



Sean Finnan

Interviewed by

Richard Sharpe

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Via Zoom

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Archives of IT

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Welcome to the Archives or Information Technology, where we capture the past and inspire the future. It is June the 16th, Wednesday, 2021 and we're in Zoom Land again. I'm Richard Sharpe and I've been covering and researching the IT industry, as it became, since the early 1970s. Making his contribution to the archives today is a man who has done a number of jobs in big companies and therefore experienced the different cultures in those companies. That is one of the things that I want to focus on thinking about because if you've been any time at all looking at or in the computer industry, you'll know there are vastly different cultures involved, although the technology may be much the same, even in companies in the same sector, as we will discover.

Also, Sean is now very interested in helping companies—company—IT companies scale up, which is surely a vital thing for the European IT industry and for the UK IT industry given our inability to reduce really scaled up companies apart from a couple, like ARM, the rest, we seem to have an awful lot of sand and some pebbles but no big rocks. So, I'm very interested in that process to talk to him.

Sean, you were born in 1961, the 6th of May 1961, and your father and his father before him were basically skilled working-class.

[00:01:39]

That's correct, metal workers, out of Limerick in Ireland and er, actually, my dad had come over before the war in 1937, but of course, that was a time when people would have signs on—on the outside of building sites saying, "No Irish need apply." So, he joined the army. I always said, you know, that's an interesting choice [laughs] if he'd only known. So, he was in the army all through the war, and then, when he came out, he retrained as a welder.

[00:02:16]

What was, erm, what branch of the army was he in?

[00:02:19]

He was in the 8th—the 8th reg—so, he was, er, Dunkirk and then Africa and then up through Italy into Germany at the end, so—

[00:02:30]

Infantry?

[00:02:30]

Yes, yes. I think he reached the dizzy heights of corporal.

[00:02:36]

Okay, [laughs], was he an insubordinate man?

[00:02:39]

I suspect so, yes. He was a stereotypical kind of Irishman, he liked a bit of fun, and he liked a drink, and er, he didn't really take orders particularly well, so, I don't know he—how he, er, survived all those years in the army really.

[00:03:00]

But he had a role in Hitler's defeat anyway?

[00:03:05]

Yes, yes, he-he—

[00:03:04]

And your mother was a weaver in a factory?

[00:03:08]

Yeah, she, uh, heard dad had been, erm, a linen dryer in the North of Ireland and, er, then they had come over to Lancashire and she had done some weaving. And then in the war—er, I can't really—I'm not sure I even know why they moved to London, but erm, and she—actually, she became a Hollerith operator, so, that's obviously where the technical er, link came from, so—And then, er, married and er, you know, ran the house, er, thereafter.

[00:03:43]

And erm, you have one brother, who is—four years older than you?

[00:03:46]

Yeah, an elder brother, Kevin, he is—yeah, he's four and a half, five years older than me. Er, I always say it's five after we've both had our birthdays, just to annoy him. Erm, and he's er—he couldn't be more different. He runs a dance company, erm, and he's done re-really well, he got an MBE for his part in the para-Olympics, er and the opening ceremony there, or was it the closing ceremony? So, he's done—he's done very well but on a completely different path.

[00:04:15]

Right, right. Now, erm, you went to school, how interested were your parents in your schooling?

[00:04:22]

Erm, well, my dad, not at all. My mum, erm... she... I remember, the only thing I really remember was her fighting very hard to get me into a different school because I—it was at the comprehensive-time, and I was in the middle school and doing really badly. And she fought very hard to get me into a school called Northfields where my brother was, erm, because she just thought it was a much better school. But around about that time... and she was successful in that, but then after that time, her... her health deteriorated so, erm, so, not so much focus on the school side, erm. And also, er, you know, I had, er, some health problems myself, I was an-an asthmatic at that time so, I didn't go quite a lot [laughs]. I remember in my fourth year, having more-more days absent than attending.

[00:05:13]

Oh, dear.

[00:05:15]

So, er, yeah. But thankfully, I got through all that so.

[00:05:18]

When you did attend, did you enjoy it?

[00:05:21]

Yeah, I did actually, I quite liked—you know, it was like a lot of people's experience of school, you—you had your mates, and you kicked a football around and tried to stay out of the way of the, er, the big guy and the, er, teachers really. So, yeah, it was—it was good. I enjoyed, erm, I enjoyed new things, I always enjoyed new things. I wasn't a particularly good student; I didn't really do homework and things like that back then. I kind of didn't understand I think what I meant to be doing there, erm, a bit of a slow learner really, so, erm, but er, but yeah, I enjoyed it and I've still got, erm, you know—one of my best friends is a guy from that time, so, erm, you know—so some happy times there, yeah.

[00:06:12]

Not much sport for you then?

[00:06:15]

Er, well, I got a sports badge for the captain of the table tennis team, er...

[00:06:21]

Okay.

[00:06:21]

Mainly because there was only three people who wanted to be in the table tennis team [laughs] but yeah, I loved a bit of er, ping-pong, as er, as it was, and I played for quite a few years. So, er, yeah, that was my sporting thing and again, a little bit—you know, I couldn't get in a football team or anything like that, not very sporty from that—particularly with the asthma. But er, the ping-pong kind of worked for me, so, yeah.

[00:06:46]

What do you think your life looked like when you were there... just coming out of school, what was the horizon like for you?

[00:06:55]

Well, it's... it's... I'll tell you what, I always thought it was fine and I now-now realise that it was quite a naïve perspective that I had. I remember my maths teacher saying to me once, you know, if you don't buck your ideas up, I won't let you do, you know, the A-Levels, you'll-you'll go down to the CSE classes, and you won't be able to do anything. And-and I was going, well, you know, erm, I'm-I'm intending to go on to university and he more or less laughed, you know. Er, I mean, he was a great teacher, I'll give him credit and he did help me tremendously thereafter, but erm—

[00:07:31]

What was his name?

[00:07:32]

Norton, him-him, and a guy called McLaughlin, er, who was my English teacher, they-they both really took an interest. And McLaughlin talked me into the school play which I really didn't want to do, erm, and er, which I really enjoyed actually. So, er, so, those two kind of kept me from erm, you know—the table tennis and the drama kept me out of what everyone else was doing, you know, on the street corners really, and er, more luck than anything, but it was just things that I was interested in, so, erm, and my prospective was, I was going to work in IT, and I couldn't really tell you why I had that idea. Erm, I mean, my brother, funny enough had started in IT and-and he absolutely hated it, erm. But I thought it seemed like a place where you could—just not a lot of people knew a lot about it. And it was new, and it was exciting and er, for a guy like me, it seemed as good a place to go as any. You-you know, no one ever—I wasn't one of those kids where someone was going, well, you're going to doing law, or you know, you'll go to this university and become an accountant and all of that. No disrespect to that path, but it was sort of wide open to me and it was purely luck that I er... I remember I thought—I'll go and work for the post office 'cause I've heard they've got a lot of different types of computer and that'll be a good place to learn, 'cause I-I-I'll get to work on all these different types of computer. But that wasn't what happened at all, they, er, they didn't like my application form and er, so, I was kind of scouting around for something to do. I was thinking about going to uni and erm, I was working as a cleaner at ACDelco, erm [laughs]. And there was a little advert on the board saying, you know, apprentices sought for the IT department, so, I went up and said, could I take the test and they said, yeah, and lo and behold, I scored

very well. I always think that was kind of a bit of a miracle really but erm, we had been—funny enough, that maths teacher had had us doing IQ tests—

[00:10:00]

Right.

[00:10:00]

Over and over and over again, so, I just think it happened to be a good-good timing for me, so that was kind of it. My... I mean, most people were trying to get erm, mechanical engineering apprenticeships, or something like that, that was sort of where people went. I mean, I remember there one guy who went to Cambridge, and it was like the first person ever from our school to get to Cambridge and it was like a massive thing that someone from our school could achieve those dizzy heights, so.

[00:10:32]

When did you see your first computer?

[00:10:35]

Oohhh, that would have been, I'm thinking, '79/80 and it was this big old—I think it was an IBM 145, er and then later, a 168, I think it was, it was—you know it had this big room with raised floorboard and you weren't really even sure which bit was the computer because there was the discs—not the discs—well, they were discs, big—they were like 10 records stacked on top of each other, big things that you carried around, and tape drives and lots of whirring. And it seemed very magical really. And it is still the image people show these days when they want to show a computer, they're like big stacks of boxes, so, erm, yeah, there—Delco, that was when I saw my first. I'd never seen—really, I'd never seen a computer. So, I'm still a little baffled as to w-w—how I decided that was the path, but erm, I was always interested in science fiction and er, things like that, so, I read a lot of those kinds of book. So, that kind of world seemed the right direction for me.

[00:11:42]

No computers or computer access at school?

[00:11:46]

No, no, not that I recall. I never, I-I-I mean, I remember being quite impressed that we had little cassette players for Spanish [laughs], we could play the tape and-- I was like—ah, that's pretty neat, so, yeah.

[00:12:02]

Erm, so, what was this machine used for at Delco?

[00:12:05]

Er, well, it was all the erm, it was all the admin systems really, you know, payroll, erm, all the processing, all that kind of stuff. And I—originally, I started in a group called OTSG, which was a-a-a-group that wrote what was called the JCL, the Job Control Language. And people find it hard to believe nowadays, but there was this whole job which was to connect what the person who'd written the programme wanted to do with the actual resources, you know, what disc drive, where was the output going to go, how was it going to be stored, how much space were you going to all this job to run in—all that kind of stuff, and that is how I started. And er, [laughs] I remember, I read the textbook and thought I had it and then sat down and tried to write some and didn't have a clue, so, erm, you know—but er—

[00:13:02]

Were you trained?

[00:13:04]

Erm, not really, I mean, erm, you know, I was handed a textbook and then I was given—so, I was-I was sort of trained on the job, erm, they gave me bits of work to do and there was a guy who kind of looked over my shoulder and was very helpful. Erm, and you know, you basically—you kind of learn-learn how you go really. Erm, and then, it was weird because that group was also er, the systems group so then you'd start writing little bits of assembler for little jobs that er, needed doing. I was always kept away from the really big stuff I think but er, you know, that was kind of how I started at-at Delco, yeah. And-and I did that—

[00:13:47]

And what did Delco do?

[00:13:48]

Sorry?

[00:13:49]

What did Delco do-- Delco?

[00:13:52]

They made spark plugs, AC Delco, they made spark plugs, so, they had these big machines that would hold form-- it was called—the spark plugs. It-it sounded like the end of the world when these machines were going off but, er, yeah, that's what they did, so, and it was probably one-one of the top two or three erm, employers in Dunstable, er, which was just a mile or so from where I lived, so, it was good for me, I could walk to work.

[00:14:22]

Oh, right, do you remember how much you were paid?

[00:14:25]

Oh, Lord, I have no idea, do you know Richard, that's a great question, erm, I think, I er, if I was earning 8 grand a year, I'd probably have been quite chuffed.

[00:14:44]

That would be good.

[00:14:45]

Yeah, maybe that's later, I don't know. I actually have no recollection of that, Richard, I was just happy to have a job and be-being paid, to be honest. I had to wear me dad's suit, I didn't have a suit, I only had me school uniform. So, I had to borrow me dad's suit until the first payday, and then, [laughs] then I could go out and buy myself a suit, you know. [laughs] I turned up in—

[00:15:09]

How long—

[00:15:08]

... in this bottle green suit and they were going, what is this guy? Anyway, so.

[00:15:15]

And how long were you there?

[00:15:16]

I was there, well, I erm, in a funny way, I didn't leave for years but what happened, was it got merged into Vauxhall Motors 'cause ACDelco, er, er, were a subsidiary of General Motors and then all the IT got bundled up into one piece at Vauxhall. So, erm, I got outsourced if you like very early in my career in Vauxhall Motors, erm. And then, you know it sets my standing, because I'd been doing reasonably well, erm, but in a very small team, and then I was in a much bigger team so, I kind of dropped down the pecking order a bit, erm, and er, went off the run the helpdesk, well, I was like—I'd run—it's over-exaggerating it, I was kind of the lead phone call taker. Erm, but that was quite good, that was first real customer contact, people ringing up saying, you know, my screen is all black and I'd go—can you check if it's plugged in and things like that. And you know, and that actually happened to me one time, so, er, I know it's a story that goes around on the internet, but it did happen to me one time and then, erm, I did that for a bit.

And then, I heard about mini computers erm, and this would have been about—I want to say, '83/84 and er, the manufacturing folks were buying their own mini computers.

[00:16:43]

Right.

[00:16:45]

And there was er, the first one was a PDP11 from DEC, I seem to remember, er, and then, later on, we got a VAX 750 or something like that and then—and an HP3000.

And so, the manufacturing side of er, Vauxhall, had got fed up waiting for the central IT department to do stuff for them.

[00:17:08]

Very common.

[00:17:09]

Yeah, well, it's a wave that got repeated and repeated, and repeated, you know, where—and kind of we're seeing it again to some extent today with, er, you know, the drive to digital. But basically, the departments were like—we can't wait for central IT, it takes too long, we'll—we'll buy some of these little boxes that don't go in the data centre, and we'll have our own little data centre. So, I got hooked up with that, erm, and then in '85, EDS will come, I'm sure we'll talk about EDS, but EDS came along and one of the things they did was standardise—they had a standard way of doing things. So, all these mini-computers had no place anywhere near the data centres, so, they all got shipped off to another little data centre in the factory actually and er, and I got—I went with it, and I was very happy, I was kind of running my own data centre. I mean, I was—talk about chief cook and bottle washer, I would—you know, if-if the modems went down, I had to pull 'em out and plug 'em back in again, and erm all sorts of stuff, but it was great, it was a great time 'cause I was kind of running my own ship and we were doing some really interesting projects as well.

[00:18:20]

And now you had some staff, did you?

[00:18:23]

Yeah, well, I had erm, the operators, they—do you know, I'm not sure they worked for me but erm, I can't remember now, did they work for me.

[00:18:33]

I was an operator; operators don't ever work for anybody.

[00:18:38]

Well, that's true—

[00:18:38]

Apart from themselves.

[00:18:39]

I think they were—I think they—kind of I was the in charge of the data centre and then there was like some night-shift folks who came in, but they worked for operations, they didn't work for me. Erm, and mostly, it was down to me to go in with the big key and wind it up most of the time, you know. Erm, but it worked pretty well, and I had a lot of fun, and you know, it was interesting 'cause you learn things like the IBM security was always very good, erm, you know, and if you had the tapes and you didn't have the right security you couldn't read it. But then, you know, I discovered that if you took the tape off and put it on the VAX, it would read anything [laughs], so, it just—it would print out all the IBM security for you and everything 'cause of course, it was ascii rather than EBCDIC so, erm, you know. It was a great time, I really enjoyed it.

And then I got involved in a project, it was a new paint shop being built by Vauxhall and I got involved and that was my first real applications work, erm, you know, I'd been writing bits of code, but it was all for the—kind of on the systems side and then this, you know. Because it was outside of the main environment, the EDS environment, erm, you know, I kind of moved into writing the code, which was a sort of a bit of barrier in those days, you'll remember this, Richard. You had the techies and the operators, and they went on one path and the hardware folks and then you had the coders and the analysts, and they were on a slightly different path. And you know, people didn't necessarily jump between the two that often, so, it was sort of a rare opportunity, and it was a big old project. And I did erm, I did what was called AVI, so, when you have a factory, you have these pots that hang under the car that go around and go through the ovens and they're basically a tracking device. And I had to write the system to track the cars and move the cars around the factory, erm, and it was asynchronous COBOL, so, it was written in COBOL, but you could basically have an event come in at any point in the programme and flip you out to a different place, so—And I used to say back then, it was like being paid for writing crossword puzzles, I loved it, I absolutely loved it. Erm, I'm not sure my code was that—I mean, it worked really well, but it was a bit unmaintainable, it was like you had to

have my way of thinking in order to maintain the code, so, er, but it worked fine for three or four years and then-then we had to tear it apart and re-write it, so, someone else—someone else could maintain it.

[00:21:19]

Now, were you then an employee of EDS?

[00:21:23]

Yeah, yeah, I moved to EDS at that point, yeah.

[00:21:26]

So, the erm, the story is that erm, a man called Ross Perot, based in Dallas Texas launched this computer services company to basically run other people's computers for them, to do outsourcing. And the biggest contract he got was with General Motors in the United States. And they even transferred him onto the board, didn't they?

[00:21:52]

Well, yeah, it didn't-it didn't quite work like Richard, if I may.

[00:21:55]

Sure.

[00:21:56]

What happened was, so, he-he was really selling a precursor to outsource called Timesharing because he'd been selling hardware for IBM and was very good at it and then he realised, oh, most of his customers had machines that weren't being used overnight so, he was like, can I lease a bit of your machine, I'll sell it to someone else, er, and that was his business and that is how EDS got started. And then about, er, 1970 something or other, Mort Meyerson joined the firm, maybe er, late '60s. But erm, Meyerson—and Meyerson was the guy who came up with the outsourcing concept where, at its simplest, you go along to a client and say, we'll do all your IT for you for five years for this price, erm, so, that was kind of the-the backdrop for the EDS. And then, General Motors bought EDS, they-they bought to company 'cause

they wanted to transform their own IT but rather than do an outsourcing contract they thought well, we'll just... we're so big, we'll just buy the firm, which is what they did. And like you say, they put him on the board, I don't think that went very well, he wasn't on the board very long, so.

[00:23:12]

No.

[00:23:13]

And talk about a clash of cultures, I'm sure someone's written about that but the EDS culture—I think he once said something, and with all due respect to my friends at General Motors, of whom I've got a lot of affection, erm, but he said something like when an EDS see—when a GM sees a snake they form a committee to decide what to do about the snakes and when an EDS-er sees a snake, he picks up a stick and kills it—something along those lines. And I mean, I think that is a bit unfair to GM, I mean, erm, they—they had a lot of talent, but there was a difference in culture very much.

[00:23:51]

What was the culture of EDS?

[00:23:54]

Yeah, it's funny because of course, the headlines were all, you know, you can't have a beard, you've got to wear a dark blue suit and white shirt, you've got to have neatly trimmed hair and you can only have one piece on your desk and—outrage and uproar. And I must admit for some people, it was a terrible thing but for me, I thought it was brilliant because you know, Richard, if you don't grow up kind of in the sort of social fabric where you get all the nuances of how things are meant to be, you mainly just blunder around, erm. And certainly, in my—if I reflect on my very early career I did a lot of blundering around, and here was a company that said look, here—we're going to tell you rules. I mean, I remember, I didn't mention this, but I remember having an appraisal about two or three years in and it was like, good, good, good, good, good, good, good overall rating—satisfactory. And I'm like, even with my maths that doesn't add up so—and then EDS came along, and it was absolutely a meritocracy, it

was if you do good work you'll get on, if you follow the rules, you'll get on. If neither of those are true, you'll have a terrible time and I just thought, oh, okay, I understand, thank you, someone's—it was like someone had given me the hidden code of how you get on, and erm, and so, I got on really.

And I went—I did, er, after the paint shop project I did a project called DCS, again for General Motors, I mean, I was with the General Motors account for many years, erm, which was a new dealership system, all over Europe, three and a half thousand sites, little Phillips PCs for all the processing in the—first PC project that we'd ever done, so, that was a very, very interesting project. Erm, but yeah, EDS and then I kind of got a gig as er, helping the various countries 'cause I'd sort of got this pan-European thing under my belt and er, I got a sense of it. So, I was asked to go and work with all of the different-- you know, GM Italia, GM Finland, GM—all the small ones, not Vauxhall, not Opel Germany, but all the others kind of thing, that was my patch. And I was sort of a freelance consultant helping the people who ran those businesses be successful. Erm, and then I got, you know—So, I always say that my first 12 years of my career were moving sideways.

And the reason I tell that story is I remember once, I think it was later when I was President of Intellect, there was a young—a young IT professionals event and I was you know asked to give a speech about my career. And someone said to me, to what do you owe your meteoric rise to success? [laughs] Well, I never thought of it as a meteoric rise to success but the point I made was I spent roughly 12 years going sideways, you know. I kind of did this job and then this job and then this job and they all sort of were related but I kind of went round. And if anything, it was a very long slow spiral for 12 years, but then I got to a place where I really knew my trade and I was you know, if I say so myself, I wasn't half bad at it. And then, I could sort of start my career, erm, in the way that careers kind of get started, so. But I don't feel like that's a loss of 12 years, I know a lot of people nowadays are like-- you know, I've been in the company a year and a half, I want to get promoted, or I'm going move, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. But I think you end up on a very narrow pile of tiles if that's how your career goes. Whereas I, actually, 'cause I had this sort of odd spiralling, I could talk to operators, I could talk to folks who ran data centres, I could talk to programmers, I could talk to analysts. I'd sort of been in their world, erm,

salespeople, managers, clients, and er, and that, I felt was a real benefit to me. I didn't—it wasn't planned, it was never—none of it was planned, it was just people would say to me, here is an interesting, rather ugly problem, do you fancy it? and I was a sucker for that, you know, I was just a sucker for it, so—

[00:28:37]

So, in two ways then—in two ways—

[00:28:39]

Sorry?

[00:28:41]

In two ways, your experience—one of the EDS disciplines, and two, moving sideways, and spiralling up, these two compensated you for the fact that this didn't happen at university or at Oxbridge, or at Eton, or Rugby and therefore, filled you out significantly as someone who now could, after these 12 years, really start to motor upwards—is that--?

[00:29:11]

Yeah, I think that's a good way—I think that's a fair way of putting it Richard, you know. I mean, in-in-in a way, it was—it was a 10-year apprenticeship, 10, 12-year apprenticeship of er, working in-in that kind of environment. But erm, and I do suspect, I've talked to people who worked for the great British firms, you know, ICL and so on, erm, and I do suspect—great firms, all of them, but I do suspect that I was just lucky I landed in EDS. Just because it was such a full-on meritocracy, just because they couldn't tell my accent from Prince Charles's, just because, you know, they had very clear measurements and as long as you ticked those boxes, you did fine. And I—as I got nearer the top of EDS, of course, it had its politics like any firm has its politics, so, [coughs] that was a different world. But certainly, for that—and they had a great believe—belief in developing people, you know, they paid for me to go on an outward bound early on, as a leadership development programme, and then, I think in '93, the paid for me to do my MBA. I'd always had an itch really, Richard, because I didn't have a degree. And erm, you know, I had gone to university actually, Vauxhall had er, you know, sent me to university, but then my mum died and it's—

it's one of those stories—The council said, well, you're not a big enough house—er, family now, to live in the house you live in—that you've been in—you know, the family had been there for like 25 years, therefore, we think you ought to move. So, erm, and this was just after me mum had died, so, me dad was a bit distraught by all this. So, I-I quit uni and bought the house you know, I went back to work, bought the house. So, er, erm, but I didn't have a degree and it itched me, and then, you know, er, EDS very kindly sponsored me into an MBA in '93, erm, which, er, which made a big difference. I've kind of jumped ahead, I know.

[00:31:19]

No, it's fine. In EDS, er, was it paternal, were you looked after in the sense that in IBM, you-your career was mapped for you, for every person, there were two other or three other people who were—who were going to come into that role if they developed, etc., etc. Was it really like that with a heavy personnel management process?

[00:31:44]

So, erm, I mean, EDS, I think was ground-breaking actually in that sense and I don't know how much of it was EDS and how much of it was the European management of EDS. And of course, they'd bought SD-Scicon and-and just as a by the way, when you do outsourcing, you acquire all the people. So, you had this very, very rich diverse, you know people who had worked for the Inland Revenue, people who had worked for Allied Domecq, people who had worked for GM [coughs] so, you had a very diverse—and then the people who had been hired and trained by EDS at as-as—straight out of uni, so, but—Erm, yeah, I think it was quite paternal, it was erm, it was one of those firms that, if you were in trouble, you kind of had—at least I had this belief, and again, I'm sure—well, there were people who used to call me Pollyanna, erm, but er, but I always had the belief. And at least the Americans I worked with were like this, that if I was in trouble they'd help me out. You know, they'd do—they'd kind of—if, you-you know, if you—if you needed some help they'd do whatever it took to kind of help you out of the hole you were in. Erm, and you know, I-I thought that was great, I mean, so, very tough on the rules of and performance, erm, really high standards.

The whole principle of never leaving a client in trouble and you know, I mean, EDS had its problem contracts like everyone, but there was a belief that you should do your very best for the customer, and at least that was true wherever I worked in EDS. And then, you took care of your team and—and a lot of that was because Perot was very, um, he was very inspired by the military. And of course, his point was that erm, someone will put their life on their line for you know, 15,000 dollars, in the army, in the US, so, it's kind of not about how much you're paying people, it's about all the rest of it. And the design of EDS was very much trying to empower people and give them an opportunity to grow, helping them if they fell by the wayside, but really holding them accountable, erm. So, you know, I'm kind of waxing lyrical about it but I—you know, I hear a lot of people saying bad things about EDS and I'm sure a lot of it is deserved, but my experience wasn't like that at all. And I was working—you know, I was close to guys like Chiapparone, who was one of the fellows who got locked up in the Iranian jail and of course Bill Gaylord who was the other—I knew a little bit. So, I kind of knew the people at the top of the firm a bit. Erm, I worked for a guy called Dick King, who had been there right from the early days and erm, so, that style of the company er, really impressed me really.

[00:34:49]

Long working days.

[00:34:51]

Yeah, I mean, you know, there was no sense of this is your hours, erm, and you had to be prepared for that. And of course, that's not for everyone, you know, people with young families and so on, that's a--that's a—a hard shift, but erm.

[00:35:07]

Did you have children, were you married?

[00:35:11]

Well, I did later on—I did later on. When I—when I moved to Zurich, er, in what was that—[sound] '96—'96 I think, hang on.

[00:35:25]

Yeah, '96 to '98.

[00:35:27]

Yeah, when I moved to Switzerland, erm—well, '96 and then I was there er, a bit longer than that I think, er, through till about 2000. The erm, the-the—we er, just-just when we went, we started the family. And er, so, you know, all—you know, I mean, you talk about my career, all credit to my wife because we arrived in-in Switzerland, she had—she had one baby and was pregnant with another and I immediately got on a plane and went somewhere else, so, er, you know. But erm, again, the firm were very good, they-they, you know, they gave us a lot of financial support to try and make it work and so on, erm. But yeah, it was—I think it was tough-tough for my wife er, in that period and er, you know, erm, no career should ever go without recognising all the people that kind of help-helped you get there really, so.

[00:36:26]

That crushed a lot of marriages.

[00:36:28]

Yeah, yeah, fortunately, when I first met my wife, I was already in it, so, right from when we started dating, I was erm, you know, I was working all the hours that God gave and flying here, there, and everywhere. And so, it was kind of—she knew what she was—she knew what was going to happen 'cause that was sort of the way it was and-and you know, she never expected me to just stop doing that. So, yeah, that was er, that was her gift to me, really, erm.

[00:37:02]

So, first of all, you were a European Regional Director, and then you became Divisional President for Global Manufacturing and Distribution?

[00:37:13]

Yeah, and that was—sorry, go on.

[00:37:15]

What is the Sean Finnan method of management?

[00:37:19]

Er, well, it's Sean Finnan, er.

[00:37:22]

Terribly sorry, first get the name right.

[00:37:26]

Yes. I erm, well, firstly, you—you're probably better off asking people I managed about that, but my point of view was always to try and lay out where I expected we were going to take the business and-and have a vision that people could get excited about. Erm, and that would be technically, that might be er, business-wise, that might be, erm, for the customer, but just have that journey that we were on and have everyone inspired to be on that journey or get the chance to bail out early, you know. This is the road we're going to go down folks, it's going to look like that, it's going to be undoubtedly hard 'cause, I tended to get put into situations that either were in trouble or needed some sort of transformation, that was really the kind of the business label I had at that time—good transformational business manager. And so, erm, that was the first thing.

The second thing was I believed a lot in giving people erm, independence to do their own thing. Er, even—so, I'd been an account manager early on and I thought every company ran account managers like EDS did. And it was only about 10 years later I discovered that in most firms, account manager really meant salesman. Erm, but it wasn't like that in EDS, in EDS, the account manager ran virtually all the resources for the customer that they served. And this came from Perot's view of being like the field commander on the beach, they might be the navy, or the army, or the air force, but they were in charge of everyone who was on the beach. And that was the idea behind the account manager thing. I thought that worked, it gave an autonomy to people. So, very much, I was very much trying to say to people, you know, bring your own creativity to this, focus on the bigger picture that we're trying to achieve, but find your path to it. And largely, I'll leave you alone, I'll help you in whatever

way you want but I'll leave you alone unless you get into trouble, erm, and then I'll come and get involved. So, erm, I was—I always try to be very, very clear, and transparent, and now, I'm talking about it, Richard, I think that goes back to the fact that I spent 10 years kind of being bewildered as to what was really going on, and er, in the early part of my career.

So, I tried to be really clear with people what it was I wanted and what I expected, um, and hold them accountable for that. But I tried to do it through motivation—I was never one really for the old shouting at things—shouting at people, erm, er, it wasn't really my style but. And you know, fortunately, most of the businesses I ran we grew out of trouble, occasionally, we had to cut our way out of trouble, it's never nice to do that, erm, because of the hard—

[00:40:45]

[unclear sound loss 00:40:48] butcher?

[00:40:49]

Sorry, Richard?

[00:40:50]

Yeah, you've erm—the internet has become unstable—are you a good butcher?

[00:40:57]

Erm, I can do it, and I have—I have done it, erm, when it's been warranted er. But I think the difference is, I always-- when I had to do it, it was to get us to a better place that I'd already mapped out. You know, some people, and you know, everyone has their style, some people will come, and they'll just cut, and they'll see what they've got. That was never me, I would—you know—so, when I took over the sales thing, there were five different sales organisations and I kind of decided that wasn't practical and I m-made one, and half the organisation left the firm and er, you know, that was shameful for them, but equally, I'd been in—I'd seen layoffs in previous years where there were call centre people, who were trying to support their family, losing their jobs and then you'd got salespeople who were earning three or four times as much and they're not selling anything. [laughs] So, actually, my relative sympathies were

somewhat jaded by that. So, I can do it, I don't like to do it, I'm not really in a position now where I'll have to do it again hopefully, so, erm, but er, I can do it, yeah.

[00:42:20]

So, you worked in EDS, and we'll go on in a bit, and Hewlett Packard, another big company, and IBM, another very big company. Did ever the word turn in your head and say, "Mr Sean Finnan [laughs] you can do this for yourself?"

[00:42:36]

Erm, er, a couple of times I thought about it, but I have to be honest Richard, and this is-this is all credit to the people I worked for. Normally, I was either solving a big problem or er, getting a bit agitated about, you know everything was running fine and I was getting a bit bored. And it would be at those moments, that I would have those thoughts and-and nearly always someone would come along and say, "Hey, there's this other big problem over here—" and I'd think, oh, I'll just leave another two years and then before I knew it, I'd been with EDS for 25 years. And er, that's very unfashionable these days, but erm, I kind of worked in all sorts of industries, I worked in all sorts of technologies, I did all sorts of jobs, so, I felt like I'd changed career a lot but er, it just so happened I had the same--the same paymaster.

[00:43:36]

[unclear 00:43:36].

[00:43:37]

Yeah.

[00:43:37]

Yeah. Very soon after you moved to Zurich, people got very agitated about Y2K, the millennial bug.

[00:43:46]

Yes.

[00:43:46]

And your company, erm, made a huge amount of money out of it—

[00:43:52]

Yeah.

[00:43:52]

As did some others. Some of the people who have contributed to the archives say that was a very big scam by the consultants such as EDS and others say, it was absolutely essential. Where do you lie on that spectrum?

[00:44:07]

[laughs] Erm, well, I believed what I was told and what I was told was, we didn't know. So, it wasn't that—it wasn't that Armageddon was definitely going to happen, it wasn't that that was the case. But the fact was, there was a lot of code around in the world where even—I still think it's a bit true today, where it's such old code that people have even lost the source code and they've just got the compiled code, and no one really knows what's going on inside that box. And erm, when you've got that scenario, it's completely unpredictable what will happen and if you've got that situation, the only prudent thing to do is to fix it. So, that was er, what I knew about it, erm, I mean, it wasn't my project, the other guys—there were other people who led that project, erm, and it went very well.

So, er, yeah, I know, and it's always that way, people will always say, oh, you could have done better, and of course, with hindsight, everyone could have done better, but er—but I'm not sure what else we could have done really. I mean, we could—it's-it's like one of those things you go—well, we'll just wing it then, shall we and see what falls over. That doesn't seem like a very good idea either.

[00:45:36]

No. So, you're rising, erm, in EDS and erm, you become erm, managing director of the UK, is that right?

[00:45:46]

Yeah, in a way—in a way, er, in a way, it was a step backwards, er, Richard, it looks like a forward step-on-on the career. But I had reached Division President, but I had

sort of got to the point where I thought, I'm either going to spend my entire career serving GM, or I've got to get out. And EDS still, at that time, there was kind of—half the company was the GM world, which was huge and then the other half of the company was the commercial world and to some extent government. And erm, and the UK was doing very well, it had signed a lot of government business and er, I just thought, I can stay here and kind of run this gig for—as far as it goes, but I'm probably, you know, I'm probably due to go into the commercial world. So, I got a job in finance—running the Financial Services Division for a chap called er, David Courtley, erm, and er, it—when I arrived, the business was nowhere near as grand as it sounded for all sorts of vagaries of the organisation. Erm, but we-we built it up and that was what I got asked to do and various people left and then people started tucking other bits under me. So, within a year or so, I was kind of back to where I'd been in the GM side of things, yeah.

[00:47:11]

What are the biggest mistakes you've made in your career?

[00:47:14]

That's a great question, Richard. Erm, I would say whenever things have gone badly, it's because I didn't spend enough time talking to customers. And generally, when things have gone well, it's because I spent lots of time talking to customers. So, for me, that's somewhere at the root of it, is being close to the expectations of your customers. It's an old phrase and trying to exceed them, but you know, working really hard and really creatively to kind of get-get past that. Erm, so, I think that is the first thing I would say. There are probable—there-there are people I promoted erm, probably a bit too early, erm and there was a—whilst we were working together, it was fine but then they went out on their own and struggled a little bit and-and then got a knockback because of that. And you know, all the right reasons but the wrong outcome, er.

So, that was something that had happened a couple of times. Erm, in the round, I've been—you know, I've been fortunate enough not to be among—I mean, normally, I arrived when the building was on fire as opposed to setting fire to the building. I'm not saying I didn't make mistakes, Richard, I'm—I made hundreds of mistakes, I'm

sure. Erm, I-I-I remem—you know, because-the--at that level of business, once you get up to running 4, 5, 6 billion dollars of business a year, the amount of decisions you're making and the quality of the information that you're having to make the decisions on, erm, you know—the—just the sheer pace of it, it is inevitable you're going to er, make mistakes.

I remember Drucker saying something like, er, you know, the average manager, erm, makes—makes three decisions a day and-and one of them is wrong and er, and er, an outstanding leader makes 20 decisions a day and one of them is wrong. So, er, or something, it was something along—you get the gist of the story, but it was something along those lines. So, you had to be comfortable making decisions, hard decisions and then you had to, you know, hold hands. So, like, we would say, right, that's the price we're going for this deal, we're all going to stand, hold hands and jump off the cliff together. No one's going to come back in three or four weeks and say, oh, well, I told you so.

Erm, so, yeah, we—you know, the er, I remember the NHS, for example, the big NHS project, and we-we done brilliantly in it, we were in the sandbox, we had 92%, so, we had a working system basically, we had thought that quality was everything about that pitch. And er, we put together a really good team, we'd built—we'd pretty much built the system in prototype and demonstrated it and scored off the scale, erm, but we got the price wrong. We got the price just wrong and so, we didn't win, and er, erm, you know and you kind of get invited to—do you want to reconsider your offer, but that was what we thought we could do it for and we weren't going to go any cheaper. And I mean, I know the companies that did end up winning that business ended up in all sorts of ugly lawsuits with, er, the NHS, which was really a pity for the country. You know, if we'd have had one great system now, a lot of the—you know, this pandemic—a lot of it could have been managed more easily by, you know the folks who are like trying to run the Test and Trace as an example, so.

[00:51:18]

So, basically, the people who got that job, which included ICL, Fujitsu, erm, under-priced?

[00:51:25]

I'm not—I'm not saying that I'm saying for how we did it, you know, 'cause what you do is they tell you what they want, you dream up a solution and then you price it. Erm, and then you kind of go, alright, well, what can we do, how can we squeeze it, will we make any money? So, you do that. Now, if someone comes up with a completely better idea then, of course, the price is going to be a lot better. So, I'm not saying they under-priced it, I'm just saying that our system worked but our price was too high.

[00:52:01]

And their system didn't work, and their price was low. I'm not going to press you anymore on that 'cause one of you-your rules, I should think, probably taught at EDS, was you don't-you don't attack the competition, you don't criticise them, you just state your case.

[00:52:17]

Er, well, you know, and it-it's a funny thing because erm, I always said one of the reasons we were so popular in government contracts is we were willing to take the blame for anything [laughs], so. Erm, and you know, it-it was very interesting when people bought from EDS, the type of people who bought from EDS nearly always had a big problem and EDS had this reputation for being able to do kind of impossible projects. Erm, and if it didn't work out, they wouldn't drop the client in it, you know, they-they'd take the responsibility for it. Er, so, now, having said that, I was more than happy to point out to er, a customer if they were thinking of buying from someone else, the wisdom of that [laughs] you know, and what risks they might be taking. But I would always end it by saying but I would say that, wouldn't I?

[00:53:17]

Yeah, okay, okay. And then, erm, Hewlett Packard came along.

[00:53:24]

Yeah, yeah, very interesting, completely different gig.

[00:53:29]

Totally different company.

[00:53:30]

Yeah.

[00:53:31]

Erm, a matrix organisation, of enormous complexity, Hewlett Packard, with a completely different culture, which was then being wrecked by their then chief executive officer, and she decided to set out on this enormous scramble for growth with COMPAQ and you.

[00:53:51]

Yeah, well, so, the guy running it when I was there was Mark Hurd.

[00:53:56]

Right.

[00:53:57]

Erm, and er, you know Rittenmeyer, who had been running EDS had approached them, I think to buy Enterprise Services from them. And they then turned that around and bought er, EDS—at least that's the story I heard, I have no insight on that. But erm, and Mark had a very different model, erm, it was hugely matrix, the erm, the account managers from all the different divisions had tremendous autonomy, which meant that you were never sure when you went to see the client—at least I-it took me a while to figure out who did I need to call beforehand, or what was-what was the, you know, relationship, all that kind of thing. Erm, and there was this general sense that we're so big we set the standard of service, which was a very different philosophy from the EDS er point of view, which was the standard of service is essentially defined by the client. Erm, and-and I suppose it's more consistent with a product perspective and the overall model, at least the way I could see it from my--what was then again a lonely position in a sense, in the—big hierarchy of HP, was er, that the idea was to just run the existing businesses as efficiently as possible in order to generate cash to buy new businesses. So, it was a very different model, it was er, it was all about cash generation and the efficient running of existing businesses, rather

than, for example, at EDS, it was a lot about the rapid expansion of the existing business, and erm, you know.

You know, I kind of arrived there er, with this reputation as a sales guy really, a sales manager because, erm, y-y-you know, in-in that period in-in EDS, I'd been asked to take over European Sales, which I didn't want to do, I wanted to run the UK, but I got asked to take over European Sales, erm, and I just applied manufacturing systems to er, er, and thinking to how we ran sales. I'm not a salesman, I-I have sold things but I'm not particularly good at it, I've met hundreds of people who are better than me. But I was a very good Sales Director, as it turned out—who knew?

Erm, and it was this application of manufacturing thinking to the-to the processes, and we went from—European Sales was in big trouble when I took it over, again, it was one of those, we've got a deep dark hole, send Sean. And erm, and the win rate was like 10%, the CEO at the time, was Mike Jordan and I said to him, "I haven't got a lot of budget" and he said, "Well, your win rate is 10%, you're wasting 90 cents on the dollar" and I thought, that is a really good point. So, erm, I worked on it for a couple of years, and I got the win rate up to 81% and we sold—in the last two years, we sold 23 billion, which I think was, at the time, a record. We did the DII, which was the largest infrastructure deal at the time at 4 billion, we did Vodafone at 1.7, which I think was the largest apps deal in its time. So, we kind of, you know, [unclear 00:57:24] all these deals.

So, that was sort of my background as I arrived at HP and people were looking to me to kind of replicate that but from a more a general management position. Erm, and you know, they were very nice to me, Joe Eason then was running erm, the outsourcing bit er, who obviously went on to great things. Erm, and he was very nice to me, but I just couldn't get the feel of the place, to be honest, Richard. I couldn't-I couldn't find my feet, and I found—I'm not saying this is what Hewlett Packard were doing, but I found, for the first time in my career, I was saying things to clients, and I was wondering whether or not the company would back me up.

[00:58:14]

Oh.

[00:58:16]

Y-you know what I mean, I was like—

[00:58:17]

Oh, yeah, that's horrible, horrible.

[00:58:19]

Yeah, and er, whereas, with EDS, good, bad, or indifferent, they pretty much, would always back you up if you kind of went out on a limb, erm, so, er, as long as you weren't completely mad, but that's a different story. So, erm, so, yeah, I found—I did alright at HP, I got good appraisals, they paid me well, they were very nice to me, Joe was very nice to me, but I couldn't—I couldn't find my way. They-they'd offered me the European Presidency for Services, which was a fantastic step, erm, and it was kind of the job I'd been hankering after for a while. But IBM came along and erm, Mike Daniels and er, a guy called Ted out of HR and a few others, and they just did a really good job of er, talking to me.

What had happened there, Richard is, the-there was a deal at Aviva, which was a mainframe outsourcing deal, it should have been IBM's all day long, and we'd beaten them. And so, they were like, how can this possibly happen? So, that-that was what led them to pull in on the thread. And they just caught me at the right moment really. Erm, a year earlier I wouldn't have been interested, er, I'd nearly gone to Capgemini at one point in time, but we couldn't agree the contract. Erm, but apart from that, pretty much I just stayed with EDS.

So, I went to IBM erm, and it was—you know, it was an exciting journey and part of my logic was this-was this big thing playing out in IBM. We all knew Palmisano was going and so, the-there wasn't a sense that the board would go outside—not that I had any insight at all, this was me reading the tea leaves. So, er, that left two people from what I could see, which was Mike Daniels, the guy who was hiring me, or Ginni Rometty. So, I thought, yeah, you know, if Mike Daniels gets the job then everyone underneath him sort of sucked up a bit and I could end up—he was running about 60

billion at the time, so, I could end up running 30 billion. 'Cause, at this point, there weren't many bigger jobs in outsourcing other than the people who were running the firms, you know, and I was kind of there or thereabouts. I'd reported to Rittenmeyer, and I'd reported to various folks in different roles. So, I-I—you know, I was—I'd run between 5 and 7 billion for the best part of 10 years really and er, well, no, 7 years at that point. So, I kind of thought, you know, this is my one chance to take that next step up erm, and I'll give it a go and see how it is, so, I went to IBM.

[01:01:01]

How was the culture at IBM differently—different then?

[01:01:05]

Er, yeah, it was really different, it was really different. There was erm—I mean one of the things was time. There was no time, all the plans were about this quarter, all the focus was about this quarter. And that was kind of er,—kind of difficult-difficult for me to adjust to actually because I always—you know, I was always on a long game, here's my vision, here's what I'm going to do, year 1 year 2, year 3, and we'll end up there. And erm, it really wasn't like that, and I remember there was a particular contractual issue with a client and I was getting enormous pressure to erm, settle it each quarter, but I didn't erm, and then, you know three or four quarters later, the client said, alright, I'll pay you 28 million—and er, which was a fantastic outturn, but it was very a-atypical for the way IBM did things. Erm, and er, so, that was different, that was different. I mean, er, I must say, I-I spent a little bit of time with Ginni Rometty, and she did nothing but offer to help me, she was-she was really good value, I thought, erm, and I was pleased in a way [laughs] although it didn't suit me, I was pleased she got the er, the job because er, she-she really had er, an eye for trying to help people be successful.

Erm, that was one thing. That thing you described earlier actually, it's interesting you brought that up, Richard, but that whole sense that there are three people outside the door who could all do your job. It wasn't quite like that, although that definitely underpinned the management thinking. But al-but also, the-the structure was so complicated, you had industries, and you had product lines, and you had the direct management line and then you had the geography line. And everyone kind of wanted to have a meeting with you. And actually, one of the reasons I left—I mean, there

were various reasons I decided to leave in the end, but I do remember staring at my diary and realising I had five times as many meetings with IBM as I had with customers. And er, and an experienced IBM-er would say, well, that's your fault, Sean, you shouldn't let that happen, but I wasn't an experienced IBM-er, and you know.

I think if I'd have done my 12 years of er, going round—So, they were very nice to me again, you know, they gave me good appraisals, paid me well, erm, you know, I was ill for three months and er, they were very supportive. So, I haven't got a bad word really, er, not particularly--but it was a very different culture, and it did—the jacket never quite fit, I think would be the honest way of saying it. I did some things well, I mean, I'm-I'm very happy, I still get calls from people who say, You remember you implemented that thing, well, we're doing it everywhere now, or you remember you predicted that would happen, well, that's exactly what happened. So, that-that was er, quite encouraging, and erm, you know, some of the people I developed there—Erm, I brought a guy called Martin Blackburn in to be my COO and he's—you know, he's running Rackspace Europe now, he's doing very well. So, erm, those kinds of things er, make me feel good about my time there but I-I wouldn't say it was as good as, you know, er, my period in the early 2000s or something had been for EDS, so, you know, six of one half a dozen of the other, Richard.

[01:04:56]

How long did you spend at IBM?

[01:04:58]

I was there three years I think, I was there three years. And the thing was, so, I-I was quite happy there, I mean they reorganised so, er, to a full Europe and I had er, Strategic Outsourcing Europe, but that was er, and that was, you know, a good job. But the way IB-IBM worked is, I knew what would happen next, is, I'd do that for a couple of years then I'd be sent to China for a couple of years, then I'd go to Latin America for a couple of years, and you know, and I-I was basically in the mill of having to do that spiral again. And I was 52 and I was thinking, do you know what, I

really haven't got the stomach to just do it all over again, erm, so, I'm not gonna. So, I called er—I called my boss and said, I want to go, he said, well, can you give us six months so we can find someone to take your job? And I said yes, sure. So, I-I-I did that and then we left on the best of terms. And there are still people there, you know, I exchange notes with, that er, have done very well for themselves, so, erm, you know. It's an interesting-interesting firm.

[01:06:13]

It's not called "I've Been Moved" for nothing, has it?

[01:06:17]

Well, I've heard that, yeah [laughs]. I mean, it's interesting now of course, 'cause they're splitting it off, they're splitting off the bit I ran, erm. I do like to point out that er, the erm, the share price I think peaked when I was there, and it hasn't been that good since.

[01:06:32]

Of course, of course.

[01:06:36]

[laughs] but erm, I'm not sure I can claim any credit for that, but er—but erm, yeah, and then, they're now spinning that off. And I think that was—there was, there was an undercurrent, even then, erm, you know, it-it's interesting, but when you're running 60 billion then growing it is er, as Mike was, growing it is not an easy thing. And people say, you know, people used to go to me, oh, you just need—I-I-I'd be running 6 billion, and they'd go, you've got a-- you just need to grow at 5% and I'm like, do you know what 5% of 6 billion actually is, you know? And so, so, yeah, I mean that's the challenge you take with those jobs, so. But I think enormous resources, fantastic resources. And I always felt the company sort of got in its own way a little bit in Europe, er, to be fair. Erm, I mean, er, actually, there was a guy called, er, Brendan, who I thought was taking us in the right direction, Brendan Reilly, erm, he went off to be CEO of Telstra actually. But er, but then you know, you get the succession of folks who come in from the er, the US for a year or so and don't really get it.

[01:07:53]

You were also mentor to the firm's highest potential European executives.

[01:07:59]

Yeah. Yeah, it was quite interesting, 'cause I was a qualified coach at that point, and so, I'd-I'd you know, I'd got me MBA and then I'd gone back and done an MSc in Organisational Behaviour, erm, and I'd also qualified as a coach. So, I've always had an interest in learning and trying to keep myself moving forward. So, I-I—when I first went, of course, Hewlett Packard were not best pleased, so, I had to go in a role that would mean that there wasn't a lawsuit between the two firms. Erm, so, I—so, I had this kind of role for a while and one of the things I did was coach all the high pots, erm, and yes, it was an interesting—it was interesting time, 'cause—and it was quite good in a way, 'cause I also learned a lot from the folks who were running hardware and software and all that kind of stuff so, yeah. And-and I mean, I'll—the reason I qualified as a coach was I'd—at EDS, I'd become sought out as someone who would take time and mentor people and I just thought, well, I'm doing all this but I've no idea if I'm doing it properly. You know, I'm just kind of telling people, well, I think so, I'll go and get erm, you know, I'll go and do a bit of training so at least—you know, I'm not doing more harm than good, so.

[01:09:13]

[laughs]

[01:09:16]

So, I did—you know, I was 52, I had also been President of the Trade Association in the UK a-at that point—Intellect, as it was called then, now Tech UK. Erm, and er, we—you know, we were trying to get the industry voice. The industry hadn't—had-had not had as big a voice. And it's interesting, you know nowadays, everyone is talking about tech-enabled futures and so on and-and, we were saying that—that could be a way out for er, a country where manufacturing and so on was in demise, erm, but it was hard to get listened to. Having said that, we did alright, we won-we won the best—CBI gave us the award for the best trade association, er, when I was—when I was president. Although, that was down to John Higgins, who, if you haven't

interviewed him, I would say you should interview him, erm. But er, he was the CEO at the time.

[01:10:12]

Right.

[01:10:14]

But yeah, so, I-I was—it was kind of interesting, I was in rooms with Lord Mandelson and all sorts of—you know the great and good trying to move-move the ball around the pitch really, erm. And-and I just thought, if I stay, I'll probably be one of those people who is dead at 60, you know, just 'cause of the way I worked and er, you know. I-I don't know why I had that thought, but I had that thought and I thought well, I don't really fancy another 10 years of charging round the world so, I'm going to pack it in and that's what I did. And er, and then decided to do something completely different, which was to start with much smaller firms, so.

[01:10:57]

So, why do we have this problem in the UK of scaling up companies, 'cause this is one of your passions now?

[01:11:06]

Yeah, yeah. Erm, I—do you know, when I—it's funny when I was on the board of Intellect, we erm, we commissioned a piece of work I can't remember who did the legwork, but I do remember, er, the Lord Lieutenant, Ken Olisa, erm, coming and talking to us about it. He'd done a study, or he'd supervised a study. And erm, at the time, it was the fact that a-a-a lot of the people surveyed had a number in their head, that was very different to their American counterparts. So, at the time, it was like, if I can come out of this with 5 million pounds clear, then I'm going to sell the business. And that was sort of the-the ambition level for a lot of people. Now, of course, there are different people, like John O'Connell, who took Staffware and so on and really did a great job growing those kinds of businesses, and you mentioned Arm and so on. Erm, but for a lot of people, they get to a certain point and then the offer comes and it's just too tempting for them to er, to take the money and go, so, and I don't—you know, I mean, that's entirely people's choices.

Whereas in the US, kind of—there's this sort of assumption that, well, of course, we're going to be—I'm going to make 50 million or I'm going to make 100 million or I'm going to make 200 million, of course, you know. Erm, and so, there is a very different sense of what success is there than here—back then. I think that's changed a lot now, I think erm, at least the people I'm seeing now, seem to be more bedding in for er, a longer journey. But the fact of the matter is there is a wash of money in the industry that you can use to help you grow, but also it does, you know, unfortunately, mean a lot of companies get subsumed into bigger companies. There is a thing called a rollup and you get a lot of companies that do rollups of four or five companies that are—fun-funds I mean, that are doing—investors, who are like, taking four, five, six companies with similar tech and rolling them into one bigger one, erm, and trying to—shortcut the entrepreneurial growth part. 'Cause quite often, you know, quite often it takes 10 years or so, or 15 years or 20 years, to be an overnight success.

[01:13:42]

Do you think that rollup process works?

[01:13:47]

Er, well, it depends on the metric, and if the metric is to make the investor more wealthy, then yes, I think it can work quite well. Er, if the metric is to grow regional geographic champions in certain technologies, then no, I'm not sure it's helpful. Erm.

[01:14:13]

Because the erm, the history of mergers and acquisitions in the IT sector is really quite poor, isn't it—hardly any pay-out?

[01:14:25]

Yeah, well, yeah, it's-it's quite interesting if you followed EDS, and then, er, you know, and then you added HP Enterprise Services, and then you add CSC, and-and then you look at DXC and it's smaller than the point you started at, and you're like—how-- you know, how can you add all those firms together and end up with a smaller firm at the other end so?

[01:14:47]

Exactly.

[01:14:50]

Er, yeah, I-I think there is some truth to that, er, Richard. Having-having said that, erm, you know, taking money to grow, I think is exactly the right thing because if you're trying to bootstrap yourself, and you know, you're kind of like, alright, if we have a brilliant year this year, we'll make an extra 300,000 and then we can hire one extra person to do selling and one person to do support. You-you're kind of like, that's a really long path to success, a really long path.

[01:15:22]

Yes.

[01:15:22]

So, if—y-you know, if you're at that point where you've made a couple of million of revenue and y-you're trying to get going, then, I think taking the money in a sensible way from a sensible advisor. And you know, those two things are not easy, by the way, erm, which is why I'm in this scale-up group, is-is er, I think it's an entirely practical thing to do. Erm, and er, you know, John O'Connell, er, who I think you've int—or you know has done this kind of interview, er, was erm, very much er, instrumental in founding the scale-up group. And he had this vision of, er, trying to help firms find the money but using the expertise of people who'd done that kind of transaction on the industry side. So, it's nearly all ex-CEOs of erm, of firms that have you know, done really well. And erm I think it's a brilliant idea actually, er, that he's trying to do.

[01:16:23]

Can I put something cheeky to you?

[01:16:25]

Sure.

[01:16:26]

I hope you don't mind. A pretty sorry state of the UK industry itself, part of the reason is that really bright people, like Sean Finnan, went and worked—

[01:16:38]

It's still Sean Finnan, Richard, you've got to work on that.

[01:16:39]

Finnan.

[01:16:40]

Laughs.

[01:16:41]

I've got to work on that.

[01:16:42]

Okay, yeah, go on—sorry, go on.

[01:16:44]

That's why I deliberately did it-- smart people like Sean Finnan, went and worked for the Americans, that's why we're in that stick.

[01:16:54]

Yeah, you could argue that and, of course, they bought SD-Scicon and SD and Scicon had merged, erm, and were tremendous companies, you know, the people I worked with that came from there, were brilliant, brilliant people, and were a big part of why EDS UK was such a phenomenal force in its day. Yeah, yeah, that's-that's true, I mean, we-we are not like the French, we do not shelter our industries er, from that kind of activity. And that is good and bad, I think, er, you know I think, er, it drives competitiveness, erm and it-and it has—it means we have a lot of people who are, you know able to move. I mean it was interesting, I was chatting to folks over at NTT Data the other day and er, they're becoming a real force in the UK now. And er, you

know, you look at them and you're kind of like, well, where have they come from?
And-and they're now working for the Japanese, you know, so.

[01:17:55]

Yeah.

[01:17:56]

So, yeah, the money comes from where the money comes from, Richard, and-and it is a shame that we don't have some British champions you know. I thought BT would be there, it was—you would think ICL had the chance to be there, erm, but for whatever reason, they, they didn't quite make it. And you know, neither did EDS, let's be honest about it, EDS got subsumed as well, so, it-it-it is that kind of industry, where, if you're in any way not nimble on your feet, someone will gobble you up.

[01:18:31]

And erm, where should the young people point their interest in the IT industry?

[01:18:39]

Anywhere.

[01:18:40]

What advice would you give, anywhere at all?

[01:18:42]

I just think it's the best industry to be in, erm, I think it doesn't—I mean, you know, it doesn't really matter, get in, get trained, try, and avoid all the stuff that you read on the internet that says there's three steps to success or if you haven't been promoted in a year and a half, or even, er, you know, the follow your passion sort of thing. I mean, I never knew that I'd end up doing things I was so passionate about and I wouldn't have been able to even conceive of them before I arrived at that spot. So, erm, I—having said that, I have been a long-time fan of Artificial Intelligence. I remember back in '85 trying to write an expert system with a shell from Agapayed, and er, I mean, it worked, but it was a bit clunky. And erm, and I think, you know, I think it's

something it's just now, it's of its time and that the next 10 years, the Artificial Intelligence space will be phenomenal.

I would say, even if you don't think you're going to work in IT, learn about data, and how to work with data, because I don't think there will be jobs in the future that don't involve working with data and—and you know, the information that comes from systems. So, even if you think I'm going into insurance or banking or anything like that, then you've got to familiarise yourself with the systems world because all—in a way, I am sort of predicting Richard, that eventually, all jobs will be IT jobs, in one form or another. So, erm, I'd say get into the industry, I love, er, AI, I love big data, I think they're thing—I think the whole erm, obviously, the companies I'm involved with now, both erm, ActiveOps and Avvio, I think are in really interesting spaces, erm.

So, you know, and erm, there—the thing that always surprises me, like Avvio, I didn't really know much about the hospitality sector and erm, I'd done some contracts with clients like that over the years. But I didn't really know that, and I've ended up working in this company and it's fascinating, it's a fascinating business and a fascinating industry and a completely different set of problems. So, erm, you know and obviously, with ActiveOps we've just floated on AIM, erm, which—all credit to Richard Jeffery, as an example of someone who didn't take the money and sell out, but as a-as CEO founder, who stayed with it. And I think that is a tremendous thing, erm, and I-I you know, I-I-I'm pleased to be part of that journey. So, so, I don't know if I've answered that question, but I would say get in any way you can, get to know a bit, and then figure out where you want to go.

[01:21:54]

You started off somewhere and you seem to have made your own luck, which is something that people have to do. So, you're the son of a-son of a-a welder and a-a weaver in a factory and a Hollerith machine maker, er, Hollerith machine erm, operator. Erm, you haven't done too badly, have you, Sean?

[01:22:16]

Not bad for a beginner is what I say, Richard, not bad for a beginner. And the other thing I would say though, erm, is—and I think this is very true of our industry, we're very lucky. It may be true of others, but I speak to the industry I know, is a lot of the people in the industry are very generous, they're very generous with their time and so, yeah, like you say, I made my own luck but actually, a lot of that was the gift of time that other more senior people were willing to give me, you know. All sorts of people and I-I-I'm kind of—I would start—it would be like an Oscar speech if I went on saying all the names, er, of the people who had helped me along the way. So, er, I shan't do that, they know who they are, but you know, lots and lots of people, especially in those first 20 years, I would say. The number of people who took time to help me and point me in the right direction or kind of go, you know, you're sort of not quite in the right space here, Sean, think about it differently—tremendous. And—and I do think our industry is very generous like that, erm, and if you find yourself in a place that isn't like that, then think about going to a place that is like that 'cause actually, there is an enormous number of them in the industry, and er, you know, generous-hearted, technically-minded people who just want to d-deliver good systems and keep clients happy and what's not to love about that, right?

[01:23:49]

Indeed. And I'm sure you were one of them as well, who gives your time generously to other people and help them along and that is why you're contribution to the archives, Mr Sean Finnan, has been very entertaining and certainly, is inspirational. Thank you very much.

[01:24:06]

You're very kind, Richard, thank you and good luck with the project, I think it's a-a really good thing.

[01:24:10]

Thank you very much.

End of interview

