Jeff again and says, “Do you think I could get a Colliers’ email address?”

During his 14-year tenure at Colliers, David has taken the company from 15 employees to 120, focusing on training and mentoring. After restructuring the company’s legal status, David also actively transformed the company culture into a more open, friendly, collaborative, and Western-style approach. David has helped expand Colliers into a full-service company, from site identification and design and build to asset services and brokerage.

While chasing rainbows may have initially brought David to Vietnam, today the partial owner of Colliers stands proud of the company he has helped to build. Aside from his philosophy of “grinding it out,” the CEO says, “you’ve got to keep on giving.” **[c]**

