



Campbell McGarvie

Interviewed by

Jane Bird

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By Zoom

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology where we capture the past and inspire the future. It's Thursday, 11th May 2023 and we're talking on Zoom as has become customary during the coronavirus pandemic. I'm Jane Bird and I've reported on technology and the IT and telecoms industries for newspapers such as The Sunday Times and the Financial Times since the early 1980s. Our contributor today is Campbell McGarvie. Campbell has had a long career in the IT industry, from systems support, sales and marketing at Burroughs – now Unisys – to senior positions at General Automation, Control Data, BellSouth and Storage Technology. His responsibilities have included overseeing the UK's last punch card factory and managing the UK branch of Storage Tech when the US parent company filed for bankruptcy protection. Campbell has also held a number of non-exec directorships and is a past Master of the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists. Campbell, welcome. I'm very much looking forward to hearing more about your life and experience in the world of technology and business.

Good morning. Good to be here.

So perhaps we could start at the beginning. You were born in 1946, I think, in Paisley in Scotland?

That's correct, yeah.

And how was, was it a happy childhood, how did you experience those early years?

It was very much a happy childhood, spent in Paisley and for a while in Edinburgh. We lived in what were tenements, and looking back on it now, it seems quite a deprived childhood compared with today, but I had super parents and I was extremely happy with it all there. Yes, it was a good childhood.

And you had one younger brother, I think, is that right?

I'd one younger brother, yes, he was four years younger and we're still great chums, a lot of very healthy brotherly rivalry between us.

So what about your education then? You were state educated, how did that go from the early years?

Well from the early years, and then it went very badly. I enjoyed primary school, I passed my eleven-plus – my ‘qualie’ as it was known as in Scotland – went to grammar school. By all accounts I’d done well at primary school and in the eleven-plus and finished in the university stream at a grammar school. And for reasons I can’t fathom today, I completely lost my way. And I went very quickly from the top stream to the bottom stream, I didn’t really understand the school and I don’t think they understood me, and so I drifted out of education as early as I could, at the age of 16, having considerably fluffed the opportunity in grammar school.

So, how did your parents feel about that? I mean they were not highly educated themselves were they?

No, they weren’t, and I think really their expectations, we’d never had anyone in the family who’d gone to university so the expectations weren’t very high on their part. Or I suppose on mine. All that really my parents wanted me to do was find a steady trade or a steady job, and education, further education was not really something they would have discussed or considered.

Right. So your, I mean were you trying to please them, do you think, in leaving school at 16 and getting a job, or is it just that it hadn’t, education hadn’t really excited your interests?

Certainly at that school it didn’t. I mean I suppose I have to take responsibility for it, but if you’re going to criticise the state education system you’d wonder why nobody ever asked a question, if someone could drift from top stream to the industrial wastelands of the bottom stream. As regards leaving, I had no choice, I had nowhere else to go, I wasn’t going to get any further qualifications.

And had you, so you hadn’t really had the opportunity to think that you were interested in technology or...

No, no, no, no, no.

... at that stage?

None of that, no.

No?

I needed to find a job and I finished up getting a job in a bank.

And was that, that was rather boring by the sound of it?

[00:04:25]

Oh, that was boring, yeah. So within a few months I realised the extent to which I'd blown it. Because my chums were still at school, they had careers in mind, they were getting into the professions, they were going to university, and I was destined to be a bank clerk, writing in a ledger book. And I figured I had to get out of that somehow and the only way out of it really was to get myself some sort of qualification. And the qualification that's available was the banking qualification, Associate of the Institute of Bankers. Which was typically a five or six-year course, done by further education. The bank I was part of didn't offer any further education so I went to night school, and I went to night school four nights a week for four years. People tell me the sixties are remembered for sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, well they weren't if you were going to Paisley Further Education Centre four nights a week. But at the end of that I learned the biggest lesson of my life, I think, which was that I emerged as the Scottish Prize Winner from about 500 candidates in the examinations. I knew I wasn't the smartest guy who'd taken the examinations, but such was my incentive to succeed that I'd proven that a lot of effort can get me somewhere, so it was a great lesson to learn.

That is rather extraordinary isn't it, how that could happen when you were capable of being so highly motivated and the school hadn't achieved it. But do you still puzzle about that now?

Yes, I do, but I can't blame the school, you know? Well, they must take some of the responsibility, but I can't put anything to it. Other than to say, what I learned at the end of all that was from adversity can come something very successful, yeah? Be good news, so that was a good lesson to learn.

So that took you four years, did you say?

Yeah, yeah.

So what sort of time, where are you up to now in your- this would have been in the late sixties, I guess?

No, that's maybe '63/64, something like that.

Okay. And so then...

Sorry, '65/66, yeah.

Right, okay. So then you had to, you obviously stayed in the world of banking, having got this qualification, for a while?

Oh, I left immediately. No, I wanted out of there. The whole purpose of getting a qualification was so that I could go elsewhere and say, look, I'm not as dumb as I seemed to be at school. [laughs]

So, no sooner had you got the banking qualification than you quit the...

I was gone. Yeah, I was gone. Yeah, yeah.

And into tech, and that was when you joined Burroughs, was it?

Yeah, I needed a job. I applied for a couple of jobs and job offers came by letter, the job offers both came the same morning. One was with Burroughs, who turned into

Unisys when they merged with Univac, and the other was with a company who made pies and sausages – McKellar Watt's, who'll be well known to anyone from Scotland – large-scale pie and sausage makers. And for one reason and one reason only I took the Burroughs job. I knew they were into something to do with accounting and finance, and part of my banking studies had involved - it was a good base course – economics, finance, accountancy, so there seemed to be a connection there. But the reason I really joined Burroughs was they offered the grand sum of £100 a year more than the sausage company. So 30 years later I had young people saying to me, how perceptive of you, Campbell, to get into the IT industry so early. And I didn't really like to tell them I did it for £2 a week, but that's [inaudible] of it.

Yeah, okay. Well, so then that sort of involved quite a lot of different roles by the sound of it. How long did you stay with Burroughs and what was it like?

I was at Burroughs 13 years. It was a super company, excellent training and development, lots of technical training, lots of personal development – which I needed at that stage in particular. And I followed the sort of standard career progression then in those large businesses of systems, sales, sales management, branch management, general management, enjoyed it very much. I struggled very much when I made the move to sales. I moved to sales because that's where the money seemed to be and they seemed to be having a lot of fun, but at the time I moved I didn't really have the self-confidence or the background which would allow me to succeed easily, so that was a struggle. And I was very fortunate then that I had, as I continued to find through my career, some very good mentors, people who guided me and helped me through difficult periods. And so I had a successful and excellent time at Burroughs, great affection for it.

[00:09:33]

So your mentors were, what, other sales people within Burroughs?

Yeah, branch managers, general managers within the company who seemed to think that there might be something they could shine up amongst this rough diamond, and they did a good job for me.

I mean it's an American company, obviously.

Yeah, yeah.

So that, do you think that made a difference, working for a US company?

Well, most of the management were UK people, but certainly there was a large-scale American influence. And I quite liked the American culture of you can succeed, dependent on a lot of effort. The standards demanded were quite high, that was good for me, to respond to the demand for high standards. And as I say, there was a lot of time and money spent on personal development, which was exactly what I needed at that time.

Yeah, I mean that's one thing that the tech industry has been very good about, I think. I mean, talking to many of your contemporaries over the course of these interviews, a lot of them came up through, had got – what shall we say – they hadn't gone up traditional professional services routes. The tech industry seems to have been very welcoming and given them all sorts of opportunities that they wouldn't have had in more traditional careers.

Yeah, yeah. Very much so in the early days, I think.

So come 1979 then, that's when you made the move to General Automation, I think?

Yeah, yeah.

So what was behind that move?

Well, I'd been with one large corporation for 13 years, had a good career, but you could certainly see that in another ten years you'd be pretty much institutionalised, I felt, and I was headhunted for General Automation, who at that stage were amongst the leaders of the minicomputer market, as it was then called. The other leaders were Digital Equipment and Data General. GA fell out of the race very early, but it gave me my first general management job and my first taste of international management,

because I also had responsibility for the Scandinavian operation. And that was a bit of a baptism of fire, because the very first time I went to Stockholm, as the new International Manager, all 30 people or so in the Swedish office told me they were on strike. [laughs] And they were on strike for a very collegiate Scandinavian reason, which was their boss had not been paid his bonus. It's kind of unusual for staff to be... yeah?

Yeah.

That was an interesting challenge, but we got through that, we got through.

And what was your, so you built up the Scandinavian side of the business, did you, thinking about this experience of international management?

Yes, I enjoyed the international aspect and I was there for just a couple of years, but it was a great toe in the water of international management, yeah.

Yes, because after two years you then moved to Control Data, so, well, that was because you were focussing on the minicomputer side of the IT world, is it?

Yeah. Then I went to Control Data, I was asked to go there, to run a company called Control Dataset, which was probably one of the fun, the greatest fun things I've ever done. Back in those days there was a very large market for what were generally known as computer consumables, yeah, there was a lot of paper, a lot of punch cards, there were things called floppy disks, which were a great new thing, there were removable disk packs. I think you were with ICL at one stage, Jane, you'll know all about ICL.

I was, yes. That's not something I talk about very much so you've obviously done your homework.

I've done a little research, I've done a little research. And so that company had been bought from ICL but still did the own label products for ICL. It's the closest I came in my career to consumer market, fast moving consumables, because it was an

interesting market, because you could change the pricing or a marketing strategy and see the results within a few weeks, yeah? So that was interesting, another approach on the side of the IT industry. And of course, as you mentioned earlier, I had the last punch card factory in the UK, which was great.

So you didn't feel that you were sort of managing decline? I mean I suppose things were moving on rather than down?

Only in that area. I mean the consumables side, the bulk of the business was still growing quite rapidly, but certainly the punch card business unaccountably had no future. [laughs] And what was interesting was the factory, they had a very strong union leadership of the print unions, and people who were around at that time will remember how militant the print unions were, Fleet Street was moving to eastern London, Wapping, and these guys enjoyed, or their principal reaction to anything was to immediately have another strike, so that was good fun.

Yes, I experienced that myself, because I was in fact involved in moving to Wapping when I worked for The Sunday Times.

Happy days. And interesting days.

[00:15:04]

It was, yes. So that was the end of punch cards, but as you say, the technology. I mean the world of minicomputers sort of in the end rather died a death as well, didn't it?

Yeah.

But not at that time. But you moved after, again, you moved quite quickly then to Storage Tech in 1982, I think.

I had another role in Control Data, I ran Control Dataset, a subsidiary of Control Data, for a couple of years, and then they asked me to do something. Control Data – not

many people are around now who will even have heard of them – but they were a large, one of the bunch, one of the Burroughs, Univac, etc, companies chasing IBM – large organisation of 60 or 70,000 people worldwide. Very much hardware based, the whole culture was one of shifting [incomp]. There was a recognition in '82, thereabouts, that that needed to change, the future was not in hardware, it was in software and services. And so they selected an individual in each country to try and lead the change from hardware into software and services, and I took that on as a director of Control Data UK across the various companies. I have to say, I failed, as the others did, to make any real impact. The hardware culture was so deeply ingrained, the idea of moving to software and services was just too challenging for the organisation. And I left about two years later, having failed to make much impact, and the company itself disappeared within five or eight years. Not because I left [laughs], but because they failed to make the change to software and services.

So...

It was a fail, you know, but it was an interesting thing to have tried to do and I learned a lot about myself and about some of the challenges. There's a little rhyme I learned at the time that I still remember, that was 'They said it couldn't be done, they said you couldn't do it, so he took on the job that couldn't be done, and he couldn't do it'. Yeah? And that seemed to sort of sum up that.

Yes. So they just, they were convinced from the outset that it wasn't going to work and so they just didn't have the heart and soul to make...

The cultural resistance was huge within them. The whole business had been built on one aspect of the IT industry and they really couldn't see themselves moving.

No. But IBM did, would you say? I mean obviously they didn't all completely die, did they, although I suppose...

No, they didn't, no. I mean Burroughs and Univac merged to become Unisys and they successfully moved to a hardware and services business. IBM of course are

principally services and software now. So many of them made the change successfully, but Control Data didn't.

No. So you then went back to Storage Tech?

Yeah.

Had you been there before? No, you hadn't, that was... because you came and went a bit with things, did you, or am I getting confused?

No, that was my first venture in Storage Tech, '84, yeah.

And how was that?

It was initially quite a shock, but then it was great fun. To explain a little of the background, Storage Tech had just been around for maybe ten years or so and had been a great success, moving into various aspects of the IT industry, particularly storage and retrieval of information, and they had expanded rapidly. I was headhunted to head the UK operation and much to my surprise, and indeed most people's surprise, within a few months the US company went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Now, within the US there was – there still is – this very sensible option of Chapter 11 bankruptcy which allows a company that's got into difficulties to trade its way out of it, yeah? Whilst protecting the position of the creditors so that they don't lose out, the company can continue to trade [incomp]. ... the case of Storage Tech, they were able to do that just by sticking to the knitting, pulling back on some of the more extravagant new product range ideas, new industry ideas, new plans, because there was fundamentally a very sound business there. So the success story was that after two years of Chapter 11 the corporation emerged, paid everyone their debts in full, most people retained their jobs, most customers retained their supplier and most of the suppliers to that company retained their customers. So it proved to be a very good system. Unfortunately there was nothing like that in the UK at that time, so you were either bankrupt or you weren't. We were in a strange situation of being the wholly owned UK subsidiary of a company that was, in a binary form, bankrupt. So that was the most exciting thing I ever did by far, was just to try to keep this thing

alive against all kinds of challenges. Customers were worried about were we there to support them, understandably, the employees were worried if the customers would go away would they get a salary next month. Our competitors were making hay, of course. And the computer press were having great fun at our expense. So it was a really, really challenging time, but great, a great learning experience.

[00:20:46]

And in the end the company, both the parent and the subsidiary company survived, is that...?

They did, absolutely. The parent company survived, everyone was paid back and most people kept their jobs, as I say. Within the UK we retained all of our customers, all of our employees. We had to have a lot of conversations with a lot of people, we had to keep reassuring them, keep proving we could do it, keep paying the salaries each month. It was testing. In fact, you were at *Computing* at one stage, yeah?

Yes, I was, yes.

Well, I just want to tell you about *Computing*. During this period, when things were particularly dark, the front page of *Computing* one week read, 'Storage Tech begs its banks for mercy', yeah? And alongside that was a half-page picture of me. [laughs] And after that was printed that particular week there was some sort of computer show at Earl's Court, so I went to this and I discovered that *Computing* had a stand at the entrance door giving out plastic bags to hold the various brochures that people picked up as they walked round, yeah? And printed on these plastic bags was this front page. [laughs] So I went back on the Tube surrounded by schoolchildren holding this bag with my face on. And it was your fault, because you were in *Computing*.

Oh. I don't think I... this would have been in 1982? Oh gosh, yeah, maybe I was.

'84. I think Richard...

Oh no, I'd left.

Oh, that's your excuse. Richard Sharpe was the editor, I remember.

Yes, yes. He would have been responsible, yeah.

We'll blame him, yeah.

Probably not for the plastic bags, that would be the marketing department, I'm sure, yeah. Well, that's right, because that's one of the exciting things about writing the IT industry, about covering the IT industry, that there were a lot of sort of boom-to-bust technologies at that stage and that's obviously much more interesting than writing about more of the status quo, so...

I understand, I understand.

You experienced that, yeah. But you, so was it then in 1988 that you went to BellSouth, President of BellSouth Europe? So that, what drew you there?

Oh, the promise of a major investment in Europe. They'd already bought four or five IT companies: Italy, Germany, UK, France, and wanted someone to help drive these forward and expand them. So it seemed a very attractive situation to get into. What I discovered was the – how can I put this – the acquisitions were not particularly well judged, they didn't relate to one another. Some were software companies, some were PC maintenance companies, it made no sense. And so very quickly I had to go back to BellSouth's headquarters in Atlanta and say you have two choices and they both cost a great deal of money. One is to write off what you've bought and the other is to invest in at least the same again to try and make some sort of cohesive business. Understandably, they weren't enthusiastic about that and no one wanted to take responsibility, so it was quickly time to move on. A misstep, a misstep on my part. But it was interesting again.

Right. So that was the BellSouth experience.

Yeah.

[00:24:15]

And you touched on PCs there of course, I mean that was the other enormous change the industry was going through at that time.

Absolutely, yeah.

But that wasn't really your sort of area of interest or expertise then, you were still on the kind of big systems side of things, is that right?

Yeah, and particularly focussing on the storage tech, on storage and retrieval, of all systems, yeah. But I was never involved in the PC business, no.

No. So then from BellSouth you then went back to Storage Tech in 1989. This time, so now your international marketing is extending to the US as well, isn't it, and you were based in Denver, did you go to Denver, or what was...

Yeah, yeah.

Was that your first foray into working in the US?

It was, yes, yes. It was interesting from the cultural change, but the interesting thing was the role was something I still see IT companies wrestling with a bit today, which is to attune research and development to immediate future market needs. Typically, people in the field, the marketing people will not be able to identify very clearly what should happen in several years' time, so the field requirements tend to be whatever features and capabilities the competitors have that this company doesn't have, yeah? On the other side of the coin you have the research and development people who very easily go off track and just find cleverer, smarter, quicker ways to do things that may not be of any value to anyone, yeah? And trying to marry those two is very challenging, and I think still challenging for the IT industry today. You know, I would just cite, almost on a daily basis it seems, you get an upgrade to your phone or your PC or whatever, and if you actually dig into what that upgrade is, and very often

it's something that's technically extremely clever, but you scratch your head wondering what problem this solution is answering, yeah? Classically, a solution searching for a problem. It's interesting. And I certainly didn't crack that and I think generally people still struggle to crack that [incomp].

Indeed. So, sorry, you were talking about what it was like being in the US at that time, yeah? So, were you, you obviously came back again, so you didn't love being in the US, I guess, or how did you find that?

Well, the UK company, the UK Storage Tech company had always been the number one world operation and for various reasons it had fallen out from that position and I felt a great deal of affinity for it, I'd been part of it in the most challenging times. So I was quite enthusiastic about the idea of going back and getting, regaining our rightful position, and we did so.

And you managed to achieve that?

Yeah, with a very good team of people. The secret always is to have the right team of people.

Your major competition at the time would have been... who were you...

Oh, IBM. Yeah, IBM.

I mean that's quite a formidable rivalry.

Yeah, loved competing with IBM. Our only advantage could be that we'd be more agile, more responsive, more aware of what customers were saying, and we had to do that constantly. So it was great fun, it was not quite David and Goliath, but we were very much smaller, had far less in terms of resources, but if we applied ourselves in the right way we could be successful, so that was good.

So they were still the market leader in terms of their share of the storage tech market, were they?

Yeah, yeah.

But you were being the kind of, we run faster...

That's right, that's right. More innovative, yeah, yeah. It was good fun, getting under their feet and taking some of their best business, that was great fun.

Okay. So then in 1994 you went back to Boulder, Colorado to cover aviation sector and so on, is that right?

No, no, not aviation. No, I took on the job of Vice President, Europe, Africa, Middle East, the whole of the international operation. So, my memories of that time are really of aeroplanes, taxis...

Ah, that's why I thought you were working in aviation.

Yes, well, I thought I was working in aviation. And it was an interesting role, I mean we're talking big numbers, we had revenues of three-quarters of a billion pounds, it was thousands of people. But it was a job, quite honestly, that it was difficult to find fulfilling. You know, there was a lot of travelling. So I did enjoy doing it, I got my Gold Card with British Airways, and I spent a lot of time in hotels, but it was time after a while to move on from there.

[00:29:36]

You've had, I mean you've had a family, I guess, so...

Yes, my family were grown by then.

Oh, they had, so in that sense you were relatively free. Okay, so you only stayed in that role for three years or so?

Yeah.

Then it was TeleConnect?

Yes, yeah, which was the opposite end of the scale. TeleConnect, I still feel slightly guilty about. When you phone, when any of us phone a banker, an insurance company or a utility, you get this voice that says your call's enormously important to us, which is why we'll ignore you for 45 minutes, and I was involved in the software that generated all of that frustration throughout the country. [laughs] The software for call centres was what we did.

Right. Ah yeah, well then you have a lot to answer for, I daresay.

A lot to answer for. Yeah, I have no defence at all.

Well, I'm sure if you hadn't done it, somebody else would, so... yeah. So that kept you, you stayed, what, till... that was quite a while, till 2006, did you, or...

Oh no, till 2000. 2000. At that stage things came together, so I decided to quit at that stage, and by then I was involved in a few other little software businesses just as a non-exec really, and I'd also at that stage got involved with the livery company, Information Technologists livery company, so I began to take a greater interest in things like that.

So let's, shall we talk about the venture, the small ventures, the new entrepreneurial side of your activities then, in the non-exec director roles?

Yeah.

Yeah, was that, so early 2000s, was that a good time to be launching a new tech business in the UK? These were all UK start-ups were they?

Yes. And they were mostly ones- I should say I didn't start them, I went along as the sort of greying figure in the corner who's seen, been around and seen some of it before. They were all down to younger, sharper, technically aware people who had bright ideas. And generally it wasn't a great idea, because if you remember of course,

there was a great boom in IT the late 1990s, and then there was the crash, and so it required quite a lot of enthusiasm and determination to start again. A number of these guys did. I don't know I contributed that much to them, to be honest, other than having seen a few of the mistakes that had been made and I had made, you were able to point people in the right direction.

Have any of them made it to a large scale?

Not a large scale, I think some of them have been successful in selling the business. I know that some of them have been successful in selling their businesses on and moving elsewhere. So I was happy to contribute, but...

It's a shame that that seems to be the main aspiration with these ventures, that rather than create a Google or a Microsoft, the temptation is to sell, sometimes to start again, obviously, because some people just want to be serial entrepreneurs, but quite a lot of other people just think well, I've made my money now, I'll stop doing it. Which is a problem for the UK, I think, do you agree?

Yes. And I mean there's a lot of debate, isn't there, about how we don't have an environment that encourages people to take their smaller business to something larger. In general the stock market's not very enthusiastic about UK companies in that area and we don't have a strong venture capital industry supporting tech in this country. There's complex reasons for why that's the case, or undoubtedly if we were to build a large-scale IT presence globally, a number of things like that would need to be fixed.

Do you see any sign of those things being fixed?

Not from what I hear, not from talking to people involved in the business. A lot of these issues are institutionalised and will require a great deal of attitudinal change, you know? And of course you contrast it endlessly with software and IT company development in India, in the west coast of the United States, and sadly the UK does not compare well as a development area compared with those countries.

So you're not overly optimistic about our chances in the short term to change this?

I don't see it, I don't see a Microsoft or a large-scale IT organisation developing in the UK, to answer your question, no.

[00:34:35]

No. So what about your work with the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists then? How did that begin and what were you most involved in?

Well, I joined the livery company in the late eighties, it had been formed in about 1980, I think. I'm a bit of a sucker for tradition and ritual and that sort of thing and I was just fascinated by the paradox of the livery companies, which had been going 800 years in the City of London, with all these traditions, and there suddenly being an Information Technology livery company when we had, I suppose, always considered ourselves as disruptors, now suddenly we're embracing all that tradition. I found the paradox interesting, got involved. I mean I learned a little about the livery company, I certainly identified with it, particularly the concentration on charity and education, and I think those are the strongest offerings from the livery company. So I was involved in a few developments there, an apprenticeship scheme, we eventually finished up helping fund an academy in west London amongst some of the poorest areas of west London. In a south London school, which had been a failing school, we helped them become a very well-established technical school for the IT industry. So being involved in that through the livery company was quite rewarding. And after a few years of being involved in various things they asked me to be Master of the Information Technologists, which was great honour, great fun and something I feel a real privilege to have been able to do.

What did you enjoy about it?

Well, I enjoyed all the tradition, I enjoyed having the fancy gown – you get a fancy gown to wear – there's a lot of dining out. There's a lot of dining out, probably put on a bit of weight during that time. But I also enjoyed seeing the, you know, what the livery company can provide and what it does provide. And we have 800 members, we contribute a lot in charity each year. We're not financially particularly well off

compared with some of the older livery companies, so the contribution we make is in our members giving up their time, their skills, their influence to help other organisations, particularly small charities, use IT to their benefit to help those charities do their job better.

Yeah, yeah. And that's been your main sort of contact in the IT industry in recent years then, has it?

Yes, yes. I'm still an active member and of course with 800 people in the IT industry [inaudible].

Yeah. So thinking about, looking over the whole span of your career then, what sort of changes would you, you know, the question is, you know, what are the greatest changes to society because of the work you've been involved in, anything you'd highlight there? What would you sort of point to?

I suppose, I suppose how little people understood, or what impact technology and computing would have on life in general. But I think it was – I'll recall his name in a minute – the chap who headed up Digital Equipment in the 1970s, who were a huge organisation at the time. He famously said that he didn't imagine, he couldn't see any reason at all why an individual would have a computer in their home. Now, if you fast forward 20 years from that statement when everyone had a PC, then he was totally wrong, but if you go forward to now, 2020-something, 2023, with the advent of wi-fi, internet, mobile phones, mobile [incomp] of various kinds, voice-activated systems, you could see that in another few years there will be no reason to have your own computer at home, it would all be done in that way. So maybe – Larsen, [Olsen?] I think was his name, that's right – maybe he went from being wrong 20 years ago to being right, full circle. I think that demonstrates the ongoing changes that IT have created to society and I think there aren't very many people who could have predicted that, and I think you'd have to be very cautious about taking a position today that predicts anything in the next ten or 15 years. Other than the influence of IT will continue to be wide, widespread.

[00:39:33]

Yes. So that's really talking about the perils of crystal ball gazing and- but in terms of reflecting on how the world has changed really since you joined Burroughs, obviously, I mean that's the most extraordinary change, isn't it, when you're talking about punch cards and so on. And now, of course, we're moving into a sort of, with quantum computing and AI and so on, you know, really quite frightening uncharted territory. But in terms of how things have changed so far, you know, what would you say has been the greatest change to society because of the work that you've been involved in in the IT area?

That's a question, Jane. How have I changed society? [laughs] I don't know, I was riding a wave that was happening all the time and some of the times I picked the right wave so had some success. I don't know I could specify a specific area beyond that. I don't think it's a very satisfactory answer but that's the best I can give you.

No, I suppose if we're talking about technology in the workplace, which has been mainly your area until recent years anyway, I mean it has revolutionised jobs, hasn't it, and I guess that mind-numbingly boring work you did as a bank clerk, perhaps it would be still, do you think, as boring, or has it made life more interesting for the bank clerks of today?

Well, round where I live you'd have difficulty finding a bank, let alone a bank clerk. Certainly some of those changes are evident, and yet, conversely, I mean I was involved in a marketing campaign, I was saying the other day to somebody, in the 1980s where the company I was with were marketing the paperless future, yeah? You may remember that. Now here we are 40 years later, there's still a hell of a lot of paper being used. And okay, there's also the electronic stuff, so I think sometimes in the IT industry we over-emphasise, or have raised expectations of the impact of the change, remembering that societies and cultures take a long time to catch up.

Yes, they say a paperless office is about as likely as a paperless loo, I think, is what...

[laughs]

So, well, what's your proudest achievement, Campbell, would you say?

Proudest achievement? Outside of my family, I assume you mean. I suppose, understanding when I was 16 that I'd blown it and I had to do something about it and no one else was going to do it for me, and sticking out going to bloody night school four nights a week for all those years. I think that as a teenager that took a bit of dedication, so I give myself a little gold star for that. And I think also suddenly discovering one evening that your company's bankrupt as a complete surprise and, against the odds, getting the business through that, keeping all the customers, keeping all the employees, somehow or other having the credibility that people believed that it was worthwhile hanging on there. I guess those would be the two that I would pick.

Yeah, okay. So, in terms of anything you'd do differently if you had your... I suppose you'd go back and work harder for your A levels, O levels.

That would certainly be true, certainly. I think... sometimes people conflate errors and mistakes, yeah? I don't think they're the same thing. Or errors and regrets, let me say. Errors and regrets are not the same thing. So, I'd have made a couple of missteps as we've talked about, but I learned from them, yeah? So I don't think you should always regret a misstep, if you learn something from it. Regrets? I don't know I have that many. I was very fortunate in the people that guided me, I had a lot of fun in what I was doing. I don't have any great regrets. I suppose I do have one regret, is that through the years I worked with some great teams of people, and I really enjoyed their company, but I was always looking to the next chapter and once I moved on to something new, I was rather careless with keeping up connections with the people I'd worked with before, and it's very difficult to pick that up 20 or 30 years later. So I regret that people I was close to I perhaps unwittingly, unthinkingly turned my back on because I'd found this new exciting thing to do. That would be a real human regret.

[00:45:01]

Yes. Perhaps technologies like social media are making that a bit easier to manage nowadays. Maybe not. Do you use social media yourself?

I do. I don't get involved in Twitter or any of that stormy stuff. I use email, I keep in touch with people. But I'm not a great fan of it and I do get concerned when I see, as you regularly do, groups of people gathering together in restaurants or bars or somewhere, and they're all looking at their phones, yeah?

Yeah.

I don't quite see the point of that if you're all together, but then, this is a grumpy old man in the corner talking, isn't it?

So, how about money as a motivator? I mean you very honestly said you'd, you know, chosen Burroughs for the sake of £2 a week, I mean did financial gain continue to be an important driver for you and make a big difference to your life and career?

Yes, it was there. I did it for a number of reasons, certainly financial would be one of them. Yeah, I come from a background where there wasn't much money, so the opportunity to have a different lifestyle was important. But also, I also wanted to find, I always wanted to do something I'd find fulfilling, yeah? So I'd like to think I had the two vaguely balanced in some way.

So, ah, you're not one of those people who lies on their deathbed thinking, oh, I wish I'd spent less time at the office? Or, you're happy with the amount of time you spent at the office or...?

Yes, very much, it was great fun working. I mean, like most of the people I guess you're interviewing for this process, we were extremely lucky to stumble somehow or other into the computing and IT business when we did. They were Wild West days, but it was great fun and much less organised, and of course new generations will

come into a slightly different world, but we had great fun, we were very fortunate, yeah.

Absolutely. And the mentors that helped you in the early days, did you also pick up mentors later on in life, or now you're a mentor to obviously people in the IT industry yourself, I guess?

Well, I hope I was, I hope I am. As I mentioned, one of the most memorable aspects of my career was the people who did mentor me, the benefits I got from that, so if you can pass that on. The whole basis of the livery company is to put something back, you know, the old cliché about putting something back. So, although, you know, I look back on the mentoring that I received would be, I think quite a lot of it would be close to what currently is called bullying. [laughs] It was quite harsh, but I was a young man who needed something harsh, you know?

That's an interesting observation, because there are different views on this, but yes, I mean sometimes it's hard to take criticism, it's quite a narrow, a tightrope, isn't it?

It is, very much so, and it seems to be getting narrower.

Yeah, yeah. Well, I wonder whether having more IT, women in the IT industry will make a difference? Probably not, I guess that's far too generalised. I mean that's presumably been a difference that you have noticed...

Absolutely, absolutely. I go back to Burroughs and it was an all-male environment. I mean females worked in the office and worked in HR, and that was it. And now it's great to see so many women bringing what they do to IT.

Yes.

In the livery company we've had a number of female Masters and that's good to see too, they're prominent people in the IT industry.

[00:49:12]

So you're, in terms of being international, your international experience then, you had a couple of spells working based in the US, you were never based on continental Europe, I guess?

No.

But you always wanted to come back to the UK. So you weren't enticed to the expatriot life, you would say? Again, is that something that you felt strongly about, or just the way it worked out?

I think the matter is family driven to a great extent, I like to be close to my family, and yeah, I think the danger as a Brit working, for example, for a large US corporation is you have this international touch so you're expected to handle the international side and that takes you back to travelling round the world on aeroplanes, you know? But I have great affection for the UK, it's where I'd always want to be based, I think.

Do you think there is a new risk of a brain drain, the tech people seeing a better life in the US?

I don't think so. These things change so rapidly all the time. Not currently, no, on the west coast just the large numbers of layoffs with Elon Musk and people like that, so I guess people are pretty wary. But there's no doubt about the fact that if you're someone with real skills, business skills, entrepreneurial skills, technical skills, there's no doubt about the fact there is a much wider field of opportunity in the US than there is in the UK, or anywhere in Europe. So I suppose that will always be an attraction for younger people.

Yeah, well, maybe quite a lot of them like you will go there for a spell and...

Yeah.

... and come back. So just, I know you've said the perils of looking into the crystal ball and being a bit visionary about the next ten years, if put on the spot, what would your sort of forecast be about how the world of IT and tech is going to change over that sort of period?

I don't know. I'm very reluctant to get involved in that, Jane. I think, you know, Bill Gates isn't entirely daft and Bill Gates said in 1994 he couldn't see a commercial application that would make money on the internet in the next ten years, if Bill Gates can fail to see it, I'm not quite sure what I would. I'm sure there'll continue to be many developments. I'm interested in the fact that so much of it now does not involve a device such as we're talking on now, and I suppose the idea of technology in its broadest sense being available as a utility, like you take your plug anywhere in the world and plug it in the wall and you get electricity, some sort of analogy closest to that I guess is what we're heading to.

And any thoughts about AI? Which camp are you in? The pause and don't do anything until we sort out the ethics, or, you know, we've got to get on with it because, you know, the other guys are and otherwise they'll overtake us?

I guess, and this is the easy answer, I guess I'm somewhere between the two. I think there's a long tradition of scaremongering about new technologies and the dreadful impact they would have. And we go back to the paperless office we were discussing, that didn't really happen, it's happened to some extent. So the robots taking over the world thing will happen to some small extent. I think regardless of what's being said, we will press on and we should press on with caution, and I believe that's what'll happen, there's enough good sense around.

And, what would be your advice for young people thinking about maybe having a career in IT and tech now?

Oh yeah, do it, because it's got to be a great thing to do. Stay abreast of the technology as long as you can. It's always been tough, you know, to keep on

relearning a new language, as it were, a new way of living every few years is tough in the IT industry. But there's still great opportunity there. And hopefully also, it's still an industry which is not too hidebound about the way people can get into it and the way they can expand their careers and the way they can develop in it, and I think that's important and hopefully will stay that way.

[00:54:10]

That's probably one of its great strengths, I would imagine, being open to talent which has not necessarily come up the conventional route.

And that's something – to go back to the livery company – that's something I was involved in there, was back in the, I suppose early nineties, the word apprenticeship had become somewhat devalued, it was associated with ageing shipyards and engineering companies who employed young people at below minimum rate for five years and then gave them a fulltime job, or full payment. And the livery company sponsored a, provided the framework for an apprenticeship scheme for young people, not necessarily educationally qualified in the traditional academic ways, but they had an aptitude and they were able to come into companies under that apprenticeship framework and develop the skills which would allow them to have an IT career. And livery companies throughout the centuries have always been involved with apprenticeships. If you think people today still take their City & Guilds examinations to prove their competence in various trades. So there's a long tradition there, we picked it up in the IT industry and through that very many young people who may not otherwise have gone into it, gone into the IT business.

Is there anything else that you'd like to mention?

I don't think so, Jane. No, I've bumbled on here, as I do, I've enjoyed it very much. It's a bit of an ego trip to talk about yourself so much. [laughs] I don't get to do that at home [laughs], but I've enjoyed it and you made it very simple, you've guided me very well through it, thank you.

Oh well, it's been a pleasure talking to you, Campbell, and I look forward to hearing more about your ventures as they continue.

Jane, I've enjoyed it, thank you.

You're welcome.

[00:56:16 recording ends]