



Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

# David Barker

Interviewed by

**Tom Abram**

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At the

**WCIT Hall,**

32a Bartholomew Close, London, EC1A 7JN

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**Archives of IT**

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*So, I'm Tom Abram, the editor of the Archives of IT and I'm here today, on the seventh of August 2019 with David Barker. We're in the hub of the premises in Farringdon Street in London and David is described as a*

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*social entrepreneur and is a prospective councillor for the City of London amongst his other interests. I'm going to talk to him about his career in IT and his start in life and where he's going to go from here. So, welcome David. Can we start by talking about your roots, your beginnings in Manchester. I think you were born in 1971. Can you tell me a bit about your family.*

Yes, so it was myself, mum and dad and my brother Robert and we grew up in north Manchester. My father was a window cleaner, my mum was a care nurse in an old peoples' nursing home. We grew up there and we were happy. It was what we call a poor community, disadvantaged people, but for us it was a happy time and yes, I went to North Manchester High School for Boys and that's where I took my GCSEs. We were the first school to do GCSEs, after the move from O levels, so we were the first cohort of GCSEs.

*Really. So I looked up a bit about your school and it sounds like, not a great establishment, from the write-ups I've seen. Is that a fair assessment?*

Yeah, I mean if I look at where I went through the school there was ... a lot of kids didn't achieve and they found it difficult to learn and to have prosperity in their education. I was a lucky one. Our year actually had a lot of kids who wanted to learn. I think actually it was a cause of the aspirations of the students that may cause it not to perform. We had a good year, a lot of kids who wanted to learn, wanted to get on in life, but the years above and below were a very different type of student who found the whole ... weren't really driven to achieve.

*Yeah. So, just going back to your home life for a moment, you say you lived in north Manchester, has that part of north Manchester got a particular district name?*

Moston.

*Right, ok, and what sort of house did you live in?*

It was the long row of terraced houses so we were the house at the end, so yeah, it was those industrial revolution rows of terraces.

*With the gunnell down the back.*

Yeah, and the toilet outside [laughs]. Yes, so that style of housing.

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*But it sounds like you were happy at home.*

Yeah, I think wherever you're born I think you live in that world and you get on with it and generally we were happy kids, a happy family. My father struggled to make enough money to give us what we needed but he always did and he always put food on the table, so yes, it was a good time.

*Yes, and his profession again was?*

He was a window cleaner.

*Right, ok, so self-employed.*

Self-employed, yeah.

*So there was a direct relationship between how much he worked and how much money came in.*

Yeah, but he always achieved it. He was an entrepreneur in himself, I think.

*You've talked, in some of the background you gave me, about some of your friends and some of the community, having a difficult time with ... I think, crime, drugs and suicide were mentioned. Was it a difficult environment?*

00:04:29

I think it's linked to any young person growing up in a community like that. You're fine whilst you're at school, it's when you leave school, it's where you're going to get to. I was fortunate, I managed to get an apprenticeship - remember the YTS scheme?

*Yeah.*

I got an apprenticeship with a good company, my career grew and I set up my own business when I was twenty-three, but interestingly, it was at that point when I created my own business, I went back to Moston. Just like you do, you always go back to take a look at it and remember, and I was at a bus stop with what I

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thought was a tramp and I was kind of sat away from him and he kind of just get staring at me and he said, 'David Barker, isn't it?' and I looked at him and it turned out he was a friend of mine from school and it was him that told me the story of my other friend. So we all left school at sixteen, I got my opportunity, Danny himself admittedly had been in and out of prison, on drugs, in gangs, Jason was in prison for murder, another friend had committed suicide, and he just told me the story that they just never found a positive life and they were dragged into ... they just never found the jobs and career they wanted and ended up unemployed. It's that unemployment, underemployment which drags people into the negative behaviour.

*Ok, well we'll come back to that in a moment, can I just ask a bit now about your school. You've mentioned your secondary school but what about before that? Local primary school ...?*

Yeah, local Lily Lane Primary School, great primary school, I've only got positive memories of my time there. Yeah, Lily Lane Primary School was good, the High School for Boys was a good school and I was fortunate to navigate my way beyond that.

*So what did you like at school?*

What did I like at school...? Well, at secondary school I was in the rugby team, I enjoyed the sports side of it. I had a good interest in technology, commerce I was interested in. Yeah, I guess learning about commerce and technology and being able to play sports, I'm an active sports person as well.

*Yeah, so you got a bunch of GCSEs, as you say, the first GCSEs, and what subjects did that cover?*

Those were ...oh gosh ...

*Obviously, the maths and English and so on, but ...*

German, Technology, Commerce, they're the three that I remember.

*Don't agonise over it. So, well, maybe I'm doing your school a disservice but in view of your comments in the background I looked up its history and it seemed to get closed in 2009 and reopened as an academy.*

Ok, I didn't know that.

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*Ok, we might come back to that in a moment, but you mentioned, I think, you left school after your GCSEs. Why? Why didn't you do more?*

I just decided, when I was fifteen, going to college and university I didn't feel was for me. While you're at school you do go and visit the colleges so you explore it as an option but the more I talked about it the more I felt that wasn't for me, so I went to my careers teacher and said, 'Look, I don't think I want to go to college or university, for me I think I'd like to leave school at sixteen and go into work' and that was my decision, to seek help at school to transition from school at sixteen into a workplace.

*What did your teacher say about that, was this your careers adviser?*

00:08:38

Yeah, it's more a teacher who's appointed as a careers teacher, so it's the same model we have today. He just was very frank, actually, and honest from his perspective, in 'Well David, if you're not going to go to college and university your options will be more limited.' I told him that my aspiration was to get into technology, I felt my future was technology – I didn't know what, I just knew it was technology - and he said, 'well, actually, really, because of your background and where you're from if you're not going to have a degree that's not really a career you're going to get into, so I suggest that you run with that aspiration... I can only get a job when I join the army, the army's good.' I said, 'it is a good career but I don't want to join the army' and he said, 'well, what about retail, a shop' and I said, 'well, look I don't want to get into retail.' So his advice was, you won't get that if you don't go to uni, therefore, you're better off not aspiring to that and failing, you're better off doing something we know you could get into.

*And, looking back on it, what was your view of that advice that you got at that stage?*

I think it's bad advice. But I don't think that was necessarily his fault, so again, going back to being a teacher, trying to give advice to every kid for every career, that is very hard to know what good advice to give, really, so ... but I know from my own experience of being in the technology industry that actually you don't actually need to have academic qualifications to be amazing at technology, but I know that through wisdom, through experience. Back at sixteen, I just felt, I'm still going to try because it's what I really want to do, on a belief I can find a way, not that I know I can. So it was rather try and fail than never try, which has always been my philosophy. Rather than give up now and do something that I just know I'm going to hate in a few years, which I think, going back to your question about that friend, I think that they fell into the

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trap of being pushed into stuff they didn't like, or would never generate enough money for them and they were like, well, I might as well do crime ...

*Yeah, I mean, I've read your book and one of the things that shocked me in it was that encounter with the careers teacher and the phraseology that, I think, you reported there which is 'for someone like you, from your background' or words to that effect.*

Yeah.

*Then you can really only consider the army or retail or whatever, which I found rather disappointing as a reflection on the education system.*

Yeah, my concern actually today is ... I mean, the government announced it again, about every school having an appointed careers adviser who, on the whole, is a teacher so it's the same old as what happened in 1987 so that's not ... we need to be doing more than this.

*So, just going back to my research on your school, if you don't know about this, apparently it closed in 2009. The stuff I read about it on the Web was not terribly complimentary about the school's performance and so on and it reopened as an academy, a creative and media academy with involvement from Microsoft as well as some other notable Manchester-based organisations. Apparently it did very well for five years and was then taken into the co-operative group of academies which, they say, was not a reflection of poor performance but a reflection of good performance. So I just wondered whether you might have got different advice from a creative media academy from the advice that you got back in whenever it was, 1980 something ...*

Six, I think.

Yeah.

Well, yeah, the idea of schools specialising in specific sectors – creative media – the key with those is their industry relations as part of what they do, and they understand better about what you can do after, so yeah. Today obviously careers into digital marketing ... I think that's the key. Back then it was all about technology. IT is a funny word because you say IT but think systems and networks, whereas when you say

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technology, there's so much more potential around, both creative and technical. So yeah, I think schools are better equipped now, some schools are better equipped today to give better careers advice.

*That's probably a step forward. So it doesn't sound like your careers teacher did you many favours but were there other teachers at school that, kind of, inspired you with your interest that led on to what you did afterwards and do now?*

00:14:00

Yeah, my commerce teacher inspired me about business and my understanding of business, that was good. Actually, my history teacher, although history wasn't my favourite subject, he ran the chess club so he was the one who taught me to play chess and, actually, it was him and my chess skills that helped me get my apprenticeship, so interestingly it wasn't necessarily my education qualifications, it was my extracurricular skills development that got me my apprenticeship, as much as my interest in technology. So that was good.

*Yeah, that's interesting. Ok, let's move on to your leaving school and you got some careers advice that you didn't find terribly useful but you decided to plough your own furrow. Can you tell us a bit about what you did after leaving school and why you did that.*

Yes, so what I did then ... you go to drop-ins, like Manpower are running a lot of support for people and the Job Centre. You go there, you're kind of looking for, how do I get into something linked to technology and what got me my opportunity ... actually it was Manpower who were managing the YTS scheme that the government had launched so I was fortunate enough to see that and there were two opportunities that they suggested: one was with Shell Oil as an accountant; and one was with a small business in Stockport which did educational software for children. My philosophy has also been, don't just look at one option, I'll look at all the options and choose the one that you should choose, so I decided to go to both those interviews so I did the interview at Shell Oil and then the small company. Even though it was a YTS scheme Shell Oil were offering more money than the small business in educational technology. So interestingly I actually got approved for both, both accepted me and they both offered me the apprenticeship. People were saying, 'Shell Oil, job for life, accountant, never go hungry being an accountant', or the risk of a small business in the start of faith, really, basically. For me, it was, like, there's only one option that tied with my wishes and that's the small business, technology, because my aspiration thing was technology, it wasn't accountancy.

*What shaped that interest in technology? Where did that come from?*

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That came from when I was thirteen, before that I didn't have any aspiration, but I was blessed enough that ... my dad, even though he struggled he always tried to get good Christmas presents and that was the time when the ZX Spectrum came out, the first proper home computer, so he managed to get us one of those. As soon as I played it, I played a game on it, I was like wow, this is amazing. The game wasn't necessarily great but just the idea of it, and then I just taught myself ... because the school wasn't really teaching coding, so I taught myself, got a book that you could kind of learn how to code on a ZX Spectrum. That was my aspiration so from that point onwards, whenever anyone would say to me, 'what does your future look like?' I said, 'I don't know, but it's technology' and that's where ... but it's interesting how those moments - that you decide that's what I want to do, be it something that you experience or something that somebody says, it's always that trigger point for where you end up focusing your energy.

*So one of the questions we often ask, in these interviews, what was your first computer, so the answer is ...*

The ZX Spectrum, yeah.

*So, 1987 then, you went to work at 3T Productions in Stockport. Was that a good decision?*

Best decision of my life. It was at a time when 'you should have gone for Shell Oil' and I was like, 'No, this is' ... it was tricky at first because you start as an apprentice and, in your head, you're going to be designing and innovating and creating from the beginning but it wasn't like that at first, it was 'empty the bins, take the post', you weren't really doing much, but you just have to stick it out, weather it, do what's asked of you and excel and keep showing interest. So, at first it was a bit ... but then, after a few months I managed to get an opportunity to prove myself and then my career blossomed from there. So it was definitely the best thing in my life. I know that had I gone on to be an accountant I would have been good at it but it's when you just know that you were born for something else and I think I managed to go on a journey that helped me to do something I felt I was born to do.

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*Of course, these days apprenticeships are much more valued than twenty years ago, they kind of fell out of favour, but apprenticeships are highly regarded now as educational training courses, mechanisms. It sounds like your YTS apprenticeship was, kind of, a bit unstructured in the sense of doing the post and*



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*emptying the bins etc. Was it properly thought through in terms of taking you from ... you know, school leaver through to professional?*

Well, I'd say that probably not structure, I think they were more government asking employers to give a young person a chance...

*Right.*

On a two-year training scheme, where they do a day-release to college and four days in the business, but whereas today you've got all those structured apprenticeships and outputs and outcome. but there was none of that, it was just, 'you're with the employer for two years, you get day release to college and then it's for the employer to decide how to utilise you'. That's what's different, I think, to today where it's a very different, more structured environment.

*So you're pleased you did it and it worked out well.*

Yes, definitely.

*But eventually you left [laughs]*

Yeah, well, it was a two year ... interestingly it was a two year apprenticeship but they took me off the apprenticeship after three months, once I'd proved myself. I did stay there for seven years so I was there 'til I was twenty-three. It was only when the Internet arrived on our shores that I saw the Internet and thought, that's the future, this is what's going to change the world. I had a real vision of its potential. But the company I was in was very good at what they did in educational software and how they did it, but they weren't necessarily moving into the Internet. It was one of those decisions again, you either stay where you are, doing what you're doing, or you leave to do your new vision. My new vision was the Internet. And in 1994 there was no one really doing Internet, so you couldn't leave and be employed by someone else, you had to leave to become an entrepreneur and create a business. Yeah, after some discussion with three colleagues and friends we decided to go it alone and create that.

*Before we pursue that, it sounds like you had this break point. You were on a two-year apprenticeship and you did something that resulted in you being taken off the apprenticeship and projected into a more kind of high-powered career, so what was it you did that brought that about?*

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That was ... when I started my apprenticeship the previous apprentice was just leaving after his two years and he actually said to me, 'David, you're wasting your time, there's no development here and you should give up now', which is not a great thing to hear on your first day, but I thought, well maybe that's just you, maybe you didn't show you wanted to do, so I thought, I'm going to give it 110 per cent anyway. So you know, yeah, I was taking the bins and the post, but I was taking the books off the shelves and reading and learning and using my time myself to develop my skills, watching the professionals, asking could I attend the meetings, showing my interest. At first it was more about observation, reading, studying, developing my skills myself anyway, which anyone can do, it's easier today with the Internet, so I was kind of investing in my own development even if the company wasn't necessarily developing me in the way I wanted to. And then, after three months, I was in a room with two of the senior developers on a critical project for the company and they were struggling with a problem they couldn't solve ... it was a critical problem that, if they didn't solve, the project would fail, the company would lose money and it would be a serious implication. But you know, it's like everything in your life, you listen at something, you believe you know the answer, so I went over to them and said, 'Excuse me, but I've been listening to you and I think I can give you the answer that you're looking for'. I suppose you're thinking they're going to say, what is it, but actually it was that social issue of their response that 'we went to Oxford and Cambridge and we don't know the answer to this, how could you know' this type of conversation, it was quite disturbing really, you know, at sixteen especially. But thankfully I didn't get angry and storm off and so on, and I actually said, 'Look, I think I do know the answer, here it is' so I wrote it down and gave them the information. An hour later, they then said to me, 'Actually, you're right, it was the right answer, it solved the puzzle and we're really, really sorry we treated you so badly'. But interestingly, that then changed ... I always believed the only way to change someone's mindset, someone's conscious bias or unconscious bias, is through positive demonstration but it's not the case and that was an example of it. So there I'd learned that you actually don't have to go to uni to know the answer to a puzzle and they learned something from that experience. That was probably the start of people realising I did have talent and then they eventually resigned from the project, because they couldn't actually do the solution, I stepped forward to the Managing Director and said, 'I think I can do this'. She said, 'well no one else is coming forward, have a go', so I took the computer, went home, solidly worked on it, went back and pitched it to the client, they looked at it and that was enough to keep the project alive and the money kept coming in and they finished the contract. So, yeah, I think it's like any project, as long as at those crisis moments then somebody steps in with the answer, in this case it was me, sixteen years old.

*So that was your big break.*

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That was my big break and after that pitch the Managing Director sat me down and said, 'you're coming out of the YTS scheme' because I was only on twenty-nine pounds a week which ... people were saying it was scandalous, young people being abused, but I was like, it paid for my bus fares, it got me to my opportunity. Three months later, they took me off and put me on a hundred and twenty pounds a week as a full time member of staff.

*That's quite a pay rise isn't it.*

Quite a pay rise, I was very happy. But even better than that, because ... my parents always struggled financially but mainly because they had kids, that's why they struggled. So actually getting that job then meant that I could leave home, move into a shared house, they then had more income and they then moved from the place I'd lived all my life to a new place, a better life for them. So interestingly, to help my parents is to help the kids move away and then suddenly they've got more money to do it as well. Yeah, that was my big break.

*So, just going back to your family circumstances then, had you wanted to go on to college or university, sixth form, university, whatever, would that have been possible within your family set-up?*

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I'd say it was possible, I don't think there's anything in that family structure that says, 'we can't afford to send you to college or uni', so my decision not to go wasn't because they can't afford to send me, it was more I just don't think it's what I should do. Now, whether if I'd have stayed in the family unit my parents would have kept struggling still is a different question, because basically by not going to college and getting a job and moving away their life was transformed.

*Yeah, I see that what you did worked out. I'm just interested in this from the point of view of funding of education and university fees, for example, student loans. I came from a working class family and I went to university in 1970 and I got what was called a full grant in those days, so my parents could not have afforded to maintain me at university, but the government gave me enough money to live on and so I could do it. But I'm not sure what the system was in the mid-eighties when you were making those decisions.*

I think it was probably still the same model of grant.

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*So you could probably have done it if you'd wanted to.*

Yeah, I guess the key is, even though my education would have been covered, I guess the question is then ... well, college I guess isn't, obviously you do go to college first, I guess the leap to university, so college would have been the seventeen, eighteen year old and I'd have been staying at home still. It's only the leap to uni that then you've got the uni, so yeah... it's a tricky one. I could have had a prosperous life still and everything could have worked out, going to college and uni, I think they're still good paths, it's not that apprenticeships are better than university. The big question is what you do on those paths, I think then defines the prosperity afterwards, so I'm sure I would still have found a positive path on either, but for me, I think, the YTS lead to employment ... I think actually I wouldn't have been ready to become an Internet entrepreneur at twenty-three if I'd gone to uni. I think that was the difference.

*I see that. I think this is a reflection on your entrepreneurialism rather than the funding of education. So you then became an entrepreneur. I'm interested that the word 'entrepreneur' comes up in a couple of ways in your background information. It says on the front of your book that you were one of the first Internet entrepreneurs. You describe yourself now as a 'social entrepreneur', so let's just talk about entrepreneurs a bit. So, first of all, what is a social entrepreneur, as opposed to any other kind of entrepreneur?*

Well, I guess the traditional entrepreneur is looking to see an opportunity in a market, to create a business that can primarily grow to generate shareholder profit and make money and sell it and move on. So the traditional entrepreneur model is to create and generate wealth for the founders, although they do have a social benefit - as they grow they employ people and create jobs - which is great and that's the great thing about business growth. Primarily the founders or entrepreneurs are typically looking for the opportunity for growth and to exit and make money in the traditional capitalist system. Whereas the social entrepreneur is seeing opportunity in issues in society that need to be tackled and we can use entrepreneurialship and innovation to develop products and services that tackle a social problem, but in the same way an organisation will be created, jobs will be created, but focused on tackling that specific social problem. So you're not driven to how much money can we make out of the market, it's how can we use business models and growth to tackle social problems.

*But presumably a social entrepreneur has to make money out of their business activities in order for the model to be sustainable?*

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Exactly, yes, so there's .. for me ... your charity model where you can ask for money and get given it to tackle a problem, but even on that model the people that are tackling the problem get paid. So everyone gets paid, everyone needs to get paid. On the charity model, it's you get given a load of money, you create jobs, people get paid, and you tackle a problem, and if there's no more money coming in you shut it down. Whereas a social entrepreneur is looking to ... you still need the seed capital, you still need the initial investment, that's required to create anything new, but then beyond that you need to be looking for a revenue model in your social enterprise, that somebody's paying to then keep you scaling and growing. So you're looking for sustainability and growth through income, whereas the charity model is, you keep asking for money until it runs out.

*So is there a kind of moral dilemma when you're a social entrepreneur, as to how much money is reasonable for you to make out of the business as opposed to how much good you do to society through the business?*

That's a really hard one. It's a difficult one but the main challenge actually is, how do you unlock investment and pay a return that's acceptable. So it's not just about how much do you get paid to do the job day to day, it's what's the right investment you should receive and try to pay back, whether it's interest or whether it's dividends, and to keep growing a social enterprise. I'm still not there yet, in 'we've all worked this out' but we try to get there by ... for example, my day rate in the corporate sector would be probably twice or three times what it is that I charge on a social enterprise. So, whereas I might charge a thousand pounds a day for corporate I'll charge five hundred pounds a day to give social advice.

*And you do both of those things on different days of the week?*

I used to, in the early days when I was creating my first social enterprise I worked out I needed to raise money to do what I wanted to do so I actually sold myself corporately to make money to develop my first social enterprise. So yeah, but now I don't do any corporate work, it's only purely social enterprise.

*Well, thank you for explaining that. So let's go back to when you started your first capitalist entrepreneur venture which was Moonfish, was it not, in 1994. So, can you tell me a bit about how you got that started.*

Yes, that was an interesting one. We created it, we left our jobs, we didn't have any contracts, so it was ... it's like any start-up, you were then working contacts, you know, you're going to events, you're networking, so eventually we ... people call it random or luck but I always say things are never lucky if you have a search and you discover and you make things happen. So we were fortunate to meet somebody who got us, as four

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professionals, and got our ambition for the Internet, got our expertise. He worked for Microsoft, didn't give us an Internet project but gave us £15,000 to create a video for Microsoft's office in Reading that talked about the future of the Internet. So it wasn't an Internet project, it was future-gazing about how the Internet is going to change the world, and we produced the video, the multimedia content to tell that story, and that's what the £15,000 was used for. But we did such a good job on that, and he got that we got the Internet at the same time, he then recommended us to a friend of his who worked at Intel, and then through that contact we got our first Internet related contract – and then of course we started working for Intel. There was the company of SCO Unix, so SCO was Santa Cruz Operations of America, again a friend of a friend recommended us to Intel, we then started working for SCO ... so they were the first technology companies and then we got Unilever, an exciting project for Unilever on their brands, so we moved from just technology to FMCT-type contracts. So yeah, it's like any start-up, you need that break, when you've got to prove what you can do and then you get referrals. I think a lot of the work we got, a lot of our income came from people just telling other people about us, at a time when it was a greenfield site, there was no one doing digital marketing, it hadn't been invented yet and we were just starting creating things, then moved into email marketing and online advertising. So we were very agile, it was about technology, it was about the Internet, what we did depending on the client.

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*So what were the skills that you and your colleagues brought to that? It sounds like it was a lot of creative stuff, graphics and so on as well as the computing, the coding, the networking and so on.*

Yeah, so as a team of four, Kate was like the creative director, the concept person. Bob was the graphic designer, visualiser. I was the technologist, innovating and new technology approach, to do what we wanted to do. So I was a tech innovator, a tech doer, and then Roberto was more commercial, so he was like project management type skills. So I would say, when you create a company, create it on your own if you've got all the skills, but typically you don't so make sure you start it with a team of different skills so that you can then become a team, deliver your first project and then scale out from there.

*So one of the things we're interested in, in collecting this oral history as we call it, is how people work together, what are the people issues in this business and how to get the people issues right and make a successful business. Can you say a bit about how you and your co-founders worked together in that environment, how did you make decisions and divide up responsibilities and so on?*

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I think the benefit of us being a team meant that we were just working like a project team. So yes, we created a company, but really the company was us. So as we won the first contract we were just running it like a project, so we were experienced professionals, we knew how to do that well. So that really worked well. Of course, the challenges really come when you start to grow and you start to go from the team doing the projects, starting to grow a business where you're now hiring new designers, new technologists. Actually, in the early days of growth we were running it more like a co-operative, so we were very much a company limited by shares and we had a board but we were running it more collaboratively.

*Were you friends?*

Yeah, we all got on well, we all gelled. Some more than others, I got on very well with Bob, for example, we used to do a lot more outside of work. Rob and Kate did more outside of work together. So yes, we variously would do things outside, individually, together. But I'd say the challenges of the company began through growth. Presumably it's the same for most businesses, as you grow, going from the doers to the managers, to divisions, to departments ... to the point where one of the founders, Kate said, we need to restructure ourselves like a proper company, have a managing director and have a board and run it properly. And that's the point where we got an external adviser in to give us advice on that. That's when it started to change, you know, the culture starts to change and then the challenges of growth were in there, as we grew, and cracks start to form and I eventually left the business in 2004. So yeah, it was great at first, it grew over ten years, my inspiration/aspiration changed by 2004, I exited and left. But yeah, I learned a lot about those first ten years.

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*So I guess that, in that phase, because you were an Internet entrepreneur then, it was a capitalist venture and ... how much wealth did you create as a result of that?*

Well, it's interesting. When we first got our adviser in, he was like, 'you guys are amazing, you're one of the top 28 in the City', you know, the profit you're making is very good, and what we do is, we times that by twenty and actually buying your agency you're looking at between fifteen and twenty million on where we were at that point. So that's how it was done. So we were riding that wave of ... and we could have kept riding that wave, growth and prosperity. So by the time we brought him in, ... we brought him in about 1999, 2000, the bubble was really there, that first bubble that was ... so he created an evaluation, I think, worth fifteen, twenty million, twenty-five million pounds ...and we've not even reached our potential yet, so

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they were the kind of conversations we were having. Into 2000 I was earning £150,000 a year salary. You own twenty-five percent of an Internet company that potentially is worth fifteen to twenty million, you're on 150 grand a year, that's pretty good [laughs].

*So did you exit with five million pounds in the pocket?*

No, it's one of those interesting things about tech companies and valuation, that's your potential based on the now, that was 2000, 2001, but at the end of the day you're only worth what people then buy you at when you finally sell. When I actually left the company, in 2004, I actually resigned from the company. Their mission was to try and grow it to make so much money to sell it, so they were very much focused on ... I'd say between 2000 and 2004 when I left, on the 'were now gearing up to sell, and that's our mindset'. Whereas my mindset was more, 'do we have to sell?' My ethos has always been about family kind of businesses, why do you need to sell. I was kind of challenging the 'why do you need to sell, what's wrong with just keeping it as it is and scaling it for a hundred years?', you know, yeah, so it's interesting how the mindset should be for me 'why do we need to sell?' to the other three, very much on a 'we're going to sell' and we're going to behave in a way to gear up to that. And, actually, that was probably the first major crack for me, was, I wasn't necessarily driven to do that. Certain decisions were then being made, like hiring a commercial director, trying to drive growth so we'd access more money, but that wasn't what drove me and some of the how of doing that, I didn't agree with. My main, even my own aspiration, because I was working globally with Intel projects travelling the world, for me I was seeing a lot more than just the Internet in running a business, I was going back to my own youth, a little bit seeing issues in society that ... homelessness, youth crime, youth unemployment. So it was about between 2001, 2004, where the business was changing, I was changing as a person and, by 2004, I thought, you know what, I don't ... this just isn't me anymore, the business, just the aspiration to sell, what was happening in that aspiration, that model of the cheque. I was so excited with what we did for many years ... I lost the excitement in that world. I just decided, you know what, I think I'd rather leave. I didn't sell, I just said I'd leave and I'll still own twenty-five per cent, you know, you run the business, do what you like, I'm walking away.

*So you kept your twenty-five per cent?*

I kept my twenty-five per cent shareholding, lost my salaries, gave the car back and started a new journey. So yes, I still had my twenty-five per cent.

*So was the company sold in the end, and did it make a ton of money out of it?*



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No, it went bust in 2007, so ... multiple reasons. One of the reasons, I felt I needed to leave, I didn't really agree with the methodology of trying to maximise profit and growth, so some of the business decisions that were being made, I just felt 'this isn't right, this isn't going to work' and it's actually against what I believe as a business person, so yeah, I just felt the trajectory they were on was very intense to make more money in the way that they were trying to do it, became the undoing and then eventually it went bankrupt in 2007. Also, I think me leaving hit them as well because I was driving a lot of their key accounts, so...

*But you weren't involved when it went bankrupt.*

No , it was very much ...

*So you didn't suffer much agony or pain.*

No, that pain of that business going bankrupt. But saying that, actually it didn't need to, it was how it was being run that eventually led to its bankruptcy. It's a shame, but actually one thing that it taught me was, every business is here today gone tomorrow, no one's ever going to be here forever. So, actually, sometimes bankruptcy is important because it's time to move on and release the resources and energy. I learned that myself actually, a few years later, but it's interesting to see how certain businesses go bankrupt. People say today, you know, eight out of ten companies go bankrupt but it's interesting to drill down from that into what were the reasons. I think that's what we need to learn from, is the reasons they went bankrupt, not just they go bankrupt.

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*And have you got an answer to that?*

I think for that particular business, it just didn't hire well.

*Didn't hire well?*

I think the adviser that came in to advise, the commercial team that was brought in to drive sales, just weren't the right people, to be frank.

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*Hiring is very difficult ...*

No disrespect to them, in the right business they would have been amazing, I just don't think they were the right people for that business and therefore they weren't capable of driving growth, and therefore they missed the mark so yeah, a key problem of business going bankrupt, one is not hiring the right people. As we all know, talent is the key to every business and having the wrong talent is detrimental. But no disrespect to them individually, in the right business they would have flourished, I don't think they were right for that business.

*I can relate to that, I've seen people do not very well in one business and excel in another business, because it's a different environment, different product, different scale and so on. Horses for courses.*

Definitely.

*So, you left in 2004, although the business staggered on to 2007, but what did you do next then?*

Well, that is the challenge because I knew my time was up at Moonfish, I knew I was unhappy. Again, I was a lot more socially conscious so ... the world isn't a good place, you know ... because you're travelling the world with rich people for so many years and you hear this analysis of capitalism's great, we're tackling, we're lifting people up out of poverty and this trickle-down effect is working, but actually, because I come from that life, I don't think it is and there's more poverty, unemployment, more crime, more social disorder, political instability ... so yeah, I just kind of, in that moment of what shall I do next, was a one-off focus on that, so leaving Moonfish, having that time to ... I just felt I want to focus on the social issues in society. I didn't want to leave to create a new tech company to do it in a different way, I thought I needed a complete change of direction. I just thought, you know what, I'd rather focus on the social issues in society than detail. I actually left the tech industry, I didn't intend to go back, and left to tackle issues in society and when people said, 'what are you going to do?' I was like, 'well, I don't know' ... 'why don't you work for government? Why don't you go work for Oxfam or something?', and I said, 'well, I don't know, why not just spend some time looking at the issues and then decide, why do I need to decide right now?' so I decided not to decide what to do now. I'm going to travel for a bit and learn more about society and from that I'll decide what to do next. So taking that nine months off helped me just to know what to do next.

*And what was it then?*

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Well, yeah, it was a great time, I went travelling. What I did, I looked at social issues like a research, or actually more like an entrepreneur does, when you need to understand the problem before you can innovate, so I thought, why not just come at it like a piece of research. So I volunteered with some projects in London that helped me to speak to homeless people in soup kitchens and single families – or even working families – struggling in poverty and youths in gangs, so I volunteered to get their stories, to tell their stories. And then I went to Germany to talk to people who lived in East Berlin, you know, ‘the wall’s come down but why is it just so poor still after so many years?’ and looked at East Berlin, went to Berlin, Israel, Palestine, to understand that, China, Russia. I went to Boston, in America, went to Newcastle up north, just listening to peoples’ stories really. To listen to peoples’ stories in society and then, based on that, to go and meet someone in government, I mean, ‘what’s your thoughts, what do you think, and well, that’s interesting because I’ve heard this and that’s not the same and maybe you need better ways of citizens communicating with government, so yeah, just meeting people, talking to people and then I got to a point where, actually, you know what, why don’t ... I could do ... and then I started to learn more about charity work and charities, and then the idea of social enterprise. To me, what inspired me was social enterprise, this idea of creating businesses with social purpose, was more something I engaged with. With charity I felt, there’s lots of people doing that, so I felt why not create a social enterprise to tackle some of these issues that I could see. And like everything in life, you can talk about it or you can start doing it, so at the end of my research project I came up with an innovation and I started to innovate a new social enterprise.

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*And what was it, or what did it deliver then?*

It’s interesting because there are two things I homed in on. One was, you’ve got lots of small charities doing amazing work in communities but struggling with technology. In fact, I’m meeting people that are professional counsellors who help men who’ve been sexually abused but they’re not counselling because they’re struggling with technology or they’ve just lost their database and actually they’re at risk of shutting down, so I realised actually that there’s a huge issue of technology in small charities. So one idea I had was, why not innovate a social enterprise that brings next generation Cloud technology into small charities. We know that no one’s doing that, we’ve heard about Cloud, I knew about Cloud when no one had heard about it yet because it wasn’t around yet, but I knew I could accelerate development for small charities. So that’s one idea, but then another idea was that the reason people are unemployed in a certain community is unluckily they were born in the wrong place, so they had poor education systems, poor training provision. In fact, the government is spending money on training with local providers but it’s just no good. And the

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problem is, there's no one else in those areas, so I came up with another innovation idea which is pop-up training academies, the idea of popping up academies anywhere in the UK, slash the world, that then gets the work training people with a new programme that does work. So within the space of a pop-up means you're not relying on the infrastructure round you, you can pop up anywhere delivering high quality programmes. But the innovation was ... this isn't about technical skills, because right now we need people that are technically gifted but also emotionally intelligent, soft skills. We need political intelligence, so the idea was not just that of a technical training programme, it was to provide wrap around emotional skills, development and soft skills development. So that was another innovation. I came up with two ideas and the problem then, of course, is .. you know, my money was going, what I had, and I then decided that the pop-up academy is my dream, I think tech companies with small charities is a good model, the problem then was how do you fund its development. So I did a prototype of a pop-up academy in London, with some long-term unemployed youth. It worked, it gave me the confidence there is something here that needs developing. The problem I had though, was I just didn't have the money to develop the business, to do technology for small charities and pop-up academies, so it was one of those where I tried to raise capital, I tried to get trusts and foundations but the answer was no from them, and looked at normal investors and the terms of investment were never attractive as a social entrepreneur, it was too much on maximising profit. It's actually, private investors are like, hang on a minute, pop-up academies, a great idea, very possible, you could make loads of money out of that but I knew that was the wrong kind of money. Going back to the wrong kind of talent will affect the business, but for me the wrong kind of money will affect the social enterprise. So yeah, rather than kill the dream I actually came up with the idea of why not go back to the corporate sector to do corporate work, make the money I needed to develop the social enterprise with small charities and pop-up academies, which is the model I ended up doing. So, I created a company called White Box Digital. In its corporate guise it was doing corporate digital projects to make corporate money, and then I was able to use that income to develop the technology for small charities and pop-up academies. It wasn't an easy model, it was quite hair-raising actually. People thought I was loaded because they saw how much money I was making on the corporate side but I wasn't keeping it, I was actually developing the social enterprise with it, so it was quite an interesting hybrid, one company actually doing these multiple things.

*So was somebody paying you to have a student in a pop-up academy?*

Well, in the prototype model it was me funding that, but I knew to launch it properly it would have to be paid for, so I didn't know who would pay for it but what I could do is develop the model, develop the technologies, the processes, in the development phase so that, when I launched it I would then find the funding. So, I work in that mindset of this faith, especially with innovation. The problem with innovation

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is, you have a new idea that's never been done before and if you can't find someone to fund it the idea dies. So my philosophy has always been, well I can't let it die because it's a good idea so I launched the corporate business to develop it further to a point I could sell the academy idea and then hope I could find someone to buy it.

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*So were you hoping the government at all, local authorities or something?*

Even a corporate sponsor, you know, I never knew who would fund it and I used to think, you could have hybrid models. But at the end of the day, unless you've got something to sell no one's going to buy anything ... it's very hard to sell an idea. In 2005 it certainly was anyway, it wasn't like today where you've got much more social investment now and social enterprise. Back then it was, you either funded it yourself or you let it die. So I managed to get a way to get it to market in 2009 through the whole making that money myself model.

*And how did it go, then?*

We got there, we got to 2009. Obviously, whilst I was developing it I was networking and I managed to build a relationship with the third sector consortium. In 2009, interestingly, the government launched the Future Jobs Fund which was saying to employers, can you give a young unemployed person a chance for six months. To me, that was the YTS, it's the same model, it's amazing, I was like, so I said to 3SC, I said, 'Look, I've innovated this pop-up academy model, tell me where your gaps are in delivering national contracts, tell me where your gaps are and we can fill it.' So that basically, we were contracted to large academies under this national contract in Newcastle, London, Worcester, Guildford, Eastbourne and Skelmersdale, so we popped up in six cities. I realised a dream, that was the dream of ... that money basically gave me a chance to pilot the academies, to pilot these new academies in six cities, and it was working, they were changing lives. And then I was speaking to a councillor in Glasgow, the Council, and they were like, 'we just won some Future Jobs funding, heard what you're doing in England, could you do it in Glasgow?' And I was like, yeah, so we popped up in Glasgow, took sixty-four long-term unemployed Glaswegians through our programme ...

*Were these young people or ...?*

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At Glasgow it was actually all ages. England was just young people, eighteen to twenty-four, Glasgow was all ages which was amazing because suddenly we had a room of sixty-four people from teens to twenties to thirties to forties. So we really showed the value of cross-cultural training because they were passing skills to each other and supporting each other. One woman was nineteen years unemployed, got into work after that programme, so it really showed the quality of the programme. So I was blessed that I managed to provide it to development through the corporate funding I was making through selling corporate work. I managed to pilot it with the government Future Jobs Fund in those seven cities. I felt we'd made it and you're just kind of racing to get over the line. Unfortunately for me, we proved it worked, the pop-up model worked, the quality of the programmes worked, the challenge was the contracts were cut prematurely and that then impacted the academies, so unfortunately, we thought we had a three-year contract, unfortunately after year two there was a change of government, we went to the Conservative/Lib Dem austerity government and the first thing that happened was, they collapsed the Future Jobs Fund. Actually, a lot of providers on that Fund collapsed with it and went out of business. I tried to survive the backlash of having the funding cut, especially when you're still in a pilot entrepreneurial phase, but I actually got made bankrupt in 2013. So, for two years I struggled to find a way to ride the deficit of not receiving all the funding we expected because of course, I therefore had a debt from that, but in 2013, I came to know it was time to close the business. When you're only operating to service a debt, actually most of it was to government in tax [laughs], it was a weird paradox of government cutting contracts with one hand and then asking for the tax with the other. So I shut it down in 2013 which wasn't an easy thing to do.

*So how did that feel then?*

It was hard because ... I mean, for me, I took it positively in that, 'oh, I've never been bankrupt before personally' you know, 'I'm going to ride that, I'll experience' ... I went to court, I listened to the hearing, I saw the hammer come down, I had the interview in government because they wanted to interview to make sure it wasn't your negligence, why you were bankrupt, and that could potentially disqualify you. I told them the story of what happened, and it was, 'ok, we can see why this happened, there's no problem with you and you're free to go and create more companies' so I was glad about that, it wasn't me, it was the consequence of the contracts being cancelled, but it wasn't hard. Psychologically it's hard because you've gone bankrupt and even though it wasn't your fault, it's still this sense of, just weariness, it's tiring to do this kind of thing. So when I left I decided to not go straight into creating a new company, I didn't know what to do next, I just decided to freelance, go self-employed, just work for a while just doing projects. I actually got a big contract that made a lot of money, about 8,000 a month, in the corporate sector but I couldn't do it – after a month I left because I just can't do corporate work anymore. So I managed to get a contract, it was

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social projects, that was half the money but it was doing work that I was helping people, and then I decided to create my next company, in 2015. So I did get back to create a new company but I did need a break, just to recover, because I think it's important just to recover from difficulties like that. But don't 'never get back on the horse' but time it when you're ready to get back on it.

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*Do you feel that you learned something from that experience?*

Probably the two things I learned were, one, no contract is sovereign. It was interesting. I felt that taking a sovereign government contract was a given, I learned that lesson, that any contract can be cancelled. So yeah, that was a big learning. And then, secondly, try not to take all the risk yourself. Essentially I was taking all the risk on everything that was going on. I think, try to find investors earlier. There's probably a point where I could have paused what I was doing and not try to keep going so fast, and realise, 'you know what, I think you've done enough now to get some investment' rather than keep doing it yourself. So, yeah, I think making a million myself to develop the academy is actually, even though at the start no one would have invested in a social enterprise, maybe halfway in they would have and I should have paused and re-checked. So yeah, could I have got investment earlier, that would have made my journey easier, and two is, no contract is sacred and can be cancelled so always have that in mind whatever you do.

*So, what did you move onto at that stage, then? This was 2015, you started your next venture, wasn't it?*

Yeah, because the challenge then is what do you do next. I'm always a big fan of evolution, you know, you don't want to go backwards and I didn't want to go back to working in the corporate sector because I left that, I didn't want to create a new corporate business because I didn't want to do it ... I want to stay in the world of social enterprise. I'd learned a lot, I'd created a social enterprise, we'd done a lot. Yes, it didn't work out but there was a reason for that and I learned from that. So then I kind of came to a point where I could create another new social enterprise, on the same thing - I see a problem, innovate a solution, hope you find an investor, do it together, scale it. But I came up with the idea of, well actually, why not do something new no one's ever done before. So, in the same way, in 1994, with three people we innovated a digital marketing agency ... so any agency is contracted by a client to deliver a service, they don't have yet and together you do things, whether it's advertising, marketing or IT or whatever. I thought, why not create a social innovation agency. What I realised is, what we need is more innovation to tackle social problems but not ... generally, what you've actually got is a frontline of charities. Charities are very good at delivering

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charitable services but don't necessarily have the in-house skills to innovate a social enterprise, to spin out something new to tackle that problem in a different way. So the idea I had was, why not innovate a tech centre, which is a social innovation agency that would be contracted by a charity – primarily, it doesn't have to be a charity – but to become their innovation agency and, together, reunderstand the problems, reunderstand how it's being tackled, can we now find a new innovation that's never been done before and spin it out as a social enterprise that's investable, scaleable, for the future. So that was the big idea in 2015. Again, that was just an idea, in 2015, but it was a good idea I thought, and so I arranged a tech centre and then, like any idea like that that was brand new, you've got to spend a few years getting a few clients, proving you can do what you set out to do and eventually bring that to the front, which is kind of where I am now. I was blessed to get three clients, the National Centre for University and Business where we're now tackling graduate unemployment with an App driving the working experience. Another innovation is mobilising more people from industry into schools to inspire kids, to go back to that problem of teachers struggling to give careers advice, more or less empower them with people from industry to help them by going into the classrooms, from all industries, that's another platform.

*So what's that called?*

That's called the Volunteering Platform.

*That's part of the Livery School, isn't it?*

The Livery School, yes, so the innovation there, so basically tech centres contracted by the Livery School's link to innovate the volunteering platform. And that's been great with the Livery. Actually, interestingly what it's done, the funding for the prototype, and I've been co-funding the pilot so it's one of those that never has enough money but I've funded half of it, in kind funding to keep it going. But now we're looking to spin it out into its own business, the Volunteering Platform. What I'm trying to do is to have it funded by the Livery, plus with scaling nationally, even though the users of the platform can come from all organisations, I'd love it if the Livery Company could be the driver of it and acknowledged for it.

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*So you get business people to go into schools and do what in schools?*



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They could give a talk in a classroom or to an assembly. They could become a governor or they could run extracurricular activities. That idea - I learned chess in school at thirteen – is somebody taught me chess. Schools are crying out now for more school clubs and, in fact, because the councils are cutting on funding to youth clubs, when the kids now have got no youth clubs we need more school clubs to keep them off the streets. So again, can the Volunteering Platform equip people from industry to go in and be the school club leader as much as a speaker.

*There's an organisation called Founders for Schools, isn't there?*

Yes.

*It sounds like it does something similar.*

Yeah, well, it's one of those that, when it came to the innovation of the Volunteering Platform the first thing you do is you look at who is doing what, so Founders for Schools, Speakers for Schools, whatever for schools. They're all out there. The challenge is, when they went round schools they're still saying, even though these things exist, they're still not getting enough volunteers and, in fact, in Hull or Newcastle. So I really worked out, even though these others exist, this is a massive issue, there's not enough volunteers. Then I analysed all their business models to ... ok I can see now why we're not scaling with these ... so I innovated. So, when I innovate, we can't innovate on a model that's the same as these because that's not innovation, so the Volunteering Platform has innovated a new model which is more scaleable to unlock more volunteers nationwide than the existing infrastructure. So yes, you're right, they do exist but we're not competing, we're innovating to unlock more volunteers and we can partner all these, so it's very much more a partnership model, not a 'we'll be the one that does it'. Actually, we all need to play a part. So yeah, there's an innovation model which is what we're driving with that and that complements what everyone else is doing. Because at the end of the day, there's twenty thousand schools in the UK.

*Yes, it's a lot to cover.*

And we need a lot of organisations trying to solve the puzzle.

*Similarly, with the technical support charities, sorry, I'm a bit out of touch in what's happening with these things, but there used to be an organisation linked to the WCIT called IT for C, didn't there, and that did a kind of similar dating agency for volunteers to help charity. What's happened to that?*

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Yes, IT for C was started by AbilityNet. Or it ended up in AbilityNet in partnership with WCIT. So when I actually joined ... so basically what happened was, before I became a member of WCIT a friend of mine talked about a failing project that was trying to get more volunteers into charities for IT advice. This was a new thing to do and it was failing so I was brought in to help turn it around and create a phase one prototype – a techcentre for me – I was brought in to turn that around and innovate CITA, the Charity IT Association, so the first platform release was developed by Techcentre so the innovation of tech surgery and what CITA started to do came out of Techcentre in partnership with WCIT.

*Right, so that's kind of the aim of the concept.*

That's a new thing. In parallel, IT for C was struggling so it eventually got closed down. So after I'd innovated tech surgery with WCIT and CITA this was failing and so what we did was basically evolve CITA, the Charity IT Association, to not just do tech advice but to do volunteer tech project delivery. So basically innovating, IT consultancy and IT project delivery within CITA taking over what IT for C used to do. So that shut down and moved over to the new innovation of charity activities association, of which Techcentre was delivering that innovation, that project. It spun out into its own charity. It got a quarter of a million pounds funding to, so ... like every one of these innovations you need some funding to prototype, some to pilot, so we got that pilot's spin-out funding, but now it's still about what is the scalability, sustainability model. So again, CITA's still there, Volunteering Platform is still in that same piloting phase, Place is in that same piloting phase. What's exciting for Techcentre is, you've got three good clients and we're all in that piloting phase of what we're all doing, which now gave me the confidence to rebrand Techcentre and relaunch now. So Techcentre being here is now revealing itself as a social innovation agency and has this stable of three projects.

*So Techcentre lives here, does it?*

Yes, Techcentre lives here, they're innovating and living out there.

*Looking at the background information again, about what you've done with those projects, you seem to be remarkably successful in raising funds from other sources to support these, from Livery Companies and charitable trusts and whatever. What's the secret of that? I'm just trying to remember which particular examples ... Cisco Foundation, 50K grant that led on to 600K from JSIC and Unite Students. That's extraordinarily successful in getting money out of people.*

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I think it comes to the strength of the partnership model of Techcentre. So the fact that it was a charity, the National Centre of the University and Business, that had the problem they were trying to tackle, graduate unemployment, contracting Techcentre to look at it and to innovate an idea to tackle unemployment, so basically I uncovered it's about work experience, all students need work experience, we need the App Work Experience. So basically, essentially what I managed to do was pull together the innovation idea, based on research, the new idea that should help and then, going to Cisco Foundation with the credibility of a tech entrepreneur who can do stuff like that. Because that ... ideas are easy, in fact, if you look at any social problem you can fill a room with smart people and you come up with the ideas, but what gets the money is their belief in the team that's being tasked to deliver on it. So Cisco Foundation is seeing the credibility of – well, me at that point - as somebody who's done stuff like this and done the research properly and gave them the confidence to go ahead with the 50K. Do your prototype. Brilliant. It all works. And then, going out to find investment, again that's our contacts with our client contacts. Eventually someone says, 'oh it sounds like a good idea' and then you're pitching it. Again, it's not just about, 'here's a good idea, will you fund it', so I think it always still comes down to who's the team that's going to deliver it. Hence, why Techcentre is about delivering the vision, not just innovating. Ideas are easy, it's how to deliver it and, believe me, what you think the idea and the solution is won't be by the time you've finished. So you need a team that is used to agile – 'No, that's not working', changing, adapting. I think the Techcentre model will do that with our clients. So yeah, I think it is ... doing your homework, doing your research, you have got a credible innovation, but you know what you're doing to move it to the next phase.

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*So Techcentre is a model going forward from here, then?*

As my own business, as a social innovation agency. Its scaleable model is ... well, there's the being contracted to work with a client to innovate an idea, that's service number one. Service number two then is, we can then go out to find investors, to then inward invest into these projects and again, the revenue model, we can look at a way we can make money from that as well, to grow. And then, thirdly, delivering the actual innovation. So, interestingly, Place has spun out into a new business and its CEO is me running the business from Techcentre, so these were the services that we could provide to early start-up. Because, eventually, what we'll be doing, once it's gone beyond start-up is hiring the people into the businesses and

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we should then be withdrawing, because then they can run their own businesses. So I think our way ahead is to innovate something new, to help raise investment, start it up to the point where it's now scaling, it knows what it's doing and then we can be looking for new innovations. I think that's what we're doing.

*So who else is doing this? Are you the only social entrepreneur?*

I'd say, and people are saying this themselves to me, that they've never heard of a social innovation agency. You've got lots of social entrepreneurs creating their own thing but I think – a bit like in 1994 innovating one of the first digital marketing agencies when they didn't exist before – I don't think ... you've got nesters, you nest there, and you've got other organisations who may do one part of that, they may be investing in social enterprise or they may be an innovator of ideas, but I don't think anyone has come together and said, 'well actually, ideas are easy, the problem is getting investment, the problem is delivering it' so having an agency that learns how to do that and then scaling that up is, I think, new. But yeah, I think that the social innovation agency model is new. It makes so much sense as well because I see a lot of social enterprises starting up and you just know, because they haven't had the experience of doing it, they don't know the pitfalls. I think having an agency model where you're bringing that experience to every project will bear fruit, I think, over time. Going back to what we said about bankrupt organisations a lot of social enterprises probably will go on to fail, but going back to why do they fail, and actually their idea may still be an amazing one, but it's lost in the embers of failure whereas actually the reason they failed is they didn't make money fast enough, not because their idea wasn't fantastic. Yeah, as an agency can we stop losing good ideas and if we can keep them going while they haven't quite got the funding yet, so that kind of thinking as well. So yeah, I think it's a new approach to social.

*And, I think - from your book I think it was – you made the point about social mobility. Is that your current primary cause, that you want to enable social mobility?*

It's a really good question. So, when I left the corporate sector the vision and the mission was a better world. Total poverty is reduced, everyone's having prosperity, so how do we get there? That's what the driver is. So, yes, actually everything I create, everything I'm getting involved with, you know they may look like individual organisations they're all part of that bigger picture, and the big picture is social mobility, yes, equality of opportunity. Creating the Techcentre, the social innovation agency to innovate new social enterprises is just a vehicle towards the changing the world stuff for everyone, and it's about social mobility, so it is about ... so all the styles we're actually creating are linked to that mission and vision as well.

AIT/

*What's the root cause, what is the root limitation on social mobility that you are trying to eradicate, then, do you think?*

It's a good question. So, I think what we need to do is to break it down into what are the reasons for different people's lack of social mobility, because they are different. That's what I think I learned when I travelled the world was, actually the reason you're not socially mobile is you don't have the right training, we just need to get you the right training, now you can be socially mobile. Whereas over here, you may be being oppressed by policies that are just not designed well enough for that community to flourish, so then it becomes a government policy issue rather than your own issue about access to training. I think that's the key. I think the key is, there's no magic bullet, I think we need to be smarter with understanding everyone's different reasons why, which could be individual, community, national or international, and then get to work at innovating to reverse those issues. But I think for me, personally, it is about equality of opportunity combined with social mobility, because you don't want to get everyone to the start line if there's no economy to pull them forwards. It's not about a decision of equality of opportunity or social mobility, they're more ...

*So you aspire now to be a councillor, then an alderman, and then the Lord Mayor of London. Is that linked to the same goal or is that a different ambition?*

It's interesting. I wrote in my book, actually, I had a conversation with somebody and mentioned about becoming Lord Mayor and they laughed at me, like, 'how are you ever going to be Lord Mayor?' and for me, it's always been, well, surely everyone should have the opportunity to become the Lord Mayor. It wasn't one of those, that I was laughed at therefore I'm going to make sure it happens, it's actually anyone should be able to become Lord Mayor. Already I'd been thinking I'd go into politics so for me it was about, 'I'm going into politics, I know that', and actually the Lord Mayor is a political position. The Lord Mayor spends most of the year going round the world meeting heads of state, influencing global markets, and the Square Mile has aldermen which are essentially MPs in the Square Mile, and then you've got councillors. So, interestingly, as I scoped out my ...what political direction should I take ... I stood as a councillor in the City of London, in Portsoken Ward, I stood as an MP in Tower Hamlets to get the experience, and out of that experience decided, I think for me, it definitely is the Square Mile, as a councillor. Now it's Farringdon Within it's where I'll be standing again in 2021, then alderman. Whether that's where I live, in Portsoken Ward, or whether that's Farringdon Within is a discussion to be had. Then, potentially could I become the Lord Mayor. I think it's possible.

AIT/

*So what difference would you make as Lord Mayor?*

I think, for me, again it's just ... there's a lot of people when you talk about the Square Mile, it's always just 'the Lord Mayor is always someone who is rich', from a rich background, from a rich family, and I think, for me, becoming Lord Mayor isn't, well I'm going to be Lord Mayor, it's actually a great social mobility. It's a story of ... actually, if you do live in a meritocracy society it just shows, the only reason I became Lord Mayor was the hard work I've made, right through the genuine relationships I've made that's got me to that position. It wasn't, 'oh let's find a poor person who can become Lord Mayor', it's 'No, no, you were the right person because you've actually done everything you needed to do to get to that position, therefore you can achieve that position.' So it's proving that you can achieve it. For me, personally, on the global stage I want to do a lot more work with United Nations and, actually, if you ever want to have aspirations and become a UN Secretary General they've always had political positions so for me, personally, becoming Lord Mayor is a political position globally and I think would also help as I then would love to have more influence in dialogue in the United Nations.

*1:21:44*

*So that was a big personal ambition. What's your ambition for Techcentre?*

Techcentre for me is just this belief that, if we can keep innovating new social enterprises they will all go on to scale globally and change lives. But can we innovate those new ideas that haven't been discovered yet. So the main thing for me is, let's keep this growing, let's keep trying to get funding to create new innovations, prototype them, pilot them, hit the spot on something new that really does go on to scale out and help more people. The good news for me is that I don't have to be a politician to change society, I can be a social entrepreneur to do that, hence why I can use social enterprise to tackle problems in society whilst I still work on becoming elected to then influence policy. So the good news is, I can be both a social entrepreneur and a politician to influence people's lives in society.

*You're also the Chair of the Education Panel at the WCIT, aren't you?*

Yes. I'm the Chair of the Education and Training Committee. Every Livery Company has committees and education's a pillar in every Livery Company, so I'm the Chair of the Education and Training Committee.

*So, what do you achieve through that? How does that contribute to your goals?*

AIT/

Well, for me, the Livery, I think are amazing institutions, the members are driven by charity and education so that has enabled me to have a platform to influence bringing in organisations to the committee that they may never have heard of that need support, they need more volunteers, they need small charitable donations. So it's a good way of finding organisations to bring in to have new relationships with the Livery. We might just connect them with the people or we might be able to help them financially or with volunteers. So, yeah, it's given me a good platform to see how we as the Livery can help in education and charity. I'm also now a Director of Livery Schools Link which is a charity that looks to work with all Livery Companies to see how they can help together in education and charity work. Again, I'm working there.

1:24:07

*So, looking back over all that experience, what would you say to somebody of sixteen now, at whatever the school is called in Manchester that you were at all those years ago. It's now called the Co-operative Academy actually. So what would you say to somebody of sixteen thinking about what they should do in the future?*

It's a good question. So I do actually give a lot of talks in schools and I always end with 'you're empowered to change your own life', you don't have to wait to be educated, so the great thing about the Internet today is you can train yourself with skills without education. So I always say, look, what's your passion, you've sat learning about it, training yourself to get ... work experience is so important so it's really important to get work experience and, really, look out for yourself and work with the school. So those who say I don't want to do work experience, it's critical you do work experience. Yes, self-teaching, work experience and extracurricular activities. You playing chess in a chess group, you might not think is a big thing but to an employer it really is, so make sure your cv, you don't just put down you've got nine GCSEs, you've got to show 'and you play chess' or you're in the badminton team or you do this or that. So it's about what else do you do because people hire people and they're looking at you now ... because the problem today for an employer is that every job they advertise there's 300 to 3,000 cvs on their desks and it's not just about who's got a 2:1 or GCSEs, it's about who are you the person. If you can't describe you as a person it's very hard to compete today so extracurricular activities, work experience, teach yourself stuff which shows you're proactive, take ownership of your life, don't blame someone else if you don't deliver because actually a lot is down to what you're doing and not what the school does for you.

AIT/

*Not forgetting that your career has been around technology, one way or another, what do you see as the big challenges for our industry, the IT industry, in the next five to ten years?*

Your question is so ... actually, I recently was on a panel discussing the future, AI, artificial intelligence and society, so I think one of the biggest challenges we have is, if the tech entrepreneurs of tomorrow are just working on the normal entrepreneur model of innovating for the sake of innovating, doing it because we can and we can make money from it, regardless of the impact socially, then I think we're in a really dangerous place. I think we need to recalibrate our entrepreneurs' mindset to 'we should innovate but we still need to evaluate whether we should, even though we can' and look at the negative social impact of innovation. Because even though we can do amazing things technically – we can get robots, we can do IO, you know, amazing things - I think we need to re-check, to say, 'Look, society should be configured to prosper humanity.' Technology is an enabler of that, not the owner of that. I think we must be innovating for the sake of society...

*... It's an ethical dilemma.*

...and prosperity and I think ethics. Not because we can. I was in that bubble, myself, where we're innovating, we're bringing in a lot of money, people are doing it, thinking we're having a benefit socially but you know what, most of the people doing these innovations don't travel the world, they don't see the poverty and the social disorder, we all just live on this narrative that it's benefiting society. So, yeah, I think it's got to balance tech innovation with government, society and use it to enable better humanity and a better world, not kind of like to make more money. Innovation with purpose.

*Sounds sensible. So what are you proudest of in everything you've done?*

I think, for me, just looking back, I just remember that woman who was nineteen years unemployed in Glasgow and now she's working and, I think, I won't say pride in I managed to innovate that great idea that's gone to place her in work experience, follow that Techcentre and social innovation, it's always the woman who's now got a job and she was unemployed for nineteen years and had mental health issues. So that's what I'm proud of. I am proud of all those people who came through the academies. I know some of them, they're on Facebook and they tell me when they've got a new job and doing stuff, and always thankful for what we did for them. So, yeah, I think it was the persevering through the darkness of innovation and, to be honest, every entrepreneur will always have the same journey of not enough money, you're in a dark place, you're risking your life for people who don't even know you but you still keep doing it because you



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believe you're going to change their life in the future. I guess, the taking, I was willing to sacrifice everything to get there, and by getting there I'm now proud of the results I've achieved. Again, there's ups and downs but there's enough good stuff in there to feel like I've not wasted those years and they'll evolve into the building blocks of what's coming next.

*Is there something you think you should have done differently?*

For me, as a person, I think creating that company in 1994. I think, too often, people create businesses, they grow, they get wealthy and then they start to help society. For me now, I think, as a person can we all take a step forward in society and be trying to help others come forward. Don't wait 'til we get here and then try and help people. I think I learned, can we do pay as you go philanthropy and pay as you go support, not wait 'til you get rich before you start helping people. So I think I've learned that as a person, to create a better society that does that. And then, as a business person, patience. Rather than keep risking it actually pause and kind of find an investor now rather than keep risking everything myself. You've always got the sense, I've got to do it now, I've got to do it now, and actually, even if you have to wait another year before you do what you want to do, it might be better to wait that year. So, I think maybe let's not feel we have to do it right now, we can wait another year. And before you know it that year's gone. Yeah, I think that being patient on the innovation journey, but be urgent about it at the same time. Urgency with patience is something else I've learned.

*Sounds good. Well, let's wrap up on that very wise note and thank you for talking today, David. Thank you very much.*

Thank you.

[recording ends at 1:31:28]