Elizabeth Sparrow

Interviewed by

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Good morning. Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's the 4th of July 2017, and we're meeting at the BCS headquarters in London. I'm Jonathan Sinfield, an interviewer with Archives of IT, and today I will be talking to Dr Elizabeth Sparrow, President of the BCS 2009 to 2011. During the interview we aim to cover Elizabeth's background, influences, and views on the industry today, the object being to capture the past and inspire future information technologists. So welcome Elizabeth.

Thank you.

[00:48]
Elizabeth, perhaps I can take you back a little while, to your early life, and ask you where you were, where and when you were born.

I was born in Ealing in west London, in 1952. I'm told that's when there still was some rationing around after the Second World War. Though I don't remember it, it was a, a very different world of course to the one we live in today.

[01:15]
Mm. And, perhaps you can explain a little about your home life then, perhaps your, your parents?

Mm. Yes. Well I was, I was a surprise, I suppose. An odd way of putting it is that I was an early menopause. [laughs] Because, my mother was surprised and went to the doctor to find out what was going on, and much to her alarm – not alarm perhaps, her surprise, she was told she was pregnant. She was actually 40 at the time. She had already had one child, after quite a few difficulties, but my sister, sixteen years older than me. So there is a huge gap between us, and in some ways I was an only child growing up, certainly the only child at home.

[02:00]
Oh yes. And thinking back to those times, was there any individuals who specifically influenced you at that time that you can recollect?

I remember, one of the things I do remember is that my parents were very actively involved in Pitshanger Methodist Church, and therefore I was as well as a child. And I think I always grew up with a strong social conscience really, and a, and an awareness of the need to give something back to society; though that might sound a little trite, that is something that right from my childhood was instilled in me, and in many ways I've never lost.

[02:46]

Mhm. And, thinking about your schooling, perhaps you could tell us where you went to school, and, was it local?

Yes. Yes I went to a school called Notting Hill and Ealing High School. It was called Notting Hill and Ealing because it actually originated in Notting Hill in the nineteenth century, and the building was actually burnt down, and I think it was the early twentieth century it moved to Ealing. It's still there. My parents really believed that it was very important to give both their daughters a high quality education, and for them, that meant sending us to Notting Hill and Ealing which was a private school. It was, it was a very good school. Obviously it was a girls' school. And so I think throughout my education I never really [loud boom sound], really believed, or even conceived, of the fact that actually as a woman I shouldn't do as well as a man, because I was in a girls' school that actually promoted academic education in particular, and it all suited me quite well. I started off in the primary school there, and all I really remember there was having quite a lot of fun, and eating cream buns at mid-morning, and, generally having a good time with my best friend.
[04:17]
As we came up to the Eleven Plus, and I don't quite know how this happened, but I was given some books that I could study that would help me with the answers and the questions, the Eleven Plus. And I started to look at this book, and something in me twigged, and I particularly enjoyed the questions about logic and algebra, you know the sort of thing. Let me think, you know. My friend Bill goes out and buys twice as many pears as I have apples, and I bought ten apples the day before, but I've already eaten two. How many apples did Bill buy? You know, that sort of thing.

Yes, yup.

[laughs] It would be more complicated than that. And I sort of studied this, and at first I couldn't make any sense of it, but I, I went into it, I looked at it, and I puzzled it, and it just caught my imagination, and I really enjoyed it. And actually, I did pretty well at the Eleven Plus and ended up getting a, a scholarship, a free place at my school. And that's really when my, I suppose, academic type of studies really took off, and I actually then began to get a lot of enjoyment into tests and stretching my mind and my brain.

Mhm.

But all the way through I just chose the subjects I wanted to do, and because they were all girls around me, there was never really any question about whether it was a girl's subject or a boy's subject. And my parents didn't either push me in one direction or the other. Mm.

[05:49]
So, well when you said you, that you chose the subjects that, that you always wanted to do, was there a leaning towards the sciences and to mathematics then?

Yeah. Yeah, that's a good question. I've… I always, I always enjoyed maths and found it relatively easy. And so, there was little question for me, as I sort of progressed to doing O Levels and A Levels. In fact at A Level I did pure and applied maths as they were called, and physics. And I reckon I did my physics exams mostly by picking out the questions that contained lots of maths in them. Because I just enjoyed the subject, and I found it made sense to me.

[06:32]
Mhm. And, when you, when you, you took your A Levels, and you chose to go on to, to university. Perhaps you can tell us a little bit about that?

Yah. I guess like a lot of people, I was offered the possibility, did I want to try for Oxford and Cambridge?

Mhm.

And, in my school, the way it worked was that you had to stay on an extra year, and then take the special Oxbridge exams. I actually felt that it was time for me to leave home. It wasn't that I disliked my parents or I had big arguments with them. I just wanted to grow and expand as a person. And that for me left, meant leaving the environment of being the only child at home, and just finding my own way in the world. So, I actually decided I didn't want to stick around at school for an extra year. But I did want to go to university. And at the time, I'm sure it's still the case now, Southampton had a very good name for its maths department, and so that was really my chosen university, and I was fortunate enough to get into it.

Mhm.

I should say of course, at the time all this was happening computing just was not a subject at all, was hardly on anyone's lips.

No. Can you remind me of the year that you went to Southampton?

So I went to university in 1970.

1970.

Yes.

Yes. And that was a three-year BSc course.

Yes, that's right, it was a BSc Honours course. And, I chose a variety of modules. I rather enjoyed the statistics side of things when I was at university. I also did do some computing. I… It was quite fun, but I, I didn't particularly take to computing, I have to admit. I do remember those days. We used to have big, long boxes of green, I'm not sure they were green, green punch cards.

Right.

So, all your programs had to be typed into these punch cards with little holes all over the place, like a knitting machine or something. [laughs] Or weaving machine you might see these days. So all these little cards. And of course, what would happen occasionally is that you'd write your program, you had to sit at a machine and punch your cards out, and of course you would drop the drawer sometimes, you know, and have to put all these things back in order. And it was a real pain. And of course we did very, very basic things with our programs, and we had the most, the smallest amount of memory and storage.

Mhm.

[09:19]
Yeah, so, my time at university was '70 to '73. I have to admit that by the time the third year came, although I was enjoying life and doing all sorts of things, my enjoyment of maths and studying had tailed away rather, and so I was, I was quite content shall I say to finish the degree course and get my degree.

Right. So quite content, but, do I understand you went on further, to further studies after Southampton?

Well funnily enough, I did. I guess I sat back then and I thought, well, I really enjoyed my time at university, and enjoying being my own person, living my own life. But what do I want to do to earn money?

Mhm.

And I looked around, and I thought, what do I actually enjoy doing? And the thing that I really enjoyed at the time and still do, I enjoyed the whole process of, sorting out information, understanding how it works. I had a particular fascination with museums, and libraries but museums in particular, the whole concept of storing articles that told us something about life, both in the past and around the world. I love to visit museums. And I just went into that field wondering what I could make of a career that, that picked up some of these interests of mine. And I discovered a career

that at that time, and you don't hear much about this now, but at the time it was called information science.

Mhm.

And this was, today I would describe this as being about the I in IT.

Oh right, mm.

But at the time of course, computing was much more restricted to processing numerical data.

Mhm.

The concepts of the Web, or the Google, were just many years away. And because I was interested in information science, I looked at how you might get into this field, and what it might involve.

Mhm.

And picked up a scheme whereby I actually did one year's work, practical experience, before doing a master's degree. And my year's practical experience was actually at the Science Museum Library here in London.

Oh right, OK.

Yes. And then after that I did a Master's in Information Studies at Sheffield University, again a leader in the field. And, what I learnt in that year, a lot of the, the principles, the theories, are still picked up today, in, particularly in the whole Web field, and, searching field, and all the sort of, challenges we have about search algorithms, data privacy, all those sorts of issues were, were covered in embryonic form in that master's course. Mm.

[12:44]

Mm. Would you say during that time there was any particular events that shaped you during your education?

Apart from the fact that really, information science captured what I was interested in, and I was very happy to pursue that field. I think the main lessons I was learning throughout this period were really, lessons about life. I remember at university when, shortly after I had got there, there were pop concerts on quite late at night. One of my favourite bands at the time was called Steeleye Span. I remember walking back in the early hours to the digs where I lived, and I remember thinking, my mum and dad would never allow me to do this. [laughs] But, I was quite confident, I had sussed out about the streets and, where I had to go and where I had to be. But it was that sense of freedom, of discovering who *you* were, not defined just by your home environment, but about who you wanted to be as a person and what you were going to do in the longer term. I also learnt a lot about interacting with other people. I discovered all sorts of different points of views and attitude. And I discovered how people can interpret single events in so many different ways and come up with so many different conclusions. And that was a, a lesson that I continue to learn, and I applied throughout my time, which, as we'll talk about, was, was quite largely involved in managing large teams or leading large teams.

Mhm.

And those I think were the, the big lessons for me at that time.

[14:38]
Yes. And, how important would you say your educational achievements, your degree, your master's degree, to your future career?

Mm. At the time of course they seem very important.

Mhm.

And they're very important for giving you that first sort of, leg, step on the ladder.

Mhm.

They become less important as time goes on, and you become more defined by what you've achieved in your career I think. I can still think back to a lot of the principles I learnt there, and they are relevant and I apply them. But I think, the biggest importance is in that first part of your career, when you're initially finding your way.

[15:30]
Mm. So, after your year at Sheffield, it was time to start your working career. So perhaps if you could take us through your early career, that would be brilliant.

Yes, certainly. So. Having got my Information Science qualification, I looked at where I might use that. Now I, I applied for a number of jobs, I looked at a number of roles, but bearing in mind my passion for museums and libraries in London in particular, I was struck by roles being advertised in what was then quite a new organisation, the British Library. The Library had been formed by amalgamating the library that used to be in the British Museum with the bibliographic services organisation that produce the British National Bibliography, and one or two other elements. And, I found that they were advertising for roles in the bibliographic services side of things. Now that meant that I could use my information, information analysis experience in reviewing materials. In fact I was recruited into a role initially that meant sitting reading all the books published in the UK, and deciding what the key subject areas were that the book covered, and, and actually giving them specific classification codes. Of course this was well before a time when any of this was in digital form.

Mm.

There were no such things as Goggle or automated search routines. So that, every book that was published, or even a conference proceeding, it all had to be analysed by somebody, somebody had to decide the key subject areas, and put key subject terms and classification numbers into a system.
[17:37]

I actually did that job for a couple of years. It was very interesting. We had a lovely working environment. But then, another opportunity came up. This was at a time when libraries were beginning to use computers, and they were beginning to computerise their library catalogues. Again, this is of another era from today. But, I'm sure people will remember card catalogues in libraries, and those were beginning to be automated around the 1970s quite widely. And the British Library was selling services to libraries. It was selling computerised services, library catalogue services, to different libraries all around the country. And I took over a role as a systems analyst in that business. And that was my first step into what would have been traditionally called, would be traditionally regarded I think as an IT role, a systems analyst.

Mm.

[18:47]

I then moved on, and was involved in what was my first, I would describe as my first big successful IT project, and this was in, around 1980. There was an international standard used in library catalogues called the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, so, no surprises that it's Anglo and is, also the USA was involved. A major update to those rules was published, and the British Library had the challenge of deciding how it was going to, convert or not convert all the many catalogue records it had for many thousands of books, how it was going to convert those to the new standard. And I, as I recall, completely, just, off the wall, on my own, said to them, 'Well you could automate this, you could do it by computer.' And nobody had really thought about this, because they were traditional librarians. They quizzed me, but they, to their great credit, although I was still quite early in my career, they allowed me to specify the change, and then having reviewed that and decided that, yes, I had understood what was required, they actually set me up with a project team, and we converted, we actually put, put together, with the help from a programmer, we put together a program to convert all these library catalogues. Now this is *the* British Library catalogue, and the catalogues of libraries around the country, university, mostly university but also public libraries. We put all the specifications I suppose, they were all programmed, they were all ready. And I remember the night that the changeover

was done, I was asked to come in early one morning. At that stage all computer programs of this scale were run overnight.

Mhm. Yup.

You didn't run these in the day, you ran them overnight. And so I came in early in the morning, ready to pick up the pieces and sort out the problems, only to be told that the whole thing had run smoothly and had finished in about, three or four hours. And it really was a great success, which was fantastic. And it gave me a taste I suppose for what you could achieve as a project manager. I had a team working for me, I worked with programmers, I enjoyed working with them very much, and we actually achieved something that meant a lot to the British Library at that stage, it really delivered an achievement.

[21:48]

And from then on, I continued to work on, working with the customers of this automated service. And eventually I also managed something called BLAISE-LINE, which was a very early online information retrieval service that the British Library had. I suppose, a very early predecessor to something like Google, but as I say, we had nothing like that. So, BLAISE-LINE was the British Library's online information retrieval service in the mid-1980s

[22:28]

Mhm. And, were there any particular obstacles that you came across at your time at the British Library?

Yah. Well I'm going to… I'll tell you about one, because I think it is relevant, for anyone really, in their career. Around the mid-1980s a new boss arrived, and I was very busy, loads of meetings, and I found it difficult to make time to meet him. That was my mistake.

Mhm.

Eventually, he obviously decided that I wasn't the sort of person that he wanted working for him, and had me moved. Now, I made a mistake. I should have made

sure that I actually, met with him, spoke with him, and showed him proper respect. But, at the time I was very very busy, and I thought, he needed to come and see me. [laughs] That was not a very good attitude. But I think, that's what caused some problems. But that also, that little incident also told me that, sometimes things just don't work out, and, as well as knowing when to stay, and, to stay and fight, or pursue your corner, you also I think in your career need to know a time to move on.

Mhm.

I have seen quite a few people in my career who have stuck on to the same job or the same organisation, despite the fact that they are very unhappy, and they're not making progress. And I don't think it's been good for them or for the organisation. And I think you do need to know when to move on.

[24:24]
Mhm. So, tell me, you were with the British Library, what, twelve years or something, something around there.

Mm, it was quite a long while wasn't it, yes. Yes.

And, your final role there was, Head of Management at the Information Office.

Yes.

But in '87 you chose to, to move on yourself.

That's right. That's right. So my final role at the British Library was being Head of Management Information, which was a more general job. But by the time I got to that, and I had… I had some really good times at the British Library. I did feel there weren't a lot of more, a lot of great possibilities for me in the organisation. And I was ambitious, I did want to progress. So I started looking around for other opportunities. The next job I did was to move to the Crown Suppliers, which is an organisation, or I should say it *was* an organisation, which was a, within Government, but it was a self-financing business that provided all the, the desks, the filing cabinets, the clocks, the

fridges, anything else that was needed by civil servants, also by embassies, and also, most intriguingly, anything used by our spies, which was great fun to hear about. Anyway, I was recruited to work on a major IT project that was replacing the system that was used for processing the sales, purchases, and also warehousing records. I was recruited into the finance division of the Crown Suppliers to be their representative on the IT project. This was great, because I wanted to get into IT, and I came at it at a slightly obscure route, but I had enjoyed my IT work and I wanted to get back into that sort of work.

[26:25]

While I was doing that job an opportunity came up for promotion, which I took, and I became Head of the Secretariat of the Board, which gave me a good insight as to what working at board level would be like. And at the time there were a lot of discussions going on about privatising this organisation. This all happened in the late 1980s, and it was the time that the Conservative government was privatising lots of different public sector bodies. I remember one great occasion where I actually had to go into the House of Commons and sit in a little box which is reserved for civil servants who were advising their ministers. And the minister that represented the Crown Supplier was involved in a debate about the Crown Suppliers. And I had to, help him answer the questions. And while I was there, one of the questions asked, and this is a matter of public record, was questioning whether one of our suppliers had potentially bribed one of the directors of the Crown Suppliers by taking him to a fancy golf weekend holiday.

Mm.

So that was, that was good fun. I shouldn't say fun, should I? But, that was a, an interesting challenge, having to advise the minister in the House, on the floor of the House, what to actually say in reply to this charge by the Opposition.

Mm.

[28:02]

While I was doing this job as secretary to – as Head of Secretariat to the Board, I did have… It wasn't a very stressful job, it wasn't an onerous job. And I took the

opportunity to do two things. I got myself a finance qualification, a certified diploma in accounting and finance.

Mhm.

I took those exams, got that qualification under my belt, and that's been a useful additional string to my bow, and I recommend anyone to do that. If you ever find yourself in a position where your job isn't taking up your full energies, it's a great opportunity to do one or two other things. I also entered a management competition, which I won, and got a, a grant to take a trip to New Zealand and study privatisation as it was being practised in New Zealand. And that was interesting too.

Oh yes, so, so what was the nature of the competition that you won?

I actually wrote an essay about women in management, and the challenges they face.

Oh. Right, OK.

This was way before I had really got involved in any debates about this subject. And, the main thesis… My thesis was, that actually, we were measuring work in a very traditional way, and it was time to rethink. What I argued was that, we paid people to go to work between nine and five, or whatever, and, it had traditionally been the case that you turned up to work in your factory or your office between nine to five, and you did the work that you could fit into that timescale. And I argued that, to encourage more women back to work, a fresh approach was required, which actually defined work to be done by objectives, or achievements, not so much the number of hours you worked, and certainly not the fact that you were working between nine to five, and not four to ten, but actually that we gave women the opportunity to contribute to the workplace by working at hours that suited them and working to objectives. And, interesting, for this interview I looked back at some of the, the great responses I had and the correspondence and the interest I had in the article, and you can indeed see that, certainly in the consultancy field, that is what people sell these days, you know.

Mm.

But, as I say, this was a, for me, I did a lot of research for the article. It's the only prize I've actually won [laughs], so it was quite good fun. And that was in the late 1990s.

And that took you to New Zealand as well, the prize.

[31:00]

Indeed it did, yes, which was super, because I love travel. And then, having done that job for a little while, I got the opportunity to do something which really began to teach me about IT. Of course, the Crown Suppliers had an IT department, a traditional IT department, and they had this big mainframe system. They used a lot of outsourced staff, but it was nevertheless a significant IT operation. What had happened was that the Government had decided to privatise this organisation, and then, failing to find a buyer, had actually decided to close it down. Naturally enough, a lot of the IT, skilled and experienced IT people, had moved on. And I got the opportunity on promotion to actually be the IT director for this organisation. I do know that I got the, clearly I got the job because of the circumstances in the, as existed, but I was able to illustrate some IT knowledge and experience. And it was an absolutely fascinating experience. I, my job, obviously, was to oversee the system when it was running, and then when the closure of the organisation was announced, to actually close it down in a, in a, in a well-managed, controlled way. And, the lesson I learnt that really surprised me was that, people were very enthusiastic about the Crown Suppliers, there were a lot of dedicated people who were just thrilled to be working there, and the IT system had, oh, it had, it had gone through all sorts of iterations and developments, and again the people working on it were very proud of it. [pause] But when the closure of the organisation was announced, I actually, and I had been struggling a little bit to be in charge of this organisation, it hadn't been too easy, people didn't see me as a, a real IT expert, so I did face challenges and people wondering whether I was really up to the job. But when the closure of the Crown Suppliers was announced, I took the opportunity to actually meet each member of staff on an individual basis to reassure them that I would be looking after their interests, to explain to them how options for them personally would pan out during this process. And that was extremely well-

received. I didn't do it because I thought it was going to be well-received; I did it because it just felt like the right thing to do. But that actually changed I think the view of the people in that department of me overnight, that sort of small step. And what was just amazing to watch was hat all these people, who had been so dedicated to this organisation, were highly motivated to close it down in a controlled and well-managed way.

Mm.

You would think people would walk out the door in, you know, a fit of pique or anger. But they didn't. They actually came into work each day and worked hard to make sure that things were managed well and managed properly. I thought that was very impressive, and that taught me a lot of lessons about human nature.

[34:41]
Mm. And, really, certainly in this interview, several times you've referred to communication and the need to communicate.

Yes.

And, I suppose, well, I suppose, as your role as an IT director, you're expressing the importance of soft skills, what is termed today soft skills…

Yes. Yes.

…in terms of management and communication.

Yes. I think when you're in one of those roles, you're much more aware of the importance of the so-called soft skill, because when you are at the coalface doing the job, it can seem like, a, less important, and you wonder why such a lot of attention is paid to it, but actually, you can really see the value of the importance of learning how to work with people.

[35:31]

Mhm. And, so, we're now in the early Nineties. You mentioned the Crown Suppliers were in the process of being closed down per se. So, after then, did you decide to stay in the government sector?

Yes I did. Although, I would describe myself as working in the public sector at this point, rather than in a central government body.

Yes. Yes.

So, I was temporarily promoted to be in the role of IT Director, and I was keen to make that permanent, and I did in fact manage to do that, moving on to the Crown Prosecution Service in the early 1990s. And I was involved there in a very interesting project. The project had been defined by, lawyers and police and court officials working together. And it was aimed at producing some sort of standards, or, it was called, termed, harmonisation, across the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, and the magistrates' courts and the crown courts. Because anyone who's not been involved may not be aware that each of those organisations has got different boundaries, geographical boundaries, and tends to work to its own procedures and with its own set of forms.

Mhm.

And so the idea was to actually introduce some common standards and some common forms. Certainly if any IT person was coming at this from scratch, you would, you would never invent the system that exists today.

Mm.

But it was trying to introduce some, some improvements.

Mm.

[37:17]

And my job was to actually implement that. Now, you will notice that that's got nothing much to do with IT, but it was to do with information and the way information is processed. And what I brought to bear were all the skills I had learnt from my IT project management roles. And, it really surprised the people I was working with. They hadn't actually seen this in operation before. And it went down very very well. So all the sort of things, the planning, the documenting, the, the communicating, all those things that you learn when you're running an IT project, the critical points, the risks, all those aspects I brought to bear in this project, and I worked with all the different bodies, so I was working with the police, the courts et cetera et cetera.

[38:14]

The project having been a good success, I looked around at what I might do within the Crown Prosecution Service, but decided, there weren't the opportunities I really wanted to pursue. By that stage I knew I wanted to stay within the IT field generally. I had just been an IT director, I had done several big IT projects, I wanted to move on in that space. And I looked around. And this time I really did move to the centre of Government because I went to the Home Office. I went as the project manager for a new integrated corporate accounting system called BAS. I had a team of staff, both finance people and IT people. And, we introduced, within, on time and within budget, this major new accounting system. A good experience, again, and good to achieve that progress.

[39:15]

And on the basis of that, I applied for and got promotion to be Head of IT, basically Head of IT, at the Home Office. And that I always describe as my, my major job, my biggest job really in my career. It was obviously responsible for a multimillion-pound budget. Many staff. Before I had arrived, I think it was about 400 staff had been outsourced to Sema Group, so big outsourcing contract. But quite a few staff remained within the Home Office as well. Lots of competing requirements, lots of different challenges. And, there were two things in particular I picked up on. One was that, there was a desktop rollout that was suffering from, a number of delays, and, one could see that by the time it had finished rolling out, it would be out of date. There were a number of issues around that, and issues around controlling the stock and so on. I took a grasp of that, and, really introduced a completely new approach to upgrading the infrastructure, which we actually achieved in a very short timescale.

We migrated two and a half thousand users onto what was then an up-to-date Windows platform. I did ruffle quite a few feathers, but it did actually achieve something that needed to be achieved, which was to bring the Home Office up to a, a standard that was secure and future-proof for at least a few years. I also launched a major new PFI procurement project while I was there. So, lots of progress, lots of challenges. But an interesting time, interesting time.

[41:35]

As I came to the end of that infrastructure project, again, I sat back and thought about what I wanted to do next. I was encouraged in the Home Office to move into a more general stream, so that I could widen out my experience and become an expert general civil servant, and perhaps progress from there. And I decided I actually didn't want to do that. I had really enjoyed my career working in IT, and I wanted to stay in the field.

Mhm.

My husband, who's quite a few years older than me, had retired, and he was at home. So it also called for, quite a big rethink about my life and what I wanted to do. And so I resigned from the Civil Service, and, in the new millennium I actually launched a new career.

[42:36]

Mhm. This is when you formed Sparrow Associates?

Indeed I did, yes. Yes. I did two fairly lengthy interim management assignments, which I enjoyed. And, funnily enough, both of them at a time of great change. I was in NatWest Bank Card Services when the Royal Bank of Scotland made their successful bid to buy NatWest.

Right.

And I was in T… I was in One2One mobile when T-Mobile purchased them.

Oh right.

And I guess, the world never stands still does it.

No.

Things are always changing. It's interesting.

So from the public sector into the private sector in terms of consultancy.

Yup.

[43:24]
Looking back, your years in the public sector, and thinking about key decisions you made in the various roles you undertook, are there any things that, looking back, or key decisions made, that perhaps you would do in a different way today?

I think this is a tricky question, because of course, you assume that everything else is staying the same, if you're tackling things differently. At the Home Office, I needed to halt one infrastructure upgrade project which was simply proceeding too slowly, and had a number of major concerns about it. If I was doing that today, I think I would be able to do that more intelligently. I did speak to people involved, but I would spend even more time speaking to the people involved, and I think I could have, I could have smoothed the way between one major project which was not going quite so well, to another major project that actually succeeded. I could have smoothed the path between one and the other in a more intelligent way I think. It's all, it always can be a challenge to give people difficult messages and to have difficult conversations. And certainly, I brought my experience of, not avoiding that, to my role in the BCS, which you'll probably hear about later.

Yes.

But that was an important one. The other one was that I did launch a major new PFI project. PFI has got a dirty name now, but at the time it was very much Government policy, and we were very much as civil servants encouraged to think in these terms.

But I think at the time we were asking technology companies to do too much. We were asking them to solve management and organisational problems that were longstanding, and really, within the Civil Service we should have been solving them. It, it was not, I think, sensible to ask technology companies to do the job for us. Though, I mean, some of them made a, a pretty good attempt at doing that, generally those contracts haven't been very successful.

[45:47]

Mhm. Am I correct… Well, I believe I'm correct that this is a subject obviously you, you're, you're well-known for, and, you authored a couple of books on the subject of outsourcing.

Indeed.

And was that something you did after you left, I say, the, the public sector?

Yes, that's right. When I was working in the Home Office, I know some jobs in the public sector might not be like this, but, boy, did I work hard. I mean I didn't have any spare time for activities in BCS or anywhere else, and I certainly wouldn't have had time to write anything. But, coming out of it, into this sort of new career world that I was carving out for myself, I just wanted to look up every opportunity I could to do all sorts of different things. Writing books was something I just fancied, try my hand out. It was amusing to me, because at school , the one thing I was never good at was writing.

Mhm.

But I had learnt, over many years of working in big organisations I had learnt to string some words together reasonably well. So, I had also learnt a lot about outsourcing, I had seen it go wrong, I had seen it go right. I had seen a lot of the pitfalls, I had seen some ways to actually achieve success. And I felt I could write about that. So, in 2003 I wrote my first book, *Successful IT Outsourcing*, which was then, I followed a couple of years later with *A Guide to Global Sourcing*, which was much more about offshoring. But my real expertise really was with outsourcing within the UK.

[47:43]

Mhm. And, you mentioned the BCS. When did you join the BCS?

I joined the BCS in, I think the 1990s. But I had never really had time to do much, but of course I did have a bit more time now, in the new millennium. So, I actually started to just put a toe in the water at the BCS. And I found my work there really took off very fast, and in very interesting ways. One of the first things I was asked to do, because I had, I think, written a short email to someone about the subject, was to chair a group looking at offshoring. And, that was a great experience actually. I gathered together some very interesting people with different views. And we looked at the whole question of how offshoring would impact on the IT profession in the UK. It was very relevant then, and of course it's still relevant today. A lot of people saw the negative side, and of course there are risks and problems, but we argued, there are also opportunities. And what we tried to do was to focus minds on, not just the negative impacts of offshoring but also, how the UK could best respond, and what the IT profession ought to do to meet the challenge. And I, I felt that was an important picee of work. I, I started giving lots of talks at different conferences and different meetings, all about this subject, and I, I did find it very fascinating. And of course with all the experience I had had of the subject, I was able to bring that to bear in ways I really hadn't anticipated when I was at work in the different organisations.

[49:41]

Mhm. And, so… And of course, within the BCS, a number of different roles, a number of different committees, I suppose culminating in, you became, becoming President in 2009.

Yes. Yeah, I mean that was a tremendous honour. Really, not long after I had sort of finished this work on offshoring, I found myself elected as Vice-President, much to my amazement. I guess, you see, I was very conscious that I wasn't an IT person who had worked in the technology fields throughout my whole career.

Mhm.

I was acutely conscious of being more I than T, and much more involved in the management and leadership than I had been in, engineering for example. And I was very, acutely aware of that. So I was, honoured, surprised, and very pleased to be first elected as Vice-President then Deputy President, and as you say, becoming President in 2009.

Mm. And as President, did you set yourself any objectives or, or things for your, your period in office?

The big thing within BCS in that period was what was called the Transformation Programme.

Mhm.

Perhaps a slightly unfortunate name in some ways. But it was a whole series of small projects, initiatives, which were all about preparing BCS for the twenty-first century, and really beginning to look at what being a professional body really meant for the new millennium, and, and making sure that we were adapting to what society needed, the profession wanted, and indeed the general public would look for out of the professional body in the new millennium. And, because this was a major programme, I felt I wanted to focus my year on some of the big projects that were ongoing. And there were three in particular that I was involved in – I should say four, which were all about, about educating the wider general public about the importance of IT, about some of the challenges, the risks involved in IT, about the potential of IT to change society, and about the great attraction of IT as a career of course. So we had four different projects, called Information Pioneers, Savvy Citizens, the Information Dividend, and Digital Revolutions.   And they were really, I thought, innovative, great fun, involved me in a lot of public speaking, a lot of PR work. I made lots of videos. All sorts of activities. And I must admit, I, I did enjoy that, it was great fun. And I felt it was very important too, to keep raising BCS's profile, as indeed, even today, BCS continues to do, which is great to see.

[53:12]

Mhm. I remember reading actually one of your objectives was to increase public confidence in IT, and, do you feel you achieved that in your time, or…?

I think none of the things we were doing could have been achieved by BCS on its own. And one of the important lessons coming out of that I think is the, is the significance of BCS working with other organisations. And, when we were working on building public confidence in IT, we did a lot of work with what were called at the time, if I recall, online centres, online training centres. They have blossomed and developed since, and used a lot of the material that we produced. So I do feel that we were acting as a catalyst which has then gone on to spawn a lot of other initiatives which are aimed at educating the general public in using IT more effectively, and particularly focusing on individuals who perhaps have been too scared to use a computer, as, as they might put it, to date.

[54:30]
And following on the theme from helping other individuals, I'm conscious that you've been very active in the voluntary sector, but, one organisation I'm aware that you are involved with is AbilityNet.

Yes.

I wonder if you could say something about that and the objectives of that organisation and your roles in it.

Yes. I was actually representing BCS on the board at AbilityNet, because, at the time BCS were very much involved. It's a great organisation that actually provides equipment and software for, to make computing, the Internet, easier for individuals with a wide range of disabilities to access. So, yes, they do a lot of very interesting work, have won a number of awards, all around the accessibility angle of IT.

Mhm. What, with, both disabled adults and, and children generally?

It's, it's the whole spectrum, yes.

[55:40]

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. And, I also see you're a speaker for WaterAid as well, so that's obviously a passion. What prompted that passion in that particular charity?

Yes, WaterAid is something I'm very passionate about and involved in currently. WaterAid is one of the charities that I have given money to for many years, and, at a time when I had stepped back from some of my BCS roles and had a little more free time they advertised for speakers to join their speaker network. I went along. They do some great preparation for their speakers, give great training. And now I speak mostly to schools but not entirely, right across London, I will go and do fifteen-minute assembly talks or an hour-long workshop. And we talk about WaterAid's work, which is providing fresh, clean and safe water to the 660 million people around the world who don't have access to clean water. It's about teaching people how to build safe toilets. We have a wonderful time with the school kids talking about toilets.

Mhm.

One in three people alive in the world today do not have access to a toilet that gets rid of all human waste safely. It's a significant problem. And we talk about good hygiene, which is simply washing your hands after you've been to the loo.

Mhm.

So I have a wonderful time with the kids talking about toilets, but also water. We have great fun, and, I will say they do some wonderful fundraising activities too.

[57:13]

That's good. Because you, other areas that you, you've been involved in the health area as well, with Barts and...

Yes. Yes. I'm involved at the moment with Barts Guild, which is the friends of Barts Hospital. And I'm also involved with Healthwatch City of London, and Healthwatch is the consumer champion for health and social services. So, we actually act as a

representative of all the, the patients and the patients' view on both primary and secondary healthcare and social care in the City. And there are pockets of deprivation in the City amongst the residents in a way that perhaps one isn't generally aware of. We just see the rich financiers walking round. But not everyone that lives in the City is, is that well off.

[58:07]

And your IT background, involved with these other charities, with Barts, once you were involved with the online shop and the website and that.

Yes. So, inevitably, being now seen as an IT person, I may not have started my career in a specific IT role, I'm obviously often asked to help with IT. So, just recently Barts Guild has, I think, introduced a really fun, new website which uses open source software, lots of plugins. It's fantastic what can be done for a relatively low price these days in introducing a secure but function rich website, quite, quite easily. I've been most impressed with what we have discovered there. And similarly, at Healthwatch I am providing some input and help on website work there.

[59:08]

Mhm. And, in 2011 you joined the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists.

I did, indeed, yes.

Yes. And today you're a Court Liveryman and a trustee of the livery company's charity.

Mm.

Would you like to say anything about that?

Yes. My particular interest actually in the livery company is with the work of the charity. The company has been very successful in raising significant sums of money to fund for example the Hammersmith Academy, along with the Mercers' Company,

but also, amongst the members there's such a, a wealth of expertise. And so, what we do in the charity is that we combine money from the funds we raise, together with the expertise of members, to achieve, you know, provide some great help to a wide range of charities. We've got a good clear set of objectives focusing in on certain key subjects, such as education, and we, we focus our efforts on charities looking after those. And indeed some members have been very active in starting or helping to start charities, tackling different issues. One of the recent ones which is great called Thames Reach, which is helping homeless people actually use IT properly and effectively, and helping them in their job searches, and other aspects, other things that will help them just to get their, get themselves back on their feet. So there's all sorts of ways in which we can help, and we are doing, though the charity.

[1:00:54]
And you assisted in the development of CITA, the Charity IT Association.

Yes. Yes, I did. I along… I must say, a lot of other people were involved. But, I was a member of a small group that were setting up Charity IT Association, which is specifically providing consultancy help to small charities. Small charities can very rarely afford to buy in IT expertise, it's way too expensive. But they can really benefit from a small amount of consultancy help to just point them in the right direction and enable them to, to start an IT project or whatever.

[1:01:40]
Mhm. And during our conversation today you've mentioned, understandably, several times education and the importance thereof. You're, I see you're involved with the Open University as well.

Mm. That is a tremendous role. I'm really honoured to be asked to do that. The School of Computing and Communications there set up an industrial advisory board, and, we have really been able together to develop the scope and vision of that board. The Open University, with a new Vice-Chancellor, has been going through some major changes, and, it's been fascinating both to share that with the members of staff there, and, and also, to be able to bring together, not just my experience but my board members' experience of seeing significant change and developments within industry,

and to be able to bring all that knowledge, and to help, to enable the Open University staff to have a forum where they can just share ideas, questions, proposals, with us in a, in a confidential and open way. We've had some super discussions at that board. Yes, I really, I'm, yeah, I'm, I'm rather proud of what we've been able to do on that board.

Yes. That's one of your many, can I say, ongoing commitments.

It's true. [laughs] Yes.

[1:03:14]
So thank you Elizabeth. Looking towards the future, what do you think will be the big, well the biggest challenges and opportunities for the IT industry in the next ten years?

The opportunities must be limitless, because IT is becoming such a part of our lives. There is just so much to be done, so many possibilities. I guess one of the challenges is that, I do find in some organisations, and some IT professionals, ironically there's almost a resistance to change. I remember myself being somewhat sceptical about whether the PC would ever take on, or would we stick with the mainframe? So that just shows how wrong I was. But, but today, you know, sometimes, when you work within an IT environment, there is just so much happening in the consumer field even that you don't quite recognise or realise just how fast things are progressing. So I think, staying up to date with what is on the market, what is being offered, what consumers are seeing, is, is important. But if we can actually widen our horizons and widen our vision to take that, that broad view of, of what is possible. There is so much that we could do, so much that we could achieve for society by applying IT in an intelligent and well-informed way.

[1:04:50]
Mm, thank you for that. And now, the multimillion dollar question to, to any younger listeners out there. What advice would you give to someone considering or entering the IT industry today?

Just do it.

Just do it.

There's just… Don't get bogged down because you've seen one IT person doing a job you think is a little boring or dull. Just, the scope, the possibilities of what you might achieve, there's just so much variety, and so many, so much to be done, so much to be achieved. So, just go out and do it.

[1:05:38]
Just go out and do it. And, I suppose the other question, you know, this might have been one criticism of the IT industry, as being male-led. So is there any, as a senior, a recognised IT leader, is there anything, particular advice you would say to women considering IT today?

I would say, don't… do try not to let it put you off. I think it, it's a problem that really concerns me, because it's a problem that's been around for so many years, and it's a problem that's been getting worse. So I don't think we've yet cracked the causes, and that we fully understand what's going on.

Mm.

But that discussion is perhaps for another time. But for any young girl thinking about going into IT, do try not to be put off by the fact that there's lots of boys around perhaps and you don't see too many girls. Because there are lots of opportunities for you. There are so many different clubs, different people, trying to help girls progress now, that even if you did feel a little alone, and you wanted some company, there are plenty of organisations you can join up with, and get involved with, where you will find more women around. Women have achieved some marvellous things. If anyone hasn't heard about the Hollywood start Hedy Lamarr, do please look her up. She was one of the earliest women who achieved great things in IT. There have been many many since. There are so many opportunities for you out there, working in IT, don't let it put you off that you just see men approaching it, doing these roles.

Well thank you very much Elizabeth, that's very informative, and I appreciate your time. And, we wish you all the best with all your continuing endeavours, and thank you for all your work in the voluntary sector. Thank you.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]