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Interview Summary Sheet Title Page

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Interviewee's forename:	PAMELA	**Sex:**	FEMALE
Honours			
Occupation:	CEO, INFOSHARE	**Date and place of birth:**	
Mother's occupation:		**Father's occupation:**	

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Pamela Cook

Interviewed by

Jane Bird

19th August 2021

Via Zoom

Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology, where we capture the past and inspire the future. It's Thursday the 19th of August 2021, and we're talking on Zoom, as has become customary during the coronavirus pandemic. I'm Jane Bird, and I've been reporting on the IT industry for newspapers such as the Sunday Times and the Financial Times since the early 1990s.

[00:25]

Our contributor today is Pamela Cook, CEO of Infoshare, a data technology company which creates accurate single views, for example, of people, places, addresses and objects. When she took the helm in 2010 she re-mortgaged her house to fund a major company restructure. Since then, she has tried to reshape the business, to use its technology and position for good, including helping deal with the coronavirus pandemic. 'What I have discovered,' she says, 'is being able to make a real impact on people's lives, whether they're at risk, need early intervention, or are trying to disguise their true identities.' Pamela is also a magistrate in Thames Valley, and sits on the Cabinet Office SME Panel, fighting for the rights and fair treatment of small businesses in the UK. She is also a popular speaker on successful information sharing, protecting citizens, and the implication of legislation on data sharing and analysis. She was named the Female Entrepreneur of the Year in the 2019 Enterprise Awards, and listed on the 2020 Data IQ 100 People in Data, and on the 2020 Global Top 100 Data Visionaries.

[01:49]

Pamela, welcome. I'm very much looking forward to hearing more about your professional achievements and experiences.

Thank you for the opportunity, it's lovely to be here.

Well, if we could start at the beginning. Perhaps you could tell me about your childhood. You were born in Birmingham I think in 1968.

Yes.

So what was your childhood like? Was it happy?

It was a delightful childhood. I was born in a slum actually, Jane. It's a, probably something that is very rare in the UK these days. And I was the youngest of six children. And, the… I mean for example, there was no indoor toilet, there wasn't any electricity, and it was very close to a prison. So, when I was three we were moved into what was called a New Town, which was a development in the 1970s of the Government at the time where they were taking people out of slums around the UK and putting them into New Towns with new opportunities and growth. Towns such as Milton Keynes was a New Town, and the one I was taken to was in Northamptonshire, where they would find positions for, generally the working class families like ours, and for the, for the men mostly, so that they could actually start with a position and a council house. So that was big news, because we had an indoor loo, and, and we had electricity, and, and it was a, quite a pivotal time. But being the youngest of six, I think the, my elder siblings struggled, because they were in the middle of a lot of their studies at the time; but for me, at three years of age, I don't, it didn't really affect me.

[03:29]
Do you think having a, having a difficult time financially, though, in your early life, really kind of fuelled your ambition and drive later on?

Do you know, no, I don't think it did actually. I think what fuelled the ambition and drive were the, the very strong morals it installed in us by my parents, in terms of work ethics and, and doing things the right way morally. Because although we didn't have any money, we never went without food, we never went without clothes. I mean they were far from being the most, trendy, or even the, the most delightful of food, but we never went hungry. And so we, we never really realised, I don't think, that we were poor. And, I think because we all had strong work ethics as children, I mean I had worked from the age of fourteen, then, one doesn't really realise, because you can buy things for yourself from a very early age, as soon as you work. So we never really felt that we had gone without.

[04:28]
Mm. What about your education? Because your, yes, your parents, just to recap on your parents, your father had actually been a monk I, I understand. Is that right?

He had. That's right, yes. Strong Irish family. And, back in those days, and I think to some extent still, the pride of an Irish family is when, offspring will go off and be bishops or, or nuns, or monks, or whatever, or priests. And my, my uncle, my father's brother, was a bishop, until he died in Australia, and my father was a monk for seven years. And, and he loved it actually, but he left on the day that he was due to take his final vows, and he met my mother shortly afterwards. So, a very humble man, and a very, a very great man.

So… Yes, so then, you obviously went to local schools, you went to state schools.

Yes.

So, how was that experience? It sounded like, I think you said survival was your abiding memory.

Yes.

Was it quite tough at school then?

It was, yes. It's… I mean I had no concept of, of wealth or class at that time, and even though it was a state school, a comprehensive, it was in a very rough area. A lot of the villages, children from the surrounding villages, in the middle class if you like environments came there. And of course, I had no concept that, that they would see that, my knitted cardigan and my very sensible shoes would, would set me aside so much. So I think I was the object of, not ridicule so much, but it certainly wasn't, bees to a honeypot. You know, it was, it was a bit of survival. And there was a few, a fair few fights that I got into, just trying to hold my own. And… And there was a few scary walks home. But… But again, you know, it was just a case of getting from A to B, getting home safely, and if I had a few bruises on the way, it was not really the end of the world. And so, it just became your normal. And… And you didn't really ever, sit back and assess whether it was fair or whether it was OK; it was just the way it was.

[06:30]
No. So, what did you enjoy about school, in terms of subjects, then? Because you did economics, history and sociology, didn't you, for A Level.

Yes. I didn't actually enjoy an awful lot about school. I was quite bored. I think the teachers were trying very hard, but didn't really keep me entertained. So I missed a lot of the sixth form, purely just, looking at external interests, and sneaking off to work. I think I enjoyed sport and drama more, neither of which of course I excelled at, but thoroughly enjoyed.

So, you, you were working, you said, from the age of fourteen.

Yes.

What sort of jobs were you doing?

So, at fourteen I was in a newsagent's on a Monday and Tuesday evening, and I was running the newsagent actually in the town centre, and on a Saturday, at £2.14[?] an hour, I remember that was my first hourly rate. And then, at the age of sixteen I was able to apply to Waitrose. So I then carried on with the newsagent's, and then I would do two nights a week and one day a weekend in charge of the cereal aisle at Waitrose. Very proud of that cereal aisle, it was always very well-presented. [laughs] And… And then, in between that, on a Sunday I started silver service waitressing. So I was running sort of, three different roles from the age of sixteen, but just one from fourteen, for the first two years.

Goodness. You didn't have much spare time then,

No.

To pursue other interests and hobbies.

Well, but you know, I wanted to get my hair done, and I wanted to get some nice clothes, because I was starting to understand what that looked like, and the choice

was, you work and then you can, you can do that stuff, or, or you don't. And it was a very simple choice, you know, there were no savings, there was no bank accounts, there wasn't any other way of, of chieving those goals. So, it was a means to an end.

Yeah. Yeah, and your, your father didn't really think that university was appropriate for, for girls, I think.

No.

It was quite a sort of sex… Because you had your, four brothers, is that right, and a sister?

That's right.

So was it quite a kind of sexist environment that you grew up in then?

Not that, not that I was aware of, but it was, I think it was fairly traditional Irish in so much that, you know, so Sundays it would be, you know, the boys would go to the pub, the girls would, would do the Sunday roast, and then, you know, everyone would come together, and then we would do all the clearing up. And, the boys were the ones that were, I guess the key decision-makers actually. But again, it never really occurred to me, never, I never stopped to think about the impact of that, or the fairness of it. I just accepted it. But my brothers went to university, but when it came to me, my father – and my elder sister, certainly didn't support it, didn't think it was appropriate.

[09:12]
Yeah. Yeah. And you, you were sort of happy with that, you, or, you were you happy to kind of comply?

I was happy, because I had made the decision to go travelling. And, and therefore, it was a very fine alternative.

And you went to Australia.

I did. Yup, I went to Australia. I was living, based with the bishop in Western Australia, who was my uncle. I was fortunate enough to be able to be based there, and then sort of, travelled out from there.

And, how do you think that influenced you? I mean, just thinking about those influences, before, before you started your full-time work, who, who would you say influenced you most at that sort of time?

I think… [clearing throat] Excuse me. I think at the age of eighteen, nineteen, I think the key influences are your friends, are the people you meet at that age. Because… I think what I realised during that time was how little I knew. I mean it was my first ever flight, was to Australia; I had never been to an airport before, I had no idea what to expect. [clearing throat] Excuse me. And… So I think I was influenced by the realisation that, how little I knew and how ignorant I was, but also how much I could help in the church environment. For example, I was very active in supporting and helping a lot of the community groups, through the local nuns and through the bishop. And I really enjoyed that. And I was a check-out chick at Woolworths in Australia as well, and that was a great experience, meeting people from a completely different… Because I was a novelty, it's back in '90-, whatever, '97 I think, I was a real novelty, because I had a very strong English accent, and, you know, that, the part of Australia I went to wasn't populated by many foreigners at that point.

Yeah.

So, I think I learnt to adapt to new situations very quickly, having not been exposed to many historically.

Yeah. So it was a kind of, quite quick growing up process, being in Australia.

Completely.

Yeah.

Completely. Yeah.

[11:08]
So then you, you came back to the UK and thought you were going to get a job selling televisions.

[laughs] Yes. So… [laughing] So I knew that I needed to get a job. I still didn't really know what I wanted to do, Jane. And, I saw a job advertised for telesales, I think it was being paid £4,100 at the time, and I thought, that sounds great. I could get there by bus. I went back to my parents' house to, when I returned. And, and generally, because it was telesales, that's what I thought I was doing, is selling tellies, televisions. And I was quite shocked, on the first day. I went to the interview, I got the job straight away, but they didn't actually ever describe at the interview what I would be doing, so I just assumed, they assumed that I knew; we obviously covered the usual interview questions. And I started the next day, and… But in the meantime I had done lots of research [laughs] about televisions, which, which to this day has been useless. And, and I started, it was tele*phone* sales of course, as I subsequently discovered, and I was selling over the telephone, in the computer games industry. So I was working for a distributor in, in Northamptonshire. And, worked my way up then to, to lead the team eventually.

So you needed to know about computer games to sell them presumably, then, did you? I mean that was what you had to get into, or…?

Well yes, but, but as a distributor, you would get all the briefing, as it turned out, from all the suppliers of the games, and they would send you all of the information you needed. So you would then just phone up all the shops around the UK and try and get them to take those particular games. So it was… You didn't need to know the intricacies, just the key points.

Oh right. So you didn't have to become a, a computer games enthusiast?

Luckily no. I've never played one to this day. And, and that's quite fortunate, because I'm sure I wouldn't be very good.

[12:55]
So, going through your sort of career from there, then. You moved sort of, up the ladder fairly swiftly, didn't you? What…

Yes.

Would you like to perhaps pick out some of those sort of key inflexion points and high points, and, you know, how you kind of wound up in the IT industry?

Well I think, computer games was a real growing industry at the time, and now, it is, of course, called the video games industry now, and it was absolutely, busy as, and, and lots of opportunities for people who were hard-working. So, it was actually fairly easy to make an impression, because there was so much need for more and more senior people. So, the, I think the big impression I got, or, or I had during those early days, was, I could manage staff, and that I was fairly good at it. And it was by, you know, pure accident. And, and as a result I ended up running the 29-strong sales team. And I did that over a course of, a few years. And, I was able to travel a lot to America, because that was the burgeoning headquarters, in California, and started to work with, with the Japanese companies Sega and Nintendo. So huge exposure at a very young age. But I think, I'm not sure whether it was because I was in the right place at the right time, or whether my skills were right, and I'll probably never know, but it, but it worked. And I had this, this ambition to always earn more than my age, and, and that happened a lot sooner than I planned. So I was, I was really pleased about that.
[14:33]
And then I was headhunted to join the, one of the publishers of the games; as opposed to being a distributor, I would go back to, take one step back and actually end up with one of the suppliers in a UK sales manager role. And, and again, that was different again. I had never done face-to-face sales, I had never travelled as a rep on the road. So it was a brand new experience and setting for me.

Was that Codemasters?

Codemasters, yeah, a fantastic organisation. And, set in rural Warwickshire. And, that was interesting from a, a genetics point of view – sorry, gender point of view, not genetics, in so much that, the chap that was recruiting made it very clear internally that he only wanted a man. He didn't want a woman. And, there were ten people apparently that had been approached for the role, one woman and nine chaps, and it came down at the third interview to two of us. I didn't know any of this at the time. And we were asked to do a presentation. And in those days, Jane, it was where you took the, the transparent slides onto an overhead projector. So of course I hired a projector, I had prepared 20 slides over the Christmas break, and turned up, and of course it was in a conservatory, so it was absolutely hopeless, because all the sun meant that you couldn't actually see any of the slides. So I then had to move the whole interview into the boardroom, and all of the board were there, so, they weren't too happy about that. But nonetheless, the two people, the final two of us, got through that stage, and then it came down to, an intelligence test, and, an IQ test rather. And so that, we both had it. And they had decided, and they told this chap, that whoever got the highest IQ test would be the one that got the job. And it just so happened it was me, and the only reason it was me was, I had done my research, and I had looked at tests, and I had understood them. And the other chap hadn't. But it was made very clear that I was not the favourite by the person I had to report in to. And, and he gave me a lot of, a lot of grief in the early days for being a woman actually, because he didn't believe that we could do the job, as females. He thought we would be, not quite right. So that was a bit of a, a sort of a wake-up for me, to realise that I would… And it was the first time I had ever been judged on gender as well, which was interesting, because I had never really thought about it as being an issue before.

Mm.

So I was glad to get through it, but it, it wasn't an easy ride. But, but nonetheless, the company was absolutely super. And it a, a really interesting, interesting role, because it was all so new. But again, I knew that, the computer games, the video games industry, was, you know, growing into a real success story, and it was great to be a part of that.

[17:17]
But you didn't stay there very long, I think, just from '94 to '95, is that right? Or…

Yeah, it was about eighteen months I think.

Oh OK. Right.

Yes. And, I think I was then headhunted. Because the role had taken off and had been quite successful, I think I was headhunted to a competitor, from memory.

Oh right. So that would have been Interactive Marketing, was it?

Yes. And… And they were representing a number of publishers in the marketplace, and they, they set up rep teams for each one of them, and one of them was Codemasters actually, and they had asked me to go and run it on behalf of Codemasters and Codemasters' competitors. And Codemasters were very supportive of that, because they could see I had almost outgrown the role anyway, and, so that was a very positive move on both sides. And then, after that, a larger organisation called Interplay, one of the American ones that I had met, were being represented by Interactive Marketing, and they approached me then to go and join them.

Yes.

So, it sort of went from there into Virgin, who then bought Interplay, Virgin Media.

Right. So you're still really in the area of video games?

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes, I was still there.

[18:37]
So, then, October 1999 you joined Infoshare. So that was your leap into the world of computing.

Yes, it was.

So, how did that come about?

Well it was interesting. So, being in computer games for so long, it was terrific, because it was, it was B2B business, it was very successful, it was easy, it was well paid, it was almost a breeze. But I felt something lacking. It was, it wasn't vacuous as such, but it was, I guess meaningless. And I really wanted to work for an organisation where it actually made a positive difference to people's lives, as opposed to providing entertainment in their living room or bedroom. So, when I was speaking to the founders of Infoshare, and I realised that what they were trying to do was use data for good, it actually struck a real chord inside me, in so much that when I joined them, it was probably, half my salary that I had been on, and a risk, a risk into the unknown, because I think I was employee number, I don't know, three, or four, at the time. So it was a real sort of, start-up business. But I just felt, there was something that was burning in my belly that said, this actually is a good thing. This is where you'll do something where people will really benefit, in the community. And it just struck a chord. And so I threw my lot in with them. They didn't have a printer, they didn't have a sales strategy. They had absolutely nothing. But they had a, a real belief in creating a piece of technology that would make a difference.

They didn't have a printer, did you say?

No, they had nothing. They didn't have anything at all.

So it literally was, not a one-man band, but just, what…

It was a two-man band.

Two-man band. You and, and, what, one other person basically?

No, it was two founders, and they were real developers, real techies, real passionate, intelligent people, but had no sort of, well, they had had no experience of running an office or being in an office or setting about a sales and marketing plan. So… And of course I had, I had come from this fairly privileged position of having a PA and a big office, and, you know, West End. And, so that the shock was quite apparent. You know, I had to learn how, about ordering stationery and real back to basics stuff. And at times it was tricky, but, what I believed in was the, the reason, and this, it… Their project, that really got me going, was actually, they were trying to identify crime hotspots in a part of London, and the reason the police were struggling was because the data they were looking at, from the different data sources, whether that was local authority or fire or police, was so poor in its quality that they were struggling to identify where their real crime hotspots were. And I thought, we could really do something here. And so by the time I joined Infoshare they had already developed the first throes of the technology which will help those police forces and those local authorities identify problem areas in the community. And that was the starting point.

[21:42]
Yes. So that was… But, you met them in a very informal way, didn't you? I mean, was this some kind of drinking, pub drinking session or something? I mean [laughter], it strikes me, in some ways your approach to getting jobs is extremely thoughtful and well-planned and researched, and all the rest of it, and then there seems to be this kind of rather haphazard, accidental, oh, you know, we got drunk together, and I got persuaded. So it's, quite a paradoxical situation.

Well, there's more to it than that, Jane, because actually the founders were my brothers.

Ah, right.

And, they were… I knew that they were up to something, and doing something a little bit different, and, we used to have what we call a boys' night every two months, and it was my turn to host. And, we did have a few drinks, and a few more drinks, and by the end of the evening I was so impassioned with what they were telling me, I

agreed to join them. But I had forgotten, actually, the next morning. So they phoned me in my Virgin office, in the West End, and they said, 'My gosh, we're so excited.' And I said, 'That's great. What about?' And… And so, we, we took it from there. But actually, I joined them, I said, 'Look, I'll come over, I'll take a three-month sabbatical, and I'll help you set it all up.' But I was so impressed within, with what they were trying to achieve, I'm still here 20 years later.

Right. So…

So, it was… Yeah.

[23:08]
So, but it was obviously a bit of a rough ride, because….

Totally.

In 2010 you mortgaged your house and, re-mortgaged your house and sort of… Yeah. So, so what… How did it, what happened?

Well I think the first ten years it was… It's really quite interesting, because we were selling desktop solutions, and I was repping on the road. So I went really back to basics, and I, it was literally getting in my car five days a week, knocking on doors of local authorities and councils and… You know, so selling the concept of sharing data at its very basic level from a locations perspective and selling the benefits in. And it was working. And it was working because, it was saving money, it was proven, and also there was good funding from Government, for what was called Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships. So I was quite naively hopping round the country, bringing in the sales, and, for a number of years, and actually it was great. I rarely went into the office, but, you know, we were keeping things going, and we'd had some great successes. But we lost our way a bit in so much that we hadn't kept up to date with technology. We hadn't really understood, looked at the market and made the, made the best strategic decisions. So in 2008/9 it was obvious that, we had to make some massive changes, and I wanted to make some really big investments, because I could see the power of making it into enterprise from desktop, and also,

going for the larger opportunities in corporate life. So, the only way… That was… So I went on an investment round, and it was the worst thing I've ever done. And there was… And again, this was the, the next, this was my second big gender shock. The… We had got to a stage where, we had had a number of meetings with this one organisation, and they, all their board had spent an away day with me and my team, and we had had a strategy together, and they were super excited, we were excited, we had agreed terms. And all they had to do was get their CEO to meet me in London when he was next down to sign on the dotted line. So we had done everything.

This was an major investor, you're talking about?

Major investor, major investor. And so, I was waiting in the hotel near King's Cross, and I was sitting down. It was in one of those tall seats where you can't see who's in it. And behind me I heard the guy that I had been liaising with at this organisation briefing his CEO on the way, saying, 'Right, you're going to meet Pamela Cook. This is why, just a reminder, they've given you all the presentations.' And I heard the guy say, 'Are you kidding? So, I've got to sit now with a woman, and you're going to tell me I've got to invest with a woman, a female-led business?' He said, 'Forget it.'

Wow. And this is…

And that's before I met him.

…2009 even.

Yep. Yeah. And that was before I had met the guy. And I was absolutely mortified. And he sat down with me. He didn't obviously know that I had overheard that, because they didn't know where I was sitting. So I went along to meet them. And, he was so rude, and, sort of, was looking me up and down, and trying to assess me as a woman as opposed to a business person. And that was a, a real shock to my system. But because that had been eighteen months of work to get there, it was… The mistake I made was that, I had invested so much time in building up that opportunity, that I had actually let some of the other sales opportunities slip.

Mm.

So… So that's when I thought, well, in that case, I've got to make the choice. If I really believe in this business, it's time to put my money where my mouth is, and that's when I re-mortgaged my house, which, could afford to do what the, not as much as what we were going to do with the investment, but enough to get us through to the next three stages. So that's when I took over the business rather than being a rep. And, since then I've been doing the dual role if you like of CEO and, and overseeing sales, or getting involved in the sales process.

[26:50]
So you, at the stage when you were talking to this major investor, the idea was that you would have sold the company or a share of the company.

Exactly.

It will have been an acquisition, you would have been acquired essentially, or…?

No, it wasn't going to be a majority investment; it was a minority investment, but it was going to be enough to get us over the line to do some exciting stuff together.

Right. Yeah yeah, OK. So, instead, you put the money up yourselves, or yourself, and, how did it, what… At this stage, what size was the company, how big were you sort of, where were you…

Gosh. We were, just between 25 and 35 people I think.

Right.

About that.

[27:35]
Yup, OK. And you… So you were, obviously your customers were all in the UK. Because, the concept of, data has got integrity, and, you know, that's coherent, and,

you know, that could be searched and relied upon, and, you know, it's, it's, you know, is true. And, you know, there are single, there aren't multiple different versions of data. I mean that's an extremely fundamental concept, you know, from almost the beginning of the IT industry, isn't it? I mean, it seems quite remarkable that in the, even by 20-, you know, 2010, a small company with 25 or 35 people should be trying to crack this absolutely colossal, you know, problem that the whole industry is wrestling with. That's a bit of a puzzle, a conundrum, it seems to me.

Well either… It's still very much an education, and we still find ourselves getting back to basics with people even now, you know, where we're explaining why it's important to get the data right. So, I can give you some harrowing examples, and one was in a Home Counties county council, where I was going through the children at risk scenarios. If you don't know who your children at risk are, because of the competing information between databases, how can you intervene and protect them and keep them safe?

Mm.

The head analyst there, a very intelligent lady, she said to me, 'Pamela, I have to produce these, this analysis every month. I have to produce these graphs for the C-suite. And, I don't have to worry about anything else, until a child is killed.' She said, 'That's when it will come to my attention as a problem.' She said, 'Until then, as long as I'm doing what I have to do, then I don't have to worry about it.' That's the worst example I've ever had. I left there in, shock.

So she was saying, the data didn't, didn't have to be correct; it just had to be good enough so that a child didn't get killed?

No, she wasn't saying that. She was saying, they don't take that as a priority for her position. She just needed to make sure that she produced enough graphs and analysis to the top table. It didn't matter if the underlying data was accurate or fit the purpose.

Right. OK. Yes.

So what she was saying was, they weren't taking that as a priority. And I think, coupled with that is, data is quite a dry subject, Jane, and sometimes people just want to have the graphs and the AI and the analysis, or the, the AML, you know, the, the RPAs, the exciting parts, the pictures; and they don't really want to have to think too much about the data. We are seeing a huge increase in people respecting that since the pandemic and a realisation that they didn't know who their most vulnerable people were, or, they couldn't put their finger on people that needed to be shielding in terms of the database. So there has been some realisation, but it is still an educational journey that we're on.

Right.

So whilst everybody recognises that it's important to get the data right, there's still a huge number of organisations that haven't got it right.

Right. OK, carry on.

Yeah.

[30:41]
I mean, so their, their IT suppliers, their IT managers, this data integrity problem doesn't, it's still there, hugely. I mean…

Massive.

You know, with all the IT global giants in the world, that they would somehow be able to rationalise the data and make sure that, you know, all the conflicts are sort of, spotted and corrected.

But there are, there are a lot of solutions out there doing what we do, Jane, so, the fact that there's lots of people doing it, means there are lots of organisations also taking it seriously. But I think there is probably an equal number of organisations who are not, or who believe that if they have a great analysis tool, or a fantastic Power BI suite, that that alone will be enough, they don't really need to worry about the underlying

information. So it's not necessarily a case of, they don't want to do it; they don't really understand the importance of it, or they haven't really taken the time to think about the steps, the logical steps to looking at their analysis.

Mm.

And an example was in the, there was a massive AI project in America not so long back where they automatically sent out closure letters to a lot of tenants who hadn't paid their rent and so on and so forth, and, it's all done automatically from their databases, automatically generated. People lost houses, it became very messy. And actually what's transpired is, lots of law suits against the authority doing that, because the underlying information wasn't correct. So these people, some of these people, not all of them, but some of them should never have received the letter in the first place. So often it will take something like that for people to think, oh my gosh, I need to think about my data. Or, people looking at it are in a low level in the organisation, and therefore they have to really fight to be heard.

Mm.

So, I still think there's some way to go. But it is absolutely getting better.

[32:35]
Yeah. Great. So… So you, you made this big investment in 2010 and became Chief Executive. And then, sort of, what's happened in the past decade then with the business?

Well we, we've… We've secured some really great opportunities actually. And I think it was because we invested… A lot of the investment that I put in, actually went into developing the product so that we were scalable and flexible. Because before we had been very restricted to desktop. And so we made an enterprise version of the solutions that we provide, and we established some fantastic partnerships in the industry, the key suppliers to Government particularly. And as a result we secured a large government contract in the financial side; we've secured the majority of police forces; and, our biggest client was the Royal Mail. So we are able to scale up to 300

million records a night in processing, and that's been probably the biggest achievement, because, we were head-to-head with one of the, a major global power, to get that piece of business. So I think that's been [inaud].

[inaud] global… You mean a big global corporation, I assume.

Yeah. Yeah, sorry, yes. And, and it was a case of, a real David and Goliath, and it was quite frightening to be head-to-head with them, because, you know, we were out of our depth really in knowing what to expect. But, but we won, and it was a great feeling. It was a real validation that, everything we had believed in, everything that we had put our investment in, had proven to be worthwhile. And… And that also fed into the SME business that I'm involved in with the Cabinet Office, it's that… You know, if you really do fight hard, and you really do put a good story forward, you can get heard.

[34:22]
Yeah. Yeah. OK. So, let's reflect on that, and more broadly, because obviously we, the purpose of the discussion is to perhaps guide other, younger people who may be thinking…

Yup.

…how they should plan their lives and things. What would you say, perhaps, you would have done differently if you had your time again?

I think I would have networked more, when I was setting, starting out with Infoshare, without a doubt. Because I think that's been something that perhaps I was a little bit reluctant to do. I think I was lacking a bit of confidence. And, I certainly would have not been quite so shy making some of those phone calls. And I would have had perhaps more courage in, in my convictions. But I think, when you're part of a small business, and you're doing something for the first time, that it's only afterwards that of course you can reflect and help other people position. But I think networking is absolutely key. Not just for opportunities, but also for sense checking what you're doing, or to have some, some peer-to-peer support, or peer-to-peer, challenges, or,

mentors, to be able to have that sort of approach. Because it's been quite a lonely journey, and I wish I had networked more.

You did, you did have a mentor didn't you, Shabnan[?]…

Shabnam Malhotra. She was, she was, since 2010 she's been my absolute go-to. She's got a brain the size of a planet. She can, she can turn her hand and head to anything. And she has never judged, and she's always been there. She, she even worked through the night with me once to get a tender out for a piece of business that we ultimately won. But, nothing has ever been too much trouble. And I think without her, I would have floundered.

But, is she, has she worked, does she work, is she an employee of the company?

No, she's a consultant. So I call on her when I need her, and she's been doing that for us as a contractor, probably for ten years now, ten, eleven years. And, and she's a real safety net for me I think. If I'm not sure of anything, or I'm having a wobble, then she's always been there.

Yeah. So…

I think it's important to have that.

[36:33]
Yeah. What would you describe as your proudest achievement?

[pause] I think it would be, creating technology which can help identify the most vulnerable of society.

And that would be, as you've talked about, people who are ill, or, in financial problems, or perhaps…

Children.

…the crime side of things.

Yeah, and children at risk. So… I mean I, I adopted my own children, and my son had fallen through the net for the local authority from where he was based. He should have been taken away at birth, for example. But, because he had had a number of social workers, and some of them were contractors, and they had different databases, when he was born there was no alert, there was no recognition that this child needs to be taken away. So it's two and a half years later before the police took him away, with his sister, and, the damage was already done. So in order to have a piece of software that can actually highlight that, straight away, and, also highlight edge or grey cases where it's not so obvious. And it's also, you know, we had a case recently as well with a police force, there was domestic assault, domestic violence, it was quite serious. I think it appeared 24, 25 times across the different databases in a police force, and it hadn't been identified together as a single person.

Yes.

So, it was that sort of thing. So it's then, looking at the wider… So it's just… And although the software itself is quite powerful, it's, it's not something that people are going to get terribly excited about, because it's not a glossy front end; it's a back office product. But what it does is very powerful, and can serve the analysis and the strategic and the operational side, and save people. That, that's my proudest, that's the proudest thing. Absolutely.

[38:36]
Yeah. Yeah. Yup. So, it's not… Money has never been… I mean, directly earning lots of money… I mean in one sense, you have explained, at the beginning it was because that was the means to an end of you having the lifestyle you wanted to have. But obviously at some stage you moved on from that to…

Yes.

…other things really.

Yes. And I think, even now, I've not earned as much as I did when I was at Virgin. You know, we've not… This is, this has not been a, a case of a huge income stream. But we've, you know, the founders and I, we've earned enough to be able to have a, a reasonable life, and, but we've put, put a lot back in, we've got a diverse workforce, we've got some very happy clients. But I think, you know, maybe I've been a little bit ignorant, because we've never really increased our pricing, we've never really pushed for tough contracts. It's just not been our MO. And… But we've been very happy, and we've enjoyed the successes that our customers have had, and we've put people before profit, most definitely.

I mean considering your sales origins, and your sales background, that's quite surprising isn't it? Often people rise and thrive in an organisation because they've done sales and they're very focused on the bottom line, and on, on, you know, winning more business, and really generating wealth.

Well yes, but I think, in the corporate world, absolutely, and particularly in the computer games industry there was, you know, there was so much money floating around because it was such a burgeoning environment, and it's, you know, ended up being one of the biggest industries. But when you're doing it for yourself, a lot of that money is reinvested, because of course your, cashflow is king. So you've got very different priorities. I've never run a business before. I've run a P&L but I've never run a business. So, it became a very different set of priorities, and for a period of, probably three or four years, it was actually all about surviving. It was about being able to pay the tax bill, and pay the PAYE, the VAT, and finding ways of, of surviving through cashflow for, post that, the investment being a complete disaster in terms of, you know, the fact that I was a female. Between then and actually getting the money from my house mortgage, and then building the business back up, was probably a period of two or three years, and it was really tough. So you don't become, you're not a salesman then, you're a survivor.

[41:09]
Yes. So, you… The reason it had got into problems around 2009 was, was financial, was it, basically, that you weren't making enough….

Completely.

Yeah.

Well we were making it, but we weren't reinvesting it well. So, we were… We thought that we would carry on selling this product for the next few years, but, in actual fact we had, we had got almost to market saturation point. We had got, I think over three-quarters of the market had our product. And so there was very little else to go. And we hadn't looked at different industries, and we hadn't looked at enterprise product. So that was a real sort of, moment that said, OK, actually, this is not great. But because I think we had been running so well and doing so sort of, so busy and so well, we hadn't done a proper growth strategy, I had been busy on the road, and, we were just so happy that we had had success, we hadn't really found the next stages. So we lost a few years in that, definitely. And because of that, we lost the opportunity to sell bigger products, and we had reached saturation point in the markets we were in. So, there was a, a couple of years there with, with… I mean we always scraped through, and we always got the minimum, but, it wasn't enough to, to reinvest.

[42:20]
And your, your customers were all public sector, were they?

Yes, because they always paid in 30 days.

And are they still?

Well Royal Mail, by the time we got them, were private sector, but I, I always see them still as a bit of a hybrid. But they were the first major… And Barclays Bank at the time, we won them. And now, we are, I would say probably about 50-50 now, because we've got sports bodies, and we've got financial institutions, and retail.

Right. OK, so you really have expanded and diversified your…

Yes.

Yeah.

Yes.

[42:55]
So, what about diversity, in terms of… I mean that's something you are… You've touched quite a lot on gender, but, your… What are you trying to do on diversity generally, and how is your, how do you think that compares with what's happening in the industry more widely?

Well I, I'm a big fan of flexibility in the workplace, and so, we have a real mix of, females and males. So we have working mums, we have single parents, we have older gentlemen, who were refused interviews because of their ages before they joined Infoshare. We have people working for us from different ethnicities, and, and those who are gender fluid. So, I think it's a case of, just embracing the need for flexibility, embracing the skillset, and actually allowing these people to shine and work to what they can do, rather than the standard office, nine till five. And that's paid dividends. We've got a phenomenally loyal team, and the creativity that comes out of that is terrific. And we don't really allow, well I certainly don't allow, egos to get in the way of business; there's no place for politics or egos in the business. Very strict about that. So, I think the, certainly the flexibility has, has really been important for the working parents that we've got as well.

[44:23]
Yeah. Yeah. So do you think you're a trailblazer in terms of the industry, and do you think things are changing a bit? I mean that experience of yours at King's Cross station, do you think that still would be quite a big risk, or have things changed?

Oh look… You know, I still think there's a, there's a hell of a way to go for that. And there was an opportunity a few years ago, two or three years ago, where we had been selected as a partner in an opportunity, and when it came to it, we actually didn't get awarded it because there was, the classic from the Eighties, the old boys' network had come into play. So there had been a few golf rounds and a few nights out, and the, the chap from one of our competitors had been given a bit of a budget to do the,

the socialising, the hospitality, the courting if you like, and he was successful. And that was purely the boys getting together; there wasn't a single female to be seen on those nights out, when I had sort of, found out a bit more afterwards. Because I was quite shocked that we had lost it so abruptly. And that was definitely one of the… And that used to happen an awful lot. So I still think it happens, and that's a fine example. But, I think it's happening less and less, particularly as the public sector are getting more and more transparent in their procurements.

Mm.

But I, I… I still go into a room and, the people I'm selling to are still mostly men. So, it's great to see more women and more women in senior positions, so it's definitely changing, but I still think it's got some way to go.

[46:03]
Yeah. Yeah. And what would you advise to girls at the moment who might be thinking about having a career in the IT industry?

Believe in yourself. And don't, don't… You know, if you've got an idea, put it forward. You know, I've stood on a stage in front of hundreds of people, and said things, answered questions and said things that perhaps aren't mainstream, or people wouldn't necessarily agree with, but I've really had the courage of my convictions. And, I think if you're, if you're really passionate about something, or you're really knowledgeable about something, or enthusiastic, let that come out. Don't be shy, don't hold yourself back. Let that… You know, it doesn't matter, there is not always a right or wrong answer. Just let that personality, let that knowledge, that belief, come through. Because people will, will be far more likely to want to engage with you even they don't agree with you.

Mm. That sort of sounds like, even your very, your experience in getting that very first job, when there were nine men… Was that your first job…

Yes.

Yeah.

No, second one.

But it would have been your sort of, enthusiasm…

Yes.

…that would have been quite a strong part of it. So…

Yes, and I think belief, and I believed in myself, and I knew that I could do the job. I just had to find a way of proving to them. So… And it's not always about being right; it's about having the confidence to put your point of view forward, and having the confidence to, walk into a room and believe in what you're doing. Even if you're nervous as anything, just having that belief will really pay dividends.

[47:33]
Yeah. So now you do other things as well. You're a magistrate in the Thames Valley, and you're an SME adviser to Government.

Yes.

So, what sort of, how do those roles, how are those things working out? I mean have you got time… You obviously have got time, because you are doing them. It must, you can't have very much spare time I think. How are you finding those other roles?

Well I've been doing the magistrate role since 2006, so that's a long time in the process, and I found a way that, you know, if you work the evening before, before you go to court, and then when you come back, then actually you can make up the time. And I think it's quite valuable, because I think it gives me a mental break from, from Infoshare, so it gives me an opportunity to think about other things, which I think is a healthy thing. And, also, feeds my need for fair justice, and I think that's the same… That's just in the criminal environment, but fair justice in the work environment and the Government. It's that sort of, similar theme, which is, as a magistrate, you know,

the, the objective there is that you're, you're giving justice on behalf of the community, so it's got to be fair and it's got to be balanced and it's got to be based on evidence. And the same with the Cabinet Office, the SME Panel. This is about giving the SMEs across the UK the opportunity to have a fair crack at government business. So how do we do that? And, I've been doing that since I was invited to the panel in 2010, under, with David Cameron's government. So they created a Small Business Panel of 22 leaders to help inform the Government about, spreading the opportunities across small businesses. So it's not just going to go to the main suppliers. It's all about fairness, and I think that's a, a common theme that runs through every part of what I do. So there's always a way, there is always a way to find time to do things you believe in.

[49:26]
Yah. I mean, would you say that's been successful? Because, looking back over the, the PPE procurement for example in the early days of COVID, there still is a tendency for contracts to go to big, you know, rich friends of the Tory Party, not to be too brutal.

Yeah, do you know, that's… I think it has been successful from an SME perspective, because, we're not going to be able to get it all right, and we're not going to be able to do it all, but if we look at the amount of spend to SMEs of Government, both directly and indirectly, that's gone up significantly since 2010. And also the Prompt Payment Code that we brought in has been phenomenal, so that, to ensure that SMEs are getting paid in a fair way. Looking at the Social Value Act; looking at fair framework agreements; looking at reasonable procurements. So these steps have all been fundamental in changing the way that government procurement thinks about SMEs, embraces SME. Looking at the contracts framework, so that we're getting all contracts put onto an area that everybody can access. So there's been a huge improvement. But there will always be examples of PPE, and perhaps arguably unfair practices, but the great thing is, is that we're able to challenge them, and Lord Agnew allows us to hold his feet to the fire. So, it's, it's slowly but surely changing the way that SMEs are embraced across Government.

[50:55]

Yah. OK. So looking into your crystal ball, what do you see as the sort of challenges… Well first of all, in your, in your sort of part of the market on this data integrity side, or, how do you see that evolving over the next ten years or so?

Well I think it will be a case of every organisation, particularly those dealing with sensitive data, will have an automatic way of knowing that they're dealing with good data, because I think it's going to be an absolute necessity. And because, a lot of that also is that customers in city centres are accessing more and more of their own information within these organisations, so they will demand for that information to be accurate and up to date. So from that perspective, I think it's a very comfortable environment to be in. And I certainly don't have any concerns about that, other than, those companies that believe that that AI will solve the issues of data integrity, because of course AI needs data to be accurate before it can actually be effective. So a lot of it's, it's an ongoing education I think, Jane, but I do think it's going in the right direction.

OK. So you think, the technology is, is up to it now then, or…

Definitely.

Is the problem people, is the problem more one of processes and people, than the technology, or…?

And culture. Yep. It's culture, it's, it's processes, and it's people; and it's, and it's an understanding that, a glossy piece of kit is not necessarily going to be the answer to all of their issues. So I think it's, it's a challenge, people needing to challenge more.

[52:26]
Yes. What… In terms of how society… I mean you've touched on this a few times, but, in terms of the work that you've done over your professional life, how do you think society has benefited?

Well society has benefited only in so much that, our clients have been able to identify, or solve more crimes; they've been able to identify vulnerable citizens, and they've

been able to identify and support children at risk. So we've had many many examples where lives have been saved as a result of the knowledge about them, whether it's vulnerabilities. So if there's a flood, do they know who is most at risk from needing support from emergency services? So, you have an 83-year-old man on the ground floor of a flat in a flood risk area; he needs to be prioritised. Whereas, perhaps a few years ago they wouldn't have even known he existed.

Mm.

Because it's the sharing of that information from a community perspective that enables people to be supported in a much more targeted strategic fashion than the scattergun approach that has previously been applied. I think that's the biggest outcome.

[53:35]
Mm. And do you think… What do you think about technology generally, and what its impact is likely to be, looking ahead a decade or so?

Well you know, it's interesting, because, if you'd have asked me this a few years ago, it would have been a very narrow answer, but now, I think every single industry pretty much is, is considered a technology industry. So we've, you know, cars, and retail, and our shopping, and, it's all, it's all about the technology that, that drives it and underpins it. So, you know, I was driving back from Cornwall a few weeks ago, and I thought, well, and it was a hell of a long journey, and I thought, I wonder, you know, in a few years' time, would someone just, be teleported there? Will it be, will they be flying there? So I think it's incredibly exciting, and I think it's going to be more automated. I think we're going to be able to make faster choices, I think we're going to make better choices. I think… And I hope that the push towards a greener environment, technology is going to help drive that. So I think technology used well is fundamental to every industry that we touch and we work in at the moment. But there is also, of course, technology that is used that is not for good, that is more concerning in terms of surveillance, or in terms of, immoral usage of it, whether it's accessing people's personal information, whether it's enabling fraud. So I think

there's a real balance. Technology's wonderful, but only when it's used well and for people, for the good of the people.

[55:02]
Mm. So… I must say, we've covered an enormous amount of ground, you're very good at getting a lot of information across in a short space of time, Pamela.

Sorry. [laughs]

Oh no, that's wonderful. Yeah, cut to the chase. Is there, is there anything, looking, reflecting back on our conversation, that you think you might like to pass on that we haven't really talked about?

The only thing is that, if I was starting out again, and if I was a, a school or college leaver, or university graduate, I think, you really need to think about, if you have a passion for technology, how do you want that to be used? So, there's kind of a few routes. So, the classic one is going to the large organisations, so the key suppliers to Government for example, the big technology organisations. But you're going to be a small fish in a huge bowl, but you would learn a huge amount in a short space of time. But your influence may be limited, but you've got security. Then you've got the middle ground, companies like mine who are growing, who are successful, where you can learn a lot but it's kind of on the fly, it's less structured, but it's secure in the knowledge that you've got healthy cashflows, you've got good growth margins, and you get in front of clients, but you may not have the training that you get from the large organisations. Or do you go for the real small start-ups, where you can actually take a risk, and really use the passion that you have and the knowledge, and the, the limited experience, but the huge learning that you've gone through, to make a difference with a start-up and get involved right at the very beginning, and not be frightened to do that. And the time to do that is before you've got a mortgage, and before you have huge overheads, where you can really throw yourself into something that you believe in at the beginning. So I think it's a case of, really think about, which area do you feel more comfortable in, and what's your appetite for risk? And, it's, it's interesting, because the Prince's Trust is also, is a great forum for people who are starting out and, and offering great support, but I think there's a gap in the market

where, people can speak to, people like me, people like you, and say, 'Look, these are the things that we would like, and, which sort of industry do you think we should get to, what sort of size company?' People don't always think about the size of company that they're going to be most comfortable in. And so I think it's those sorts of, non-standard challenges that I would really suggest that people who are starting in technology would really think about, so they don't start up on the wrong path. But also most of all, and the biggest thing is, believe in yourself. Because there is always a way.

Yes. I mean being an entrepreneur is, is tough, challenging, and, and received opinion tends to be that you have to fail several times, you know, before you are going to succeed. So to expect young people to do that, you know, before they've got a mortgage, or, you know, got to that, that stage in life, is, is quite a big ask, isn't it? Often people come to these things actually later in life, when they have managed to build up some security and some contacts.

Yes, that's…

[58:07]
You've kept Infoshare private, have you?

Yes.

Yah. And is that something that you would continue to want to do? You've got no plans to sell, or, or to have an IPO, or…?

No, not at this stage. But I think, you know, I never say never. You know, there's always going to be people that are interested, and there could be a collaboration that we would be absolutely crazy to turn down. There could be a partnership opportunity that means that we have to do investment, or joint investment. And I think, you know, you should always keep all your options open. But, there are certainly plans at the moment.

No. You're not motivated by wanting to take your millions and, and retire?

Do you know, I don't even know what I'd do with it. I've… All I've known since I was fourteen is work, and I really enjoy it. And I've never had a fall-out with my directors. I've had some fantastic client meetings. And, I think whilst I'm in that… I, I generally wouldn't know what to do. And I love, I love, I love the fact that we've got a great workforce, and we've got some really good clients. And I, I think it is a lot to ask a young person to take that sort of risk. I think you're absolutely right. But, I think also, for them to even think that it's a possibility is something that should be considered. I don't think it should be sort of, written off as, as a crazy, a crazy concept at this stage.

[59:24]
Do you think in the IT industry that there is space for, some sort of Silicon Valley equivalent in the UK?

Well I think it… There are some fantastic small businesses in the UK at the moment starting up with wonderful apps, wonderful ideas, and a lot of them with, sort of, postgrads. And, and I think particularly around the London area, and out in the Thames Valley, there are some fantastic working groups who are pulling together some very exiting innovations. So I do, I absolutely do. And, we've had, you know, through TechMarketView, they're always talking about the success of UK businesses, and, and the fact that we are attracting some top talent.

TechMarketView being…

TechMarketView being the daily digest, the daily bulletin from, the daily analyst bulletin about the tech industry.

Right.

And, and they're… It's really interesting, because they really do look at the UK tech industry, and how it's doing, compared with the rest of the world, and we're doing well. We're attracting some really strong investment, and we really encourage a lot of the, the young entrepreneurs on board. There's lots of government funding for it,

there's lots of government support for it. And, and it's certainly something that we want to keep in this country.

Well on that positive note, I think we'll leave it there. Pamela Cook, thank you very much, it's been great talking to you.

Jane, likewise, thank you very much.

Goodbye.

Goodbye.

[End of Interview]