

"By setting up my own advisory business, I thought I would be able to maintain and hopefully strengthen my contacts in the music and entertainment world"

Paul Beard, founder and chairman, Alexander Beard Group

This is evident in a corporate timeline on the firm's website, which shows it has made nine acquisitions since 1987, one merger and one joint venture, and in the process has moved into areas such as advising professional sportspeople, international schools, globally active charities and estate planning.

Beard says he thinks the true acquisitions figure is closer to 11, and adds that a couple more are "at various stages of discussion".

During its 27 years in business the company has also entered, and left, Malaysia, the Isle of Man and Cyprus, as they no longer fitted the direction in which Alexander Beard was going. One area that has taken off and is now the company's fastest-growing operation is the employee benefits side. Launched in January 2007, this helps companies to manage employee benefit packages for groups of UK and EU-based employees who work for international companies. International schools are a major component in this area. Alexander Beard provides schools with a retirement plan that enables them to offer their teachers and other employees a chance to put money away for their retirement. It currently has 1,100 active members and about \$20m invested, Beard says. Alexander Beard got its start in this area in 2005, when it acquired Midian Investments, ta company that had been in the business of providing pensions and healthcare products to the international education community. The acquisition gave Alexander Beard the sole rights to market the International Schools Retirement Plan, its flagship product. In 2008, it acquired another firm in the sector, Junos, from where it signed up two individuals, Janet Jenkinson and Leslie Stevens, who now run Alexander Beard's international schools division.

A similar scheme exists for the charity sector, which it launched about two and a half years ago.

## No master plan

Beard says he didn't set out to create the multi-faceted international business he now oversees but simply "took it in the direction it seemed to be going, and looked at opportunities as they've arisen".

"Take employee benefits, for example. We saw that a number of big American companies, particularly in Silicon Valley and on the west coast, had small groups of employees in the UK and Europe who were not getting the services they required from the larger employee benefits companies they were using.

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business that have presented themselves along the way.

Most of these have been in the international space, and several have been created in response to a lack of products for expatriate Americans as well as Britons who move to the US.

One of these, for example, is a UK pension product that Alexander Beard created specifically for those of its British clients who have settled permanently in the US, which the company calls Amvest.

Launched six months ago, Amvest is a type of self-invested personal pension but it invests in funds that are denominated in US dollars, and clients receive advice on it from one of the company's own registered investment advisers based in its San Francisco office.

Its benefits, says Beard, include the fact that 25% of the fund may be taken as cash from the age of 55, potentially tax-free, although this is an area of some discussion at the moment; existing Alexander Beard clients are not charged transfer fees if they move their pensions to an Amvest account.

Because Amvest is a Sipp, it remains a UK pension fund, so if the US at some point enables UK pensions to be transferred into such US fund structures as IRAs or 401(k)s, it would be possible at that point.

"It wasn't complicated to set up but it was hard work because a lot of people wouldn't talk to us about it; they didn't want to go the extra mile," Beard says.

"Dimensional [Fund Advisors, the Austin, Texas-based asset manager] was willing, and it deserves a lot of credit for that."

## **Employee benefits**

One of the hallmarks of Beard's management style is that he is quick to try new things, and equally unafraid to ditch them if they don't work out. "So we set out to offer them a service, and it's taken off.

"One of the new areas we've been working on is helping expatriate Americans who are being told they must transfer their 401(k) pensions from the US institutions that have been looking after them. We have a product that deals with that."

For now, at least, there are no plans to add any more offices or branch out into new lines of business. "We want to concentrate on developing the business the best we can from the offices we have," Beard says. •

## Key points

- Founded in 1987, Alexander Beard Group initially specialised in looking after clients in the music and entertainment industries, based in London.
- The company was drawn into specialising in international financial advice as its celebrity clients began moving to the US and elsewhere from the UK.
- In 2005, Alexander Beard opened an office in the US to cater for British clients there.