Capturing the Past, Inspiring the Future

Michael Tobin OBE

Interviewed by

Ian Symonds

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology. It's the 30th of January 2020, and we're in the offices of the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists in Smithfield, London. I am Ian Symonds, and I've been working in information technology and management consultancy since 1976, a period of enormous change in the industry.

[00:20]

Today I'm talking to Michael Tobin. Michael is a serial technology entrepreneur, writer and philanthropist. He has a multitude of awards including an OBE for services to the digital economy in 2014. We'll be talking about Michael's background, influences, some key events that shaped his career, and his views about the industry today and where it is going. So Michael, I believe…

Hello.

Hi. I understand, in the last couple of weeks, you've just returned from a trip to the South Pole. Perhaps you would just like to kick off by… And you may even be still suffering the after-effects.

I am indeed still suffering. I've got a stress fracture on one foot, and I still can't feel most of the fingers that I still own. But, it was a charity event that we embarked on, took about a year in the planning, and probably the most brutal thing I've ever done, both mentally and physically. Walking over 110 kilometres in minus 47 degrees temperatures with blizzards, and, a lot of pain, to raise money for children with brain tumours. And, I raised over £120,000, and the team as a whole raised over £300,000. So, it was a fantastic achievement on that side but it was very very brutal.

[01:45]

OK. Well, it sounds, I mean it sounds a fantastic experience. We'll come back to more of your charitable work later on. But, to go back to the beginning, when and where were you born?

Ah, right. Well, seems like eons ago now. Born in '64 in, in East London, in Bermondsey, and, my father was in prison when I was born, he was a bit of a ruffian. One of nine brothers, so they had a gang, worked with the Richardsons, the Krays, all

those sorts of people at the time. Not a very nice chap, was quite violent. When I was seven my mother decided to escape his, his clutch, and we, we went out to Africa. She was working for a company called British Rhodesian Steel at the time, so it was a natural thing to go to Rhodesia. Little did we know of course that that was just about the moment they were going to declare Unilateral Independence. And, civil war broke out. We were petrol-bombed four times, one destroyed the house. I was shot at around thirteen times, one got me in the leg, as a kid. And, by the age of twelve we couldn't take it any more and we tried to get back to the UK. At the airport they, in Africa, they took everything from us, they took our clothes, our luggage, our money, our, everything except the passport, boarding card, and the single layer of clothing that we were wearing at the time. And so we landed back in Heathrow effectively as refugees, you know, back in our own country. And, went to a squat in Stockwell, lived in a squat for two years, and we survived by breaking into old condemned houses waiting for demolition. And you'd very often find old pianos that people just didn't want to move. And so we'd tune them up and roll them down the Old Kent Road and sell them in East Street market for £20 each.

Mm. This is with your step, then stepfather?

My stepfather. Yes, indeed. So…

So you had, you had your, your real father was…

Chasing us actually. He, he even… My mother managed to get, after a couple of years of being in Rhodesia, managed to get a picture of me in the garden of the apartment block that we were staying at to him via many, many members of the family, so there was no way of tracing it. And he bribed the immigration people to tell him which country we had gone to, and then, hired a helicopter to fly around Salisbury, which is now called Harare, until he recognised the background in the picture, and found us. And we managed to get him deported again, but he, you know, he was quite a resourceful chap.

Yes. Did you have a better relationship with your stepfather then? How was that?

It was OK. It was OK. It was different. Obviously from a very different culture himself, and being, being sort of, born and bred Afrikaans. So it was, it was odd. But, you know, it… My, my eldest brother became a policeman, the other brother became a fireman. Everyone wanted to reject the, the sort of, the family sort of background in some way or another.

[04:48]

And at the age of sixteen I couldn't wait to, to leave and get a job, so I left school at sixteen, didn't do any A Levels or anything like that. Did an apprenticeship in, with a company called Rockwell Automation, just been, just acquired a business called Allen-Bradley's in Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire. And, that was an apprenticeship in electrical and electronic engineering. Didn't really know why I wanted to do that or anything else. It just happened that that, that kind of fell into my lap at the time, and it was a way to earn money. And, I didn't, couldn't afford a, you know, buses. I was living about seven miles away, down the A5, and I bought a pair of roller-skates and I roller-skated seven miles each way to and from work, and I'd work from six in the morning till ten at night, doing all the hours that, you know, God sent, to get as much overtime. But it was on peanuts, I was, I think my first salary was like, £30 a week. So, you know, it was, it was hard to raise any money. But I was, the work ethic was there, and I tried to do as much as I could.

[05:50]

Mm. Did you… I mean as you said… Well, what were you, apart from school, what else did you do when you were a teenager?

Well I played football, I loved football at the time. When I was in Africa I was scouted by Northampton, Newcastle and Wolves, but my mother wouldn't let me go back at that time. Even though, it probably would have been a better thing for me. But, ultimately, you know, things don't pan out the way you always want them, and, you know, I ended up doing the, out of school at sixteen, and, off to the apprenticeship.

Yeah. Do you… I mean, do you regret that at all now…

No, not at all.

…that you didn't go on to university? Has it made a, has it influenced your career, either…?

I think everything influences everything, right. I mean, the whole point… So I'm a great believer in, not regretting anything. Because they, everything that happens to you, helps shape who you are at any given time, and, you know, if, in our house with the kids and everything, I just tell them, you know, 'We don't have regret, we don't have mistakes, we don't have failure. We simply have successes and learning.' And, you know, we learn more from things that don't go the way we want or expect than we do from things that do go the way we want or expect. Because, we never tend to sort of, assume that there could be luck involved in those things for example. We just say, oh well that worked, therefore it will always work that way. And I think if you look at life today, especially in technology, the rate of change is changing so fast, nothing can be taken for granted, certainly not in a business sense, and, and you know, the fact that you've got it right once, gives no endorsement to the fact that you may get it right again just by doing the same thing. So I think, you know, looking back at all the things that didn't happen the right way, those are all character-building, or character-shaping, and I'm quite happy…

[07:52]
You mention a, I mean you're open about the fact, I think, I think I read it on your website, that, you felt you were bullied when you were at school, both in Rhodesia and back in the UK.

Yeah.

Is that…

Well, so, obviously, at that time of UDI, you know, having an English accent, and we were the perpetrators of putting sanctions and everything, so, everybody hated me. And by the time, four years, five years later I had managed to get back to the UK I had a Rhodesian accent. So everyone didn't like me there either. So it was kind of a…

Was that formative, or…? I mean did you give, were you able to give as good as you got in the bullying?

Yeah, I think it, it gave me a certain resilience. I think, I think what, what I used to sort of find myself doing was, protecting other people that were bullied, as well. It kind of, gave me a sensitivity to it perhaps that I probably wouldn't have had had I not been a recipient. In latter years, I did a lot of work with the Diana Foundation, which is anti-bullying at schools and things like that. But, you know, I think that, it's easy for kids, even unwittingly, to, I mean, all kids do it to an extent, right, you know, they tease, they take the mick, you know, how you want to say it, but, I think that, you know, it it is informative when it happens to you. It's more informative than reading about it or observing it somewhere else.

Mm.

So I guess, yeah, it probably did affect me to an extent.

[09:19]
OK. So coming back to your first job then at, at Rockwell in Bletchley, tell us a little bit about what that job involved.

Well it was industrial automation, so they used to make programmable logic controllers, and these things were effectively the first robots. So, industrial automation would be in anything from sort of, you know, when you get a can of beans it's gone through a process of, the can's been made, the beans have been filled to a certain level, the lid's been put on, the wrapper's been put on, it's been packed in a pack of 24, and off it goes. And there's no human intervention in any of that. So, you know, the, the computational power of industrial robots gets all that done, high speed, high volume and that sort of thing, very low failure and error rates. So the, the logic in that is, is a bunch of computer equipment. So I used, I learnt how to fix and fault-detect in PCBs way back when you didn't throw PCBs away, you got a solder sucker and, and took out chips leg by leg, and heated them up, and soldered a new one in, and, and repaired them. So following circuit diagrams, using oscilloscopes, that sort

of thing, I used to repair cathode-ray tubes. Well you never see any of those any more, but, you know, that was, again, a lot about sort of, understanding the circuitry that now almost all lives inside one IC, you know. So, so knowing how a transistor works, knowing how resistors, and impedance, you know, can be exploited in, in things like dimmers in your house, you know, light dimmers. You know, those sorts of things, people take for granted, it's just having out of the box. And that's the sort of thing that I was able to learn. But I also spent time, as an apprenticeship used to do, was putting you on the shop floor. So for three months I just sat there kind of, putting rivets into a, into a panel. And you get to understand how kind of, how difficult it is for people to do that day in and day out for eight hours a day and still have a motivation and an interest in working for that company. I worked in the accounts, and understood about payrolls and, you know, late payments, and how not paying your, your suppliers affects your, your output, you know, six months down the line, and, and things like that. And quality control, you know, in doing sample testing. So you move around the company. And I think we've missed this actually in, you know, modern times. People are so focused on, on getting a degree in university, which is a fantastic achievement, and I think it's very important, but not everyone is academic to that level, and some people are perfectly competent and, and could do something alternate to a degree, like an apprenticeship in a, in a vocation, electronics, plumbing, electrical work. We recently renovated our house, and, did a complete renovation, and we couldn't find people with the skills of sort of, master craftsmen. We had to fly them in from Lithuania and, and Estonia and places like this, because they just don't exist any more in the UK. And I think the way that we look at it in the UK is that, an apprenticeship is an alternative to higher education, whereas in Germany for example an apprenticeship is an alternative higher education. Subtle difference but very important. It's seen as a, as a par, but a different way of approaching that level of your life.

Yes.

Whereas in the UK it's slightly seen as a discounted qualification.

[12:54]

Sure. Yeah. I mean, I was going to ask you, I mean, given, in the light of your subsequent career, which was, you know, much more in sales and management…

Yeah.

…that, how did you… You must have been a fast learner, [MT laughs] if you like, to, to go from a sort of, very technical, engineering focus, to, to that sort of stuff.

Yeah.

But I mean maybe that rotation in the, in your first job helped you with that.

Well I think it did.

It gave you the basics of accountancy and stuff like that I guess.

It did. And there's probably one thing out of sort of, fault-finding, problem-solving on an oscilloscope and working around a chip, which is a way of identifying problems which is still done today, which is, you know, if you've got an issue that has multiple parameters around it that could go wrong, if something's going wrong, you need a process of elimination to work out which bit of it is going wrong. Because, it's rare that everything goes wrong at the same time. So, by the process of elimination, which is typically what you do on a printed circuit board with an oscilloscope, you, OK, that bit works, then that bit works, and then, ah, this bit doesn't work. Why is that? It could be this, or it could be this. And you kind of go through that sort of, mental gymnastics. And I think applying that to problem-solving of any description today is, is very helpful.

Mm.

But on the flipside, talking about learning, I mean the first person that taught me how to sell actually was the singer Bryan Adams's cousin, which is another story, but, he… And the most important lessons he… He gave me this one story that I will always remember. I was probably, I don't know, I was probably 22 at the time, and,

he said to me, 'Imagine you're a broom salesman, right. And you are in front of a row of terraced houses. There's 100 terraced houses in front of you. And statistically, your company has been selling brooms for 100 years, and statistically you know that out of these 100 houses, one of them's going to buy a broom. 98 of them already have a broom; one of them doesn't have a broom but can't afford yours; and one of them's probably going to be able to buy it. So the first door that you knock on, and you say, "Hi, I'm a broom salesman," and it gets slammed in your face, you shouldn't feel forlorn; you should go, "Yes!" because I'm one step closer to my sale. You know statistically you're going to have to have 99 no's before you get a yes.' So having that approach. And I think this is very important in life again, looking at what we would perceive as a failure, as simply a step towards success, is very very important. And it keeps a, a positive outlook in life. And that, that, he taught me that early on, and that kind of stuck with me for a, for a very long time.

[15:28]

And he also taught me a couple of other things in sales, one of which is, knowing when to say no as a salesperson. And, and there's a, there's a certain tendency in salespeople to, you know, give discounts, agree, say yes to everything, you know. It's like, 'Yes, what's the question?', you know. And I think that, there's a certain point where respect is lost from a buyer to a seller when they realise that the yes word is being used too often. Because, the buyer wants to know where his parameters are as well. He wants a good deal, but he needs to understand where he's pushing too hard. And so I think, it's very important to, to get to that point quickly in a negotiation, say, 'I'm sorry, that is, that is a position I cannot cross.' You know, let's, 'Let's maybe talk about some other things here, but that's my limit.' And knowing, being prepared to walk away at that point.

Mm.

And I think that's very important, not just in, in what we see as traditional selling, but in negotiation in general. And we use negotiation in every form of life, both personal and, and professional.

[16:34]

And while you were having these, these lessons from Bryan Adams's cousin…

[both laugh] Yes.

…you had, by this time you had moved on to work at a company called Goupil.

Yes, that's right, a French computer manufacturer based in London, based in Putney.

Yeah, based in London. And…

And I went there as Technical Director actually. And again, I, I had no idea, I didn't… I believed I could not do the job, but I thought, you know what, I can learn. And so I kind of, fluffed it a little bit, and I elaborated on, on my skillsets and experience. And, the company wasn't selling anything anyway, it was a UK subsidiary of a very expensive French computer manufacturer. And I was early into the company. And they said, 'Yeah, sure, fine, you can be technical director.' Soon learnt there was nothing to be technical about, because it wasn't doing anything. So I picked up the Yellow Pages. And that's when I started to talk to the sales guy. And, and we flicked through the Yellow Pages, and, and managed to land on a company in Wales called Dragon Computers, believe it or not. They used to do the old Sinclairs and the BBC computers. And they said, 'Oh, funnily enough, we're looking for a new range of computers. Come down and see us.' And I took the Goupils there, and they bought 100. And, it was such a shock to the French headquarters, because they said, 'Hang on a minute, where do we get 100 QWERTY keyboards from?' You know, because they're all AZERTY in France. And, and you know, big problems for them in the construction.

Yes.

So…

So I was going to say, I mean, these weren't exactly brooms, but they were, they were from the, you know, you know the saying, nobody ever gets fired for buying IBM.

Yeah, and,, and these things were quite expensive items.

So you must have, you must have thought you had an uphill struggle with these Goupil machines.

Definitely. Definitely. But again, just fell on… I mean, you know, I can, I can reel off… And I, and I, I was talking to a, to a group yesterday for dinner, and I said there that I probably could reel off about 100, give me long enough, 100 situations where, on a coin toss, had the coin come down on a different side, I would not be where I am sitting today. And, if anyone says that luck does not play a very significant part of success, you know, I think they're, they're fooling themselves, right? And, the fact… You can create opportunities to find more luck, but had I not phoned up that particular company, on that particular week, I wouldn't have got that particular deal. And my name then wouldn't have been in lights in France when, unfortunately for the gentleman, who made a full recovery afterwards, the CEO had a heart attack, and couldn't continue, and the French said, 'Look, I'm not going to waste money with a headhunter. This guy seems to know what he's doing. Give him the role.' So at the tender age of sort of, 23, I had my first CEO role.

Mm.

Making all the mistakes and learnings of, of a, of a bad CEO, you…

Well give us an example of one of the mistakes you made at that time.

Well thinking that, thinking that, shouting louder would, would, would get things done better. So, somebody didn't quite do what I wanted. I would shout at them. I would smash a cup against the wall. Do all the things that I thought a big boss should do. And, of course they just felt, I was an absolute idiot, right. And… But I didn't know, I was knew and young and… And, and it's only through experience that you, you know, you learn… I hadn't even had that many bosses to, to have a reference point, of, of what good and bad was, right. So, it was only through sort of, experience and, and learning that you are human as well, and make mistakes and all those things, that you kind of change your, your approach.

Mm.

And a, and a collegiate kind of, empowering and non-blame culture gets much much more done in an office environment.

[20:22]
Mm. Mm. And were any of the managers in this first job of yours, or, it was your second job really, but, were any of them, you know, influential at all?

Well, other than this guy, the sales guy who was Bryan's Adam's cousin, I think he was, he was great. I mean, I still have, I still, from time to time, speak to him. He lives in Beverley Hills, and he sells semiconductors, you know, sort of, second generation semiconductors, takes them off state-of-the-art equipment and sells them in hospitals, and things like that. And, yeah, we, we still occasionally talk. But, you know, he gave me the ability I think to negotiate, which is a very important part of our lives, you know, the ability to, to achieve what one wants without leaving a trail of destruction behind you.

Mm.

So outcome, a positive outcome for everything.

Mm.

And, you know, I always have to remind myself of those lessons, because, still today, I was, I was chasing some lost luggage that Iberia kindly have generated for me from my trip back via Madrid from the South Pole, and, shouting at the woman at the end of the phone, who doesn't know you and doesn't really care that much about your luggage, but just happens to be the person that you are speaking to about your problem, is not going to help you get your problem solved. But having an engaging conversation with them, and sort of, articulating what that luggage means to you perhaps, and saying that, you recognise that their job is potentially difficult with the tools they have at hand, but, have they thought of doing this, or have they thought of

doing that, is a much more endearing and more likely positive outcome way of communicating with people.

Mm. Mm.

So I think that, that messaging at that time was extremely influential for the rest of my life.

[22:14]
So after Goupil, you, you spent ten years or so working in France.

Eleven years in France. Yes, that's right. I went out to the headquarters, to try and help them set up their, their Scandinavian operation, even though I had never been to Scandinavia in my life at the time. But I spoke English, which is more than most of the company did in France. And, I found myself three weeks into my French venture, not speaking a word of French, and the president of, of the company, bearing in mind it was 50 per cent owned by the French government, was found to be forging Banque de France letterhead and giving letters of credit out willy-nilly. And so the company was closed down. And I had a choice of either returning to the UK, where I, I felt pretty comfortable, or making a go of it in France, which was very much out of my comfort zone. And, you know, that, that coin toss came along again. I was sitting there, thinking, what on earth am I going to do? And I, I was reading a French newspaper, and just happened to glance, not reading it because I couldn't understand French, but kind of licking through it, and I happened to glance at a, at an advert in English for a PA to a, to a managing director of a company called International Computer Group, based in, in west Paris, in the west of Paris, and, in Île-de-France. And, I thought, well… I phoned them up, because it was in English. And I said, 'Look, I don't want to be a PA, but I can do stuff. And you've got computers in the name, so…' You know, and he said, 'Well funnily enough, I'm employee number one. The PA was going to be employee number two. So if you would like to come along and do biz dev or do something, yeah, come along.' So I started working with them, and, this became… It was a, it was actually funded by Computacenter, who still operates today, a listed company here in the UK. And, a chap called Peter Ogden, who was the, the head, the chairman, actually was CEO at the time of

Computacenter, had set this operation up to build similar business, or an allegiance of similar businesses across the world. And, this was a fabulous success, and we were very lucky to spend four years doing that in France, until I saw an opportunity with a company called Tricord Systems, that was, to set up businesses across Europe, primarily set up subsidiaries of Tricord into multiple countries. So I, I liked the look of that, and, took the plunge with that, and started opening up businesses, and, based in Paris, but moving around Europe. So I was eleven years in France.
[24:45]
And then, eventually, I was headhunted by a company called ICL, a good old English mainframe manufacturer back in the day, to, to fix their business in Denmark. Which was a, a sort of, a mainframe business that did kind of, break/fix on mainframes. And I had to turn it into an outsourcing business, a managed outsourcing.

What do you mean by break/fix?

So they used to basically just be a…

It's not a term I've come across.

Yeah, so break/fix was simply a, a maintenance company. So they used to have a, a Danish subsidiary that went out there and, and repaired broken mainframes. Which was a dying trend, because, a) ICL wasn't selling that many more mainframes, mainframes weren't the flavour of the month. You still had a legacy business to support what you had out there. But more and more, maintenance was, third party maintenance it's called now, was more of a logistics business than a, than a technical business. It was all about just deploying spare parts to the right place at the right time.

So where you broke one machine and, what, you used the parts for another one or something?

Exactly. Exactly.

Is that what you mean by break…?

Exactly.

Oh I understand now, yeah, OK.

And so, you know, third party maintenance.

Yes.

[26:00]
And so, so the outsourcing trend was getting more prolific, so people were looking to outsource their IT departments, and have third party companies come in and run the IT for them from, you know, from cradle to grave, so managing all their, their software licences and all this sort of stuff. And, I, I didn't have any experience in that either. Didn't have any experience in mainframes, didn't have any experience in third party maintenance. But I thought, how bad can it be? And actually, when I had the interview in Windsor in ICL's headquarters there, they said, 'You can go and… We like you.' I remember, a chap called David Polk, lives in the Channel Islands now, a lovely chap, and he said, he says, 'Look, I like you. I think we can do something together. We're going to try you out with something that you can't possibly fail in because it's such a shambles anyway. You know, you can't make it worse. So I'm going to send you to Denmark.' So I thought, yep, fine, OK, let's do that. And, and funnily enough, there's a bit of a funny story around this, again, again coin toss, right, and, people, when they ask sort of, how do you bottle your success, right, and all these things that I'm telling you are very difficult to bottle, because they're almost perchance situations that take me from one step to another. But I moved to Denmark, and, again, didn't speak a word of Danish. I, I wanted to endear myself to the, to the local business, and, it was, it was quite interesting. It was nearly Christmas, and, they had had three or four, I think I was the fourth MD they had had in about three years, all failed to transform the business and transform the, the fortunes of the business. And I thought, well first of all I'm going to try and get the, the employees on my side. And I had ordered a, a Father Christmas outfit to be delivered to the, to the office on a Friday evening. And my plan was, I had built a map of all 400 employees, where they lived across Denmark, and worked out all the ones that had children, and I was going to visit them on Saturday and Sunday, all day, drive to each of them, and deliver, you

know, with the Father Christmas outfit, deliver toys and, and chocolates and things to each of the kids. And so I, this, this Father Christmas outfit, which is slightly different in Denmark, they have furry grey trousers as Father Christmas, and clogs, believe it or not, which is quite strange, but anyway, we, we got this delivery on a Friday evening. And on Fridays Danish companies tend to leave early, about sort of, two, three o'clock in the afternoon. So at 4.30 this thing got delivered. And I was trying it on in the office, and one of the chaps that was still there, my, one of my sales guys, walked past and looked in, and saw me in this Father Christmas outfit, and said, [laughs] 'What are you doing?' And I explained to him what I was going to do that weekend, and I said, 'Please don't tell anyone, it's a surprise, and I'm just going to turn up at everyone's house. I'm going to go from 9 in the morning to 9 at nine.' And he said, 'Oh that's great. You know, my wife works in the state hospital in Copenhagen, and she works in the, in the alcoholics ward actually, and a lot of them come in around Christmas time in particular, and a lot of them never leave. And I wondered if you would be so nice, as you've got the Father Christmas outfit, would you just, go and visit the ward? It would mean a lot to them for Father Christmas to turn up and give them a couple of chocolates, and, you know, these people probably won't have any visitors over Christmas.' And I said, 'Sure, fine.' So we took a cab to the, to the hospital on the Friday evening, and I, and I went into this ward, and, she was so happy I did this, and I… And people were typically old, they were, you know, alcoholics, they, they would never have had a visit, and may never have come out that Christmas. And so, it brought a lot of happiness, and it was quite tearful for me to, to see how, how challenging it was for people to, to you know, survive Christmas that year. Byut anyway…

Mm. Mm. And what was the reaction of your, members of staff when their boss turns up in a Father Christmas outfit?

Well it was, it was amazing. I mean first of all this guy's an idiot, he's mad.

A mad, mad Englishman has come. [laughs]

Yeah. And, and you know… And it was, it was something completely different. So I couldn't be put in the bucket of the last three people that came out and tried, right?

Yes.

So I, I didn't want to be tarnished already from day one with a negative brush. So, this put me aside. They all said I was nuts. So, let's see what else he's going to do, you know. And that, that was enough for me to have a differentiator.
[30:25]
But the other thing that was interesting was, on that evening, I got a cab back from the, from the hospital, still in my Father Christmas outfit, and, I could see the taxi driver staring at me in the rear view mirror, and he said to me in English, he said, he said, 'Look, I've got to ask,' he said, 'what are you doing, you know, getting a cab from the, from the alcoholics ward of the hospital in a Father Christmas outfit?' You know, 'Are you OK?" you know. And I explained to him what I was doing, and he said, 'That's wonderful.' And at the time by the way, at Tricord I had joined the Magic Circle, to learn magic, because I, it's a long story, again, probably I haven't got time now, but I ended up in the Czech Republic trying to sell SuperServers to Unisys, and, the nearest thing they had seen to a SuperServer was probably a fax machine, you know, the level of knowledge for, for tech was quite wide. And me giving a day's education in English when they were trying to follow a foreign language and a more sophisticated product, their eyes were always drooping. So I, I came back and said, 'I think I've failed on this educational process to help them sell.' And so a friend of mine said, 'Well why don't you join the Magic Circle, and, every time they start to fall asleep, or drift off in the presentation, do a magic trick, and they wake up.' So I did this, and I joined the Magic Circle, and I managed to do, I went back to Prague, and they said, this was amazing, kept them awake, and attentive and everything. Anyway. I said to this, this taxi driver, I said, 'Well, you know, what do you?' He says, 'I'm a ventriloquist.' And, I said, 'Wow, who said that?' [laughs] And… And I said, 'Well funnily enough, I'm a magician, but, it's not my day job, but I do.' And he said, 'Do you know what, I'd love to give you my card,' and we exchanged cards. And about three months later, I was still struggling with the business, I had built a sort of, a good rapport with the, with the employee base, but I was still struggling to get our first deal in outsourcing. Because, we didn't have a reputation for outsourcing, and, no one would give us a chance to get a reputation, because you know, you didn't have a track record, therefore you won't get a track record.

Old story, yes. Yeah.

And anyway, so, one day I get a call from this taxi driver, after three months, and he said, 'I'm opening a new children's ward in the hospital, and I wonder if you'd like to help me. I'm dressed as a clown, I do kind of, balloon animals, and, you know, all that sort of stuff, and, you can come along and do a few tricks.' I said, 'Absolutely.' And I contacted Fujitsu and all these people, and got some laptops for the kids that they could bring to their beds, and, the ones that couldn't get out of bed, and, you know. And, so we had this fantastic day opening the new children's ward. And it was filmed, and I thought it was filmed by the hospital. And it wasn't, it was filmed by national TV. And the next day, in the national newspapers and on TV that night, it was all over the press. And, the news in Danish, which I never read, I had to be told it was there, was like, 'Can corporate Denmark have a heart?' Right? And it focused on me as CEO of this company doing these things for the children. And I got a call from the Ministry of Health, and they said, 'We're about to close our tender for outsourcing our IT. And I notice you haven't put anything in.' And I said, 'Well to be honest, it's a bit big for us, and, we didn't think we'd stand a chance anyway, we're not winning.' And they said, 'I think you should put in a tender.' I said, 'But you're closing tomorrow.' 'I think you should put in a tender.' And we won. And afterwards when we were celebrating, he said, 'Look, anyone that cares that much about kids in the hospital is not going to let us down outsourcing our IT for the Ministry of Health.' And that's how we got it.

And that was one of the evaluation criteria. You were expecting this…

Exactly. Now how do you quantify that and replicate it?

No, you can't, no.

You know, it's success, right?

Yes. Yeah.

[34:13]
So when I say about, you know, creating luck, right, it's, it's about doing things that you… I mean I go to so many networking events all the time, and my wife, you know, I come back and it's like, 'I really don't want to go out tonight, but I've promised I'd be there.' And my wife says, 'Why do you do it?' And I say, 'Well look, I'll meet someone that I won't even hear from again for four years, but something spins.' And the concentric circles that you can create around yourself, create the luck that we define as luck when it happens.

Yeah. Yeah.

But you're just creating more luck.

Yes.

Right? So I'm a great believer in saying yes as many… I mean, you, you know, you're a long time dead, you can rest in your box, and until then, I want to do as much as I possibly can.

Yeah.

Right? So, so you know, that then got us on a track of success. The great reference of the Ministry of Health helped us get lots more outsourcing contracts.
[35:05]
And I joined what was called the Millennium Programme at the time, in 1999/2000, which was a handful of people that, that ICL gathered together to be the kind of, the senior management of the future, from all over the world. And there was about 20 of us. And that was again a fantastic thing, because first of all it put me in the limelight to set up their e-business operations in Frankfurt, but secondly, it introduced me to a guy called Jaglish Parikh, who was a yogi from India, which I subsequently introduced to every one of my management teams ever since, for the next 25 years, and he teaches you how to hypnotise yourself, and stand outside yourself. So, again, I'm a firm believer in slightly alternate leadership styles.

Well, I'm beginning to get a sense, as, as to why you were described in the Times I think in 2014 as a bit of a maverick.

Yes. [laughs]

And… [laughs] And one of the technology sector's most colourful characters.

Mm. Well I think they were referring specifically at that time… Two things happened. Obviously I… Well three, a few things happened.

[36:17]
Well, I was going to come on to your time at Redbus Inter-

Yes. I mean, so… I mean, I joined Redbus just after 9/11. The, the Internet bubble had burst, and I was still in Frankfurt, head of an e-business operation, which kind of, didn't feel like the safest place in the world. I had a two-year-old born in Denmark and a one-week-old born in Germany.

Mm. And you got married presumably just about this time, had you, as well?

Yes. So…

Because you're a bit of a, you're quite a family man aren't you, I gather, sense?

Well, I, I do my best. I've made my mistakes in the family side of things as well, which, again I call learning. And my, my wife benefits from the, the errors of my previous marriage.

OK.

But it's all good. And, and so, so basically I thought, well the best thing to do was to get back to the UK and hunker down and try and sort of, reconsolidate. And, I found this business called Redbus Interhouse, which was founded by two larger-than-life characters. One was a chap called Cliff Stanford, who had just created Demon

Internet, you know, the first sort of £9.99 all-you-can-eat, you know, ADSL type dial-up Internet access, back in the day when, when you dialled up and tried to send an email and you'd go through the, [connection sounds] noises before you connected. I'm sure many of your younger listeners won't, won't even have ever heard of that. But, it was the traditional sound of a, of a modem dial-up before you could actually spend a minute per email to, to download. So he founded this business, which was a datacentre company, along with a chap called John Porter, who was son of Dame Shirley, who was the only person ever to be convicted of jerrymandering in the UK since the Second World War, and grandson of the founder of Tesco's, and his grandmother's name was Tessa Cohen, which is why Tesco's is called Tesco's of course. And, these larger-than-life characters had created this business. But primarily used it for a lifestyle vehicle, so it was, raised about 400 million on the Main Market, and then, promptly spent it all. And…

[38:27]
Well tell us a bit for the benefit of our listeners, who may not know what Redbus did.

Yup.

Just tell us what its business was, who its typical clients were, what services it provided and so on.

Yeah. So, so…

And how it made its money.

So, Cliff Stanford created a company called Redbus Group, which he wanted to be a kind of, a Virgin brand, you know, like, with Richard Branson, he was styling himself as a rather fatter version, but, as hairy a version of Richard Branson. And he had Redbus Films, which made *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Maybe Baby*, those sorts of things. And he had Redbus landmine clearing equipment, Redbus Serraglaze, which was a reflective coating for windows, and he had Redbus Interhouse, which was the status in the company. And he listed the datacentre company. And datacentres are the place, the physical environment. We think of the Internet, or specifically the cloud, as

something up in the air. Well of course it isn't. It's real servers, real switches, and they all live in buildings, and these buildings are highly connected, power-hungry, sort of, non-windowed buildings around the, around major cities in particular, that house all of the infrastructure behind the Internet. And, and back in 2002, most of them were created around the late Nineties, '99, '98, and most of them had listed, spent all the money, and basically gone bankrupt. And Redbus was, had about a market capital of 6 million, and, it was burn-, it had 6 million in the bank, and was burning 2.3 million a month. So you could count your paydays on less than, less than a hand. And, I didn't do my due diligence properly, just took the job because it was, Internet-y, and it was in the UK. And suddenly realised that this company was going to go bankrupt. They'd kind of hoodwinked the board, its shareholders. So I kind of came in with a rescue plan, which started a boardroom battle of, of gargantuan proportions. It was a listed company so it was still public. Had four EGMs and two AGMs in a fifteen-month period, constantly in the limelight, in the newspapers. But we eventually succeeded.

[40:45]

And I tell you, again, a good example of luck, right. So, I remember going out to the Czech Republic to open our Prague datacentre, and all I could think about was, this is hopeless, there are no customers, nobody was currently, was then using them. The Internet just hadn't flourished yet. It was a great idea ahead of its time.

In the Czech Republic you mean, yes. Yes.

Well, full stop.

Yeah.

Anywhere in Europe. Even in the UK, they just weren't being used. You know, you had AOL, and BT, and that was about it as customers.

Mm.

And, and in the Czech Republic I thought, all this is is another quarter of a million pounds a month, you know, cash burn. And we had the British ambassador to the

Czech Republic open it with a, you know, sort of, ribbon cutting and, and everything else. And I, I remember taking off, flying back to the UK. It was very stormy, a very bad, bumpy, bumpy flight. And I got back to the UK, and they were talking about the Danube bursting its banks, and Prague flooding. And of course…

Yeah, I remember it, yeah.

Yeah. So, I think 2002, 2003.

Mm.

And… And I got straight back on a plane and went back out to Prague again, and met with our insurers, and we were insured for £50 million, which is how much it would cost to build this datacentre. I said, 'Give me 8 million and I'm out of here, but it has to happen now.' And the guy thought Christmas had come early for him, because, you know, 50 million becomes 8 for an insurance company, great. Gave me the £8 million. I was, I was able then to run the company for another five months, while we, we downsized it, and got new investors. And again, had it not rained, I wouldn't have got that money, and the company wouldn't have existed. So, the whole story wouldn't have happened had it not rained in Prague that year, in the proportions it did. So, managed to get new investors.

[42:32]
You were saying there were no clients for datacentres, or very few.

There wasn't, yeah. There just wasn't.

I mean, people must have thought there was a good business case for building them.

Yeah.

Were they banking on the market expanding?

They were banking on the market expanding, just at the point when the dotcom bubble burst.

Right, OK.

Right?

Yeah.

And the investment for the IPO was great, because, everybody was investing in massive multiples of zero revenues, right, because that's what everyone was doing at the time, and then everyone realised a lot of it was emperor's new clothes, you know. And, we're still seeing a lot of that today. You know, people don't learn unfortunately, when it comes to money. They go through exactly the same errors and same greed. We're all generally driven by greed or fear when it comes to the financial markets, you know, and, the same, the same thesis applies today as it did then, you know. Everyone was so worried about not being on the bandwagon, didn't really understand the bandwagon; paid a lot of money to be on it, and then suddenly realised there wasn't a bandwagon.

Mm. So the market must have… Well, I mean…

It then started to take up…

[43:35]
OK, well tell us, tell us what happened in terms of the merger with Telecity.

Yeah, so, so slowly… The principle of the business was sound. It was just ahead of the curve, right?

Yes.

And when… The great thing about datacentres is, you have a fixed operational cost base, and the more you can fill them, the flow-through margins are tremendous. But the disadvantage is, before we get to break even, you've still got that fixed cost base.

Mm.

So if you've got no customers, you've got an outflow every month. It's not proportional to your deployment of, of value sort of thing.

Mm. Mm.

So, you know, your cash burn is significant until the volume of customer picks up. But then it was exponential. So, you know, things that we were doing on the Internet, everything was going, everything was going well, we were doing more and more, the Internet was getting bigger, and, and volumes were, were growing exponentially. So the number of people that needed capacity in datacentres was growing. So we managed to take the business private. And then, we consolidated it with a company called Telecity, and we adopted their name because it sounded more synonymous to datacentres than, than Redbus, and we didn't get as many calls from old ladies asking when the next 615 to Brighton was. So then we re-listed the whole combined entity in 2007. So we had gone from a 6 million market cap. So we re-listed for 200 million, after avoiding bankruptcy, and then, we sold it in 2014 to Equinix for 3.6 billion.

Mm.

[45:09]
So it was a tremendous ride over that time. But there was a couple of interesting anecdotes that I'll pull out from that time. First of all, when we took it private, I told my management team that we were going to consolidate the industry. And of course, the management sort of, sees consolidation as… Imagine, imagine the two biggest competitors in any industry, right, so, you know, IBM's going to buy HP, or, or Compaq was going to buy HP, back in the day, or, you know, whatever. And you say, well, clearly there's going to be two people for every role. And so consolidation means synergies, and therefore, there's going to be a lot of us that's going to lose our

job. So, the team was very nervous when I said, you know, 'We're going to consolidate.' And I went to great lengths to explain that, each, you know, the only way this industry would survive would be to have one major player and not two of them trying to kick each other to death with the relatively low demand that was still being experienced.

Mm.

And so… But I couldn't get the fear out of their minds. So I took them up to, to Scotland, they thought they were going for a whisky tasting, but if anyone knows the old Forth Bridge, not the new one, if you go north over that, and you get to the north side of the Firth of Forth, you can double back on yourself and you'll find a, a large aquarium, manmade aquarium, which is enormous. And, and it's so big you don't realise that you're not in open water. And we pulled up there, and they said, 'This is kind of strange for a, for a whisky tasting, but, OK, carry on.' And as we got in, I asked two by two to get their wetsuits on, and their breathing apparatus, and, get in the water. And they found this a very strange thing, and especially strange as the first two got into the water and they could see the shark fins floating around in front of them. And, I was called all sorts of names, most of them non-repeatable on this transcript. But, the… Every one of them actually went down and, and went into the water with these sharks, and these were very big, very dangerous sharks. And, they all went down, and the only, the only request was, 'Please don't try and reach out to one of them, because they will have your arm off, but other than that, be calm and they'll be calm to you.' So no nets, no cages, swimming with the sharks. And so when they came out, I had a debrief with the team, and I said, 'Well how did you feel when you realised what you were about to do?' And they said, 'We hated you,' you know, 'We can't believe what you were trying to make us do, it's ridiculous, I was so scared.' And I said, 'OK, when you were on the seabed, and you were looking at these sharks, and looking at them in the eye, three feet away, how did you feel?' And they said, 'Well I was still nervous, but it was so exciting, it was amazing that we were actually doing it.' And I said, 'How do you feel now?' And they said, 'Oh, life-changing, I'm so glad I did it. I don't want to do it again, but I'm so glad I did it, and it's something I can tell my kids.' I said, 'Well every time you come across a situation, first of all fear and worry are irrelevant and nonsensical emotions, because

we don't fear the past, and we, we rarely fear what's happening at present. We fear the future, because we fear what *could* happen. And if we mitigate that with all the possibilities of doing things to, to mitigate the worst scenario, the likelihood is, we're fearing something that never will be as bad as, as we fear it's going to be.'

Mm.

So, it's like paying interest on a debt you haven't drawn, right? So it's a wasted emotion.

Yes. Yes.

So get the fear out of it, and say, you'll probably have an amazing experience going through this, and you'll probably be a better person when you come out of it. So apply that every time you're afraid of a situation. Of course any of them that I didn't want after the synergies, I could give them a little nick on the arm. [IS laughs] Sort them out.

[48:50]

But… Then the funny thing was, that, when we did consolidate it, and we then had one big team of two companies that had been sworn enemies for the last five, seven years, of course most of the team on both sides got it, but there were still one or two of them who were still talking about 'them and us', in the old ways, couldn't get to grips in this kind of, united thing. So I took them to the North Pole. And, I don't know if anyone's been there, but they, they have the Icehotel in the North Pole, which is made every year from blocks of ice out of the fjords in northern Sweden. Amazing, they build, you know, the hotel rooms are ice, the beds are ice, the tables are ice, the chairs are ice. And the plates, the glasses, everything is made of ice. And it's quite spectacular. And I took the management team there, and, they were in the, they were in the Icebar, just like the one in Regent Street in London actually, but it's minus 5 degrees there, and it was minus 30 degrees in, in the North Pole. And, they were having a few vodka shots and things, which was quite important for later. And then when it was time to retire to bed, I explained to them the sleeping arrangements. And one of the things that they weren't aware was, because of the cold, you have to sleep two per bed for body warmth. So the ones that didn't get on well together, I made

them sleep together. And they were the best of friends in the morning, because, one of the issues is, having had a fill at the bar, you're not allowed to… One of the things you don't have in an ice hotel is an ice toilet, and you have to go outside. And you're not allowed outside at night on your own, in case you slip, and you'll die of hypothermia very quickly. So you have to go two-by-two. So, the guy that doesn't like you, then you have to ask him to come with you, with a torch, and monitor you while you do your business outside, and then warm your feet up on their bottom in, in the bed afterwards. [IS laughs] So, slightly alternative ways of, of getting messages across to your management teams has been sort of synonymous to my leadership style. And that's I think why I got the maverick trade name.

[50:50]
Well I mean it was a very successful period wasn't it, with the expansion you talked about.

It did, yes, spectacular, yes.

And, I mean…

And a massive shareholder value.

When you, when you weren't taking your staff on team building exercises of this sort, what, how would you characterise your, your general approach during this period? And what were some of the issues that, that you had in terms of expanding datacentre, datacentres? Because presumably you have to keep on building new ones, do…

Just had to keep building new ones, yeah.

…expand capacity, yeah.

Absolutely. And, and you know, obviously…

That's not easy is it?

Cash flows and things like that. And you're spending hundreds of millions a year, right. So, you know, managing that is important. But, but the most important thing for me, and I, I never recruited a single person by looking at their CV, ever, in my life, in any job, I've effectively had a triage team, right, that could a headhunter or it could be an internal HR, that said, to a certain extent all these guys fit the criteria. And I've never, never wanted to see their CV, and I've just sat down with somebody and, had a feeling. And I've never looked for a skillset that correlated with what I want them to do. I looked at an attitude. Because I can teach skills, but attitude is a very difficult thing to teach. So, the most important thing out of all my businesses is finding the most brilliant people around them attitude-wise, that you can surround yourself with. And, and then empowering a vision rather than a strategy, which is, my first book was called *Forget Strategy. Get Results*. A little tongue-in-cheek but, the point is, especially again, today's world is changing so fast, technology is moving things so fast, that, strategy is too prescriptive. You know, Jean-Paul Sartre says a fabulous thing. He says, 'In football, everything is complicated by the presence of the opposite team.' Right? And you can draw it all out, and you can build your strategy, and all the rest of it, and then someone will come along, who doesn't know your strategy, and actually quite frankly doesn't care about it, and goes and disrupts everything. You know, to the point where, Uber are now a verb now, you know, right, so, that, that company has been Ubered. Right? In other words, it was a good company, but now someone's made it irrelevant. And, and, you know, looking at your business… I like to get people to look at every function in their business and say, you know, since the beginning of time, especially with technology, it's always been about, how do I do that cheaper, faster, more efficiently, quicker, whatever it is. And now it's all about, how do I not need to do that again? Right? And it's a completely different thought process. Right? And I think that, that we need to have that kind of, out-of-the-box view of life, regardless of the industry, whether it's technology-based… The great thing I love about working in technology is actually, you work in every industry, because, technology is as prevalent in every single walk of life as, a piece of paper, you know, in a, in an office. It doesn't matter what they're doing in the office, the piece of paper's there, consistent, and technology is consistent. So, that's the great thing about technology, it can be applied to any industry to augment or completely revolutionise that industry.

Mm. So, so… But your approach, as set out in your book, was about, you know, industry as it is today really in, in the new interconnected world, and…

Yup.

Where it's, you know, some things have become so much easier haven't they, start-ups and everything like that.

Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, you know, and, and it's about having brilliant people around you.

Yes.

You know, and if you can impart a vision, and the vision doesn't, isn't, as I said, non-prescriptive, and you say, 'We want to be world famous for doing X,' and then all the way down, whether you're a top, top executive or whether you're a sales guy, or whether you're a cleaner, right, you understand how your bit fits into that vision. You don't need to read a document to tell you what element it is.

[55:01]
You've got a story about a cleaner as well haven't you?

[laughs] I have actually, yes. And that was in my Danish times. And I had been there a week, even before my Father Christmas thing. And I was, I had my, back in the day there was no kind of, instant, go on the Internet and, and get yourself an English-Danish dictionary. I had a proper hard book Danish dictionary in my hand. And I was trying to get through a document. And it was again, 5 p.m. on a Friday evening, everyone had gone home, trying to translate some words. And I heard this vacuum cleaner coming down the corridor, getting louder and louder and louder, [motor sounds], like that. And it came into my office. And I said to the guy, 'Look, I'm really sorry,' I said, 'but I'm trying to concentrate on this. Could you just, do this later?' you know. And he turned it off, [motor winding down sound], like that, and he walked up to me and he says, 'You don't know me, but I know you. You've been here a week. My name's Per. How do you do. I'm the cleaner.' He says, 'I know

that you are here to turn round the fortunes of this business, and I rely on you to do that because, I'm a full-time employee, I have children, and I need this job. You rely on me to make sure that every time you bring someone in this office, it's as presentable as it can be. So you do your job, and I'll do mine.' [motor sound] Like this.

But it was fantastic, that he actually…

A slap in the face.

…understood… Well it was a…

Great.

But he, he's far more aware than…

A hundred per cent, he knew exactly what his role was.

…most, most cleaners. Yes, exactly.

Right? And, and that was within, within a week of me saying, 'Look, I don't know how I'm going to do this yet, right? But it's for all of us to deliver the transformation.' And he took that as, 'I've got my piece. I know my role here,' right? And, I will take that attitude over any academic or, or technical qualities. So. And it was a real slap in the face for me. [laughs] One I've never forgotten.

[56:57]
Yeah. I don't think it's any secret that, that when you left Telecity in 2014 there were some disagreements on the board at the time.

Yup. Yup.

Are you able to tell us anything about what was going on there, and what, what happened?

Sure. Sure. What actually… The chairman that I had brought in at the time, a guy called John Hughes, I brought him in before the IPO back in 2007 actually. And so I remember having the interview with him, and I said, 'I know where this is going go John. You are going to end up being executive chairman, because I can, I can give you a litany of your previous non-exec chairman roles, and they're been, Sophos, and, all these people, and, and you've always become executive chairman, and you've wanted to the day job.' And he said, 'Yeah, yeah I, I know, and I've learnt my lesson, and I don't want to be involved in the operations when I…' And guess what, he ended up with him Executive Chairman at Telecity, and I also put him in at Just Eat. And he became Non-Exec Chairman of Just Eat until he became Executive Chairman at Just Eat after that. He's sadly passed away now. But, but you know, we came to a fundamental disagreement on, on evaluations of a business. That was a company called Interxion, which also did very similar things to what we did. European based, but was listen on the US market rather than the UK market. On EBITDAR terms, we, we were trading at parity on a multiple level as, as them, but on an earnings basis, because our investors and European investors generally look at earnings, whereas US investors tend more to look at EBITDAR, and they don't really care about below EBITDAR numbers, like, interest and depreciation and tax and all those things. So we traded at a 60 per cent discount to Interxion on an earnings basis. And he wanted to do a deal where we consolidated these two businesses together, at a parity, at a par level. And I said, 'This is bad for our shareholders.' And we came to blows on it. And there was only, there was only going to be one winner, and the chairman wanted to be a FTSE 100 chairman and have this consolidated business. In the end, when I left he, he announced that that was what was going to happen. Our share price went down, because our shareholders realised that it was a bad deal for ours, and Equinix, the global leader, came along and said…

Snapped it up, yup.

…'Well, it's got to be one of these, because I'm not letting it happen, and these guys are so cheap now, because of the way you've structured the deal, we'll buy then.' And it was the better business. So, that's how it happened. So, I was instrumental in

causing the, the exit, but, not necessarily in the way that I wanted, but, it had to happen, the industry needed further consolidation.

Mm.

And it's not stopped consolidating all the way through, and, I've been pleased to be part of a number of very significant transactions since then.

[59:33]
Mm. Well, I mean, you're a chairman and non-ex yourself now aren't you of a number of companies.

Yeah, I'm a non-exec, and I am very much not an executive chairman.

Are these still largely in the, in the same sort of business area, datacentres?

Some of them are. I've got this fabulous business in, in Bristol, which is called Ultraleap, which is the sensation of touch in mid-air, mid-air haptics. Which is nothing to do with datacentres, but it's absolutely brilliant. Came out of Bristol University. And this young man, looks like a kid but he's 28 I think, came up with this fantastic technology out of Bristol, and, now, it started with a £600,000 investment from IP Group, and is now, we're doing our pre-IPO round of over 300 million. So, it's flying. And it's the ability, the sensation of touch, using ultrasonic signals, which is like your, the reversing sound you get from your bumper sending out a message.

Mm. Mm.

And you can turn, you can turn lights on in mid-air, and things like this. Quite spectacular.

Mm. Or even remotely I suppose, could you?

Remotely. Absolutely, yes.

Yeah yeah.

With the feedback. So, you could feel a button from 100 yards, and you could feel the click on your finger. But it's not there, it's 100 yards away.

OK.

So it's spectacular. So it's not… There's a lot of them in the datacentre space, but some of them are outside. I'm also chair of another listed company called Audioboom, which is the largest European podcast platform, which I think is a great, you know, space. I mean podcasting is, is growing so fast these days.

Mm.

So again, all tech but different sort of, fast-growing zones.

That's in the same area as Spotify, which is also a company…

It is. In fact…

Are they competitors for you, are they?

Well they're… Well they… We're the platform underneath Spotify. So we're a supplier to them.

OK.

We're also a supplier to Apple's podcasting. So…

Oh well that's a good position to be in.

[1:01:22]

It is, yeah. And… And, I'm also chair of a company called Bigblu Broadband, which is high-speed broadband into remote areas of the country which will never get a bit of fibre. So you put a dish on the wall, and you can get broadband via satellite. So, again, very topical with the Government's desire to make everyone have access to broadband.

Absolutely.

You know, BT with its fibre can only do about 98 per cent of the population, and… And then in places like Australia, you know, all the, most of the population lives around the, the coast, and the farmers and people in the middle will never ever have a piece of fibre in their life. So how do they get access to broadband? It's got to be via a satellite. So.

[1:02:07]
OK. So, we've talked about your first book, 2014, Forget Strategy. Get Results. You've written another one recently, which is called Live Love Work Prosper. Yes, Live Love Work Prosper: A Fresh Approach to Integrating Life and Work. What's that about?

Well I kind of, I came to the conclusion that, this nonsense about work-life balance doesn't really exist, and, you know, the world is, is littered with people that actually are very very, *very* good at either work or life, it's usually work, that have terrible opposite environments. So, a great inspiration to me, you know, as a leader, Nelson Mandela, but you know, he had a horrible home life. I mean he was divorced twice, his kids were arguing over his legacy before he was gone, and, you know, and he, he admitted one of his, you know, it wasn't, the regret for him wasn't the 27 years he spent in, in prison; it was, it was the failure at his, at his personal life. And, you know, Clinton is another great example, you know, great leadership qualities, inspirational speaker and everything else, but when you, when you put… If you try to put 100 per cent of yourself into something, at the forsaking of others, you cannot expect to have a work-life balance, because, balance doesn't exist, right? And, I thought there had to be a better way of trying to be successful at both, and, and I like to think of work and life as a sort of, finding a 45-degree tangent. And the analogy

that sort of, I use in the book, is, let's say for example your two passions are weightlifting and long distance running. And you have an aspiration of winning an Olympic Gold. Well the chances are, if you continue to do weightlifting and long distance running, you are not going to win an Olympic Gold at either of them. Because the body shape just doesn't, is not conducive to either. Right? So… But what you could do is, you could think about winning an Olympic Gold at decathlon, which does require you to do both of those disciplines. So you won't be the best in the world at either, but you will be the best in the world at doing both.

Mm. Mm.

OK? So it's that finding ways to integrate both work and life together.

Mm.

And, you know, very often I'll sit at home in the evenings, well always actually, I'll sit at home with the computer going. I'll be watching a film, I'll be doing emails. You know, the average fourteen-year-old today consumes four hours of content for every hour they are consuming content.

Mm.

And, I was doing a speech in Barcelona a year ago and this woman said… And I hadn't done the speech before. And she stood up and said, 'Are you condoning the use of all these gadgets and phones and all this sort of stuff then for children at school?' And I said, 'Well, I think one of our issues is, we look at technology as a problem, right?' And I said, 'I presume you've got a fourteen-year-old that spends all their time texting and messaging and, you know, not being part of the family.' I said, 'If you, if your child came home after school and flipped open the laptop to start doing their homework,' which most of them do now, 'but had the TV on because there was a National Geographic channel on the Amazon rainforest, and put their headphones on because they were learning on Rosetta Stone how to speak Mandarin, and they were texting their friend the answer to a maths question because they, they had answered it, you'd be bringing your, your neighbours in and saying, "Look at my

star child."' Right? Yet we don't do it because we're worried not about the technology, the technology is just a tool; we're worried about the content, right? And so the content is not something you're going to stop a child accessing by saying, 'Don't.' You've got to install a mentality and an ethos and a culture for them to choose themselves not to.

Mm.

Right? But the computer is like a gun, the mobile phone is a gun, it sits there. It will sit there for 100 years with a loaded, with a bullet in it, doing no harm whatsoever, if no one picks it up. So, it's not the gun's fault, right? It's the user. And it's the same as, as any user of technology. The technology is…

Mm. It doesn't have to be a gun, does it?

It could be anything.

Any tool.

Any tool.

A tool for something else.

Exactly. I was using more of a dramatic thing there, right. A gun can be used for good for bad, but it also can not be used at all.

Yes.

But it's how the person that picks it up defines what, the mentality of the person that picks it up defines how that tool is used.

Yes.

So the tool… And, and technology is like toothpaste, right? It's not going back in the tube. So trying to fight against any particular form of technology, mobile phones or Twitter or, is, is a nonsense.

Yes.

So you've got to understand how to make sure that people understand the good uses of the tool.

[1:06:58]
I thought when said about integrating life and work you were going to say something about, you know, you know, well, about harmonising, harmonising your objectives and so on, but also something about, like, authenticity, you know, that, that you believe as much in your family as…

Well, you know, I think… So let's say…

…as well as your work. Is that…

Let's say that, you know, like, there's an aspir- Let's say middle management, right?

Yeah.

Usually very aspirational. They're on a career trajectory. And let me just, just get out there the kind of, the gender thing. I'll use male and female in one version, and you can reverse it, right, just put that out there. So, let's say, a woman is aspirational in getting, getting to the next level in her career. OK? And so she has got five or six peers also looking for that next promotion. OK? At home, generally, you know, young family, maybe a little kid, bath time. The husband has come home early for bath time. But has also mentioned to the wife, 'You know tonight, right, I'm going out for a drink with the guys. Make sure you're home by 6.30,' and we've agreed this in advance. So the woman goes… So, 6 o'clock, she goes to leave the office, and the boss grabs her in the corridor and says, 'Oh, look, I'm really sorry to lay this on you late, but, I've got to have this for tomorrow morning. It's got to be done.' Right?

'And I really need it, I'm counting on you.' Now, she could go home, and then, go into the toilet and pretend she's got a sore tummy and sit there for an hour, trying to get the work done. Right? And then lie to her partner about, 'Yeah, no, it's OK, I'll be in in a minute. I'm not working, I'm just…' And then you end up with this disconnect of, of trust, right?

Mm.

And you're lying to the person you're with. And actually, there was a survey done by a man called Oliver James who wrote a book called *Affluenza*.

Mm.

Who is a clinical psychologist.

Yes.

And he, he said that 76 per cent of middle management that were asked this question, admitted to lying to their spouse about working from home, right? Working at home. And so you start lying to the partner.

Mm.

Right? And then you go into the office the next morning, and you're standing around the water machine or the coffee machine. 'Oh, did he lay that on you as well? Oh God. Did you have trouble last night?' And now you're being endearing to people in the office.

Yeah.

Right? And you're lying to your partner. Is it any wonder that, you know, relationships fall foul of, of office flirtation, and, and these sorts of things, you know?

What should she do then?

Well, imagine coming home and saying, 'Look, I know I've said that…' First of all being honest, right, with your partner. 'I know I said that, but look at, look at this. Look what this guy's told me to do, at 6 o'clock,' right? 'Now what shall we do about this?' Right? Now if you put yourself and your partner in the same decision-making camp, rather than in the opposite camps, you can say to him, 'You know what, I've got two options here. I can do the work, right, and you can be late for the guys, right? And you know how important this is for me to get the promotion, and you know how important the promotion is to get the bigger house for the baby. Or, I can tell him to go shove it up his rear end, right, and we know where that conclusion's going to go. So please help me make that decision.' And almost invariably, the guy will go, 'You know what, I'll call the guys, I'll be half an hour late. Get on with it as quickly as you can. Help me out here please.'

Yes.

But you're on the same side.

Yes.

Right? And suddenly there isn't this wedge, that you're stuck. Because, because 50/50 doesn't work, ever.

Mm.

Right? You are always torn one way or the other.

Mm.

So, so don't try and make 50/50. Don't say, 'I'm home now, I'm not going to touch my phone.' That's ridiculous.

Mm.

Right?

So are you the same person at home as you are in…

Yeah. Absolutely.

…now, and, and when you're on a board somewhere?

Absolutely. Absolutely. My phone will always be on the table at a, at a dinner. Somebody once said to me at a table, there was four of us, my wife and I and another couple, and they said, 'Don't you find it rude to have your phone on the table?' You know, at a private, at a private dinner. I said, 'Well, I've got fourteen, fifteen board seats in four different continents, right. Now, at any time of day, any given one, the chances are, nothing is going wrong, because I've set up management teams that are empowered, and all those sorts of things. But there might be something going on. Now if that phone was in my bag, in the, in the cloakroom, right, a little bit of my brain would not be sitting here having this conversation. It'll be thinking, what *could* be going on?'

Mm.

Completely wasted energy by the way, because nothing is, probably.

Mm.

But if it's sitting here, and it's not bleeping and flashing and doing all those things, then I *know* that nothing is going on, and I'm 100 per cent engaged. So again, not looking at the, the phone as a ball and chain, but looking at it as a liberator, right? So that slight twist on, on the way we view the technology.

[1:11:45]
OK. You've got, in 2014 you were awarded an OBE.

Yup.

Which was, I'm sure a great honour for you, was it?

It was wonderful, yes, I'm very, very flattered and humbled. Because obviously, all of the success came from an awful lot of people doing fantastic jobs, not, not just me. So…

Yeah. And Prince Charles said something like, 'What, you again?' or, or something, or words to that effect?

He did. Well I… [laughs] Well I actually…

Is that because you had met him previously in another capacity?

I, I meet him quite a lot actually. I was heavily involved in the Prince's Trust, obviously one of his charities, and also the British Asian Trust, which is another one of his charities. And, I, having, kind of, meeting him every six weeks or so, I was rather hopeful to have his mother give me the, the award at Buckingham Palace. And so when I learnt it was him, obviously, a slight tinge of disappointment, tiny one, came across. And he saw me coming to, to receive my award, and said, 'Oh no, not you again.' And I said, 'Well I was about to say the same, and I was hoping it was going to be your mum.' And, we all had a little chuckle at that. But… And subsequent, I, I continue to do a lot with, with his charities, and he's an incredible man.

[1:12:57]
Yeah, well tell us something about your charity work. Yeah, that…

So, so you know, I have, I have my own foundation now as well, and it's, it's focused on education, empowerment and welfare of children. And I think, you know, there are so many amazing causes in life, and, and you know, the charity, the third sector is so competitive, incredibly competitive. And it's like a business. It has to be run like a business, it has to be efficient, but also it competes with other charities. Every charity competes. So you've got to kind of, for your own sanity I think, in a

benevolent mode, you need to try and find what's important to you. And, and I think the world will only ever change through education. And, point one is, getting kids educated, but the second point is, getting them into an environment where they can receive education. And that means getting them off the wrong tracks, getting them into a better sort of, emotional and physical environment, and protecting them, and also curing them of, of illnesses so they can get back into the, the sort of, the core thing of, of education. So, that's where my ethos is. And, I still do a lot for the Prince's Trust. In 2017 I did 40 marathons in 40 days to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Prince's Trust, and raised a significant amount of money for that. I sleep in the streets every year for Action for Children, which is bringing awareness and obviously lots of funds, usually about a quarter of a million a year, for homeless children across the UK. Recently my, my trek to Antarctica was for children with brain tumours. And, you know, I, I try to do one big event a year plus many other smaller events. And I'm probably on about fifteen, active with about fifteen charities at the moment.

Hm. On the, on the, what, as a trustee or…?

No, not so much as trustee. I've been, I, I'm in and out on trusteeships. And I tend to sort of, have a three- to five-year period where I'm… So I was heavily involved with Action for Children, and the Prince's Trust. Now I'm just fundraising for them. I think it's healthy for them, just like any board composition, to get new blood occasionally to come up with new ideas.

Yes.

So, so I try not to sort of, hang around until I'm asked to leave. I tend to move on on a regular basis.

[1:15:21]
OK. So just, looking back and reflecting on your career. What… Well career to date I should say.

[laughs] Still going. Can't afford to stop. Yes.

I mean, have colleagues and friends played a part in your career at all?

[hesitates] Yeah, I…

Would you feel you're very much self-motivated?

So, so the team that I built at Telecity has become a family. It's funny, I was at a, a private equity event last night, where I was, I was the keynote speaker to 32 people in a private room in a restaurant. And five of them were former colleagues at Telecity. And nine of them are mentioned in my upcoming book actually in a couple of years' time – a couple of months' time, sorry, that, that talks about the whole Telecity story and the evolution of the Internet industry. But the, the family of those individuals, the friendship that that's endured. I've just done two deals with private equity in Holland, and I brought my former Dutch country manager in Telecity in to run it. I chair a company called Pulsant in the UK, and my former financial controller at Telecity is the FD there. And, you know I, I bring as many of the… Because they're trusted people.

Yes. Yeah.

And I know they're capabilities. And I, and I… And I know how to work with them.

Mm.

So wherever possible I'll use the same people.

It's great, build, you've built your network and…

Yeah. And, and you know, and I, again, I'd rather take an approach and, and a capability and a, and an attitude, over and above a skillset. Because I know that I can take an individual without the skills and give them the skills, but getting them the right attitude takes a lot more. Yeah. So I think that's important, that sort of, family that was built out of initial adversity, to spectacular success, is, you know, I like to try

and replicate that as much as possible. And then, friends generally I think, you know, give you… I mean, I had a sad, literally just when I got back from the South Pole, I had the sad passing of my sister, and, my brother's here from Australia at the moment for the funeral, and, we tend to see family very seldomly, because, it's always sort of, weddings and funerals and things like that, and, although they're always there mind-wise. But you see your friends a lot, and, you know, you make, you make more time I think for your friends than you tend to do generally for your, for your family, you know, just, other than your immediate family. And they play a big part in my life, friends play a big part in my life, because they, they give me a sense of stability that perhaps, through my childhood especially, I lacked from family.

Yes.

So, friends do, do play a part in my success on the basis that they give me a stability in my life.

Grounding. Yes.

Yeah.

[1:18:37]
Yes. OK. I mean of your achievements, which, which one would you say you are most proud of?

Well I think I've got a lot more to, to give, but I… I think the, the business ones don't really even get on the list, because, you know, I, I think the Antarctic and, and the, the 40 marathons for me were things that put me out of my comfort zone so much, that it puts a lot of other things into perspective.

Mm.

And I was talking, again last night, to this team about, for the, on the first day, I didn't realise, Antarctica is at 10,000 feet, it's not at sea level like the North Pole, and on the first day I suffered from altitude sickness, and I thought my lungs were going to

explode. And dragging this 200-kilo sledge with you, and, it's unbelievably painful, and you're minus 40 degrees, and everything is numb, and you can't feel anything, and you just want everything to stop. And the team around me, of which I only knew one individual beforehand, Lewis Moody, he's a a great friend of mine, the former England rugby captain, and he came and just said, 'Look, we'll do it at your pace. Because someone's going to going to have a bad day. Everyone's going to have a bad day on this trip. You know, you're getting yours over quickly, but, you know, everyone's going to have it.' And I felt, for the first time in my life, I needed people. And I have always been in a position to, I'm the one that gives the assistance, you know, I'm the one that people come to for support.

Mm.

And on day one of this two-and-a-half-week trek, I needed someone to just be there, to get me through that day, right, emotionally. And, it was a shock to me, and it reinforces and reinforced for me the, the concept of team. You don't need even to like… Out of that group of people there were, there were a few that I think, I, I will become very good friends with over time, and there are a few I'll probably never see again, because, we just didn't gel, didn't click.

Mm.

And I, you know, life's too short, I don't want to spend time trying to make that artificially work.

Mm.

But there were a couple that I'm absolutely already planning to see again.

Right.

And… But what it told me was, even the ones that, that I didn't necessarily get on with, everybody worked to get everybody through, right. And a team doesn't necessarily need to like each other, but it needs to know that the team is what counts,

and not the individual. And it was a big lesson to me, of, you know, being more and more as time's gone by famous for my individual, individuality. It's a big wake-up call again that, we all need it. We just haven't got out of our comfort zone enough to realise we do.

Yeah. Yeah, OK.

So.

[1:21:30]
Interesting. Yeah. This sounds like an interview doesn't it. What would you do differently if you had your time again, and why?

Ah. So, I think when… I wasn't a particularly good husband the first time round, and I think I probably would have reflected on, on the, on the pain I inflicted on a personal basis to my first wife before, before embarking on that particular one again. But the lessons I learnt are, are benefiting my second relationship.

Good, yes.

So, I probably would have changed that.

Yes.

Empathy with people is, is a very important trait.

Mm. Business-wise, what, what would you say?

[pause] Learnt quicker that, if you want something done, get it done yourself. Don't rely on other people but empower them. Invite them to share your journey, and you will find that they'll be doing amazing things that you hadn't thought of in the same direction. Don't dictate to people. You know, just, just give them a path and let them run. If you can, you know, if you get the best finance director you can possibly get,

and you know that you've imparted the vision correctly, why on earth would you tell him what to do?

Mm.

You know, because, clearly he's better than you at your job, so, go and let them… The great thing that I always do in, I always did in an executive role, was leave the door open, and anyone that came and asked a question, just bat it back. You know, 'What would *you* do?' And they'd walk away. And, you know, I think that's really important. Get the best people around you, and have confidence in them. Yeah. It's a lesson you can't learn quick enough.

[1:23:26]
What do you think are the biggest challenges and opportunities for the IT industry in the next ten years?

Well I think one of the biggest opportunities is, getting more girls and women into it. Because, you know… You know, I always used to think back at school that, you know, generally girls were better academically than, than boys. I don't even know whether statistically that's still true, but, I had the impression it was. Boys always end up getting diverted with, you know, other things in later school life, you know, cars, girls, you know, that sort of thing, but girls tend to be very very strong academically. And I think, we're missing a trick in the IT environment with so, so little representation.

Mm.

And that comes from, from the fact that there's, there's little representation in STEM subjects at school I think. But I think that's something that could really change, really sort of, quantum jump tech going forward. And I think the, the other challenge is that the rate of change of technology is significantly greater than our ability to adopt it. So I have a, I had a microchip put in here, in my, in my hand, that can open my car door, and I've got another one to put in this one now that will replace my Oyster card for the Underground. And when I talk to people about it, they say, 'That's crazy, you

can't inject a chip in you.' I say, 'Well we do it with our cats and dogs for a start.' But, but you know, you have a titanium hip, or you, you know, you have a stent put in your heart. Why wouldn't you do that? You know. And if it recorded all my blood type and everything else, if I had the misfortune of an accident in the street, someone could scan me and know that I was allergic to penicillin, or… And I think our ability to adopt technology far lags technology's ability to enhance our lives. So I think we need to, we need to get, quickly get embraceable, right, with, with tech. The opportunities, goodness me, I mean the endless… I mean, I just can't… You know, every generation I'm sure has said that they live in the most exciting generation, but we really do now, and I just wish I could fast-forward 100 years just to see how some of these things evolve. But, it's, it's just brilliant what's happening. I mean, you know, I'm working with a business in Cambridge that's creating graphene that will change, will revolutionise so many different parts of, of so many industries, and, and you know, people are growing ears in, in petri dishes, and, you know, so that we can grow parts of our body to replace it if they get, if they go wrong, or get cancer, or… It's amazing what's happening. It's just amazing.

[1:26:10]
I wanted to ask you about one specific thing actually, which was climate change, given the industry you've worked in for most of your life.

Yeah.

I read an amazing statistic that, if current trends continue, that, I don't know… I can't remember the exact details, but it was something like, in ten years' time 30 per cent of carbon will be generated from datacentres.

Yup. Yeah, probably will.

Is that a figure that you, that, that you could imagine?

I mean… Yeah, I think if it carries on, yeah. And… But, but remember, it's not the datacentre itself, right; it's all the equipment, it's all the servers and the switches and the routers, right, that, that would be sitting under someone's desk if they weren't in a

datacentre. So the datacentre itself is inherently efficient, because it's doing it efficiently. But the volume…

It gives you a… I guess you can manage…

Yeah, you can manage it much better.

You can manage the problem in one place can't you.

Exactly. And you've got, you know, you've got so much more control over all the heat that's generated. So for example, in Holland, we used to take the excess heat and pump it 500 metres underground to a local hospital and heat the hospital.

Yeah. Yeah.

Right? Now all of that heat would have been generated, but just, you can't do that for one server sitting under your desk.

Yes. Yeah.

Right? But if you can concentrate it all together, you can really take advantage of that.

Mm.

So in Finland for example, they take the heat and they, and they put it through local housing. So they are building datacentres as part of office complexes, or, and, and then, and then using that surplus heat to save energy. Now, that's not always possible, but it also doesn't take away the fact that, we are using more and more equipment. So park the fact that they're in a datacentre for a minute, and just say that every single device, right, is more prolific. So, millions of Internet of Things devices, millions of phones. You know, we've just crossed the threshold of more devices connected to the Internet than living people, right? But that will grow 20-fold in the next ten years. And so all of these have power consumption. And a lot of them actually, for Internet

of Things devices, are not in datacentres, but they're communicating with boxes in datacentres.

Mm. Mm.

So… So that's not stoppable. I think, you know, where the trend needs to be is, how do we generate the electricity to power them, and what do we do with the surplus heat generated beyond it?

Mm.

And one is, solar, wind, all those good things; and the other is, taking it and using it to heat homes that we would have otherwise needed to heat with other power generation.

Yeah. I think it's suggested that places like Iceland could become a great place for datacentres.

Yeah. Yeah they…

Because they've got hydroelectricity.

Yeah, absolutely.

And they're cold anyway. So…

The only problem with Iceland is that it's actually like a giant volcano, and it has about 54 earthquakes a year, and, and there's one big cable coming in and one big cable going out. And…

Well I was going to say, that's the, that must be the issue, surely.

Yeah. I mean it…

Because, I mean connectivity is the key thing for a datacentre.

It is. It is. And, you know, and latency also, right. If you're serving… You know, if you and I are so used to streaming the, the cricket live on our, on our iPhone wherever we are, and yet we're streaming it from a server in Iceland, it's just going to be so so so so so slow, it does, [juddering sound] it jitters like that. And then we'll say, this is a rubbish service.

OK.

So, it needs to be much closer to the eyeballs.

[1:29:36]
So just to wrap up, Mike, what advice would you give to someone entering the IT industry today?

Ah. Embrace it. Don't get too technical. Don't, don't get hung up on trying to understand technology. Business is simple, right? Talking big numbers, big words, and that don't, don't sound very techie. So, benefits, you know, supply-demand, cash, those are all the things that are important, just as any other industry. The tools of technology have whizz bang names and stuff like that, but they're just tools to get things done.

Mm.

So focus on the benefits, right, of the, of the tech; don't focus on the tech.

Great. Michael, it's been fascinating hearing about your life, career and outlook on life. On behalf of Archives of IT, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us.

Pleasure.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]