



Sir Kenneth Olisa

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It is Wednesday the 21st of February 2018, and we are in the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists, in the City of London. And the person entering the archives today and making his contribution is Sir Kenneth Olisa, OBE. And when I say that the archives is here to capture the past and to inspire the future, I believe Sir Kenneth's story should inspire people.

[00:35]

Sir Kenneth, you were born in 1951, in Nottingham, to a white mother and a Nigerian father, and the Nigerian father was absent. What was that like?

Obviously I can't remember 1951, I was rather young at the time. I grew up in what can only be described as the poor back streets of Nottingham, through the Fifties. It's very hard for anybody in the twenty-first century to even imagine what life was like. It wasn't, I don't want people to feel sorry for me, there was no reason for sympathy, but if I say that my favourite place to play was a bomb site, it means nothing in 2018, but Nottingham was pockmarked by places where bombs had dropped in the war, buildings had been demolished and then left as bomb sites, on which we played. So, what it was like was, it was a poor upbringing. I was an interesting object for people who didn't see, weren't used to seeing black people at that time. Not only was I the only black person that most of them had seen, I was also the only black person that *I* had ever seen. And so, it was what I can only describe as an interesting period of time to grow up in. My mother had an eclectic group of friends, so she had Indians and West Indians, as well as lots of white British friends amongst her group, and some family. And so I, I think I led a fairly cosmopolitan life by comparison with most of my, my neighbours.

And that cosmopolitanism, was it driven by your mother, and were you driven by your mother and given a real focus by her?

Well I, I can certainly say, I was driven by my mother. My mother... My mother had a very simple view, which was that if you didn't try your absolute best then you hadn't tried enough. So she didn't mind if I didn't succeed at things, but she did mind if I didn't try to succeed at things. And I, I think that culture is part of the Ken Olisa

that's talking to you today. My mother also had this amazingly developed sense of justice. I once said to my mother, 'Mum, you know, if you didn't try and find absolutely every wrong that you saw, you'd live a lot longer.' I said, 'You know, dog dirt on the street, and what's happening in NATO, are not equal subjects. Just imagine how much more energy you would have left to live a long life if you didn't worry about the dog dirt on the streets.' My mother died age 98.9, so I think I lost the argument, and she continued to the end to find absolutely every injustice that she ever saw. And I've certainly inherited her sense of right and wrong, and it's, it's a binary sense of right and wrong. She used to get terribly angry when something wasn't fair, and I realise I do the same. So I know without doubt that my mother was, is the cause, the motive cause behind my success.

[03:16]

What type of schooling did you go through?

Again, I, I think I... I have to go back a step and say, it will become obvious through the rest of our discussion that I am a card-carrying founder member of the optimist party, so I look back through amazingly rose-tinted spectacles at most of my life, and you will have to work quite hard to find the negatives. There must have been some, but I have to work quite hard to remember them. My school, I went to state schools, I went to a state primary school and then state secondary school, but I had the most remarkable headmaster in my primary school, Mr Spencer, for example.

And you remember the name.

I certainly do. I remember the man.

That's important isn't it.

Mm. And his personality was huge in the school. I look back and I always think, and one doesn't know what other schools are like, but I remember every morning we would have an assembly, as every school had to do by law in those days, and he would always start the assembly, as we walked in and sat down, playing classical music on the record, gramophone. And, so, things like Mozart and Beethoven and, so

on, are all completely natural from the age of seven or eight or whenever I went to that school. And I remember him once saying, ‘And that was a piece of music called *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. *Eine Kleine Nacht* is German, *eine* means a little, *kleine*...’ Sorry, one. ‘*Kleine* means a bit, *nacht* means night, and *musik* means music.’ And I remember sitting on the floor, this cold floor, thinking, aren’t foreign languages odd. Why don’t they just say, a little night music.’ So, he had this view about us having a broad education. I imagine, he had obviously been through the war, that he was a socialist, possibly even a communist, I don’t know, but he certainly thought that, irrespective of the poverty of our backgrounds, we should all have opportunity, and he sought to raise our aspiration. So one very memorable day he came in and he sat on the stage and said to us as we’re sitting there on this cold floor in our short trousers, he said, ‘This country is run by elite, and the elite have a language of their own, and they speak this language to keep other people out of it.’ I remember we all looked at each other, this is the day he has finally flipped. He said, ‘And two of the words that are used by the elite are champagne and caviar.’ And he said, ‘You are all too young to try champagne, but you’re not too young to try caviar.’ And he took out of his pocket a two-ounce jar of caviar, and a packet of biscuits, and he gave us a tiny dob of caviar, and it was handed out to my year. And then we all tried it. Of course, caviar tastes horrible at the age of eight or nine, so everybody went, [retching sound]. And once we had done that, he said, ‘Right, you’ll never now be intimidated when somebody talks to you about caviar.’ Now that’s stuck in my mind for, 55 years, as a fundamentally important message both about the quality of my education, but also a general principle that, the system in which we all live is designed in such a way that those who have power and authority retain it, and the rest don’t. And my argument, and my mother’s argument, is, no that’s nonsense. People who do the right things will be able to do these things, not just because they’ve inherited positions of authority. So Mr Spencer taught me early on that there were no doors that I couldn’t go through. And I sit here as Her Majesty’s Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London saying, Mr Spencer, you were right.

[06:30]

He was indeed. And you passed your Eleven Plus.

Oh sorry. Yes, I'm back to school. So I passed my Eleven Plus, went off to grammar school. I went to a revered grammar school called High Pavement. [coughing] I went to a revered grammar school called High Pavement, 18th century school, founded school in Nottingham. There were two schools in Nottingham: there were many, but we consider there only to be two, because, even then I was putative snob, the High School, which was a public school, and the grammar school. Tragically, when I got there, by the time I got there, the comprehensive system was beginning. The comprehensive system is not of itself tragic; what was tragic was, a well-established 300-year-old grammar school was being converted to a comprehensive school. And now, that headmaster decided the way to do it was to make life intolerable for all of the old teachers at the school who had made and created the culture of the school. So he essentially picked them off one by one by one. So I was there through the years of secondary education, as all the men, because they were all men in those days, who had made the school great in living memory, were ignominiously got rid of, one after another, and replaced by enthusiastic young, more left-wing, comprehensive school type teachers. My school has subsequently been pulled down and has gone away completely. It's a sad story. I didn't like my headmaster, as you can possibly tell from the tone of that point; not as much as my mother, who detested him, and it was mutual. So I spent most of my time at secondary school in a bubble of distaste between the headmaster and the Olisa family, Mr, sorry, Mrs and master Olisa. And it became, interestingly again for those who struggle with the rose-tinted spectacles perspective, I stood to be head boy in the sixth form, and didn't win, it went to some totally appropriate bloke who was a sports captain or something, didn't seem anything wrong with that to me. It was a secret ballot, so, that's how these things go. And one day the Latin master said to me, 'How does it feel to know that the headmaster vetoed you as head boy?' And I said, 'No, I don't think, I think it was a fair ballot.' And he said, 'No no no, there were two cameras, there were the teachers and there were the boys. You won both. And then the headmaster vetoed them both.' I can tell you, it feels pretty horrible to know that your headmaster so detests you, but you're at his school, that he would do that. But, there is a God, and the God has a sense of humour; I think God is a woman because it's a particularly angled sense of humour, because in the third... I did my A Levels, I did rather well in my A Levels, and suddenly I'm in the top three boys in my school, and we stayed on for the third year sixth form. And in the third year sixth form, which is a very privileged area, as you wait a term to do

your Cambridge entrance exams and then go away, there was no choice but to make me head boy, because of what had happened. So I became head boy. The headmaster thought that would be good, because it was only a term, but, his fatal mistake was not to appreciate that it was the term in which School Speech day was. So my first ever public speech was a tear down the system public speech, which I got to give in the Albert Hall in Nottingham, to a mass audience of shocked parents, quite supportive, and astonished boys, very very supportive, some teachers who thought I was quite a good bloke, and one very angry headmaster. So I think I left with the tables balanced back there again. Then I of course, having done very well at A Levels, became his hero, because he now saw kudos, and he was an Oxford man, and the sole reason that I chose to go to Cambridge.

[09:58]

And you mentioned God there.

Yes.

And Olisa means God.

Mhm. Which is a happy coincidence. It gives me a lot of problems when I go to Nigeria, which I do, I'm chairman of a company in Nigeria, and I now travel frequently, or regularly, to Lagos where I have lots of trouble, because in Lagos I am a white man from England, as opposed to the man that I know I am [laughs] from England. So I generally have problems. Small, a relevant but funny story. As ever, I'm checking out of my hotel a month or so ago, and the nice young lady behind the counter says, 'What room number?' And I tell her. And she says, 'And what's your name?' And I say, 'Olisa.' And she smiles. And I said, 'Why are you smiling?' She's still typing. She said, 'Well, because Olisa's a Nigerian name.' I said, 'Well that's not surprising. My father was Nigerian, and I not unreasonably have inherited his name.' So she then looked at me, for the first time, and said, 'Well you don't look Nigerian.' [laughs] So I said, 'Well Nigerians don't *look* like anything.' So we had a ridiculous conversation. And I noticed her name badge, and I said, 'Well, you don't even have a Nigerian name.' She said, 'Yes I do.' I said, 'No you don't, it's Blessing.' And she said, 'That's a Nigerian name.' I said, 'It is not a Nigerian name.'

It's an English name. Blessing's an English word.' She said, 'Well I have a Nigerian name as well, and it's,' Vietnam or something. And I said, 'Well what does that mean?' And she said, 'Blessing.' And so I just gave her my credit card and left.

[laughs]

[11:12]

You went to Cambridge University.

Mhm.

Very different from Nottingham. Very different from even a grammar school in Nottingham.

Mhm.

And then a comprehensive in Nottingham. How did Cambridge strike you, and how did you strike Cambridge?

Well Cambridge was wonderful. I attribute... I attribute my success in life to my mother and her drive, and then to the experience that I had at Cambridge. I arrived, like everybody else, we had all been head boys of our school, some of us less controversially than others, but we had all been head boys of our school, we had all done well at A Levels, we had all... So, suddenly it didn't, none of that counted for anything, and it was as if one was stripped naked, there we were, all exactly the same. Except we weren't of course, some people had enormously privileged backgrounds and some people didn't. However, that didn't matter, that wasn't the Cambridge that I went to. I went to a very good college, Fitzwilliam, of which I'm very proud to be a member now, an Honorary Fellow. Became... Fitzwilliam was very much an open access college. It prided itself on its history of being open, as opposed to closed. In fact its history was as a non-collegiate body, so if you weren't able to become a Cambridge undergraduate, but you were going to study in Cambridge, you joined a non-collegiate body, and it was called Fitzwilliam House, then Hall, and then it became a college, and became a normal college. And so some of the world's greatest leaders had been, were Fitzwilliam alumni. Lee Kuan Yew for example, couldn't join

a college because he wasn't a Christian, and so, joined Fitzwilliam. So we have this contradictory background, culture if you will, pattern emerging here. On one side we have all these amazingly important alumni; second, we had a slight chip on our shoulder because we weren't, it hadn't really been a college for a long time, and we were out of town, and so on. However, none of that made any sense to me, I just arrived at this place which looked as close to paradise as I could have imagined. And I had been there, I, the story has become a bit apocryphal now, but my memory is, I had been there only four days, and my best friends had been forged in the 3.9 days preceding us sitting down to dinner one night, and we're there in our suits and our ties and our gowns, having formal hall. And one of my colleagues said, 'Oh, I've got to go and see the tutor, I've been called to see the tutor on Friday. I don't know what I've done wrong.' I said, 'Oh God, I've been called as well. I don't, I don't know that I've done anything wrong though.' Somebody else said, 'We did make quite a lot of noise last night. Do you think we're going to get a bollocking?' And, we all went, oh no, we're in big trouble here. Friday, I go and sit in my tutor's office, and he, famous Dr Hardy, now sadly dead, and Hardy said, Dick Hardy said, 'So, so why are you here?' I remember taking the invitation out of my pocket. 'Because, sir, I've got a...'. He said, 'No no, I know why you're *here*. Why are you at Cambridge?' Pretty simple question really, but quite a profound one. Well, you can't say, because my headmaster was an Oxford man and I didn't want to go to Oxford, therefore I went to Cambridge, that would be pretty weak. But I kept thinking of all the things I *shouldn't* say. So I said, ah, I knew what he wanted to hear, I said, 'To get a degree.' And he said, 'Yes,' he said, 'what else?' Well I had rather exhausted myself on the getting the degree bit, so I said, 'To get a First.' Because I had been trained at school, I knew how to deal with teachers, you just tell them what they want to hear. And he said, 'Yes. What else?' I remember looking out the window thinking, well actually, I, I really rather egged it on a bit there with the getting a First bit. I have no idea why I'm here. I've just been on a traveller for the last n years, which has landed me in Cambridge. And I heard myself say, 'Actually, I don't really know why I'm here.' And he said the following. 'Olisa, if you matriculate into this great university, you are 97.6 per cent guaranteed to leave with a degree. And if you have a degree from Cambridge, you are set up for life. Therefore as far as you are concerned, you are set up for life, unless of course one of the three things that can happen to you, happens to you. One,' he said, 'your father dies, and you must go back and inherit his lands.'

Secondly, you die. And thirdly, you have a nervous breakdown.’ He said, ‘I’ve read your file.’ He said, ‘You don’t have any lands to inherit, so that’s not going to happen. You appear to be extremely stable mentally, so that’s not going to happen. And whether you die or not is irrelevant to the point that I’m making, that otherwise you’re set up for life. Therefore, Olisa, you are set up for life. So don’t waste your time trying to get a First. I’ve read your file.’ He said, ‘What you should be doing is getting out on the river, making friends. This is a place to drink deep of. You will get the best education by drinking deep.’ And I remember sitting there thinking, no one has ever spoken to me like this before. My entire life has been, don’t do this, don’t do that, you must do this, et cetera. There has never been that kind of opportunity. And then he leant forward and said, ‘Sherry Ken?’ And a love affair began. Fitzwilliam was wonderful for me. And I, I had a very happy time there. I studied a wide range of subjects, following Dr Hardy’s dictum, I became very politically involved. It was a difficult time, the early Seventies. The left-wing riots in France and so on and America had happened, and the younger brothers of the men who had tried to support those things in Cambridge were still there. And they were just making life miserable. So they were running, they ran deficits for the junior members’ account, they stopped giving money to the rugby club and the boat club. And all the things that you are there to enjoy were being questioned all of the time. And, some of us sat around in room... Actually, I sat around in room with some of my friends saying, ‘This is outrageous, something should be done about it.’ And my friends all turned on me. And remember, these were early friends, these are, it’s a very vulnerable time, because they might not like you any more, and you suddenly find you haven’t got friends. And they turned on me, and they still talk about this, and one of them said, ‘We’re sick and tired of you banging on about what’s wrong. Why don’t you do something?’ And I remember, up until that point it had not occurred to me that in this mighty institution, I could do something. So I did something, with another friend we organised a putsch. We threw out all the left-wingers, and we were elected to the council, the Junior Members’ Association; the next year I became Junior President and restored peace and harmony and happiness, and, as benign dictator to Fitzwilliam College. Which means that now, forty-something years later, I’m still welcome there whenever I go even near, never mind to, the place.

[17:03]

Do you like the position of being a benign dictator?

I rather enjoyed it at the time, yes. It's, it's gone now, I've... [laughs]

Do you consider yourself a benign dictator now?

No, I'm benign but not a dictator. I'm a democrat.

Right. Well in the sense that you seek consensus?

Yes. I... Yes, I, I... Even then I did of course. It was, we were eliminating a small group of irritating people. It was the will of the majority; it wasn't, it wasn't Ken the dictator. You have to interview my friends to get a better answer to this particular question. They may see it through a different lens. But no, I, I... Society and community is all about... Well, let's go back one big step. What drives me. What drives me is a sense of longevity. I like the idea of, of things continuing and improving. My fifty years, playing on a bomb site, and things I do today, life, I can assure, an upward graph. I read the newspapers about how terrible things are. No no. I remember what it was like living in a house with an outside lavatory and no bathroom. Nobody lives like that in my country any more. So I see a wonderful gradient which is, which is very much positive. And the way that, that happens is, people of goodwill come together to do positive things. So, I think I can demonstrate a strong track record of twenty-something years in charitable activities where I sought to, to muster the common power of the human condition, and then help others who are less fortunate.

[18:19]

You also seem to have learnt, apart from the ability to pass examinations, you seem to have learnt an intellectual rigour. There is an intellectual enquiry going on, it seems to me, in your work. For instance, when I look at the literature of your different companies, and the charities and so on, there is an enquiry going on, and you don't just take things on face value, you try and drill down. Did you get that from Cambridge?

Cambridge certainly amplified that. I, again, one of the big lessons, actually big lecture, but big lessons, big tipping points for me in Cambridge. I arrived at Cambridge as a natural scientist, I had loved chemistry, I had a lab at home. It was just, it was my life. Then I had a job for a year working for IBM, my gap year, and suddenly computing was a lot more interesting than chemistry. Then I got up to Cambridge, by which time I had lost interest in chemistry and physics and, and mathematics particularly, because I had done that at school. I discovered a whole world of other things that I hadn't known about when I was at school, because I'm of that generation where you were picked out as an artist or a scientist at age fourteen, and arts were for other people and science was for you. And suddenly I discovered, actually, the arts were interesting. So after a year of natural sciences at Fitzwilliam, I changed to social and political science, and I suddenly discovered anthropology and sociology and criminology and all those sort of things of which I knew nothing. It was, it was like a child in a sweetshop, it was this, all this information, all this knowledge that other people had studied forever, all piled in. And I remember one particular lecture, a seminal lecture, on the subject of structuralism, given by Professor Leach, who was a Provost of King's. And he came in to this lecture. It was a sunny day I remember, it must have been in October, because the first lecture in the term of that topic. And, I'm sitting there thinking, oh, this is so much better than natural sciences. First if all, there's no laboratory; secondly, it's not very hard work; thirdly, it's full of women. There were no women in natural science. So I'm at the back of the class, big mistake, looking around, surveying my new kingdom. And in swept Professor Leach, a fearsome looking man. He went up to the board, he said, 'Good morning,' as he swept in. And on the board he wrote 'Love is like a red, red rose. R Burns.' And I watched some of my colleagues writing 'Love is like a red rose. R Burns', October something or other, something or other. I remember thinking, oh man, you know, maybe this isn't as much fun as I thought it was going to be. And then he wrote 'Love is like a green, green cabbage.' And before he had written 'Trobriand Islander', we had all burst out laughing. And he span around, and said, 'Why are you laughing?' Of course we stopped laughing immediately, because we were still really schoolchildren. And he said, 'Why were you laughing?' So we start pointing at people who had laughed more than we had while denying that we had laughed. And then he said, 'Why do you believe that to compare the most pure of human emotions to vegetable matter, which is red and inedible, is somehow better

than comparing it to green vegetable matter which has a use? Why do you find that risible?’ And I was sitting there thinking, actually, because I’ve never thought about it. And now you’ve made me think about it, actually, I feel slightly foolish that I was one of the people who laughed. He then went through the logic of structuralism, which is not today’s topic, but he ended up, I remember, with a slide of the Archbishop of Canterbury, or some other high churchman, and a Trobriand Island witch doctor, as we would call them. One is a figure of authority, the other one was a short wizened man with a bone through his nose and a grass skirt. And he started to dissect them. He said, ‘You see the man on the right is the witch doctor, and he has a bone through his nose. That bone is a relic. It is apparently the bone that was in the body of a famous man many, many generations ago, and he’s bought it with him, so on, it’s an honour to have it through his nose.’ We all thought, oh, how primitive. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘you’ll notice a locket around the neck of the archbishop. That contains a fragment of bone from St Peter.’ [laughs] By the time he had finished his lecture, these two men were identical. It was astonishing. That is the logic of structuralism. And I remember stumbling out into the sunshine, yet again thinking, rather than just having a smart opinion, one should try to understand things. And when you understand them, as I was trained to do as a scientist, life can be, can be very different. Obviously then moving on into the career in IT, as a programmer initially, or systems engineer as we called them in IBM, it’s not about opinions, I think this program should work. It has got to work. So you’ve got to be able to dissect down to the bare essence of something, and then, and make it work logically. And I was good at that, and I enjoyed that.

[22:37]

You spent a gap year at IBM. Is that right?

I did. Yes.

Did they find you, or did you find IBM?

Well again, for those people who are young, thinking about their careers, under huge pressure from teachers and parents to sort out what they’re going to be, et cetera et cetera, I think my life story, which is deeply venal, is probably, or this particular

aspect of it, deeply venal, would be quite helpful. So, go back to the third year sixth form at my school. There are three of us, Nigel, Ian and me, and we're all hoping to get into Oxbridge. We had a classroom that had been designated the third year sixth form combination room, but it was a classroom, with no comfortable chairs in it, but it was ours. So we would repair there in breaks from time to time, looking down on the Portakabin which was the sixth form combination room to which we no longer needed to go. And we would talk about, probably the future, because there wasn't much else to talk about then. Nigel was a mathematician, Ian was an English student, and I was natural sciences, so we didn't have very much in common. I remember one day, one of them, probably Nigel, saying, 'So what are you going to be doing in your, in the gap year?' Now I hadn't thought about it, I hadn't given it a moment's thought. I was focused very much on getting through the exams, and actually, the other, the next thing, the next day. So, I said, 'Oh I don't know. What are you doing?' And he said, 'Oh I, I've got a job, and I'm going to be working.' I said, 'What about you Ian?' And Ian said, 'Well I've got a job as well.' And I said, 'Well I, you know, I'm considering my options. I might, I might go travelling. I haven't really thought about it.' And the bell rang. So I didn't have to expose the fact that I had given it zero thought until that moment. And then, some days later we're talking again in the office, and by which time I had decided I would become a bus conductor for my year off, and I got the Nottingham City Transport application form. And it paid quite a lot of money, well it paid, won't seem much money today, but it was about £600 a year, and there was an overtime allowance as well. So I thought, that's pretty good. You know, I'll never do anything... If I get to Cambridge, I'll never do anything like this again, so it's a wonderful opportunity, and, blah blah blah. So I had rationalised this in my mind. Anyway, we were in this room, and I said to Nigel, 'So, what are you going to do then Nigel in your year off?' Because I had now sorted out what I'm going to do. He said, 'I'm going to work for a company called IBM.' I said, 'What do they do?' He said, 'Well it's a computer company.' I said, 'Oh really? Well I know what that is. I've never heard of them. What are you going to be doing for them?' He said, 'Oh I'm going to be a computer operator.' So, oh how dull. 'And how much are they going to be paying you?' He said, 'Oh, well, it's, it's really quite lucrative. It's £800 a year.' I went, oh, OK, that's more than being a bus conductor. [laughs] I think being a computer operator sounds more interesting. 'And what about you Ian, what are you going to do?' And Ian said, 'Oh I'm hoping to work in

Nottingham City Library.’ I said, ‘Nottingham City Library? What, for a whole year?’ And he said, ‘Oh, yeah, it’s great. I mean I’m going to be doing English, it’s full of books, and it’s really quite logical.’ I said, ‘Well, does it pay well?’ He said, ‘Well, I thought so,’ he said. ‘It pays about £400 a year.’ So I went, mm, OK, if £800 a year is now the new mark, I think I’d better find a job with £800 a year. So I mentally tore up the Nottingham City Transport form, and went back home, and applied to IBM, this is deeply embarrassing, for no reason other than it appeared to pay more and Nigel was going there, and I was vaguely competitive. And I got an interview, and I did an aptitude test, and they took me on as their wizard’s assistant in the sales department in IBM. So, would work for IBM in Nottingham. I would travel to London first class, with my colleagues; we’d write stuff for customers; we’d go and do a sales course; come back to Nottingham again. While Nigel was down on the third floor changing tapes. So, I have to say, my love of technology really began then, but for rather bad reasons. I could have been in transportation, had it not been for Nigel.

[25:59]

And there is a individual competitive element to you as well.

Er... My wife once said something slight... Put it slightly differently. ‘The trouble with you,’ she said, she often says that, but this in particular context, ‘The trouble with you is, you always want to be on the top table.’ And I think that’s it. I don’t mind being with a lot of other people on the top table, but I don’t like to not be on the top table. So my competitive is slightly collective rather than having to destroy other people.

And yet there’s an element there which maybe your mother would have said, you’re interested in elites, Ken.

Mm.

But you’re interested in joining the elite, Ken?

Mm, top table. Oh no, Julia, my wife, has got it absolutely right. No no, I, I don't like going to things if I'm not on the top table. I... The VIP door is the door for me. Go back to Mr Spencer and his point. There should be no doors that are not open to you.

Right. You walk onto an aeroplane, you want to turn left, not right.

I do. Well I don't want to, I generally do turn left. [laughs]

And you are able to do that.

I, broadly speaking, yes.

[26:51]

You left Cambridge and you joined IBM. You had an introduction to IBM already.

And you started as a systems analyst and programmer, is that right?

Well we called them systems engineers, but that was the job, yes.

You called them systems engineers.

Yes. Yes.

And your job was to write programs for IBM customers.

Or, well help the salesman sell a system, then design the solution and then write the code and then implement it.

Right. And what was the technology then?

Well, I was telling my wife this the other day. One of the tasks that I had was running a system in the Black Country for a customer, and they had an IBM 360 Card Model 20. None of this means anything in the 21st century, but, those who are listening will know that when you turn on an electronic device it boots up, you hear the disk

clicking on a computer, the mobile phone goes blank for a bit and then it starts. That's when it's loading the operating system into memory, so it can then operate. The IBM 360 Card Model 20 had a card operating system. So there were about 1,000 punched cards that had to be put into a hopper, and then you pressed the button and the hopper fed them all the way through. That was the operating system that then went into the memory which made the computer then work. So the biggest risk of operating an IBM 360 Card Model 20 was carrying the cards from the drawer across the room and putting them into the hopper, because if you dropped all 2,000 cards, it could be the rest of your career putting them back together again. So the technology was pretty primitive by any standards, but amazingly sophisticated by historical standards. Man had had nothing like this for, 2,000 years, and then suddenly there we were, doing calculations in the blink of an eye, and, and so on.

This is 1970.

This was... That was my gap year, 1970. So, absolutely.

[28:30]

Yep. So, there's two things about IBM that I would suggest to you that were important for you, you may say not, of this time, not the IBM today. One, that it was very strong in training people.

Mhm.

And two, it was very paternalistic.

Mhm.

It looked after people, and it created career structures for them.

Mhm.

What was your training in IBM, how did they train you?

Well in, in my gap year, they spent quite a lot of money training me, and I was taught to program, in, obviously, in my gap year. And I was taught about customers. And I was just an intern. So, I look back on that now and that's already a good example of your point, that that was a serious investment in a boy who may never reappear in their life. So, it was, it was done for good reasons, not for selfish reasons. But I then graduated and went to IBM. The first course I went on was nine weeks long, and we were taught more technical things, telecommunications and so on, but we were also taught how businesses ran, balance sheet interpretation, z scores et cetera, mini MBA stuff I would say, case studies, practical as well in between the two. So it was, it was a wonderful... And that was just in the first course. It took three years to make me into a salesman, and I was taught the sales skills, how do you ask a question, how do you answer a question, how do you structure a presentation, how do you put a slide together, how do you, how do you, how do you. All those techniques. How do you deal with an objection. As well as the underlying philosophies of technology and so on. And we were regaled by amazing people who had been, humbly were heroes who had come back from the battlegrounds of the IT industry, destroying the competition, and they were our heroes and we sat at their feet and listened to them telling stories. So a huge investment, huge, huge, huge investment in, in skills and in knowledge and so on.

[30:16]

Which nobody is making today.

No. And, and it shows. So, for example, there was no point in going to tell a customer or a prospect what your computer did, because they had no idea. There was no point in talking about how fast a disk span, or how much storage it had, or any of the other things that excited us back in the office. It was of zero interest to the customer. They were busy trying to manage inventories or get their bills out early or whatever. So we were compelled to learn about how businesses ran, and then how our solutions fitted. And we were taught, and it's lived with me ever, all these years, and I still deploy daily, the need-feature-benefit was the way to structure an argument. What's the need, what's the problem, what's the feature, i.e. what are you selling them, and then why is your solution better than everybody else's. And even now, I go into a meeting with somebody and I think, oh God, I haven't really prepared for this.

I know what I want, but how am I going to structure it? Aha, need-feature-benefit.
And in one goes, and does need-feature-benefit, and it never fails. So...

Need-feature-benefit.

Feature-benefit. NFB.

Right. Right.

It's so powerful.

So you start with their needs.

Correct.

And then you feed the features of whatever system you've got, whatever project, whatever service, whatever product it is, into their needs, and then you tell them what the benefit for them is going to be.

Correct.

And that gets you the business, and you shake hands, and you get the money.

Well exactly. I, I was quite successful at it, and I attribute it to need-feature-benefit. Because if you don't agree with the customer what their problem is, and therefore you've got a solution, you are rather boring their backsides off. But today, much selling is, here's a brochure, you've got a nice personality; go tell the customer about what the product does. Actually, that's no help to them. And I'll give an example. I just bought a new printer for home the other day, and I was trying to find the best printer. If you look at printer reviews, they're all about features. It doesn't start with need. So, I'm a chap with a small home office. I want to do various things. Here are my five or six requirements. No no, it doesn't go that way. It's, how fast is it, what are the feeds, reads and speeds, as we used to call them, of the printer? So, drive-by selling is the, is the model today, whereas it used to be, problem-solving. My great

colleague Derek Rogers[sp?] at IBM, salesman, used to say, IBM stands for I Bring Magic. And we felt that we were doing great work for people because we were helping their businesses run better, but we had to understand their business to be able to say that.

[32:24]

And yet you're a man who wants to be at the top table, but also has something which is critical about joining and about elites. IBM was an elite company, and also insisted that you conform, you become an IBM man.

Mm. Mm.

You had to, didn't you?

Mm. I remember once I was, I just mentioned my friend Derek Rogers[sp?], he was the salesman when I was assistant engineer, from whom I learnt so much on the job about how to be a salesperson, how to listen to customers and be empathetic. And he and I were with a customer, on a train coming back from somewhere, Birmingham or somewhere, to London. And we had been with this customer all day. And as the train was pulling into Euston station the customer said, 'Can I just ask you, do you have a company shop?' Now we were astonished, because in fact, IBM was about to launch its first shop selling typewriters, and it was supposed to be really deep secret. So we were caught. But how does he know this? So we did some pathetic no comment answer, about, we might be doing something with technology one day in a shop. He said, 'No no, I don't mean selling technology. I mean where you can buy your things from, like your clothes.' It was... We were appalled, what a terrible idea. We said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Well you are dressed identically, you have identical briefcases, the same coat, the same suit.' Derek and I looked at each other in horror. We didn't consider we had anything in common, other than that we worked for IBM. But we were indeed identical. I like to say, you could travel for an international meeting, go to meet somebody in Milan for example, and he would meet you at the airport, and two IBMers would find each other in the airport, despite everything else that happened, because there was something about us. So no, I, I very much felt that it was an elite organisation.

[33:54]

How many black people were there?

Oh about one.

Did you feel that you were special?

[pause] When I was, when I was over goal I was special, when I was under goal I was hiding. I... No, I wasn't treated any differently. IBM, IBM... Actually, you... It's a really good point, not as a race point but as a really big point about how business was again back in the, in the Seventies. My boss and I would sit in the office, and I was a boy, a schoolboy, talking about whatever we wanted to talk about. Ray Parrott[sp?] was my boss, I was there. We would talk about whatever we needed to talk about, the system, the customer, whatever. And he would treat me as an equal. He would call me Ken, I would call him Ray. We'd have our jackets off. We'd then go to see a customer, and we'd put our jackets on and we'd drive out, and, the customer was always Mr Smith or Mrs Jones or, well it's never Mrs Jones, always Mr Smith or Mr Jones or Mr Brown or something. And we'd get in the car, and it was Ray and Ken again. And of course, because I started there, I didn't realise, I hadn't really clocked what it was like to be working almost everywhere else in the UK at the time, where we had these strict hierarchies. But I look back on it now, and the evidence was there. I remember, I would call on people who would be the administration, head of administration for a big company or whatever, and they would be wearing their military tie. Because we're talking about the Seventies, and they, the war wasn't that long before. And their standing, their ego, came from their war service, and that's how they end up getting the job. But we were Ken and Ray and jackets off and so on. So it was an amazingly American, egalitarian elite organisation, if that's not a contradiction in terms.

[35:20]

Do you think you would have survived, not to say... Well, would you have prospered, as a black man, in a British company?

I think I would have struggled, looking back on it. I think IBM... IBM had attracted, I say arrogantly now, some of the brightest people in the UK. I would be sitting next to a demob soldier on one side, and a great scholar from Oxford on the other side. It was the most eclectic group of people. And we were on a mission. And I think what I've learnt about business generally is, good businesses are on a mission, and IBM was absolutely on a mission, it was to conquer the universe, and to have IBM machines everywhere, doing good with happy customers. The obsession with the customer ran through everybody's, everybody's veins. So, our objective wasn't about the internal hierarchies, though they were important; our obsession was with winning more customers, doing more things in the marketplace. And that was much, much more important than where you had come from, who you were, what language you spoke, your religion, et cetera. So no, I think... IBM was a hugely privileged opportunity. I mean I could have gone to work for a, BP, British Petroleum as it was, all the other things that were, for a budding chemical engineer were the options. It would have been very different.

[36:25]

Did you get a sense as well of this paternalism in IBM, that your career was to a certain extent, not quite being determined for you, but, doors were closing, doors were opening, you were meant to go in a certain direction?

Oh very much so, yes. Yeah, no I... Yes, absolutely. IBM, IBM, we collectively knew what we were trying to do, and people were voted in or out depending, and promoted up or pushed out of the way, depending on their, their contribution. But I go back to that point about the mission. It was... I mean I'm sure IBM was riven with politics that I didn't see. There was certainly a rigid hierarchy. It did go off the boil while I was there. So I'm talking about the early, early days of my time at IBM. But what I saw was, we were on a mission. I remember in Nottingham, in that summer, my intern year rather, there was a secret office, a blacked-out office, in the corner of the office, the open-plan office where we all worked. And it turned out this was the Boots team. And IBM had decided that it was ridiculous that a company the size of Boots wasn't an IBM customer. And so, this team was the team focused for two years on how to make Boots an IBM customer.

[37:30]

So Boots, based in Nottingham.

Yup.

A big distributor, a big chemist, pharmacist as we now call it.

Mhm.

Plus, making its own products in pharmacy.

Yup.

And, also, had a library didn't it, the Boots lending library.

It did, yup, absolutely, and the shops. Yup.

And across the country. So a massive retailer.

Yup.

Did you win them?

No I, I didn't. I just admired these people that went in and out of this secret room all the time. But I remember coming back from my Christmas – for the... They might have been... Again, interesting from the paternalism point. I was invited to the Christmas party, after I had gone up to Cambridge. So I worked for that nine months, whatever it was, went up to Cambridge for the first term, and they invited me to the Christmas party. I look back on that and I think, so there was schoolboy who had been in their office for eight months or whatever it was, and he said goodbye, and it was all rather nice, and then they had the thoughtfulness to invite him back into the fold, and, and there are other stories there. So, so I remember, by that time I came back they had won Boots as a customer. And Boots became one of IBM UK's biggest customers.

[38:26]

Right. And so, companies like Boots were falling to IBM. Eventually the public sector fell to IBM. Was there any concern, in your mind, that this was destroying the UK computer industry?

No, I... Because I despised the UK computer industry, because I was very competitive. IBM, we were, we were doing this great work for humanity and the future of it, and we looked down on all the other companies, there weren't very many by the way, but the other companies. ICL was obviously the, the biggest, and ICL was stumbling along winning contracts unfairly on government deals and all the rest of it, as we viewed it every time we lost one. No, I don't think I thought about national policy and national industrial strategy when I was in my early thrusting days trying to have a career.

[39:06]

How far did you go in IBM, what was your, high point of your career in IBM?

Well... Now, I'm embarrassed to say, not very high. So I began at the lowest possible level as assistant engineer; I became a salesman; and then after a few years as a successful salesman I became a product marketing manager. But the manager title was lower case, I wasn't a manager; as several other IBMers pointed out to me, I just managed products, but I wasn't a manager. So I would say, I can't remember how many levels we had at IBM in the, in the field, but I would probably be about three levels up from the bottom. Amazingly, and back to the point about top tables and elites, I can't remember whether it's now five years ago, six years ago, I got a letter from Sam Palmisano, who was the head of IBM, inviting me to the IBM's 100th celebration in Upstate New York. And I remember thinking, first of all, this can't be serious, because I haven't had any association with IBM for all those years; followed by, but this is far too good an opportunity to miss; followed by me logging on and registering, and thinking well that's wonderful, actually, it's serious and I'm going. And it coincided with a Thomson Reuters Audit Committee meeting, which happened to be in New York, I go back to, there is a God somewhere, point here. So it wasn't even inconvenient for me go. So I go in this limo up to, taxi thing, up to,

Poughkeepsie or wherever it was, Yorktown Heights is where it was, to this amazing, absolutely amazing party, I have to say, celebrating their 100th anniversary. And there were four of us from the UK. There were two former general managers, a man I think who used to run manufacturing, and me. And even to this day, I have no idea why IBM decided to invite me, out of the tens of thousands of people that could have been on that list, and who certainly outranked me several orders of magnitude.

You had an OBE by then.

I probably had an OBE, but I was far from being the only person from my generation to have an OB or a knighthood or whatever in IBM. I have no idea.

You were a black man as well.

I doubt that had anything to do with it. I have no idea.

Are you sure?

Oh, I'm sure, yes, it was irrelevant there. And, it was a fantastic, nostalgic event. We were in a tent, a marquee, and they played this film which everyone can see, which is the IBM 100th. And they started with an extremely old man, he's 100, who says, 'I was born in nineteen,' whatever it was, 100 years before. And it goes all the way through, this little baby, and it went through the bits of the space programme, IBM contributed. And I tell you, we were all ready to go out and kill for IBM all over again. If ICL had been in the car park, we'd have destroyed them there and then. It, it's still in me. So I think I am an IBMer, even after all those years.

[41:30]

Right. And you decided to jump ship, in 1981.

I did.

Were you not getting up fast enough into the top table, or, were you poached?

In the... In my day job now, and, I think this, this might be helpful to others, I talk about two very different business cultures, *the* two very different business cultures. I talk about the, the aircraft carrier mentality, aircraft carrier captain mentality. It's all about maintaining the status quo. It's all about the past. Wherever you go as an aircraft carrier, you're largely dictated to by where you come from. It would be mad in the, in the bridge, to say, 'Quick, let's nip to port.' It's just not possible. You can't do most things. Versus a fighter pilot culture, where you don't care about the past, as long as you've survived it, though there may be some lessons to learn; you care fundamentally about the present, and more importantly, the future. And those two different cultures are very very different. IBM when I joined, it was absolutely a fighter pilot culture company. It was an entrepreneurial business. Everything was possible. Boots should be an IBM customer, so we'll make Boots an IBM customer. Everything was possible. What happened, I only realised subsequently, what happened was, in the US, Department of Justice launched a preliminary antitrust suit against IBM. It meant nothing to us in the UK. I remember we used to look at noticeboard announcements for the latest fights between Nick Katzenbach and some... But, it was fundamentally important to IBM in America, obviously. And so what happened in IBM was, the power which had been in the hands of sales and marketing in IBM moved to accounting, accountancy, and lawyers, i.e. the process people. So suddenly we weren't able to do things, and there were suddenly rules about behaviour. I mean we had lots of rules about behaviour, but the rules about behaviour, we saw, about filling in forms and sending, about audit trails, and things that bore no resemblance to the swashbuckling sales and marketing driven business. To give an example of the cultures. When eventually the DOJ case, I mean damage had been done, IBM had become driven by rules and processes instead of by the mission, but I remember, a man called Komisky[sp?], Frank Komisky[sp?], I think Frank Komisky[sp?] the second or third, but anyway, Frank Komisky[sp?], who was a very short man, and I'm not particularly tall, a very short man, but immaculately quaffed and dressed, and, teeth by Steinway as one of my colleagues used to describe him. And he came to present to 1,000 salespeople in a theatre in London to tell them what had happened in the DOJ case. So we think, because we're British, we're going to be fired. Obviously he can't be coming all this way to give us good news. So we sit in this theatre, full of trepidation. And onto the stage, British people explaining what's going to happen, and onto the stage comes tis god, Frank Komisky[sp?], teeth

shining in the, in the spotlight and everything. And he said, 'Gentlemen,' because of course in those days there were almost no women in the salesforce. He said, 'Gentlemen, the decision by the DOJ to drop this case confirms one thing: it's not illegal to be great.' [both laugh] And we went out into the sunlight ready to kill for IBM all over again. What I didn't realise was, by that time his power was only going around telling messages; he no longer was driving things, his culture was no longer the point. It was the lawyers and the accountants. At my level, level three as I described it earlier, obviously that was all really rather esoteric. Down on my level, just suddenly, we had to fill out forms, we had to fill out timesheets about where we had been. It was, it was just, not IBM as I, I had known IBM. People got into trouble for things, as opposed to praised for trying things. It was just all, wasn't for me. And so I left, I jumped ship as you say, to – which was a wrench, leaving a tribe, but a wrench, and I went to a company called Wang Labs, which was very much a fighter pilot culture.

[45:06]

And during this period of the 1970s, late Sixties and 1970s, around Boston, Massachusetts was growing up a, a number of different companies, Digital Equipment Corporation, driven by the Olsen brothers and particularly Ken Olsen, and, also Wang, by some Chinese American entrepreneur...

Mhm.

...who was building, quite a remarkable company which was... How would you describe Wang?

Well fighter pilot first of all.

It's a fighter pilot.

Absolutely. Everything was possible in Wang. Wang was totally unstructured. IBM, everything was possible, but it was structured. Wang was the other end of the spectrum. It was chaos. But it was constructive chaos. Two men, Dr Wang and John Cunningham, built the business up from nothing. Dr Wang was this genius, a true

genius, invented all sorts of amazing things, how to dress ferrite core memory for example. He was a genius. And Cunningham was a brilliant salesman. So Cunningham would go out and try and sell something; the customer would say, 'If only it did this, then I might buy some.' He would come back, Dr Wang would reinvent it so it did this, and then Cunningham would sell it. And they built this enormous corporation. And I was lucky enough to join when we were still very much on the, on this steep, I say, we were fighter pilots, here we were in the vertical take-off phase. In the UK, I, the numbers won't be right now, but I joined the UK, we were turning over, eight million, nine million pounds or something, and we were turning over fifty or sixty when I left. So it was a hugely exciting curve.

[46:32]

How many people were at Wang UK, do you remember, when you joined it?

I don't re... I don't remember, but it would be, it would be, 100, including engineers, and it was 1,000 when I left, it was growing.

Did you find Wang, or did Wang find you?

Headhunter, headhunter. I don't think I had ever heard of them.

Right.

But quite a few IBMers had left to go to Wang, again, my, my kindred spirits, the people that wanted to get out and win and, win for the customer.

Did you tailgate anybody in particular?

There was a chap, now sadly dead, called Roger Clark[sp?], who actually was a, he was a, a really good man in IBM, a good friend, a good man in IBM, he went off to Wang, and we all thought, ah, the bastard, he's betrayed the tribe. And then I found myself dishonourably crossing Manchester Square to go for an interview at Wang after having some big IBM meeting, which was a dreadful meeting, and added to my reasons to leave. I stopped for lunch on the way, and there was Roger Clark[sp?]. I

go back to my earlier point about there being a God, or at least someone who thinks in coincidence terms. And Roger was just a wonderful man. I just needed that extra confidence boost to carry my journey through Manchester Square for the interview to George Street. And then when I had joined, I'll always remember Roger Clark[sp?] running down the corridor shouting, 'Is it true, is it true? Has Ken Olisa really joined Wang Labs?' And my last wobbly nerves about whether I had done the right thing or not were dissipated by Roger being there. So, tailgate would be the wrong thing; I think massively boosted by, would be a better statement.

[47:46]

And what position did you join at?

I joined as a VS products manager.

A product manager?

Yes. I clung to the title product manager. I had been Series/1 product manager for IBM; I became VS product manager for Wang Labs.

And did that have a capital m?

It had a lower case m. [laughs]

[48:03]

A lower case m, still. Let me just take a little bit back to IBM. You were the Series/1 product manager at IBM.

Mm. Yes.

This was a minicomputer that IBM put together, didn't really have an operating system, was meant to come out of the box and work, and didn't. It was a bit of a disaster, wasn't it.

Well it was a bit of a disaster...

Did that influence... Sorry?

It was a bit of a disaster, absolutely. Well I was a successful Series/1 salesman before I became the product manager for it, even though it didn't work. The story's interesting. You mentioned Digital Equipment a moment ago. Digital Equipment were eating IBM's lunch in the factory. We didn't care about the factory, the factory was where people who wore blue collar things worked. We didn't do anything there. Stock control was as close as we ever got to the factory, and we did it in clean environments with, with data. But the... But Digital Equipment then began to move into the office, and that was our territory. And so IBM, big guys, decided that Digital Equipment had to be destroyed, and so we invented something that looked rather like a PDP, I think 11, but some PDP, which, PDP-11 didn't have an operating system, it was just a very clever processor, and other people had written operating systems. So IBM obviously, looked at the PDP and said, let's do a better one of those. So we created one that looked really smart, and could work in an office or a factory. But it didn't have an operating system. As the IBM sales and marketing organisation, we only knew how to sell things that worked, so, i.e. when you turn them on, they did something, and when we turned ours on, a red light came on and that was it. And then you had to buy an operating system from somewhere. And there weren't any. So it was quite a difficult product to sell, I have to say [laughs], in those, those days. I look back on now, how difficult it was. And, it was, it was, well it was extremely difficult. However, we of course succeeded, and we sold some, customers bought them; they got operating systems eventually. Waterloo University produced an operating system with the event-driven manager. I shall never forget this, it was like the cavalry company over the hill. And IBM continued to try and produce its own called RPS, I have no idea what that stood for, but that was always late, and never ever really arrived in my lifetime. So thanks to Waterloo University we had something to sell. And then customers began to use it, and, my job was to market it to, by then a very dispirited salesforce that thought it was a, a piece of iron. But it was an attempt to deal with Digital Equipment. Eventually Digital Equipment dealt with themselves, so it didn't matter, but, and IBM can claim no credit for the demise of DEC.

[50:16]

So you are in Wang. You are helping to drive this form of technology, which is basically minicomputer-based.

Mhm.

Mostly in the office.

Mhm.

Some typesetting for example.

Mhm.

Some word processing, prototype word processing, yes?

Mhm.

Driven by terminals, not batch-driven any more.

Mhm.

A new type of interactive computing. And you were part of the salesforce driving that forward in the UK. How was that?

Well, it was, again, in the 21st century it's very hard to imagine that life was ever like this, but in those, in those days, data processing meant adding up numbers. So it was binary and it was numbers. And word processing didn't really exist. Wang invented word processing to all intents and purposes. There were products to do typing that then turned into documents, but it wasn't word processing. And Wang had a terminal where if you wanted to insert a character in a, in a line, you move a cursor to where you wanted to insert it and then you pressed a key with the word 'insert' on it. [laughs] And that allowed you then to put something in. We still do that on keyboards today. That was a Wang invention. And so, if you were a PA typing letters all day, suddenly, you didn't have these odd IBM 80-column card things, or

worse than that, a typewriter, you had this machine where you could do fantastic layouts and document structures and so on, and you could type more easily. The only downside was, it cost £30,000, and a typewriter cost, a really IBM expensive typewriter, cost \$3,000. So the sales challenge for Wang was to persuade people that it was worth 30k instead of, whatever. And that was part of the joy of selling word processing. However, it was a movement. PA after PA after PA said, 'I don't care how much it costs boss, I want one, and I'm not going to work here if I don't get one.' And so there was this amazing tidal wave, rather like when the PC began it would follow the same curve, a tidal wave of people buying something. But I was responsible, not for that side of the house, but for the computing side. Because Wang was determined to out-IBM IBM, and the VS was a, was a data processing machine. However, you could also do word processing on it. So we had, we had the first machine, I believe, in the world, that could do DP and WP on the same machine. And eventually, not in the beginning days, you could then take something out of DP, like a spreadsheet, and put it into WP. So again, it was exhilarating, because it was pioneering, it had never been done. Obviously never been done before by the definition of pioneering. And, wherever we sold word processing, we had happy customers, because, they were doing something that had not been possible before. So it was exhilarating.

[52:47]

And the year you chose to go to Wang was the year of the PC.

'81. I suppose it was, wasn't it.

Yes.

But it was a, it was just, I don't think anybody knew that, we didn't know it then.

You didn't know it?

No. No, we were just beginning.

Would you have stayed if you had known it?

Er... No. No.

And been offered a job marketing it?

No. No no, because it was, it was all aircraft carrier culture then, it was...

Right.

My days had gone. Of course, I mean, although the PC started then, it began to get into volume four or five years later. And the interesting story about Wang is, we had software to do what we did on our own proprietary stuff, to run PCs, and John Cunningham had this idea that we would have, every PC in the world would be running Wang software, but we were a hardware company, and in the field we found it really quite hard to imagine only selling software. We gave that away to sell a box. And something I've observed over the years in the technology industry is, people who sell boxes find selling software quite difficult, and the idea of selling services impossible. people that sell software look down on boxes, and find selling services difficult; and people who sell services look down on both of the other two. And, although I was able to sell all three, I'm in a small number of us who were able to do that, because there's some kind of religious affiliation... I have a very good friend who sold boxes and he once said to me, 'I can't sell things you can't touch.' I said, 'Well I think you probably can.' And he said, 'No, no, I just can't, mentally.' So, it was an interesting time, people moving into this software and then services, which is the common state of the industry today, but it moved from the bundle, you bought everything from one person, and you got everything free apart from the box, to being where we now are today.

[54:19]

One small incident that I want to deal with that's here, your comments on it, maybe it passed you by in Wang in 1983. There were a number of product announcements in 1983 by Wang, I believe a relative of Dr Wang was in charge of marketing then, and he made a number of announcements which later became to be proved to be

vapourware, and it's called the vapourware announcements, i.e., they didn't come to market, they were about software.

Mm.

Did that disturb you?

No. '83, I was... Now let me see what I was doing in '83. By '83 I was probably head of marketing for, this is terribly old man stuff isn't it, I can't remember now, probably had of marketing for the UK, possibly for Europe, by then. But anyway, I was doing something in marketing. Or I could have been running a sales district. It was one of those two things. Well we didn't care what announcements were that came from Lowell, because they came all the time, thick and fast. The term vapourware was an interesting term, because if I remember it right, we had things like WangNet was announced. WangNet was anything but vapourware; again it was genius Dr Wang, had worked out that coaxial cable, you could run many channels simultaneously on a single cable. Therefore you could network around a building. It's just that it didn't quite work in its first announcement – in its first delivery rather, and it didn't quite work in its second delivery. It worked spectacularly well in its third delivery. So, the vapourware thing was really the competition's view of our first two attempts to get something which was amazingly innovative, to get to work. And you think about it now, we assume that all happens without wire, it all happens with Wi-Fi, but it's the same technology, which is, you can now over the same bandwidth run multiple channels. Dr Wang had a genius to spot that. It was announced. Horace Tsiang I think was probably the chap who was inventing, and wasn't a relative but was Chinese.

[56:02]

You began working outside of the UK, because you got more and more authority within Wang, did you not? You, you became head of marketing for the UK.

Mhm.

And then, you rose up to a European position I understand.

I had a meteoric rise in Wang. But as somebody famously said, it's not just the cream of folks at the top. Wang was growing exponentially, and, I had been trained by IBM. And so, so the kings and queens in, because there were women, lots of women in Wang, the kings and queens in Wang were the people who had been trained either by IBM or by Xerox. Because both companies invested huge amounts in training people. Everybody else were just people that knew what they talking about and got on with something. So, if you look back, if you looked at the echelons of Wang, certainly in Europe, it was generally ex-Xerox or ex-IBM people who rose to the top. And I attribute it to the fact that we had been trained. Message to young people listening to this tape: training is really important; it's not just about your personality, it's about actually having knowledge and being able to do the job properly.

And particularly that they have to find that training themselves nowadays.

Yes.

Because it's not going to be put on a plate for them.

Yes. Exactly. So, so do not dismiss it just because it's not obvious. So, yes, so I had a meteoric rise in Wang. Wang was growing exponentially, so all I do is cling on really. So, I can't quite remember the way it all went, but I was product manager for a product; then I became product manager for all products, manager of managers as it were; then I moved into marketing properly; then I moved into sales, because you couldn't really progress in Wang if you hadn't been a sales manager, and I ran a sales district for a few years; then I became head of marketing for Europe. And then Wang hit the rocks in America. Dr Wang and John Cunningham fell out, and in the falling-out the company was divided between the two factions. And, it began to shrink, which is a bad thing in business. And the European management team were lifted, lifted and shifted as the Americans say, lock, stock and barrel. So my boss, Ian Diery, who ran Europe, my colleague Bob Curtis[?] ran engineering for Europe, I was marketing, et cetera, we went as a package over to America and took over America. So I found myself in the most bizarre position. I became head of marketing for Wang Labs USA

[58:12]

Now all of my life, IBM and Wang, I had received marketing messages and nonsense at the wrong end of firehose, and had to try to implement them for local needs.

Suddenly I was the man at the beginning of the firehose. It was the most wonderful thing. And we were in a turnaround, and I learnt everything I know about turnarounds from that experience. Because when a company starts to go, the first victim is morale. And once morale goes in, you, it's like an avalanche, it builds up and builds up.

[58:39]

So Sir Ken, what did you learn from the turn round at Wang?

I think, two things I can, maybe more but certainly two big things stand out for me, in answer to that question. The first is, in a business turnaround, you can never over-communicate. It's too easy in business generally and with senior management and focus on numbers and so on to get your head down and worry about the detail. Actually, you can never over-communicate. Think about the person at the end of the command chain who is trying to deliver on the mission of the organisation, and they need to be pepped up, kept up to speed with what's happening, listened to, because communication's of course two-way. And you can never over-communicate. People often think they can write a note to everybody and say, 'Get on with it,' and then that's fine. Actually, no, you must do much more than that. So lesson one is, you can never over-communicate in a turnaround. I think the second big lesson is that you, you must remain obsessed with the customer. Again it's too easy to worry about lawyers and accountants and balance sheets and inventories and so on, and forget about the customer. And the minute you start to forget about the customer, in any business at any time, you are beginning to sound your own death knell. And obviously in a turnaround you need customer loyalty and support, even more than you do when things are just cruising. So it's... And it's quite easy to forget about them. You worry about the product, you worry about pricing, you worry about tax, you worry about the banks. They're all things to worry about. But the most important thing is to worry about, remain obsessed with, the customer. And if you can get those two things right, then, you bring everybody together on a mission. Because customers don't want businesses to fail; staff don't want the business they work for to fail. So if you can communicate with everybody, if you remain obsessed with the customer, you

will then find that's reciprocated by the staff, by the customers et cetera, and you have a chance of success.

[1:00:30]

From what you described earlier, in your role in IBM, and your relationship with the company, it seems as if you learnt those two things at IBM. Is that right?

Certainly IBM taught me the importance of the customer. It was a religion in the time that I was in IBM, as I probably said earlier. You could almost win any argument in IBM by saying, 'Well, the customer says,' and then filling in the blank. As opposed to, 'I've had a good idea,' or, 'The science says.' So, I think that obsession with the customer, I absolutely learnt in IBM. And I went to the IBM's 100th birthday party in Yorktown Heights in New York, amazing privilege to be invited to that, given that I was badge number two trillion in IBM and, very low level person at the time that I worked there. But we had this wonderful video shown to us by IBM, what, six, seven years ago now, and it brought it all flooding back to me, because it was all about customer and the mission and changing the world for good, and it wasn't about balance sheets and earnings per share and all that sort of nonsense that so obsesses public companies these days. That's a long way of saying, yes, I learnt the obsession with the customer at IBM.

[1:01:37]

But the balance sheet must balance, and the money must come in, and profits must be made to survive. And you have more than survived, because you went on and formed a number of different consultancies and venture capital companies. What did you therefore do after Wang?

Well, first of all, I would say there's a cart and horse discussion to be had some other time perhaps. I think obsessing with satisfying and delighting the customer, and guess what flows from that, are revenues and profits and cash flows. Not the other way around. But that's a, that's a particular but very important point. Well I left, I left Wang. Actually, I, I didn't leave Wang, I was fired from Wang. The Wang in its final days, before it went into Chapter 11, was a very different business from the one that I had joined in its, in its, actually, not even its heyday, en route to its zenith.

Because Dr Wang tragically, Dr Wang was a genius, Dr Wang tragically had contracted oesophageal cancer and died, and with him died the entrepreneurial leadership, that mission orientation that I ranted about earlier, and he was replaced by lots of people in suits with MBAs who knew about spreadsheets and balance sheets and, and so on, and didn't care at all about customers. And, and Wang and I began to separate at that point, intellectually but also clearly eventually practically. And I, I decided that I needed to leave, and I thought about different ways of getting out of, of the company, and there were only really two, you get yourself enough job and you go away, which I would have considered to be a defeat, or you go with a big dramatic bang. So I thought, well I shall go with a big dramatic bang. What could I do? And I thought, well I'm, I'm going to construct a management buyout of my part of the business, which my boss keeps telling me is sucking cash, wasting time, irrelevant, et cetera et cetera, and I think is actually generating cash and profitable, so it shouldn't be very expensive. So I thought I'd put together a management buyout, confident that one of two things would happen: I'd either be successful, which would be a big dramatic exit, or I'd be fired, which would be a big dramatic exit. I can honestly say, looking back on it twenty-something years later, I did expect to leave owning the business [laughs], dramatic exit. Unfortunately, I was fired. So I found myself on the outside of Wang. We had moved back from, we had been in Boston and then Brussels and moved back to London. It was a very interesting time. I was in my mid-forties then I suppose. Very interesting time. And I say this now in a world when entrepreneurship is second nature to everybody, but back then, still entrepreneurs are slightly frowned on, starting your own business was a slightly odd thing to do. And, and it wasn't my first choice. And I was offered a job, similar job to the, the Wang job, head of Europe, Africa and the Middle East for a big software company, and I thought, oh it would be fantastic to get this, because what will happen is, I'll have the same car and the same salary, I'll have to go to Atlanta instead of Boston every month, but apart from that, it's the same. My neighbours will never know I've been fired. Actually, that would be quite good for my self-esteem and ego. And a little imp that lives inside me popped out and stood on my shoulder and said famously, 'So, you're going to spend the rest of your life working for great companies that somebody else has created.' And I remember looking out of the window, looking into the distance, and thinking, if I'm ever going to start my own business, it has to be now.

[1:04:44]

So with a tiny amount of capital, I rented some rooms in a, in a slightly damp basement. I admit it was in Knightsbridge, so I wasn't exactly slumming it, but a slightly damp basement. I took my new PA from Wang with me, and I started a company called Interregnum, which became, it was originally an adviser, advising marketing and so on to technology businesses, but it became a technology merchant bank, we listed it on AIM, we raised some money, we did some interesting things. We built up a portfolio. We survived the dotcom boom and bust. It morphed into being, in fact an oil and gas company, but that's another story for another time. But I had ten very very interesting, constructive, and wealth-creating years at Interregnum. And I left there in 2006, and started my current private, privately owned merchant bank, Restoration Partners, where we essentially advise technology-oriented projects, and we raise capital for them, and we find people for them, and we help them get their strategy defined. We do classic merchant banking things.

[1:05:45]

How did you survive the dotcom crash?

Well we had raised quite a lot of money, I'm pleased to say, on the Stock Exchange, ahead of the dotcom crash, actually about an hour and a half before the dotcom crash began, so the timing, I got my strategic timing right for once at that time. And then I had, I was lucky enough to have very intelligent, very capable colleagues, former IBMers but not all, just IBMers, but people who had got the, got the core mission. And we built up a portfolio of assets, and we did things with them, and we created some value. And so on. And we stretched it out. Now, I'm trivialising what was quite a rocky journey, but nevertheless, you know, it was a rocky journey that we survived and we created something of value.

[1:06:26]

And you were able as well to devote more and more time to what we'd consider non-business, external, external interests of yours.

Mhm.

Charity interests. You have a particular interest in the homeless I understand.

Well, yes. I have a great interest in social inclusion. I'm a, I have a phrase that annoys everybody which is, I embrace diversity. But I think the diversity of humanity is the exciting thing about, about being human, as opposed to, why isn't everybody like, Arthur or Bill or Mary or, or Jane, whatever. So social inclusion is a natural bedfellow with, embracing diversity, we should find ways for people in the human race to be able to join into the benefits of it, rather than not. And so, I've long cared about that, so, and it's, it manifested itself when I was at school doing things for the Old People's Welfare Committee as we called it, but we painted old people's flats and that sort of thing, and did shopping for them. At university I tried my hand at helping, serving food and assisting in, in a hospice, and, and... So I thought, I've always been interested in social inclusion, but I think I settled on finding people who had once been included, who then find themselves excluded. Because, redemption and re-inclusion is a quite important part of the, of the theory of social inclusion, for Ken at any rate. And I was very upset when I came back to the UK in the, what would have been the early Nineties, to see just how many people were living on the streets of London who hadn't been living on the streets of London when I left in the mid-Eighties, and had nothing to do with my coming and going, it had all to do with the social changes in the UK. And I had a rant about this, and then I was connected with a homeless charity, and I was hooked. Because these, by definition, these are fellow human beings, who once had what we would consider to be normal lives, who, something has gone catastrophically wrong for them. So, in terms of, well, I'm very fond of saying, you can measure, I think, the level of civilisation in a country by how it treats its most disadvantaged, its most weak and its most vulnerable. And in many ways somebody who was happily married one day and finds him or herself living on the street a month or two later, with absolutely nothing at all, you can't think of a greater example of the vulnerable and the weak and so on. So yes, I, I joined the board of an organisation called Thames Reach, all that time ago, and I brought, if I did anything to help them, I brought business skills to a sector which is not a natural companion with business skills. So, guess what, we worried about the balance sheets, we worried about the cash flows, we worried about the P&L, all of which I'm pleased to say got stronger and stronger during the time I was privileged to be there, but we never ever lost our focus on the service user, the customer, in this context. And we were pioneers at Thames Reach, for example, in recruiting former homeless people to

work for Thames Reach. I believe today something like 40 per cent of the staff of Thames Reach are people who have experienced street homelessness. So, again, that obsession with the customer comes through as a, I think as a shining light on a, how to make an organisation work effectively.

[1:09:23]

I know that you have said in the past that really there is no distinction between how you run a company and how you run a charity.

There should be no distinction. There is tragically often a distinction. People will dismiss things, oh well, it's a charity. No no. It's just the same. Things like balance sheet, I don't want to go on about this, but things like balance sheets and cash flow statements and so on, they are, they are symptoms of a, of an organism. So, it's about body temperature, or BMI index, or BM index or whatever, they're, they are factors that tell you something about an organisation. The organisation, to be successful, I think has to have a mission, it has to have a purpose, a mission, a reason to exist that can rally people, and it has to do good. And I don't think that's different in a commercial environment than it is in a, in a charitable one.

[1:10:07]

In your role now as an investor, as a merchant banker basically, what are you looking for to invest in?

Well, I... I've been so privileged to be in the IT industry, and I, and I know this entire project is about the history of the IT industry, so we should take a moment just to remind ourselves, first of all how lucky those of us who started out early on were, the pioneers. I suppose, actually, to claim to be a pioneer is a slight overstatement. I think I wrote my first program in about 1968, and I probably got it to work in about 1970. But, so I was, I was around in those days when computers were obscure concepts, as opposed to something that you carry in your pocket and briefcase and so on. So I've enjoyed that journey. But we've transformed, the IT industry has transformed livelihoods, entertainment, safety, transport, everything, it's been wonderful. And it would be easy to start to say, it's kind of finished, and, there are a couple of things that might change now but we're cruising. But of course none of it.

What's happening now is what I always call the age of ubiquity, the time when, everything will be a computer. The clothes that we wear will have something on them that lets us identify them, their location, their status, et cetera. Et cetera et cetera. It's called the Internet of Things, but I think that understates what it is. It's not things, it's ubiquity. It's the fact that everything will be a computer. At which point the applications to do good for humanity will be mind-blowing. I can't conceive of them, I'm in my sixties. It'll be the next decade, twenty years, that these things happen. But one can begin to see the early stages of exciting application. Take driverless cars as a rather trivial example, but driverless cars, all the technology that goes into making a driverless car work is an embodiment of the ubiquity concept that I've spoken about. But the healthcare benefit, it goes on and on and on. And we're just beginning. So I, I'd like to say, there have been so far three eras of development in IT, characterised by the mainframe era, the minicomputer era, and then the personal computer era. And if you look at those as in the Stone Age, the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, we're now into that next age, the age of ubiquity, when again a whole raft of things will be developed that one couldn't have conceived of twenty years ago, never mind, I struggle to conceive of now, but never mind 30, 40 years ago when I started.

[1:12:24]

And then how will wealth be created, wealth defined both as human good as well as cash good as it were? Well, I'm going to leave that to younger people, but there are so many already evident examples of that. I was listening to someone today talking about a new blood monitor for diabetics. So without piercing your skin or taking blood, you can detect blood levels, toxin levels, from outside the body. And you can do it 100 times a day. So now you can monitor – well, they have to turn it into a product, but it will be capable to monitor people's levels of toxicity. So we could all wear those things, be monitoring all the time, having the process done by some enormous computer in the cloud, and healthcare benefits then just flow from that. Instead of at the moment we have, somebody has to prick themselves with a needle twice a day to get somewhere. So, it just, it just gives and gives and gives, as the ingenuity of mankind reflects itself in the application of technology.

[1:13:18]

This is part of your basic optimism. Is there not a down side? There is considerable concern among some people about the impact of AI for example.

Well, yes, it is my unbridled optimism. I can see that immediately. I'm a founder member of the optimist party. I'm proud of that. I think, one of the constants through my life in the IT industry has been the constant doomsayers saying, yes, but what you're doing now will put people out of work. Well, first of all, there are some people I don't mind putting out of work. Why one earth did we sent men to risk their lives to go deep into the Earth to collect coal, when you can set a machine to do it? Why would that be a good thing? So there are lots of jobs that people do today that I don't think are justifiably good things to do, for the people doing them or for anybody else, if we can create wealth that can then be distributed in other ways. But I'm always reminded of an advertisement that IBM ran back again in the, well what would it have been, the early Seventies, when I was working for IBM, and at that time, the two big objections we had to deal with as salesmen in IBM were, one, you're a profitable American company; why should I buy from you when I can, bracket, buy from a loss-making British company? Was one objection. And the other objection was, but if I buy a computer from you, it will put people out of work. And I remember IBM got so cross about this second one, we, they, raised their head above the parapet and ran full-page advertisements in the major broadsheet newspapers. And the advert was quite simple, it was words, no pictures, and it said, 'Two men were observing activity on a building site. One man turned to the other and said, "If they weren't using that digger truck, they could employ ten men with spades." And the other man turned to the first man and said, "Yes, and if they didn't employ ten men with spades, they could employ 100 with teaspoons." IBM.' And I, that still makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck, because the point is, the progression of mankind is about technology and its application. And we shouldn't confuse that with how we then redistribute wealth. And so we, we can't stop the technological developments, so what we have to worry about from a social policy perspective is, as we generate wealth, let's make sure it doesn't all accrete to the very few, and it gets shared with those greater numbers. But that's to, to avoid confusing social policy with the advance of technology.

[1:15:29]

Are you concerned about the speed with which monopolies seem to be established, monopolies such as Facebook, such as Amazon?

Not, not really. Because, in a democracy, we have all the mechanisms to deal with that. If we don't deal with it effectively, that's a failure of democracy, it's not a failure of, of commerce. And, we've been dealing with antitrust issues, IBM of course was a victim of a Department of Justice investigation all that time ago, although, I have to say, it was dropped, I remind everybody. There was a great line from Frank J Komisky II I think he was, who when it was dropped, gave a fantastic motivational speech to the UK salesforce when he said simply, 'Gentlemen, I just want to confirm that the Department of Justice has now confirmed that being great is not illegal.' I think businesses are all about trying to create the biggest possible thing that you can, and that social policy is about making sure that's done benignly and not malignly. And again, they are connected. There's not a confusion there. But the, but the onus is on social policy to make sure that the bad things of scale are not visited upon the population.

[1:16:37]

What's your biggest mistake that you've made in your career?

The biggest mistake. It's an easy question to answer. The biggest mistake I made is not to follow my own advice. Now, I don't mean generally, I generally do follow my own advice, it would be hypocritical not to. But one of the best pieces of advice I have received from others but have often given out is, in strategy, it's always quite difficult, when you're making big, bold mission-driven moves, it's always quite difficult to be confident of the next step, before you take the next step. And I am very fond of reminding people of the lesson of the orangutan, which is, you should never let go of tree A, as you swing through the jungle, until you are sure that tree B is secure. And the biggest mistake I made was at Interregnum. We had raised our first fund, it was going well, we were investing well, we had got good profile, things, we were doing it differently. We were doing all the things I love doing. And we were absolutely confident we were doing to raise our second, much larger fund. And so we invested almost all of our first fund before we failed to raise the second fund. And we were suddenly left holding a baby of all these investments, and we had no money to invest in them. That was a clear mistake, because had we held some money back, life would have been very very different. Alternatively, had we managed to get tree B to

work, like would have been very different. However, every cloud has a silver lining, and what ended up happening was, I and my colleagues in Interregnum learnt everything I know about corporate finance in the year in which we moved our assets around different companies and so on, to preserve the value that we had created. So, I'd prefer not to have learnt it that way, I think a book and a tape would have been a rather more benign way of learning it, but nevertheless, we learnt a lot that year. I can't remember anything about 2002, but I came out of it an expert in corporate finance. But I, as I say, I would prefer not to have done it that way. Tree B, make sure it's firm before you let go of tree A.

[1:18:25]

You must be able to, I imagine, compartmentalise your work, because you're the Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London, that is the representative of the Queen; you have a magnificent uniform, including a cap. You salute her, you present her, represent her in various places. You often go to the Palace to these formal events. And you are on the board of a number of companies, including a Nigerian company. This is a, a tremendous amount of work for a man in his sixties, who's looking well, but is in his sixties.

Well thank you. I think I, there's nothing to add to that really, thank you. [laughs]
I... But seriously, I think in business, you know when you meet a great sports person, they think that what they do is pretty normal, and they're worried about getting from 97 per cent perfection to 98 per cent perfection. So I, I occasionally play golf with proper golfers, and I'm just embarrassed how bad I am at it. I've been playing for 30, 40 years, and I'm no better than I was when I started, because I only play three or four times a year. And it's really frustrating for them; it's quite frustrating for me as well. And I see what perfection looks like. But I'm kind of a 20 percenter in golf, maybe I'm exaggerating there, maybe a ten percenter, and they're up in the 70, 80, 90 per cent bit. I think it's one of the great mistakes that people who have been successful make, which is, they assume that they're normal, and they can see the difference between 100 per cent in wherever they happen to be, and it's relatively recently in my life I've realised that this ability to compartmentalise does actually separate me from lots of other people. So I can go to a meeting, for example this meeting, and only be thinking about what we're doing at the moment, and not have 1,000 other thoughts of

other things going through my head. But the minute we've finished, this particular interview, I'm off to a meeting to discuss governance at one of the large charities that I chair, and there for that next hour I shall be focused entirely on governance with that large charity. I thought that's what everybody did. I realise it isn't what most people do. So yes, I, I am blessed, because I, I certainly didn't create this with the ability to compartmentalise. A second point I'd make David is, I'm also blessed with being unbelievably privileged, and yes, I do have a wonderful uniform, it has a cap, you quite rightly say, I'm interested you pick on the cap. Most people pick, quite rightly I would argue, on the sword and the spurs, but I'll settle for the cap, the sword and the spurs. I am, yes, amazingly privileged to go to events at palaces and abbeys and so on, in my own right, as opposed to just tucking in with a brown ticket in the back row of something. But more importantly, the lieutenancy, it was created by King Henry VIII, so it's been around for quite a long time. It's a force for enormous good. Next Friday I shall be handing out 30 British Empire medals at an investiture in the Tower of London. The Constable of the Tower of London and I will both give speeches about the history of the UK, heritage, the importance of community and contribution, and then 30 nervous people will step up onto the stage one after another to receive a British Empire medal from me – from the Queen I should say, but via me, as their anxious families sit in the audience and watch what's happening, and then will take lots of photographs, and will celebrate. And they'll go out into the world knowing that the Queen has recognised their contribution to society and community. And I get the honour of being the man who gets to pin the medal on their chest. What's to complain about?

What's to complain about when he comes from the back streets of Nottingham, and has got sword and spurs. Thank you very much Sir Ken Olisa.

Thank you very much.

[End of Interview]