



Billy D'Arcy

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology where we capture the past and inspire the future. And I'm Richard Sharpe and I've been covering information technology, how it's now called, since the early 1970s. The very first book I was forced to read in university for my English literature and humanities course was by EM Forster, and it was called Howard's End, the subtitle to Howard's End was 'Only Connect'. That's what people should do. And the man who's making his contribution to the Archives today, Billy D'Arcy, has, in his professional life, been only connecting people all over the place and he's involved now in a very big project to connect people through the Underground, the London Underground, and he's done such work and his company has done such work in New York and in Hong Kong. Billy, you were born in 1969?

Yes, I was, indeed.

Where was that?

I was born in Ireland, in Dublin, Ireland, actually and I lived there until 2009, actually.

What were your parents doing? What was their background?

My parents were self-employed, very entrepreneurial. They had retail and a wholesale business and as an only son I was destined to actually enter that business.

But you slipped away, did you?

I did. I went off course, very much because my mother actually said, I don't want the life for you that your father has had because of the amount of work involved in that particular piece and the fact he never had weekends, or very hard to take holidays, and felt it was better if I went into more of the corporate life. And as a result of that I actually changed course and entered into telecommunications.

Now, apart from that excellent advice from your mother, what else did you get from your parents, do you think?

I guess I got a real appreciation for customer experience and actually also a high level of emotional intelligence, very much from my father in particular, who was very much a people person. Also a political astuteness and politically aware, because actually growing up we were very, very keen on local politics, national politics and I was involved on the fringes of that with my parents and it taught me a lot about the market, the country, economics, social impact, all of these various things that have come to, I guess, help me throughout my career.

In '69 Ireland was not in a great state, was it?

It wasn't in a great place, but actually it's a very resilient nation and it always ends up re-creating itself and there's something about the spirit, I believe, of Irish people where they, you know, if you want to get them to do something, it's probably best to tell them that they can't.

[laughs]

Because it makes them even more determined, and I would describe myself in that camp.

It hadn't yet really emerged from the de Valera era and it hadn't yet put itself forward, really, as one of the tiger economies?

That's correct, it hadn't, and it was really, I guess, technology and looking at how Ireland could really focus itself in terms of technology, but also education. And it has some amazing universities and colleges, some fabulous education, right the way across from, you know, pre-university all the way up to post, and it's served it extremely well. And also from an overall strategy in terms of how to attract great businesses into Ireland. Ireland is a hub for US companies in particular, because it's a geographic gateway into Europe. It's a financial gateway into Europe as well, and an emotional one. And actually, it's the only English-speaking country left in the EU today, so when you look at it that way, I believe it will help the country to prosper, going forward.

[0:04:34]

Did you enjoy your education?

I did, but I couldn't wait to get out and work and I really wanted to get stuck in. I believe that, I wouldn't describe myself as overly academic, but I understood that I needed to have certainly a good basic layer. I went to third level education as well. I may not have been the top of the class, as such, but I certainly got myself through that. But actually I would say there that it wasn't wasted, it reinforced much of what I actually came to love and learn out there in industry and actually in practice.

What were your subjects then at school and then at university?

Well, I actually studied English, economics, sociology and Greek and Roman civilisation.

Okay!

Which is an unusual one and I've always had a love of English and English language and remarkably, my three children, who range from twenty-eight down to nineteen, all three of them are studying English. One of them is doing a PhD in York University and that, the middle one is doing her second Masters in Trinity College, Dublin and my third is in Oxford, in second year in Oxford studying English literature. So I guess I've, maybe I've just instilled that in them as well. So English would have been my favourite and sociology in particular, because how people operate and interact, I found that fascinating. Economics, but I'd really no interest in Greek and Roman civilisation, none whatsoever, but at the time you had to pick four subjects. So it was that or anthropology and I felt that it was probably the lesser of two evils.

Do you enjoy sports?

I do. I love rugby and I love golf and I love anything to do with water. So I have a boat on the River Thames here. I've had boats pretty much all my life because I grew up beside the sea, south of Dublin in the beautiful county of Wicklow, which is about

fifteen, sixteen miles outside of the centre of Dublin overlooking the sea in Bray - Bray, County Wicklow - and then the mountains are directly behind me, which reach into Dublin, so always loved that.

We may be related because my maternal grandmother came from Bray.

Really? Wow, fabulous place.

Very fine place. Not that she liked the English very much, but she came from Bray, she was of that generation. Was it automatic that you'd go to university?

It wasn't automatic. I could have chosen not to, but actually I was encouraged to and I was glad that I did. And it was at a time where a lot of people decided not to, they went into apprenticeships, they went directly into the workplace. But Ireland was changing dramatically then, and as I mentioned earlier, there was a real focus on education and actually what that did, how you could be empowered as a result of a great foundation in relation to university.

And this was the late eighties, 1980s, yeah?

It was, it was '86/87/88, that period of time, and it was certainly something there that if I look back at my, the people that I was in school with, I would say probably sixty to seventy-five per cent of them actually went on to third level education and the others went down the other course, which was directly into the workplace.

By then the industrial Irish Development Association, the IDA, had been tremendously successful and with grants and with also tax relief for profits being registered in Ireland had made, had helped Digital Equipment Corporation go into, of all places, Galway in the west, which was, well, previously would have been seen very isolated really, but really did a lot for Galway. And other people came in, particularly around Dublin and around Swords, around there, so the place really was a Celtic tiger by then, was it not?

Yes, it was. I mean and very large names such as Intel and Microsoft still have a very firm presence there in Ireland today. Apple in Cork, for example. So a very, very important base for them, but also attached to much of what I mentioned earlier there, that gateway into Europe. Clearly everything was done to attract these organisations into Ireland at the time and that lower tax rate played a huge part in that. So yes, the tiger roared loudly at that stage, but it's great to see that those organisations didn't just dip in, but they're still there today.

[0:09:58]

Perhaps without them you would have become part of the Irish diaspora, would you?

I would and I mean I've heard the figure before, where there's about five million people, population in Ireland, but there's at least forty million passport holders globally, which is very interesting. The joke goes, it says there's only two types of people in this world, those that are Irish and those that want to be. So it's an interesting one. But it's a very powerful diaspora and people often say to me, Richard, when I go back to Ireland to visit, they say what's it like being Irish in London. And of course it wasn't always a great place for the Irish for a number of very historic reasons, but actually I think I surprise a lot of people by saying that I actually believe that the Irish have been nicer to the... oh sorry, the English have been nicer to the Irish than the Irish have been to the English, and in fact the Irish are nicer to each other abroad than we are to each other back home. And I really mean that, because it's a very- we actually go the extra mile to help one another when we're outside of the country, which is a really nice thing to see.

Many English people with the most tenuous connection with Ireland, grandparents and great-great-great-grandparents way back are applying for the Irish passport because it gets them back into the EU. [laughs]

Yeah, well that's right, and it's remarkable actually. So that number of at least forty million passport holders has grown vastly over the last couple of years, yeah.

Now, was your first work at Cable & Wireless, was it?

It was and I very much enjoyed it there, yeah.

Did they find you or did you find them?

I begged them for a job. I mean I literally, I did, I was shameless. I had several interviews, I was told no at least once or twice, and finally I think they gave in and I joined there, but I had a fabulous time. I learnt how to sell. I learnt how to sell in that business and very much a great commercial grounding. And I spent a number of years there, but actually I recognised there that I would only really learn so much, and a small aspect of telecommunications by remaining there.

And you joined in '91, was that right?

I did, I did indeed, and I, you know, went in the same day as four other new starters and I was the only one left when I was leaving of those four people. So it was survival of the fittest and so much so that you were afraid to take holidays and- in case you lost out. But it really helped form a great work ethic for me, as such.

And Cable & Wireless has an immensely long history going back to the great, what has been called the 'Victorian internet', the world undersea cable network, which was an amazing piece of Victorian technology, controlled by the British and the cables were made down in Greenwich in London and were shipped and laid around the world with Great Eastern being used, for instance, and the whole Empire being networked together. And then along came the wireless of course, which pretty well obsoleted that and Cable & Wireless was actually formally formed in the 1920s, was it not?

It was, and in fact in my library here as I look to my right-hand side, I do have a book which was gifted to me by the managing director, the CEO of Cable & Wireless in Ireland, Nick Koumarios, many, many years ago and it's the history of the Great Eastern and actually what they achieved. They were ground-breaking and top innovation, and very, very brave people in terms of what they did. But that technology is still very relevant today because actually the fibre needs to be connected, and whether it's through the Channel Tunnel or whether it's through

underground links, or undersea links, I know that there are a few very bespoke niche businesses there that specialise in that space, because after all, the UK and Ireland are island nations and they rely very heavily on that.

And knew exactly where all the world cables were, because they'd laid them. In the outbreak of the First World War, the first thing the Royal Navy did was to find the cables going into Hamburg and cut them.

Yeah.

[0:14:48]

Now that brings me to Cable & Wireless. I've met some Cable & Wireless people and there's always been something of, hm, are you a spy, about Cable & Wireless, about the British old secret service influence in there. Was there such a thing?

No, there wasn't actually. Ireland was quite unique when I worked with Cable & Wireless there in Ireland as a country, because it was actually, they decided that they wanted a presence and they decided to buy two organisations. One was Telephone Rentals and the other was Sound Systems, and they brought them both together and they renamed it Cable & Wireless. There was, it was a small company in Ireland, it was about 200 people, it felt like family, actually, and it didn't have too much of an influence coming in from the UK, for example, albeit you knew who the boss was.
Yeah?

Were you trained, heavily trained in Cable & Wireless?

I was and I was very much mentored at the time there by a number of people who I look back and I think, you know, I've never met people like them again in my life, they were so, so good at what they did.

Can you name them?

Sorry?

Can you name them for the record?

Well, I mean one of them would be Nick Koumarios, who is still very iconic in terms of what he does and what he did for that business. People like Barry Moylan, for example. Barry was one of the best salespeople I've ever seen commercially, and from a customer point of view and relationship perspective, really, really very good. Noel Ryan, another individual who I worked with for many years there, again, fastidious in terms of how he went about managing his customers. And they were all very different, but actually when you take the best of what you see from each of these individuals and you look to adopt that in terms of your own style, it's hugely helpful.

Billy, what do you enjoy about selling?

I like customer interaction and no two people are the same. I like to understand what makes people tick and really also understand what people need and look to see if we can address that. I love doing what I do today because we concentrate on outcomes and it is what is the outcome somebody is looking for and how can you, if at all, help that individual and organisation to be able to achieve the outcome. I love that about it and it gives me a buzz. But actually, whilst I started off in sales, Richard, my career took me into other functions and ultimately, you know, general management, managing director of an area, and ultimately now CEO where my day involves that and I hope it always will, in terms of sales. But more importantly it's about getting great people to do stuff that they thought they may ordinarily not have been able to do. So it's leadership and that's the difference today.

And what is the Billy D'Arcy method of management?

So I like to delegate, but I learnt how to do that very late in my own career. And I wish I'd learnt to do it a lot sooner. It happened very strangely, actually. Certain things happen in people's lives there that you think, wow, that makes them the person that they are. And actually in 2013 I got very bad news, that my wife didn't have long to live, but thankfully she's still with us today. And at the time I was, I got great support by O2, the company I was working with, the CEO, you know, and the team around him rallied around me, rallied around Louise and actually we got her fantastic

care and thankfully, as I said, she's in the full of her health today. But what happened, Richard, was because I wanted to make sure I was with Louise every single week that she was going through extensive treatment it meant there that I had to rely more heavily on my own team, and what happened as a result of that, my team became more experienced, I learnt to trust them more than I ordinarily would. And I often joke and say I kept them so busy they hadn't got time to find a job anywhere else, it was another benefit. But I remember being called into the CEO's office one day and he said, look, I was just wondering, why is your business going so well and Louise is so sick? And I said, it's quite simple, I learnt to delegate. And he said, well, there's a lesson in that for all of us. And it is something that I now encourage people that come and work with me to strongly ensure that they do within their own teams.

But you can never really delegate responsibility, can you?

Well no, I mean and I learnt that only recently when I was on holidays back in Ireland for a few weeks, there are certain things there that you just need to be able to be there to, you know, involve yourself in and whatever. Ultimately, yeah, but I like to give responsibility, but you have overall responsibility as a CEO, yeah.

[0:20:14]

Now, when you, you were managing, were you, in Cable & Wireless by the time you left in '95, so you're four years there, have you an experience of management in Cable & Wireless?

Just at the very tail-end of leaving Cable & Wireless I was responsible for a portfolio, a Panasonic portfolio of services, and it was only after I left there when I went into Eircom that I started to really get stuck into management, because I was the first external person into Eir, as it's known now, it was called Telecom Éireann, which is the equivalent of BT in Ireland, as such. And I was tasked with managing some of the largest accounts, including Intel, where I had an office on site, there was a team of people there, I was responsible for the day to day, and then also with one or two other very major accounts that they had, which were, and we would have had exchange

equipment located on sites. These were huge, these were massive campuses and it was then that that's where I guess I honed probably more my management skills.

And just for the record, it's E-I-R com, isn't it? As in...

Well, it is, but they shortened it in recent times to Eir, E-I-R. It's gone through several iterations, as such, and several ownerships since it spun itself out of state control.

Why did you leave Cable & Wireless?

I left for a couple of reasons. First of all, when I joined Cable & Wireless – sorry – as in why did I leave Cable & Wireless, to join to Eir, was it?

Yeah.

Yeah. Sorry, I left Cable & Wireless, primarily, Richard, because I really felt there that I was going to be very niched and into a very, a small aspect of a much broader industry of telecommunications and the only way to really understand the true breadth of telecoms, which I was starting to get a real passion for, was to actually go and work for the national incumbent, right? Now, in the UK that's the likes of BT. In Ireland it's Eir, which, as I said, used to be called Telecom Éireann. And they did everything from, you know, residential landlines all the way through to corporate business, public sector business, SME business, and retail and it was a vast piece. So that was the main reason for me wanting to leave, to go there.

And you became an account director there in 1995, is that right?

That's right, I did.

And your accounts included Intel?

They included Intel, indeed, and it was, you know, during that period of time I was also given Gateway 2000, which was an amazing organisation. Many people still

remember the black and white boxes that the computers came in. But they located there because actually Ireland had re-created itself again, yet again, during the decades to become the call centre capital for Europe. And as such the first major call centre into Ireland was Gateway, Gateway 2000. And they needed somebody on site running that account for, on behalf of Eircom and I went in and provided the leadership for that, until the day I left, actually.

And we're coming up therefore to the year 2000, otherwise also known as Y2K.

Was...

I remember it very well.

Well, tell me about it, was Eir concerned about Y2K?

[0:24:02]

I remember it very well, I still remember the people that were tasked with ensuring that everything stayed up and nothing crashed. It was a very momentous time, actually, particularly in the industry because people hadn't given it a lot of thought, right, up until probably two or three years just before the date, and then everybody started to panic. But actually, thankfully, everything went very, very smoothly in that regard, in that respect, but it was a very interesting time just as you turned the turn of the millennium, yeah.

And we also saw an amazing outburst of dotcom and 'dotcon' as well, an enormous burst of the bubble in 2000.

We did and there was a lot of money around at the time, and actually, even bad ideas were getting investment, and that was part of the problem. And people were, and institutions, organisations were investing in dotcom and it was almost like a lottery in terms of what would pay out and what wouldn't, and ultimately the bubble got so big it got popped, it imploded and there was a lot of casualties as a result of that.

Now you've, I know that you said that Cable & Wireless in Ireland was quite small, but the parent of course was very big.

That's right.

Eir is a big company, WorldCom that you went on to was a big company and BAI is a big company, has it never occurred to Billy D'Arcy, ooh, I could do this on my own with a couple of million?

You know what? The reality of it is the way I actually set myself up in these businesses is that I feel like that I'm actually running that business, I'm in a start-up. So, for example, I'll give an example of my time in O2, I remember very fondly back in around 2012 I had noticed there that actually O2 in the UK wasn't very relevant in public sector business and I convinced the board to put me in as managing director of that business, and actually we went from eleven per cent market share to forty per cent in two and a half years, as a disrupter, as a challenger. We weren't operating as an overly corporately considered organisation, we were behaving like a start-up, or we were very well backed and very well-funded. When I left O2 in 2017 to join BAI people thought I was nuts, they thought I was mad. I was going to an organisation that nobody had heard of, it wasn't a household name, but actually they know who we are now and it was a vision from the group CEO of BAI, which was a government owned state department in Australia, a hundred years old, was spun out, originally bought by Macquarie and then actually subsequently bought by Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board that had a vision to enter into Europe, they needed a CEO to run that, to build that business and to ensure there that actually the last greenfield major true global city that is London got to benefit from BAI's infrastructure and expertise in the Underground. And that's, you know, so I went in to do that, but it was a start-up, Richard, it was a start-up mentality, because, yeah, it was building from scratch and now today we have up to 600, 700 people at any one time in the Underground on any one day doing five million man hours of work over the course of the next number of years.

And in between time you had two companies, you were in two companies, and one of them got into some very severe financial trouble in 2002, WorldCom. What was it like working with Mr Ebbers?

It did, it was an amazing company, because when I left Eir, the reason why I left was because I was approached by WorldCom in under a brand they had, which was UUNET, and UUNET was the jewel in the crowns. It was a beautiful company, seventy-five per cent of all the email globally transit their network. It was a huge business and they were looking for somebody in Ireland to become the first UUNET employee, and that was me. So again, that start-up, challenger type piece, I'm not afraid to take some risks, which are hopefully very calculated but based on good judgement. And I went in to do that and loved my time there, I felt it was amazing, very innovative, creative company, beautiful clients, terrific clients that actually spanned all of the continents around the world. And unfortunately the business had corruption attached to it at the highest level, so much so that, I know Bernie Ebbers has passed away now, but clearly he got a custodial sentence as a result of that. And it never was able to shake off that scandal at the time, which was registered as the largest bankruptcy of its type anywhere in the world in the *Guinness Book of Records*. And what I will say is that it was, it taught me about brand and it taught me about loyalty of customers and it taught me about, you know, doing things that were not in my job description to keep this show on the road and the business coming in. Because at the last nine months of my four-year period of time in that business was spent in Chapter 11, which is effectively, you know, bankruptcy where you're looking at administration, really. And, you know, you've got a scenario where your competitors are looking to take your best people, you're fighting to make sure that people believe you when they say, when you tell them their salaries and their commissions are going to be in their bank account at the end of the month, right? And customers, I found, were far more loyal than I would have thought at the time. They loved the service, they liked the company, they felt let down by the company, right, as did many employees. But it was a real learning because, you know, as I said, I ended up doing stuff there that was never in my job description, but you do it because actually you want to fight to keep this business alive.

[0:30:44]

Yeah, yeah. Did you feel tainted by that?

I felt disappointed and I felt let down, because actually I felt that – this is, when I heard, when the news broke I thought, nah, it's too big, it's too big to go bust, right,

and surely this is a mistake. Unfortunately it wasn't a mistake. Clearly governance and compliance and accounting practices have dramatically improved and as a result of organisations such as WorldCom, as a result of organisations such as Enron and others, because – Arthur Andersen as well – it all happened around the same time. So yeah, I suppose let down is probably the feeling I would say most, yeah.

Did you move then to O2?

I did, because during that last nine months of my four-year tenure with WorldCom many of my colleagues had actually moved and some of them had moved to O2 and one of them had said, oh, there's a guy we know, his name is Billy D'Arcy, he's still with WorldCom and actually he'd be a really good guy to consider to come in and run the corporate business and the business side, the B2B side of O2 in Ireland. And I met with one of the board and the rest is sort of history at this stage, I left to join them, and I'm very glad that I did. It was my first foray into mobile communications, actually.

Right. Good timing, again. You're a lucky man, aren't you?

Well, I guess I am and I have been described as a bit of a lucky general by people, but you know, I do try to remind them there that I actually, I put a lot of it down to judgement, yeah? And also hard work and tenacity.

That was one of the things that Napoleon asked of his generals, whether they were lucky or not.

Right.

But luck is of your own making, isn't it, really? Is that what you're saying?

It is. Well, it is and I also have a belief there that surrounding yourself by great people, and they don't always have to work for you, but you've people there that you've learnt to like along the way, people whose values are what you want and their judgement. And triangulation is a very important piece for me, because you don't

always make the right decision, nobody has a monopoly on that, and when you've got to make some really large decisions in life, sometimes it's very important to be able to ask of others what they would do, and then a lot of the time that satisfies you, that actually the decision you were going to take was the right one to take. Sometimes it's the other way round, it stops you in your tracks and you say, hm, maybe I need to think about this a different way. But it's being able to do either, is very important.

What would you say, Billy, are the biggest mistakes you've made in your professional life and what have you learnt from them?

Well, I mentioned one of them earlier, which was, would have been I would have liked to have been able to learn to delegate sooner than I did in my own career, but clearly I learnt there by doing that, you provide a greater level of leadership and ultimately the bar rises in the organisation. I would say there that staying too long in any organisation's not a good thing. And I was nearly spending fifteen years in O2. When I started my career I never wanted to work in any organisation more than five years, I felt that was a good time. And getting out at the top is very important. I'd got very comfortable in Ireland, I was there six years or so in O2, and they knew that about me, and that's why they changed my role and asked me to go to the UK. And then similarly, when I was in the UK I changed during my role with them to take over as MD of that area, and then, you know, I was asked to go back in and ultimately run all of corporate, multinational and public sector just before I left BAI. And I didn't proactively go out there looking for that role, but I often think, you know, if I hadn't have got the tap on the shoulder, would I still be there, right? So I would say regret for me is probably not staying true to that, maybe I should have left O2 a little bit earlier, because what I do now I just love. I'm thinking could I have done that maybe five years earlier, so...

[0:35:28]

Often being part of a manager, manager's role, you have to be a butcher. Are you a good butcher, Billy D'Arcy?

As in taking tough decisions?

And also people out the door.

Yeah, I am, and I believe the day you look somebody in the eye to give them a role, you have to be prepared that it's maybe three to six months later that you may have to look that same person in the eye and tell them that it hasn't worked out, but always treat people with respect along the way, because behind every one of us – you, me, people that work for me, people I've worked with and worked for – there's a family and making sure that you always recognise that. I've never got enjoyment or any thrill or any kick or any pleasure of having to let somebody go. It's, I feel there that actually we may have let that person down. Because the vast majority of people come into work to actually do a very good job. Sometimes it doesn't work out, but the main thing there is to tackle it and to handle it head on and not to bury it. And large organisations get away with moving people into the long grass, smaller organisations don't, right? And therefore it's extremely important for me there that I treat people with respect. I would say there that one thing I have learnt along the way, Richard, is to go to the nth degree to make sure we've the right person coming into the business. And actually a key piece for me is can they do the job. That's a prerequisite. Secondly is, will they create the magic, right? And the third one is, will they fit in with the culture of the business. So if you can get somebody there that actually you can satisfy yourself on all three things, right, it's more than likely that it will work out. And three attributes I often look for with people is have they got the hunger, right, are they hardworking and are they humble, is there a humility there? Those three elements are extremely important in terms of their mindset.

H, H and H. Humble, hardworking and humility.

The three Hs, yeah. Yeah, it is, it's extremely important because what's not to like about those things. Because if you think about the opposite to those items, they're fairly repugnant. Yeah?

2017 you jumped out of O2 to a company, as you say, many of your colleagues and people around you in the industry said, 'scuse me, who's BAI? I've never heard of them.

That's right.

They're now actually owned by a Canadian venture capital company, is that right?

It's actually not venture capital, it's the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board and they put a half a trillion Canadian dollars to work, right. So they are responsible for placing 500 billion Canadian dollars of pension fund, and Canadians are particularly good at paying into pensions, and as such they have investments around the world, everything from toll roads to energy, windfarms, digital infrastructure through BAI, and they're a terrific parent. They own ninety per cent of us and the other ten per cent is owned by two of the smaller Canadian pension plans. So they're long-term, patient investment. They like long term and of course the returns that they look for are very reasonable and are suited to long-term infrastructure programmes.

Now, the technology you're using, I understand, is called neutral host telecoms.

Yes.

Billy D'Arcy, what does that mean?

Well, it means where we can actually build one network that many operators get to share and get to use at a fraction of the cost that it would cost them to build it themselves. There's a time advantage, of course, in that as well and of course if you look at the Underground where we're doing that, even if four operators wanted to build their own network they wouldn't be able to because there's not enough space. There's just simply not, it's the oldest, tightest tunnels in the world, right? So therefore we come in and we say, we're neutral hosts, we're technology agnostic, we concentrate on outcomes, we're vendor agnostic as well, so we're not tied to any one technology or vendor. It's all about the solution and ultimately we take a long-term view as we build these networks out and we don't compete against our customers in their traditional markets. So I don't have an enterprise business, I don't have a consumer business or an SME business, we are a network providers' network, that's what we do, right? So we provide networks to organisations like Horizon, AT&T,

Sprint, T-Mobile, the likes of BT, the likes of Three, Vodafone, all the networks that you would expect, yeah?

[0:40:26]

So your current big project is the London Underground?

Yes, it is, yeah.

I'm going to ask you a question and you're going to say you're not going to answer. How much is it worth?

So, I'm not going to answer because it's commercially sensitive, right. However, what I will say, Richard, is that we're investing over £1.2 billion in terms of the bills of that programme and it's, and that is over the lifetime of the contract, which is a twenty plus five year contract which has not just seen BAI put in a 5G and 4G network in this environment, but actually upgrade into 6G and 7G during the period, because every seven years that goes by, an extra G is added, as such. So because of the length of it, we expect to do upgrades.

The London Underground at its peak, I understand, has 1.4 billion passengers a year.

It does, which effectively equates to five million journeys a day in the Underground. But clearly it's not at its peak at the moment.

No. And it is also, in terms of wireless or anything else electronic, a really savage environment, is it not?

Well, it is...

You've got high power lines, you know, to run the trains and you've got cables, you've got signalling, and you're laying optical fibre down, are you?

We are. In fact, because of what we're doing, and I'll come on to talk a little bit more about that, but we will effectively run 700 kilometres of cable in that environment and

linking all of the technology up that we need to link up. We are not just tasked with putting in the cellular infrastructure in the Underground, we're also tasked with doing a parallel network for the police, fire and ambulance for emergency services. We're taking over 100,000 streetscape assets at street level, which are traffic lights, lampposts, bus shelters, front of stations. We'll also run a fibre network through the Underground, coming up at every one of the iconic stations, to nine data centres that we're building across London, and actually interlinking these with the traffic management ducts that are at street level that TfL own. We'll also take over the existing pilot on the Jubilee Line and furthermore, we'll take over the wi-fi that's been in there for over ten years and we'll enhance that. So it's a massive programme, it's a truly connected London, and as I said, London is the last greenfield place of its size and scale in the world to have this and it's been denied it for decades.

I understand your company has done this work in New York and Hong Kong.

We have, and we've done it very successfully. In fact in Hong Kong we're on the fourth generation upgrade there, it's in there twenty-two years, right? In New York we were given seven years to build this out ten years ago, over ten years ago actually, and we did it in five and a half years. So we're very experienced, and we also won the rights to do it in Toronto as well, and we've built a great network there. In fact I benefitted by taking the CEO of Toronto to become my COO here in the UK, because he's an amazing engineer and I want to make sure we have the most advanced network anywhere in the world in London.

What will 6G give?

To be honest, much of the hype around 6G – 5G, 6G, 7G – is driven by the vendor equipment manufacturers and that's how they make their money, they make it out of the active equipment, passive and active equipment that the networks connect to. So right now 4G is more than adequate for most people, but actually 5G has a lower latency, in other words lower delay aspect to it, so it's more accurate. 6G will further enhance that, and again, 7G also. So it's yet to be determined, but clearly capacity and speed are core to these networks.

[0:44:59]

Are you allowed to have Chinese equipment inside your networks?

We don't have Chinese equipment in our networks, actually. It's not that we're allowed or... we've just chosen not to. And it's primarily because actually the solutions that we've put in place haven't required it. Clearly in London we're doing work on behalf of the Home Office, it's a very important asset in London to have, so therefore it wouldn't be appropriate under the current guidelines from government to actually have certain equipment vendors in that environment. So the good news, Richard, is that we're actually using a company from South Korea, a company called SOLiD, as our core partner for active equipment that makes everything work. And actually, we have a long-standing relationship with them because we used them in New York and we used them in Toronto.

Are there European suppliers that you use as well?

There are, there's a vast ecosystem out there and the suppliers tend to be not so much European, but many of them have a firm base in Europe and they've actually done some considerable work in Europe before. So there are a number of organisations there that we will use for various componentry and parts of the solution, as such. But the organisations that ultimately link into this network are organisations like Ericsson, organisations like Nokia, but that's primarily done through the mobile operators that bring that equipment into our data centres. We take them the rest of the way, so it's their responsibility to bring that in, yeah?

Who's your competition?

So our competition would be first of all, it's fairly diverse, it's... there was a hundred interested parties at one stage in London when they kicked off the programme. It went down to eight bids, went down to four, down to three, down to two and ultimately ourselves on 1st March we were told the good news. So our competitors, many of them come from the US. Companies like [incomp 47:18] Wireless, they were interested, Digital Colony, a big fund, Cellnex, a big Spanish quoted company that had been buying up Towers, Towers businesses. Many of them formed parts of

consortiums and that, we had differentiated ourselves in our bid because we weren't a consortium, we were one organisation that was taking on overall responsibility to deliver this.

Right.

And the others actually formed consortiums.

Which often lead to finger pointing.

Well, it can do and relationships in life and in business take a lot of work to keep together, right, and when you're dealing with a twenty years plus, you want to make sure there that you know who you're dealing with. And therefore we felt it was very important there that we stood up and said, it's BAI, that's who you deal with. And when we wake up in Toronto we think of the TTC, when we wake up in New York we think of the MTA, when we wake up in Hong Kong it's the MTR and when we wake up in London, it's TfL. Simple, yeah?

TfL's been battered about recently, but it does in the main seem to be a very good co-ordinator of transport for London. Is that your view?

It's a very good co-ordinator. It is a very good co-ordinator, they're an exceptional bunch of people and we work client-side, they work alongside us. It's a true partnership. In their offices in Paddington on any one day it's not unusual to see TfL people alongside my own team planning as to how they're going to, various challenges or milestones, and it's great to see. The reality of it is, a city like London can't function properly without an underground, it just simply can't. There are ten million, well, approaching ten million people that live in London or its direct environs that are connected to the Underground, so it is a true world city in that respect. It's a similar population to New York and it's inconceivable to think how people could get into Canary Wharf, for example, easily, you know, every single morning without the Underground, yeah?

Absolutely. Those Jubilee trains coming along. I used to work close to there and it was amazing. But, but, but, we don't really have a twenty-four-hour Underground, do we?

We don't, but, and that's different to what's in New York, for example, where it's twenty-four hours. When we were building that network we had no gaps in the schedule, I mean we literally had flaggers there that would actually tell people when a train was coming through, a green flag and a red flag. Safety is very important to make sure when you send people into tunnels, they come out. And I'm ultimately responsible for health and safety for not just my own people, but also our contractors and our prime contractors in that space. So we take it very seriously. They're hostile environments. But that's what we've found a way to do with BAI. We go to places other people don't want to go. When we're dealing in Australia we're often in forty degrees Centigrade temperatures, we're dealing with bush fires, okay? Forest fires and we've helicopters flying in diesel to remote generators. It's what we do.

[0:50:49]

Does your company, BAI, intend to grow organically or by acquisition?

Both. It's a great question, Richard, because this year's been a great year for us. We've made two acquisitions. I've been directly responsible for one of those which now reports directly into me, and it's a company which is very interesting because it's got an Irish business as well, based out of Dublin. And also Reading. And that company's called Vilicom. The other company we bought this year is called Mobilitie and they have an operation in every state in the US and they're leaders in terms of what they do, neutral host and venues. So inorganic growth, we've been doing that, and we will continue to look where it makes sense to go further in that respect. But actually, great organisations are able to do both, right? And we've been able to demonstrate this year we've definitely done both, and we will continue to make sure that we do, which is the reason why we acquired Vilicom, because I wanted to make sure I have more firepower and more capacity, more capability, and I wasn't ignoring the market that needed to be addressed.

Here's another question you probably won't answer, what are you looking for next?

In terms of businesses?

Yeah, to buy.

D'you know, anything that can actually help me and where it makes sense to actually capture opportunity that makes sense to us, above and beyond. So the clue is in the fact there that I wanted to make sure I had a great network – sorry – a great capacity building out of London, it was uncontaminated, that we did a great job on that. But actually, I also wanted to make sure that, it's Sunderland, we won the Sunderland deal there recently, the smart city, and that's a twenty-year deal too, that is all contaminated. And then the layer in between is going to be Vilicom's domain to make sure that we address that. Now, if Vilicom, for example, aren't able to do all of that, we'll either add to Vilicom, like we'll grow that business, or we'll actually look to complement it with another acquisition. And also we're actively looking at opportunities in mainland Europe as well to see where it makes sense, because we're at that point where we wanted to get the UK right, we wanted to be relevant in the UK, which we very much are now, and then we'll expand from there. So the timing is great for us, yeah?

What's the next best... sorry, what is the next best win available on the Continent for your type of technology? Is the Paris Metro good?

So we have been looking at the Paris Metro and they're adding lines to that at the moment, so there are a number of lines being added and we'll look at that, and that's in preparation for the Olympics which will be there. But I think the big opportunity in mainland Europe is where many of these networks have been built out, they've been built out by the operator community in the past, the mobile network operators, and that was fine when they were building a 2G network and a 3G network, some of them maybe 4G network, but now they're looking at a scenario where CapEx, capital expenditure isn't as plentiful as it was before and is there a better, smarter way to do this. And that's where neutral host comes in, because we can take that pain away, we can do that for them, and on behalf of them. So there's an opportunity there to look at where that's, you know, going to happen quite quickly. Europe is behind where the

US is in terms of its receptiveness to neutral host. UK is ahead of the rest of Europe in relation to that, but the rest of Europe is catching up fast.

[0:54:45]

Surely a French company's going to get the Metro, isn't it?

Yeah, but a French company may not have the experience that may be required and therefore there could be a great opportunity to partner with an organisation there that is able to do that with them. So we're not afraid of partnerships and we're happy to look at that where it makes sense.

Billy, if you keep to your old timetable, which you broke at O2, you'd be leaving at the end of around '22 to the beginning of '23. It doesn't seem to me that you want to do that at all, you're so excited about this business.

Well, I'm very excited by it, Richard, and I really want to make sure there that I stay true to creating a legacy in London for myself and whoever follows behind me, both in life and in work, to look at this and go wow, this guy was able to mobilise a team to defy gravity to be able to do this for London. So I'm very happy and passionate about what we're doing right now and I often say to people when they say, well, when are you going to leave? I'll say as long as I feel valued, as long as I feel excitement, I'm excited about what I can see in the next couple of years, why would I want to leave?

There is a civil servant inside the economic department of the government of Ireland who had the idea of the Irish Development Authority and I don't know his name, and as people go in the Underground in the years to come, they won't know your name, Billy D'Arcy, but they will actually thank you for being there and putting together that network that you're putting together on the Underground, because they'll be able to use their mobile phones. Thank you very much for your contribution, Billy D'Arcy.

Thank you very much, Richard, it's been an absolute pleasure.

[0:56:37 – end of recording]