

How I got here

Ray Stannard, of International Trade Financial Solutions, talks to TID about his career.

By Antony Shepherd

What keeps you working today?

My business helps smaller exporters and importers, dealing with the money side of international trade transactions. I'm focusing on payments, letters of credit, and foreign exchange.

And who are your customers?

My main market is the SME, those usually with under £1 million turnover, but I'll support firms of any size who can use my skills.

What took you into international trade?

Banking began for me at 10am, 31 Aug 1976, at Lloyds Bank, Ilford, a date never forgotten! The foreign transactions were much more interesting than the routine domestic securities.

So you aimed at the bank's international department?

I did, but Lloyds had no international trade vacancies. So after looking around for a time in 1986 I joined BOS – Bank of Scotland – in the City.

Did life before your first job in 1976 influence your later choices?

No. I was born and bred in Chelmsford, ex-grammar school, with no clue what the next step should be after school, but university didn't appeal. Lloyds Bank was one of three employers who offered me a position.

Did BOS provide interesting roles?

Yes, I was at BOS/HBOS from 1986–2006 and BOS became HBOS in 2001. BOS London was once fully staffed with 250 international/treasury people. Gradually, however, the operational side was relocated to Glasgow. At the lowest point, I was one of only four remaining.

And the better roles at BOS?

During 1996–1999 I spent three interesting years on Correspondent Banking, working on liaison between BOS and its partner

banks worldwide, and travelling around Europe. My job was improving and sustaining relationships with these people, thereby getting costs down per payment for exporters and importers. It made us more competitive.

And latterly at BOS?

BOS had about 28 branches in England, and 15 branches south of Birmingham (my patch) for whom I was the international trade specialist. I was on the road providing credibility for the bank's corporate team when an international trade man was needed.

What other memorable roles for you at the bank?

Have you heard of IBAN for international payments? I was Chairman of the cross-bank committee to develop the IBAN standard in the UK, under the UK industry body for payment services, APACS. In addition, I represented BOS on other APACS cross-border committees, working on euro development and its implementation in the UK.

Why did you leave HBOS in April 2006?

I was made redundant, but wanted to be so. I was managing 12 people, but the department was becoming more sales and target driven and I was uncomfortable with this. So I preferred to leave and set my own objectives.

So you quickly set up International Trade Financial Solutions?

No. There was a long gestation and prep period whilst still at HBOS. After leaving I spent the first 12 months getting my model right, too.

What was your strategy for ITFS?

High street banks provide a personalised international trade service to corporate accounts, with costs being subsidised by account activity. But for SMEs, this service doesn't exist, hence mean a gap for ITFS to fill. Banks now are more sales-driven, with relationship managers often more like



Ray Stannard.

salespeople, and don't always understand, say, the benefits of an L/C.

So you provide to the SMEs what the bank provides to the corporate clients?

I am a bridge between the exporter/importer and their banking needs. I give my time free, for a fact-find and diagnostic meeting, at my risk. From that, if I feel I can contribute I put a proposal together. I work on the basis that if I think the client can cover my fees from savings achieved within three months, it's a viable proposition for both. From month four he's in profit. Also, if I do the job well and train them, they can soon dispense with me.

What do importers most want your advice for?

Some typical examples:

Issue one may concern a client's cash flow ... with, for example, Chinese suppliers demanding payment 6–15 weeks before my importer client receives the goods to resell. An L/C can be a simple solution, avoiding some overdraft cost.

Issue two might be about the quality of goods shipped, often not as good as the samples. So it's better to reject before, not after, the goods are shipped. Independent inspections at port of departure cost more, but reduces risk. Pre-inspection as a term of the L/C can make sense.

So why use your services?

Independence. I don't have to recommend anyone's services. I'm helping by "minimising commercial risks when trading abroad". Clients can never avoid all risk, but at least with me their business decisions can be based on fact, not ignorance. ◀