

# Ed Attenborough

Ed Attenborough is MD of Attenborough Laboratories in Nottingham. It's a family business that has been in operation for just under 100 years. Ed gave up his career in software development for the likes of NASA to take over the reins just over twelve years ago. Here he speaks about his views and approach to business.

**BOD : Hi Ed. How's business?**

**EA :** It's pretty good at the moment, thanks. There's solid business within the capitation scheme market. Patients are more and more aware of their oral health and are taking positive steps to maintain a healthy mouth. That said, our NHS work has reduced by as much as 70% since 2006 and the introduction of the new contract. We've also noticed a downturn in elective cosmetic procedures since the recession started. But overall business is good.

**BOD : Tell us a bit about Attenborough Labs**

**EA :** The company was formed by my grandfather 98 years ago, after which it was run by my father for over 60 years. When I joined the business twelve years ago, I saw an opportunity to introduce new technology into a market that was still very traditional in its approach. We now have a great mix of experience and technology. Some of our people have been with us a very long time, but are still open to new ways of doing things, which is very refreshing. I now believe we are the highest tech laboratory in the UK.

**BOD : What changes have you noticed in your business and the sector over the past few years?**

**EA :** Well, there have been three main changes that have affected us. Firstly, as I've already mentioned, there's been a huge downturn in NHS work, which has mainly been driven by a large percentage of our client dentists moving to private practice. In essence, we have also made the same journey.

Secondly, about six years ago, we noticed the influence of globalisation on our market, most prominently in the growth of 'offshoring' - that is laboratory work being sent abroad to places as far away as China. However, that pendulum is now swinging back our way. Offshore laboratories may be cheaper but they are compromised by their lack of proximity to the clients and are limited in their communications and also in how effectively they can provide high level support and service in what is a very time sensitive market place. We have stuck rigidly to our belief that clients will pay for a service that is superior in value and quality and with minimum hassle attached. As a result, I think we have shown a way for the business to stay viable in the UK.

**BOD : How has the global recession affected your business?**

**EA :** We've been lucky in that we've never had all our eggs in one basket. As well as the bespoke laboratory services we offer, we also have a manufacturing arm to our business producing dental brushes - 80% of which are exported. Any dips we've had in one part of our business have been compensated by growth in another part. So, we've remained fairly steady throughout the recession. That said, we are starting to notice issues around supply and demand. As some countries start to come out of recession, others are not keeping pace, which means supplies from those countries cannot satisfy the growth in demand from those at the forefront of the recovery. This inevitably leads to inflationary prices. This is an issue that will affect most industries and will therefore lead to a period of significant inflation in my opinion.

**BOD : What are the key principles you live by in business?**

**EA :** I think our website sums it up...*'responsible and experienced advice to our customers, rigorous testing of all new processes and materials, individual care and scrupulous attention to detail.'* My grandfather wrote those words and they are as relevant today as they have always been.

**BOD : What are the main opportunities for Attenborough Labs going forward?**

**EA :** Digital dentistry...no doubt about it! The digital revolution is acting as a catalyst to vertical integration and a compressing of the supply chain. This is also being driven by regulatory reform within the industry. There is the opportunity for the market to be turned upside down where every member of the dental team can be involved at all stages of the service delivery. It's about knowing who your preferred partners are and where your business adds the most value. This is clearer to me now that it has been in a long time. There are more opportunities now than in long time...it's a very exciting time to be in this business.



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**BOD :** And what about the threats?

**EA :** These are wrapped up in the previous answer. It's knowing who the right partners are for our business. As different elements of the market start to merge together, various businesses will start to overlap. For instance, people not traditionally involved in technology and manufacturing will want to get involved. We need to preserve our highest skills and artistry and combine these with new technologies. This will make sure that we maintain a very robust position within the market.

**BOD :** What are the main challenges you personally face as the MD of the company?

**EA :** Taking advantage of the many opportunities that exist! It's important that I maintain the space to stay strategically focused and not get drawn into the coal face of the business.

**BOD :** If you could wave a magic wand, what one issue would you like to resolve in your business?

**EA :** How long have you got? I suppose the main obstacle we face is the challenge of getting an industry that is still very conservative in its outlook to accept and even embrace new technologies. We need to open minds to the possibilities of what technology can deliver. But it's not easy, you can talk to a lot of brick walls in this industry.

**BOD :** What's the best bit of business advice you've ever been given?

**EA :** Do what you do best!

**BOD :** Finally Ed, what's your view on the future of NHS dentistry?

**EA :** Well, clearly there is still a social need for NHS dentistry, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a good living from it. I think that those who want to progress their own business and dentistry in general will have to broaden their horizons. It's the only way to deliver a good work/life balance.

*Ed Attenborough was talking to Les Jones  
You can check out Attenborough Labs at...  
[www.attenborough.com](http://www.attenborough.com)*