Lisa Perkins

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 Wednesday, 1ˢᵗ May 2024 and we're talking on Zoom, as has become customary during the coronavirus pandemic. I'm Jane Bird and I have written about 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 Lisa Perkins, Director of Adastral Park and Research Realisation at BT's R&D centre. Before that, Lisa was Chief Information Officer at Openreach, BT's UK telecoms maintenance organisation, which looks after the cables and exchanges that connect nearly all the UK's homes and businesses to broadband and voice telephony. Lisa is also visiting professor at the University of Suffolk and she is involved in many organisations supporting the business, industry and technology communities in her local area of East Anglia. Lisa, welcome, I'm very much looking forward to hearing more about your life and experiences in the world of telecoms and IT.*

Thank you.

So, if we could start at the beginning. You were born in 1974 in Birmingham.

I was.

And I think you had quite a few older brothers and even an older sister. It sounds like you were very much the younger one of the family.

Very much so, yeah, by a long way, yes. So there was, I have five siblings, my sister's the eldest and we have four brothers, but they were all born within a space of ten years and then there was a ten-year gap before I arrived on the scene. [laughs] So I had a peculiar experience of being sort of an only child, but as part of a big family, it was a bit strange.

So did you have a happy childhood? Is it a time you look back on with joy and happy thoughts?

Absolutely. So when I was eight I moved to Malawi with my parents and that's sort of where I say I feel like I had an experience of an only child, despite having all of

these siblings, because I was the only one that moved to Malawi, because by then the next eldest was eighteen and at college, so he stayed here in the UK. So my childhood really I very much remember as being in Malawi and having actually just quite the most idyllic childhood, you know, very carefree, very free, very nature oriented, you know, without any of the trappings of any of the technology at the time, actually, which is a bit ironic given what I ended up working in. So it was a very, yeah, a very happy time.

And your father was an engineer, I think, is that right?

That's right. So he started his career at the Post Office, so he was an apprentice with the Post Office as a telecommunications engineer and then later on in his life he put himself through night school to gain his degree qualifications, and then he transitioned from there to academia, and so he then basically transitioned to lecturing in electrical engineering and telecommunications at various different universities across the world.

So there was technology in the family. I mean, were your brothers and your sister working in engineering and technology as well?

Some of them, yes. So I had three, three of the four brothers were involved in technology. So two of my brothers worked at BT for some time during their career in telecoms, and another brother of mine was very much in the IT area working at Apple.

Okay, so was there technology at home then? I mean what was your first exposure to computers?

So probably the earliest memory I have is that when I was probably about five or six my dad was one of the pioneers of optical fibre. So he was working in conjunction with many partnerships, both with BT and other academic institutions on the research associated with optical fibre. So I remember running sort of through the house picking up peculiar objects asking if these things were optical fibres, you know. [laughs] That was probably the earliest memory that I have of, you know, something with regard to technology. I wouldn't say we were particularly, you know, I wouldn't say that the house was particularly full of kind of technology, gadgets or the like,

probably commensurate with that era really, I don't think, you know, kind of obviously as time went on and life evolved and technology evolved, that probably became more of a situation. But at the time for me it was less about kind of gadgets in the house, but just much more about hearing this language, you know, with my father and, you know, kind of colleagues that used to come to the house and, you know, for meetings, etc.

[00:05:58]

Yeah. So you were, in terms of schooling, you were at state schools, although you went to the grammar school in Birmingham, didn't you?

That's correct, yeah.

That, I guess was that a fee-paying school at that time?

So it wasn't a fee-paying school, but it was a grammar school, so you had to pass your eleven-plus to get into it, but no, it wasn't a fee-paying school.

Was it in the Day School Trust? Yeah, anyway. It's quite a well-known school, isn't it, for academic excellence?

Yes.

So did that sort of push you in the direction of technology? Because you did tech A levels, didn't you?

I did do tech A levels. I mean I think my background is slightly curious in that actually I tried to resist going into a tech career. So I was pretty consistent across all subjects at GCSE level and could as easily have gone into a sort of history/geography A levels, as I did end up going into kind of maths, physics and biology. I think at that time when I was choosing my A levels I was already aware of this imbalance in the industry regarding women in technology, and in a very subconscious way I think I reached for that, but not because I was particularly, you know, committed and

passionate about moving to a technology domain. But in point of fact, the experience that I had at King Edward's Girls' School wasn't a very happy one and sort of created this connection in my head – I mean obviously this is all with hindsight now, you know, I understand what has gone on, I didn't realise this at the time – but I think I reached for technology as a way out of being in an environment that was heavily female, because my experience being in an all-girls' school for two years was particularly unhappy. So it was more a selection of subjects based on, you know, those types of thinkings, as opposed to, I'm particularly committed to, you know, kind of technology and wanting to kind of follow that technology domain.

In fact, you in fact went to a sixth form college to do your A levels didn't you? You didn't stay at the girls' school. Presumably that's the reason why you didn't stay there?

That's correct. So I moved back from Malawi, from this idyllic, absolutely wonderful environment, to Birmingham, this all-girls' school. I'd been used to a mixed school. So I had to deal with, you know, the culture shock, the different type of schooling. I came back very naïve in comparison to my peers because I had this very sort of isolated upbringing, I suppose. And it was a real shock to me. And so, yes, I couldn't get out of there as… fast enough. And it was a bit of a battle with my parents who obviously wanted me to stay at King Edward's, you know, because of the reputation that you describe, but I'm very glad that in the end they saw that I was going to be a lot happier at the sixth form college in a more balanced environment. And that, I think, definitely proved to be a good decision in the end.

[00:09:57]

Yeah. And you did pure maths. You're obviously very good at maths. Did you do two maths A levels or…

No, it was pure and applied maths A level. So at the time you could do pure and statistics or pure and applied. So applied was obviously all around the mechanics and so, yeah, I opted for that type of maths versus the statistics.

So do you think you had a sort of early leaning towards things that work, machines doing things rather than the pure theory side of things, presumably that might have influenced your…

Yeah, I hadn't thought about it actually, but yes, probably. And then that then goes on to explain why I wasn't happy when I took my first degree choice, because I loved maths at A level and so when I went on to then choose my first degree, because I wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to do, I stuck with a more general degree and I did combined honours in the two subjects that I loved at A level, which was maths and biology. And in my head I actually thought that I was going to go for a teaching degree and I was anticipating that having two subjects would, you know, kind of differentiate me as a teacher. But what actually transpired was that the maths at the degree level was nowhere near as enjoyable as the A level because it was far too ethereal [laughs] and not related. So actually, in point of fact, your observation is probably spot on, actually, in terms of, you know, it needed to be applied and real and mean something and have an outcome, rather than just prove that zero doesn't exist or does exist, you know. [laughs]

Yes, I can get that. So, did you have mentors at that stage? I mean were you influenced particularly by teachers or lecturers or other adults that you knew?

I had a very good relationship at A level with, well, with actually all of my teachers, but my maths teacher particularly. She was, you know, she was quite inspirational and, actually looking back, I realise, you know, kind of quite congruent with the person that I've turned out to be in terms of, you know, she liked challenges and she was quite resilient and she was, you know… I don't know what the description is, but a bit of a force of nature, I suppose. And so, you know, certainly at that stage I guess she had an influence, definitely. When I moved into university, not so much, I think I lost that, I didn't replace her with anybody particularly at university and I mean I think if I was going to be honest, my first degree was something I just, in the end I just had to try and get through. I probably knew very early on in my first year that I had made a poor decision, but because I'm so obstinate and stubborn, I wasn't going to let it beat me. So instead I made myself miserable for three years [laughs] and just stuck with it. And it's telling, actually, because the combined honours programme at

Aston University is very large, you know, there's a lot of subjects that you can choose from and most people sort of did business maths or biology and chemistry, and there were only, at the start of our first year, there were only seven of us that had selected biology and maths, and by the end of the final year I was the sole remaining person who had stuck it out, which completely shafted me when it came to the exam timetabling, sadly. But yes, it was a tough combination.

Ah, so before we leave your early life completely, just going back to the Malawi thing and what you were saying about challenges and adventures and so on, I mean what took your father there? I mean presumably, was that lecturing? Why go to Malawi? It was sort of the end of empire, I mean the empire time was kind of coming to an end, it must have been a strange time to go to Africa.

So I mean I think my mum and dad were phenomenal, because in the sixties they left England with £5 in their pocket, three children under the age of five, and got on a boat to Ghana. And so that was long before you could google what anybody anywhere looked like or what you might expect or what have you. And they just went for it and they went for the adventure and, yeah, he lectured in Accra, at the university in Ghana, and then from there after about six years they moved to Malta and he lectured there before he returned back to Birmingham. And then, yeah, obviously he was given the opportunity with funding from the Overseas Development Agency to implement a degree programme at the University of Malawi and yeah, he took the opportunity to have another adventure and create, you know, it was Dean of Engineering, and created the electronic and electrical engineering degree programme for the university out there.

[00:15:46]

It was very much for the future, it wasn't that he was in a sort of role that had become obsolete really with the breaking up of the British Empire, it was a bit more the opposite really, it was helping to create a new world in Malawi. So at least he didn't have that sort of awful feeling that these people all had where they, you know, where they thought they didn't have a role in life any more because the only thing they knew was how to run the colonies and when they didn't need to run the colonies any more.

No, I think that was quite some time before. I think there must have been at least a decade between the two situations, yeah. I don't think there was any, there was no sign of any kind of colonial or empire type scenario.

So you obviously like Birmingham because you stayed and went to university there, didn't you, at Aston University, rather than going off to the furthest – a lot of people choose to go about as far from home as they possibly can for university.

I did stay in Birmingham, it's not particularly because I'm a fan of it. [laughs] I think there were other sort of personal situations that arose that meant that that was the best option for me given those circumstances at the time. And with, you know, with hindsight and in retrospect, it's a regret, you know, I really wish that I hadn't been, I hadn't been made to feel that that was my only option. So, you know, but it served a purpose.

So you stuck it out, not just to get your first degree, but then you did a doctorate as well.

I did a masters.

A masters.

Yes, yes. And again, I, again, very much informed by a couple of different things. One was, again, kind of an evolving personal situation that meant that that was a good option. But also, you know, in terms of at that stage you're thinking, you know, obviously about your career and what are you going to end up, you know, sort of what are the job opportunities, what's the market like. And there was still very – well, there still is now, isn't there – but at the time there was this very strong narrative around women in technology and, you know, the MSc was supported, I think, by EPSRC and within incentives for female candidates, you know, and so I took that option.

And were you still thinking at that stage that you would teach, or were you starting to think more widely then?

I think as I selected to do the MSc, I started to let go of the teaching angle, but I think I always thought that was maybe temporarily and I would come back to teaching, and I'm still thinking that. [laughs]

Well, never too late.

No, exactly.

Despite the government refusing to fund that Now Teach organisation that one of my FT colleagues set up. But anyway, okay, so you joined BT. I mean obviously that was pretty much what you did as soon as you got the Masters by the looks of…

Yeah, it was basically, the Masters was six months study and exams and then six-month industry placement. So I essentially interviewed and was successful for an industry placement with BT. So I completed my MSc there and then basically secured a permanent role.

[00:19:58]

So that was, you know, did you feel that was where you wanted to be? I mean obviously it's worked out very well for you.

I think, I feel like I went a little bit with the flow, if I'm honest, you know. Because I didn't have a very specific view on what I definitely wanted to do, it was a case of, well, I'm going to try this, you know, I'm going to try this, let's see what happens, you know. And so, yeah, so I went with that.

I mean, BT has been through so much change in the last few decades, and although 1997 when you joined, I mean a lot of that change had already happened, I guess it was still, you know, it's changed a lot since. Did you feel that it was, I mean had

overcome its problems? Because you started off working in early IT, in early internet telephony and things, didn't you?

Yes.

So you were there at the beginning of all that. So presumably did you think BT was sort of the place to be, rather than in an IT company where the telecoms side of it was, you know, was different from all those tech companies that were sprouting up?

I think the IT tech companies sort of came along a little bit after that, so, you know, if they were around at the time that I sort of selected BT, there were much fewer of them. So really I remember the choice being more about are you going to have a role with a service provider such as BT, or with, you know, a vendor such as, you know, at the time, you know, Nortel, you know, I had an interview with Nortel, and the like. So- and obviously they've evolved over time in various different shapes. So I think the whole dotcom tech companies and IT companies came along just a little bit after that, you know, in the 2000s really. So I didn't feel, you know, at the time that that was a safe choice. I think we were a little bit guided, you know, that these big organisations that are well established and have, you know, serious, you know, billion-pound turnovers were the choice at the time. So it was much more a choice of which one of those, as opposed to, you know, seizing the wave of the new tech.

Yeah, it was probably a lot less risky. Although, you know, well, I guess no one was going to let BT go bust, clearly, but there were…

But the internet, I mean it's odd I was really even thinking that though, you know, like obviously you would now in making a decision as to kind of you'd be weighing up those risks. I think also, you know, I had come from a heritage of BT engineers, you know, my grandfather was an area manager in the field, my dad started his career there. By the time I joined BT I already had two brothers, you know, there, so it did feel, yeah, it was definitely a safe, it felt like a safe bet.

Yeah, yeah. Okay, and then you, I mean looking at your CV, the sort of first significant role you mention then was in 2008, working on superfast broadband. And

I guess that was at a time when suddenly the capacity needed for broadband was really skyrocketing wasn't it?

Yes, well prior to that, so I'd had, prior to that I'd had experience delivering cutting edge technology in terms of voice over IP and both kind of from a residential and a kind of a business perspective, and then I shifted from that to running the first broadband platform, you know. So I think that was, you know, 2 meg download speeds and everybody thought it was the bee's knees. And I remember at the time when I ran that platform, we just couldn't, you know, we couldn't roll it out fast enough, the demand was absolutely sky high. And then, you know, transitioning to, you know, well actually, there's this opportunity with this new technology to drive speeds of, you know, 128. [laughs] I remember thinking who on earth and for what purpose are people going to need these speeds, you know.

128, what, megabits per second?

Yeah, yeah. From two, you know.

From two?

Yeah. So I ran the previous kind of broadband platform that was delighted to be able to offer people 2 meg, because prior to that it had been dial up and it was, you know, kilobits and, you know, like you used to kind of log in and then open an email and go and make a cup of tea and come back and hope that it had opened by then, you know, sort of thing. And so, yeah, you know, prior to sort of rolling out the superfast broadband, so I was responsible for, right from the beginning, a feasibility study in terms of what was the art of the possible through to actually rolling out the first two trials. But, yeah, kind of prior to that it had been transitioning between and rolling out the existing broadband platform.

[00:26:36]

Yeah. Okay, so you were by this stage already in a position of quite sort of senior management responsibility. How did that kind of come about? Had you always seen

yourself as a manager or were you kind of identified at an early stage as being good management material? How did that evolve?

I think quite quickly I recognised that my strengths lay more in managing, organising, delivering, making things happen, than pure technical, you know, because obviously I started my career, as you said, you know, kind of IP design, you know, coding, televoting, platform, you know, and so on and so forth, and I wasn't particularly happy. And then when I moved into kind of working on the voice over IP platforms, that was where I had my first taste of actually helicoptering out of the detail of the tech, having a good appreciation of it, but much more about applying it and making something happen and delivering something. And it kind of then just built from there that actually in order to do that you need to manage effective teams and, you know, kind of over time determined that actually that was something that I was able to do effectively and that was what I was more interested in, you know, it was building effective teams, helping people develop and achieving goals together as a team. So I learnt for myself that that was what motivated me.

And BT supported you, it wasn't like you had to leave the organisation to get these responsibilities elsewhere?

No. I mean one of the things that, you know, I think sometimes feels like a bit of a cliché, but I think clichés happen because more or less that's the truth [laughs] and this is what happens. Because of the size of the organisation there was just so much opportunity to go and try different roles. So the ability, you know, for me to move around the business and extend my experience and develop new skills in different parts of the organisation, so moving from, you know, the core kind of technical part out to wholesale to run the broadband platform, global to work on different projects, retail on others, you know, it meant that I had a superb opportunity to sort of try things and work out, well, you know, what of all of that motivates me and how do I develop on those. And so yes, BT was very supportive from that perspective in terms of encouraging and enabling that to happen.

[00:29:53]

And wasn't bothered by the fact that you were female? I mean you must have been relatively unusual, I would think, it's got to be, I mean always been quite a male-dominated business hasn't it?

Yeah. I… no, I mean I think I've always had support. What I have realised, and again with hindsight, it was interesting, oh, I don't know how many years ago now, three, four years ago, I was on a panel, a session for, you know, Women in Tech, and we were talking about bias. And, you know, I was preparing for the panel and I reviewed a whole load of research and information around all the various different types of bias, and I sort of stepped through all the different types of bias and thought, oh yeah. No, I've encountered that, yes, I've encountered this. Oh yes, I did have that. So I think for whatever reason I've been able to navigate successfully despite the fact that I have actually encountered all of those different types of bias along the way, but I don't have a, you know, I don't have any form of sort of bitterness or angst about it, you know, it's more from an observation perspective, a learning perspective, and the ability to make sure that it doesn't happen into the future for the next generation, is something that I'm kind of quite passionate about. But, despite the fact that I did face all of those challenges, I don't think I ever really felt that I was being curtailed in any way. Or if I did, I found a way to manage it.

Get round it.

Yes.

I suspect having – is it four big brothers – that might be quite helpful, actually.

Definitely, yeah, yeah. And also I played, you know, I play a lot of sport, I still play a lot of sport and I tend to play, you know, for example, I'm in the squash leagues at the moment at our club and I tend to play men, it's unusual for me to play a woman. You know, I used to play football with men from work, and so on and so forth. So again, I think it's a little bit of a reaction to that experience I had at a girls' school [laughs] that my inclination is always to look into that domain. But, you know, also it's kind

of quite sad because another reflection at this stage of my life is that, you know, I haven't benefited until, I'd say the last ten years, from actually the power of real positive female relationships, you know, and that support and camaraderie. But I'm very grateful that I now have that and I look to offer that and extend that to others as well, so it's kind of life is a learning, isn't it?

Yeah. Well, it's good you've met those people now and that they are out there. So just to go back to your career at BT then, so then you changed again in 2011 to Director of Global Services working on the health programme. That must have been quite interesting. I mean that was after, presumably with the NHS, that was after the, a long time after the whole IT project had been abandoned, the integrated IT project that they tried to implement. I mean that was…

Yes, well it was still, there were still remnants of that lurking, you know, and there was the Spine programme and so on and so forth. The role that I had responsibility for there was with respect to all of the contracts that we had signed with the NHS that we would deliver on, and my role was an assurance role to try to cut through some of the angst that had developed between the two organisations in terms of the NHS's faith in BT to be able to deliver on their contracts and commitments. So, it was quite a painful role because internally, you know, I had to review in detail the plans that other people were responsible for. Which was a little bit alien for me because obviously I'd come from a background of being in charge of all of this delivery, and then to sort of move to a, I'm going to mark your homework type scenario, I found quite frustrating. But it was a very good learning in terms of, you know, kind diplomacy and negotiating and [laughs] coaching as well, and so yeah, I didn't stay in that role for too long because I learnt, again, you know, the whole process is about learning what you do want to do and where your strengths lie, and I felt that wasn't the most motivating role and that I needed to actually be in the thick of getting things done, not being the sideline kind of colleague.

[00:35:35]

So then you moved to BT, to Global Services, I think, is that right?

So I moved from Global Services to Group. Yes, so I had responsibility- so that's where I sort of shifted… well, up until me moving to Global Services I'd always had a networks slant to my role, you know, it was always, you know, it had been broadband networks or voice over IP networks or intelligent networks. When I moved to Global Services that was the first time really it was predominantly IT, and then when I moved into the Group role, Director and CEO, I had responsibility for the IT transformation for various of the Group functions themselves. So it was all about helping BT to be more effective and more productive. So I had responsibility for everything that wasn't HR or finance, so two of my peers, one of them had responsibility for the finance systems, one had responsibility for the HR systems and I had everything else. So legal, communications, fleet, supply chain and others. So that was my first real exploration into kind of IT transformation programmes per se, in various different domains. And again, and a whole new learning. It gave me really good insight into how BT works, you know, and all of the various different functions and departments, and kind of latterly as I came into kind of this research role that's proved – well, all of my experience has proven to be hugely beneficial - but the, you know, the way that BT works and the challenges of each of those areas kind of was very insightful. And also, it was the first time that I hadn't delivered something to a customer. So, you know, the customer was internal BT and so learning how to always play second fiddle, because the company was always going to prioritise what was going to help it to kind of grow and be productive with customers. So again, you know, that learning of negotiating as best you can in terms of kind of challenge where you're not the number one priority, but you still wanted to be able to deliver and make an impact.

Yeah, yeah. And of course we are talking about a global organisation. I mean the name British Telecom is a bit misleading in that sense, I suppose, because Global Services is obviously talking about the international role BT was playing.

That's correct. And I mean obviously over time that has waxed and waned, you know, and I think now it's kind of a lot more, you know, it's gone through a period of time, at the time that I was there, where it was trying to grow in all domains internationally. You know, now it's kind of pared that back to being very specific about what are the key locations where we can have the most impact and be the most

profitable, basically. So it's a lot more focussed now, but yes, it is definitely still an international organisation.

[00:39:26]

Because it sounded a bit like a demotion when I was reading through that you were CIO at BT Group, and so that would – and the group has, whatever it is, £21 billion sales in 180 countries and 100,000 employees – and then you went on to Openreach, the maintenance organisation, which then it's got a smaller budget and, you know, it's only going to make five – only – five billion pounds in sales, obviously still a huge organisation, 35,000 staff. Is that what you did though, did you sort of take a step down or…

No, no, I think that's just how the optics, maybe is how you're reading those kind of parameters, but in terms of looking at the metrics of my role specifically, it was pretty much equivalent. So the budget that I had, you know, so I was a director in Group CIO and I moved to be a director in Openreach CIO, and the budgets were, actually I think as I moved into Openreach the budget that I had responsibility for was higher than that that I'd had in Group and the imperatives, you know, again it was that transition from being a director in Group CIO and not having a huge amount of leverage or priority by the business, to being in Openreach with significant challenges in the customer base that needed solving. So it was a more challenging role with more responsibility and more impact.

Okay, so that obviously, I can see that that would have been quite, you know, keeping your, pushing yourself to your sort of, to be freshly challenged. So you did that from 2014 to 2017, I think, is that right? And then you went into the, over to the R&D side.

Yes.

So what was behind that move?

Well, I mean I think throughout my career, with maybe one exception, up until that point, I'd always felt that three-ish years was a good time to spend in a particular role.

So, you know, there's a year of really getting to grips and really understanding what the art of the possible is and building the right sort of strategy. Then there's a sort of a year of delivery and implementation. And then in my experience is, then it's a, you start to, you get to a point where, okay, I'm established, this is working, all I can see into the future for this now is more of the same. I'm not sure that there's a lot more to be learned, you know, in terms of my skills. And so quite naturally and subconsciously, but again, with the power of hindsight looking back, I can see that that's a pattern for me in terms of how I've progressed my career, but that that last year is, I now need a new challenge and I need to find something and kind of moving on. So there was an element of that and then there was, you know, kind of just huge attraction for the role, you know, with R&D from many different angles. The managing director himself was a huge attraction because he was just such, reputed to be just such an awesome leader, a real inspiration and such a fantastic person to kind of work with.

Who was that?

Professor Tim Whitley. So he, you know, he really was, yeah, he's now left the business, but he really was the – I've worked with some really great people – but he really was the, you know, a real inspiration. And, but just the content of the role was just so exciting and appealing to me, because it felt like, you know, this was the, all of the things that I've enjoyed across all of those different other roles all brought together. And it's a very large role, it's a very diverse role, but it's a very impactful role as well, and what I love about it the most is that the impact is not just about, you know, how do I support BT to be a successful company and to grow and all of those things, but I have the opportunity to impact the next generation with kind of the skills programme and inspiring the next generation to want to take up tech as a kind of career, stick with their sort of STEM subjects. I look after a tech cluster in terms of Innovation Martlesham and I have the opportunity to help businesses to be successful. And it's hugely collaborative so, you know, we collaborate with other players across industry, thirty-plus different academic institutions, and so the art of the possible in terms of the research and the innovation and what we can do and what we can find and the best solutions to solve real societal problems was highly appealing and has proven to be hugely motivating. But also from the perspective of the impact that I can

have for the region, you know, really well established with a fantastic network across the kind of east region in terms of the, you know, again, the positive impact that we can have in collaboration with the other stakeholders for the region. And, you know, that, obviously as I've got older and have had children here is really important as well. So without doubt the best role of my career.

[00:45:54]

Hence you've stuck it for longer than three years.

Yes, six years. [laughs]

And by the sound of it you're not in a rush to go anywhere else?

So I actually am, unfortunately, going to be transitioning out of the role and leaving in the next three months.

Oh right, okay. Outside BT?

Yes, yeah.

Are we allowed to know where you're going or…

I don't actually have a view on that at the moment.

Okay. Right, okay. Right, so I was going to ask you, yes, I mean you've mentioned Tim Whitley. So are there any other mentors or influential people in your life that you haven't spoken about who you'd like to sort of cite, credit for affecting your choices and what you've done over the years?

[pause] There are no real standout… I mean I know that the whole reason that I'm here where I am was definitely influenced right at the early stages by my dad, so he was the biggest influence in that regard and sometimes I thank him for that and sometimes I curse him for it. [laughs]   The, you know, I've had some great line

managers, Tim without doubt being kind of the standout in terms of much more than a line manager, much more that kind of inspirational kind of leader. And I've had some pretty bad ones as well, you know. So it's been a real mix and I think, you know, recently there have been some really great people that I've been very fortunate to develop relationships with that I would say have been of recent times a really great mentor and hope to continue. And actually, one of them you've interviewed recently. So that was Stephanie Liston, she's somebody that I would definitely speak of in that regard.

Okay, so, well, looking back over it so far, what would you say is your proudest achievement?

So, there is actually a standout answer to this and it's not, you know, rolling out superfast broadband to connect everybody and give them higher speeds and create great opportunities for them and so on and so forth. One of the things that I'm most proud of is that in collaboration with the University of Suffolk and other stakeholders across the region, we established the DigiTech Centre at Adastral Park, which is a centre of learning to inspire next generation and for apprentices to learn at and develop their skills, because it's kind of pivotal. It's a nice, you know, it was a £9 million institute that we've physically established that I think will go on to serve, you know, many future generations and is a great example of what collaboration can bring, you know, with the right combination of well-intentioned people to do something positive. So I'm afraid it's not a telecommunications or IT outcome. I mean it feeds it, the students coming out from there will be coming out with the skills around cyber and AI and smart technologies and so on and so forth, network engineering, software engineering. But I think in terms of an enduring impact, that's one of the things that I'm really proud of.

[00:50:22]

So what is it? It had £9 million of investment from the collaborators, did it, to set it up?

Yeah, it was funded by the local enterprise partnership and with kind of matched funding from, you know, ourselves, the university and other regional stakeholders, basically.

And what does it do? People come and do placements there or…

So the main learning is degree level learning. So… but it's differentiated learning because it's in the heart of a business ecosystem, so the students that come to learn academically in terms of any of those subjects are doing it in congruence with business. So also at Adastra Park, I mean another thing that I'm very proud of is the fact that I managed to double the size of the tech cluster, so we went from 80-odd companies to 150 companies and they, you know, have become part of that DigiTech Centre. So they support the facility, because basically, as an ecosystem, what I'm most proud of, I suppose, is the establishing of this thriving ecosystem that is driven by collaboration and partnership for the good of all. So the DigiTech Centre is just one example of that manifesting, because the university benefits because it's able to offer a differentiated level of learning to its students that distinguishes it from its peers, the students get to learn in the heart of a business ecosystem, so their learning is much more applied, and so they can make that transition to kind of a business role effectively. But the businesses in the ecosystem, BT included, have the opportunity to home-grow talent in various, with the skills that are most relevant and that are of critical value to them and their future business.

Yeah, because BT has always been a very strong sort of presence in that geographical area, hasn't it?

It has, yes.

That centre of excellence. So I suppose it's built and reinforced on that.

That's right. I mean we've run a schools programme for about ten years, and I've been involved in that, prior to me even being in this role, you know, as a kind of a volunteer to make sure that, you know, from a schools perspective we're reaching out, and we're working with children that are early in their learning curve, you know, to

help, but particularly girls, you know, because you have to get to girls early [laughs], because if you wait till they're 13, they've made their minds up, typically. So…

What age do you have to get to girls then, would you say?

So we start at year two, you know, so they're sort of six, seven years old. And we've designed the whole, we've got a whole programme of different interventions right across all of the age ranges, you know, appropriate to what they're kind of interested in, but you know, the year twos typically are working with, we call them Bee-Bots and, you know, it's fun learning, but effectively what they're doing is they're setting an algorithm, you know, but it's a set of instructions as to how to move your Bee-Bot across a, you know, a map to get from A to B.   And it's just kind of establishing that baseline that, you know, kind of as to what an algorithm is, what a technology can do, the impact that it can have, and then, you know, the interventions then blossom from there, you know, right through to the 16-year-olds that come and do their work experience or, you know, and have placement in the work to understand, you know, the application of technology and the types of careers and roles that you can have, and so many other interventions in between.

Okay, yeah, no, that sounds, I mean that's very much where we're focussed as well at the Archives of Information Technology, is inspiring the next generation, so there's a good kind of overlap there.

Good.

[00:54:48]

And so as Visiting Professor at the University of Suffolk then, what sort of activities does that involve you in?

So I would say, not enough. [laughs] And I've told them this as well. So I have given some lectures, but predominantly it's about just being, you know, kind of actively supportive of the university with various, you know, kind of opportunities to be involved with what's going on at the university. But we're currently working on

how I get more involved and start taking on more lectures. So you see I am starting to get into that teaching domain. [laughs]

So you are, yeah. Okay, so I wonder what advice you would give, well, particularly to young people who might be thinking about these careers that you're highlighting to them, both sexes, I mean I guess to girls, and also to boys and girls as well.

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. So I mean I think one of the things that I'm really keen for students to understand is the wider variety of different roles that technology can offer, and that's one of the areas that we work on with our programme, is to give visibility. You know, I think there are some myths and maybe some stigmas around what a role in technology looks like and that you have to be stuck to a computer coding away. I mean I've never done that throughout my whole career. And I think the impact that you can have. So I think one of the things that we've learnt particularly for the girls is that association of the impact that you can have with technology and the problems that you can solve and the difference that you can make to people's lives, you know, societal issues that you can bring a solution for. So, my advice is to go and try as much and as many different types as you possibly can to work out what, you know, what resonates the strongest. I mean, you know, as we've just talked through in terms of my career, that's effectively what I've done through my career, you know, trying lots of different roles, but the most important thing is, whether they've worked out or not, is learning from it, you know? So where I've had roles that haven't been particularly suitable for me, I've always managed to take something away from it, you know, that I've learnt and developed. And even if that learning is, no, that's, you know, I know, for instance, that assurance role for Global Services, I know that that doesn't work for me and I can use that as a filter when I look at new opportunities that, you know, anything that means I'm not central in having the impact that I would want to have is something that will frustrate me, so steer clear. But, you know, I use that as an example, but essentially it is, don't be afraid to try lots of different things and see what works for you, but use every opportunity to learn.

Yeah, sure. Anything you would do differently if you could have your time again? I think you've touched on a few of those things. You've been very honest.

Yes, definitely I would go away to university. [laughs] So what would I do, what would I change? I think, yeah, I mean I feel like there was a lot of me just going with the flow and being open, which is not a bad thing, to trying things, but maybe not really thinking about it as deeply as maybe I should have done, you know, and certainly as I'm encouraging my children to. I mean I do think in my defence, you know, my son is in his final year now at university and my daughter is doing her A levels, there is significantly more information around now in terms of all of the different types of careers that there are, and even the subjects that they've been able to study at school, you know, there's much more diverse subjects that they can choose from that I didn't have, you know, the choice of when I was at school. So I think, you know, as we've evolved, you know, fortunately that's the benefit, you know, that there are more options, there are more choices, and I think they're much more savvy about what they do and don't want to do than I was. So, you know, so I would like to be able to take that knowledge that they've got and the choices that they've got and take that back, you know, and I would probably, dare I say it, have made a completely different choice. [laughs] Not to say that I haven't enjoyed my career, I absolutely have enjoyed my career and particularly the last six years, you know, really enjoyed the experience and the impact, and I'm going to take that into the next stage of my adventure, that is, you know, kind of that's a recipe that works for me, that makes me happy.

[01:00:30]

Yeah. So talking about the future then, am I guessing that you're a bit reluctant to talk about your own future because you're sort of still in a state of flux about it? Is that right?

Yes. I mean I just don't know, you know, I'm weighing up kind of lots of different options now in terms of, you know, kind of what the future holds. And what I am trying to do is that learning that we just talked about, not rush into something and just go with the flow, but be very deliberate about what the next thing brings. So I am trying to take my own advice. [laughs]

And what about the vision, your vision for how the industry is likely to change over the next sort of five to ten years, if you can look into your crystal ball, what do you see in the years ahead?

So, I mean I think, you know, one of the things that I – I'm going to be quite candid – but, you know, I am not looking to continue in telecommunications, I feel that telecommunications as an industry has kind of gone as far as it can and unless there's radical change, it will continue as it is now as almost the sort of the utility that it's become. You know, people expect connectivity, they expect speed, they expect, you know, and I'm much more interested in all the technology that you can deliver over the top. You know, so the impact that, you know, the solutions can bring in all of the different sectors. So, you know, kind of one of the research areas that I'm responsible for currently is smart technologies and Internet of Things and the application of that across different use cases, I think is very exciting. So the fact that, you know, in a health use case or scenario, you know, you can help people to become, to be independent in their homes for longer with the right technology and the right kind of monitoring of non-intrusive type technology to help people be cared for remotely and to be independent, as I say, for longer. But also, you know, in the case of a kind of a smart city, I think from a sustainability perspective and the environment, the opportunity to manage things, you know, in a clever way that means that we don't have cars unnecessarily roaming round, you know, towns looking for car parking spaces and, you know, degrading the quality of the air standard, but also, you know, kind of from a sustainability perspective, not emitting fumes. And obviously you take that to the next level and driverless cars and autonomous vehicles and electric vehicles and so on and so forth. So I think the nature of the whole industry has got to move in those domains where we want, you know, to be driven by the real societal challenges that exist in terms of healthcare, in terms of food production, in terms of water conservation, in terms of the environment, you know, there are so many problems and technology can make a real difference, I think, in all of those domains and I think, I hope [laughs], that the trend of technology will move in that domain. And, you know, I'm chair of Tech East and I had a very interesting event last week where we were talking about clusters around different domains. So the one we were talking about last week was fintech, so technology for finance services, and I think what we'll start to potentially see are just these clusters emerging where they have a particular theme

whether it's, you know, kind of fintech or AI tech or quantum tech or what have you, but I think it will move towards more diverse, smaller companies with niche applications. And now of course, you know, the likes of Google and Apple and Microsoft and all the rest of it might snap them all up, as they do do, but, that's my hope anyway, that we have, you know, better set of choices for people to make the best decisions informed by the right data and the right technology.

[01:05:27]

Right. Well, is there anything that you would have liked to mention or talk about that we haven't covered?

I don't think so.

In terms of women in tech, I guess you're hopeful that it can become at least a 50-50 balance, is that what you think is realisable or likely to happen?

Yeah. No, I think it really is realisable. But it takes active work, it's not just going to happen naturally. So though that's sort of the interventions that I spoke of, you know, with our schools programme, we're starting to see the benefits of that because, you know, it's taken a long time, we've established this programme over many years, we're now starting to get a much better balance of applications through the apprenticeship scheme so, you know, we have a richer pool of more diverse applicants to choose from than we did ten years ago, you know. And so it is really feeding it from the grassroots all the way through, but it is also active sponsorship, proper support and camaraderie across the network from all, you know, not just women for women, just, you know, everybody for everybody in terms of ensuring, you know, everybody really signing up to the fact that, you know, a diverse organisation really is a more productive organisation. You know, the closer as an organisation you can be to the customers that you serve, the better, because that thinking embedded right up front in terms of, you know, from research through to product development to delivery, you know, needs that diversity of thought and input to be successful.

Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you very much, Lisa. It's been very interesting talking to you.

Thank you.

And I wish you luck in your role and we all look forward to seeing where that takes you.

Okay, thank you.

Thank you.