



Sir George Cox

Interviewed by

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28th September, 2016

At the

WCIT Hall,

32a Bartholomew Close, London, EC1A 7JN

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It's September 28 here in London, England, and this afternoon I will be talking to Sir George Cox, one of the pioneers of consulting in the information technology field, through his company Butler Cox Plc, and more recently a top executive in a number of large companies, and in addition to that, Director-General of the Institute of Directors here in the UK. Our talk this afternoon will follow the conventional format that we have been using. First we will cover Sir George's business career, and then his background, influences, and views on the industry today.

[00:43]

So, George, good afternoon.

Good afternoon Alan.

You joined Vickers-Armstrong, the aeronautical group, immediately after graduating. What took you there? I see you describe yourself as technical assistant in the flight test department. What did you actually do?

Well, I studied aeronautical engineering at university, and when I was at school, the only thing I ever really wanted to do was go and design and build aeroplanes, that was my big passion. And so, naturally, as soon as I had got my degree I looked for an aircraft company to go and work for. And I picked Vickers-Armstrong's, because they were near the river, and I was keen on rowing at the time. So it's as logical as that. I also thought I'd go into the flight test department because it seemed a bit sexier than going into a big design office or a big aerodynamics office. And so, I joined them, and worked at their test field at Wisley, and they were testing the early VC10s and 1-11s and the last of the Vanguards, these airliners. And, in many ways it was good fun, because, it's a small unit in a big company, but you're working alongside, you know, Trubshaw and, all these famous test pilots, which, you can imagine what it was like for, you know, a graduate straight out of university working along with people, beside people like that. What I found was, after a year or two, though, it wasn't leading anywhere. I could see people with as good a degree as I had got, two or three more years' experience, doing the same job and for little more pay. And so, that's the point at which I said, I've got to rethink my career.

What did the job actually consist of?

Oh, analysing test data from the flights. And occasionally you would, you would get a flight in one of these things, which was, you know, good fun, you know, flying planes under test, particularly if you were doing route proving, how traffic was. That was, that was pretty sexy stuff, if I'm honest, that side of it was good. The work itself wasn't that demanding, and you would be sitting going through masses and masses of data and applying small corrections. Because in those days, the way you record data, you go on the aeroplane and you photograph the instruments, you know, and then, you would spend ages afterwards going through the film, writing it down, and you apply instrument corrections, pressure corrections and that. And it was pretty tedious. And you thought, well I don't mind doing this for a few months, or a few years, but, you said, well hang on, this is, this is not really terribly demanding, I'm not learning a great deal. And I looked around in the company, and, I couldn't see good opportunity.

Mm.

I did try for something else. I, I applied to the sales department of this big aircraft company, because I thought... I had been a fairly outgoing person at university, and I thought, well, I can, I can, you know, I could probably sell. And I had an interview, and they offered me a job. And I thought, well that's good, because I can stay in an industry I like, stay with a company I like, and, progress. And for the final session, I was sitting there, and they said, 'Well we're going to offer you a job.' And I said, 'That's great.' And then, I said, 'What will I be doing, you know, when I start next month?' And I thought, they're going to say, you know, 'We'll send you off to Pan Am,' or TWA or Qantas you see, and stuff. Great. And they said, 'Well, for the first four or five years you'll be sitting there doing route proving calculations.' [laughter] God! So that was it. At that point, I was moving out of the aircraft industry.

[03:44]

OK. So you moved to the Molins Machine Company.

Yes.

What was the attraction there?

Well, I, I hadn't thought of doing anything else other than working in the aircraft industry, so, for the first time I'm looking at adverts in papers for things I might do. And I saw this advert for, graduate engineers, couple of years' experience, to train for management. And you think, I like the sound of that. And so I applied to this recruitment company, and it turns out the company in question was Molins Machine Company. Molins was a private company, a very, very fine company, making tremendous machines for the tobacco industry. You know, in subsequent years I wouldn't have thought of working in the tobacco industry, but back then, wouldn't bother me or anyone else at all. And, they had never had graduates ever, and they were seeking to recruit six graduates to work in management, to train for management, to go through different departments for a couple of years and then be given a department to run. And I thought that was pretty, pretty exciting, and, they offered me the job, and I took it.

[04:45]

Mm. You had trained as an engineer, but this was very much a business position.

Yes.

Were you...

Bothered about leaving pure engineering?

...bothered about leaving... Yes.

No. And I've got this view which, that, people think that people who read engineering ought to become engineers.

Mm.

We don't think that of most professions. Most lawyers who study law at university don't become lawyers. And engineering's actually quite a good grounding for other things you know, because it's about structuring problems, solving problems, working with natural materials, working with other people, working in teams. Engineering isn't a bad background for almost anything, is my view.

Right.

So, you know, I don't regret studying the degree I did, but, that wasn't going to be my future.

And there was attraction in management, attraction in sales, or...?

There was at the time, you know, for, managing sounded pretty, pretty good to me at the time, and, was a route upwards. And, I'd been pretty good at... If I'm honest, I had been pretty reasonable at running things at university, and I had been in the rowing, and the engineering society and that. So, I was quite keen on that sort of thing. And I was quite outgoing, and, reasonably articulate I suppose for someone of that age. So, yes, that appealed to me.

[05:54]

Right. So how did the, how did the training go?

Well initially it was just what I expected. They moved around different departments, and, in fairly basic roles, and you'd spend days cutting up blueprints, or, running round the stores getting parts out. But it was fine, you saw how different parts of the company worked. But then, I had been there, I guess about, eighteen months, two years, and they called me in and said, 'George, we'd like you to do a programming aptitude test. Because, we want to move you into this new computer department.' And I didn't like the sound of that at all. I thought, you're just shunting me into some backwater here.

Do you know why they wanted to move you into the computer department?

Well, they decided, and this is quite interesting, that their manufacturing processes were so complex, which they were, their building materials was a third of a million different parts. And just controlling the bespoke machines they were making for different customers was proving at the limits of what you can do clerically. And at the time, with great foresight, they, they thought, these new things from America in computings, they can do it. And they did something that no other company to my knowledge did at the time, or perhaps since. Through their contacts they brought in two people from IBM in the USA, one at board level, one immediately below, for executive roles on a two-year secondment. They said, no one here understands this, and they brought these two guys in. And, so, this department mushroomed from the initial six of us to, ooh, 100 people in about eighteen months. So to be the first six was fine. Why me? I think perhaps because I had mentioned I had seen a computer at the aircraft company. At one stage we were between testing aeroplanes and I had a month's secondment to Maths Services, and there was a Ferranti Pegasus thing. I mean it's a proper computer.

Mm.

You could walk inside it. It made a noise, and there was a sort of golf ball banging out tape at the end, which I thought was just miraculous. But, I had no idea what I was getting into. And I almost quit over it to be honest, and it was my wife who said to me, 'Don't be so high and mighty.' You know, give it six months in this department and then, then get back on track. But, you know, get on with it. So, I went to that department. And that was transformational.

[08:11]

Tell me about that.

Well, the company really was very ambitious, given its problems. It had the first factory data collection, automated data collection system in Europe. It had, while I was there it hid factory-to-factory – this is in the Sixties – microwave links out to Buckinghamshire. It was really right at the cutting edge. Now of course, we didn't have the skills, or the computer power, to do what we were trying to do. So the initial systems weren't terribly successful, they were clumsy, they took hours to run, they

were difficult. But, there was terrific commitment in the company to doing it. Moreover, in the department of 100 people, they brought a lot of people from the factory, different levels, so it was a, a really multi-skill team that did understand the business. And, given the, the leadership at the top and ambition, it really did drive forward. So that was good. However, after a couple of years of doing that, and being a project leader on some of the biggest projects, I decided, you know, well I'd done this computer stuff. We'd almost completed the task. We can't do all we promised because the machines were too small, but the big machines coming in, the big 360s are coming in now, that will do it. And, there's a bit of tidying up to be done, but we'd done computing. And I, I thought this department was like a project team which would disappear once the whole work was done.

Mm.

You know, as I said, we were, we thought we were just automating the clerical systems, like they had automated the factory before, rather than moving into this new era where systems never stop developing. So, at that point I said, I want out, back onto the kind of course I was on before.

[09:51]

And you became Requirements Planning Manager.

Initially they made me Requirements Planning Manager. So I had a department to run. And then within a few months of that, they moved me up again and said, 'Would you move to Buckinghamshire and become Manufacturing Administration Manager?' which ran all the production control, the store, the logistics et cetera, in their Buckinghamshire factory. So I was, what, 27, with, I don't know, about 400 staff working for me. That was good, that was challenging, you know, they'd done exactly what I had hoped for in the first place. So, I then spent two years in that role.

What did the job actually, when you do that kind of job, what does it actually consist of?

Really, in a company like that, solving production problems all the time, parts problems, whether they're brought-in problems from outside, manufacturing problems outside; balancing the different schedule; trying to get these complex machines out, particularly while they're being modified, right the way to the point where they go out the door. You know, it's, it's a very exciting life, because it's, every day is a, there's not a lot of planning in it; it's problem solving. But it's good. And you're dealing with staff you've never dealt with before. I mean I had been there about a month, and I had a disciplinary problem with a forklift truck driver who had been caught sleeping behind, you know, the warehouse. And I remember, he came in with the union representative, and I had the head of HR next to me. I remember saying to this guy, 'Ted, do you realise what this kind of behaviour is doing to your career prospects here?' [laughs] And the convenor looks at me, as if, you know, this, this kid's off the planet. And, you learn about... Up until then, I had managed people like myself, graduates, people working on highly motivated work. All of a sudden, you're managing people who drive forklift trucks, or, or slingers, you know, and, production control assistants, chasers, lorry drivers. It's, it was a terrific education.

How did you get on with, with that kind of people? How did you get on with the unions?

I, I got on pretty well. And I was given the role of chairing the joint consulting committee. So I wasn't bad in my people skills. And people made allowance for the fact I was a bit younger than most, but I was, that went well, and, I can't say that I didn't make a, the odd blunder, but no... I was, I was very, very stimulated by the job. It was very challenging. The problem is, you end up working very early mornings, late evenings. They worked Saturday morning so I'd go and see them. Then you bring in a shift of Sunday. So it turns into a seven-day-a-week job. And the problems are never-ending. But, I must say, for that stage of my life, it was good experience, it was very good experience.

[12:25]

So you decided to move on?

Yes. I decided, you know, I've now worked for that company, what, for, five years, something like that. And I couldn't see myself, I wasn't going to be given the factory director's job. I was settled in Buckinghamshire. So, at that stage I thought, well, career-wise, what comes next? And I applied for a job, which was a natural step up from what I was doing. I was actually offered the job of head of manufacturing for Smith Industries down in Cheltenham.

Mhm.

Which, again at the age of 28, was, was a big job. And provisionally I took it. And then I spoke to my boss, with whom I had a good relationship, and he said, 'George, you're going up this manufacturing ladder very rapidly, on a very narrow base of experience, and, why don't you go into management consultancy for a couple of years?' I hadn't, that hadn't occurred to me. And I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'Well, you'd see a bank, an airline, a government department, a retail company. You'd broaden your experience enormously, you know, two or three years with a consulting group. And then you could come back as a factory director, production director somewhere.' And I thought that sounded both stimulating and good advice.

Mm.

So I turned down the job with Smith's, and I applied to a consulting company.

This would be Urwick Orr.

Urwick Orr. Because at that time Urwick Orr was the biggest of the consulting groups around. Moreover, they had a specialist computer consulting arm, the only one going, called Urwick Diebold, working with John Diebold. Now John had been the original computer consultant in the States back in the Fifties. John was the man at the age of 26 coined the word automation.

Mm.

And he was on the front page of *Time* magazine and that. He was a great character. So the combination of him and this very respectable, reputable, large British management consulting group, seemed a very good, very good attraction. So, I, I applied to them, and, got a job as a consultant.

[14:24]

Was that essentially a job which was learnt on the job, or did you sort of, step into it as a fully-formed management consultant?

No. Urwick's were good, and they did what I'm not sure a lot of consulting groups did at the time, or even do since. You had something like three months' training, no matter which level you went in at, before you ever saw a client. And, the training was excellent. I mean you'd get a, a senior union leader come along and talk about industrial relations, you'd get a senior person from the finance sector talk about, you know, financial systems. Really excellent. But it was worth joining them almost for the training programme.

Mm.

They invested an awful lot in the people they recruited. And that was everybody, not just the specialists in the computer area or whatever else. And that's aside from, you know, all the basic skills, like writing reports and interviewing people and carrying out investigations. So again, the training was excellent in its own right, quite aside from preparing you for the job in hand.

Mm. Can you describe any of the projects which you managed at that time?

Consulting projects I did once I became...

Consulting projects, mm.

Yes, we did a number of projects. Inevitably I got put on things which related to manufacturing. I remember the very first one I had. I had come off this course, and I was all fired up to go and sort out the strategy of some major corporation, and,

somewhere exotic in the world, Bogotá or New York or, you know, this is great. And my first time, and they said, 'George, you're going to Spennymoor.' [laughter] Spennymoor. Where is Spennymoor? I look it up. It's in Durham. And it was the Black & Decker factory.

Ah.

And, I went in there to come up with a computer strategy for the company, or at least that part of the company. And so I remember going up on a cold Sunday evening [laughs], flying up from Heathrow to... And, interesting thing I found was, the company there didn't want us at all, we were wished on them by Head Office. And for example, they were required to give us an office, an office with a telephone and facilities. What they had done is, they'd put up a glass, glass office in the middle of the factory where everybody could see you like a goldfish bowl, with a metal table in the middle with a telephone on it. [laughs] And this was miserable, I can tell you. And, so, I came up with a, you know, a computer strategy for them to automate a lot of their systems at the time. So that was difficult. And then another very interesting one, where we looked at the whole, what we now call IT strategy, for the Royal Ordnance Factories, which made explosives and tanks and shells and guns at the time all around the country. It was Government-owned. I worked on that with some civil servants. And that was very, very interesting. Well so, most of the projects I did would relate, inevitably, to manufacturing, which frustrated me slightly, but nonetheless, was very interesting.

[17:13]

Mm. At that time, when you were evolving a strategy, an IT strategy for a company, I mean were there guidelines, or were you inventing it as you went along?

Oh, no. The big problem was, the people who had commissioned it, the management, had no idea what we were supposed to be coming up with.

Right.

The concept of a strategy, you know, for computing...

So you had huge problems of changed management and the like

Oh huge. Yah. And, and even getting the top level to understand.

Mm.

You know, this is what... They think, oh well we'll do that. How much shall we pay them to do that? And it's done. And, wasn't like that. And, introducing change, you realised, particularly an organisation not used to change, was very very challenging indeed. Very challenging.

[18:51]

So, at the same time, do you think you were laying down the guidelines for best practice for the future?

Well, a project that I ended up by doing was, we wrote a, I think it was the very first handbook on project management for the Civil Service. You remember they set up a unit for the first time ever, I think, late Sixties, early Seventies, to have a sort of, IT policy if you like for...

Yes.

And we wrote a book on how to manage computer projects. And it's all the things that you would expect, you know, about, defining the requirements, agreeing with the user, getting a user executive take responsibility for it, et cetera. But I learnt quite a lot doing it, partly the language, you know, point out to me, 'George, don't use the word management, that's rather pejorative,' in the Civil Service at the time. So, that was interesting. And, again, one good thing about consulting is, you do go into different cultures, totally organisations. So, no, it was, it was a, it was stimulating, and, had its highs and lows, inevitably.

We have to say, the Civil Service hasn't proved very good at following your handbook. [laughs]

Well... I, I don't think anyone has, to be honest. I mean computer projects now still have problems.

Yes.

They still overrun. Part of the problem you get, I believe, is that, people who manage projects successfully, and, for two or three times I was actually taken out, I worked with Xerox, running a big project there...

Oh yes. Mhm.

...was, what happens in industry is, or commerce generally, is, if someone manages a project very successfully, they never get another one. They don't want to do another one. You know, they want to move, use that as a platform for moving on. So we're constantly re-learning.

Ah.

And, some companies have got much better at it, but, a lot of the things that one saw back then, you still hear today.

Mm.

People are not understanding how to define requirements possibly, the dialogue when you define requirements, saying, well, we can do all that, but if we do, this is what it does in terms of complexity and cost. Whereas back then, I think still to some extent today, people on the IT side, when you give them a set of requirements, it's a challenge to deliver it. Rather than go back and say, 'No I don't think you should be doing that,' you know, or, 'If you do that, it's going to be very costly,' the answer is, that's what they're asking for, let's see how we can deliver it. So I think issues like that are still around today. Similarly, the whole problem, I used to lecture on project management as a result of this for Urwick's, and, you get round to... I remember talking on estimating, and, my view on estimating is, it's nothing to do with a

technical ability to estimate. It's a psychological thing, and a political thing. Because, if it was just inaccuracy, you find it hard to estimate something, you say, well, if that's what it's going to turn out to be, if you're inaccurate, some estimates come in too low, some too high. It doesn't happen like that at all. Nothing ever comes in half, you know, at two-thirds a budget, or two-thirds the time. And I remember one time I was lecturing, and a chap presenting said, 'Oh this, this estimate's absolute nonsense.' He says, 'Every project we've done comes in at twice what we said it's going to be.' [laughter] You know? That's it. He saw, that's it you see. And I actually came up with a definition of estimates. Estimates are the highest figure you can come up with, and the project will still proceed. [laughter] And that's it. And you see, you see it in other spheres of life, you know, you see it in government projects, et cetera. And you know it's a, it's nothing to do with the technical ability to estimate; it's much more to do with the psychology of, [laughs] of producing estimates. So, that was, all those sort of lessons came out of this, this period with, with the consulting group.

[21:37]

And of course this was still in the days of, I mean, data processing.

Yes.

Big machines and...

Yes. Oh yes.

There was no IT as such at that point I imagine.

No, no it was big machines. And, and we needed bigger ones, was the view, yah.

Yes. Yes.

Yah. The problem was just, you know, scale. You know, we can do everything if you give us a big enough machine.

[21:57]

You must have done well though. I mean, you went on to become UK Director of Diebold.

Well, John Diebold had split with Urwick's, and, set up his own company. And, he recruited David, David Butler, and David recruited me.

Ah.

And that sounded fine, because, we thought the management of Urwick's was a little bit stick-in-the-mud, old-fashioned, indeed looking back, it clearly was. And, so David had gone to Diebold, who was now building his own company up in the UK and Europe. And, so I joined them. So I thought that sounded a lot of fun. I enjoyed working with David, we had done projects together. And so, I went to Diebold.

Sorry. Diebold was doing this in the UK...

Yah, Diebold had started his own company in the UK.

Not in the US?

Oh yes, he, he'd always had his own company in the US.

I see. Yes. Yes, I understand.

But in Europe it had been, in UK it had been jointly with Urwick's.

Right.

But he had got, they, he had bought them out, or they bought him out, and now he restarted. And, working for John was very interesting.

Mm. What was he like to work with?

John was impressive, and incredibly difficult to work with. John had an ego like no one I've ever met. Absolutely incredible. John would have one of his colleagues get on the previous plane to him, when he flew to Europe, to meet him at the airport. If you suggested that John met a client at a hotel, he wouldn't turn up. It would have to be an, you know, exotic location, you know, a prestigious location. But, what he had was style, which was absent from a lot of the IT industry background. John had style. He had a, an apartment in Park Avenue, New York, and each month he'd have a lunch. And when you went to his apartment, it was like the John Diebold museum. There was pictures all round the room of him, there was, looked like children's encyclopaedias, there was John in every year, you know, it was, embarrassing in that sense. But he did have a lunch, and, he'd have the president of a major corporation, the chairman of a visiting delegation, a Russian, you know, trade delegation. He'd have an ambassador or two. And, this around the table. And to be fair, when you went along as the head of his UK company, he'd always introduce you as important as they were. He never, there was never a case of, George is sitting in on us, you know. 'I'm very proud to introduce,' you know. And, you look round, and you'd think, well I don't, the kind of people they, not sure they know him, but they recognise each other. And it's what I learnt was, reputation by association.

Right.

And John always did things with great style, and thought big. And that was impressive. That was impressive. And he was also a great thinker, in terms of... You know, he'd come up with this concept of automation long before anyone else did. But I was at one meeting, and, someone said to him, this is back, 1974, something like that, mid-Seventies, and someone said to him, 'Mr Diebold, what's the next big thing?' And he came up with this thing of automation in computers. What's the next big thing we're going to see? And John came up with this stupid expression, at the time I thought it was, privatisation. So... [laughs] What do you mean by that? A lot of things which are run by the State, now are being taken over by private companies, the State moving them out of the public sector.

Mhm.

At the time I thought, I don't know, [laughs] bizarre sort of thing. But he had great, great foresight on things like that. So, an impressive man. Frustrating man, but impressive.

[25:42]

OK. Well you worked for him for, I think, four years, something like that.

Yes. Yes.

Must have been testing.

It was testing. It was well-rewarded. He was, let's say, you had to learn to handle John, handle his ego. And, one of the funniest episodes, if I can digress briefly...

Mm, please.

...was, we went to a meeting of his European managers, and John, at the end of it John said, 'Next month it's the John Diebold Harvard Lecture.' And it was an annual lecture at the time, and it was a big deal. You know, you would get people flying in private jets all over America. And, you know, it was impressive. And he said, 'And, for everyone attending, I've got a surprise for them.' And he suddenly produced this golden apple. On one side is the Harvard crest, and on the other is John's bust, you see. [laughter] And this thing is, Alan, this thing is disgusting. I mean this, this really is. You look at it and you think, this is naff beyond belief. This is... This looks like the kind of chocolate thing that you put on your Christmas tree for kids. And you could see, all the people were looking round, and the Germans and the French looked just... Everyone's horrified you see. But no one will laugh. 'Oh, John, that's great.' And John says, not only that, he says, 'I'm having several struck, so you can give them to your best clients,' you see. [laughs] And immediately, the German starts protesting. And the German, Jürgen[sp?], he's the best manager of any of us. He pays the wages for most of the crew. The German company is so successful. He said, 'Oh John, John that, that will not go down with European clients.' And John, 'Doh! rubbish!' you see. Anyway, 'I want to know how many you want.' [laughs] 'OK, Jürgen[sp?], how many you want?' 'Oh John...' 'Ah...!'

And John gets really mad you see. And he passes immediately on to the Frenchman, who is a bit more canny, you see. [with accent] 'Mr Diebold, could I have ten?' you see. [laughs] John says, 'Right, ten for you.' And the Belgian... You see, he's going round the table. And, the answer comes... You're trying to trump the guy next to you, have a bit more, you see. [laughter] And, it gets to... The German meets up. he's still protesting and spluttering, and can't understand what we're doing. And he turns to me, and said, 'George, how many do you want?' 'John, that's... I know they're expensive, but, [sighs], don't know. Could I have, fifteen?' 'OK George, put you down for fifteen,' you see. You've no intention of giving these to anybody. These are going straight in the bin, you see. [laughs] Jolly good. And, he turns to David, who was running the Diebold Research Programme at the time. And, you never know how David's going to react to things, and David said, 'John, I'm not sure how you're going to like this.' You think, oh God. This is going to be trouble. 'John, could I have 120?' [laughs] And, you see all the Europeans, the German just started... [laughing] And, Alan, I can hardly control myself. I'm shaking, you see. I'm shaking. Oh God. And David, this was, John turned... Shut up, you'll get us fired, you know. I'm about to fall over in hysterics. And, 'David, that's, that's a, that's just the kind of thinking I'd like to see more of in this group,' you know. Go to shake his hand. And that was it. Maybe they'll throw 'em away straight as they get them you see. And that, but that was it. And, so you, you learnt to play with John's ego.

A wonderful story. [laughs]

And, that was him. I mean, if you understand and play the game, he wasn't bad to work for. If you ever tried to confront him, and give him a touch of reality, that was bad news. You could suffer for it.

[29:19]

And you said that David Butler had, was working for him.

Yes, David, he was running their... They had given him the, he moved into one of the, the Diebold Research Programme out of Frankfurt, so he was working out of Frankfurt at the time.

Right. And, you say he recruited you.

He recruited me.

How did that come about?

Well he recruited me because he was really running the UK. And then they moved him to Frankfurt, and then they gave me the UK to run.

Mhm.

So that's how we worked it. So David was Frankfurt, I'm running the UK. And, because that, the Diebold Research Programme, this joint research programme for big users of technology, David was heading up.

Right. So that was how you met?

Well we met at, we met at Urwick's.

At Urwick's.

Urwick. Yah.

OK.

Yah.

[30:00]

That's fine. OK. So, right, so 1977. You've been working for Diebold for four years. And now you establish Butler Cox.

Yes, that wasn't out of any desire to form my own company. It had never been the kind of thing that crossed my mind. The idea of running my own company just

didn't, didn't occur to me, and didn't appeal to me quite honestly. I suppose, I'm just a corporate person, and, you know, I feel quite happy in a corporation, in a big team. But...

Well do tell me about the formation of Butler Cox.

Well, what had happened was, we had had a, a big project that we had done here, it was a massive computing project, in terms of fees and level, looking, for the whole of the Plessey group and its strategy towards this new technology.

Mm.

Because at that time, Plessey was making, a large part of it was making telephone exchanges, the good old-fashioned, you know, Strowger exchanges et cetera. And, all of a sudden IBM had invaded the area with a private exchange. And of course IBM operated differently. A Plessey proposal would be, that thick, addressed to the telephone manager. IBM would fly the chief executive and the finance director down to Lagode[sp?]. And so they could see this technology was going to transform the industry. It was a big threat.

Right.

And, we did a strategic study for the board, for, the chief executive, Clark, the chief executive, the Clark brothers, who were the two chief people running Plessey, on to, the impact of this technology. And in the course of working on that, one suddenly saw, hang on, what we thought was computing, that's just the start of it. This is far bigger than we ever really appreciated. This is far bigger. This is going to invade the office, it's going to transform telecommunications. You could see it was going to herald a massive change.

Mm. Mm.

And this really came out of the project, because it was a lovely project, we did a lot of research, globally, for it. And saw a number of the world authorities, you know, it was, it was a terrific brief.

Right.

And so, we came forward with a strategy for Plessey. But in addition, we went, I went back to John and said, 'John...' I gave a presentation in New York, and said, 'The world is changing.' This is going to affect far more people than we thought, and we should take the, the sort of, success of the Diebold Research Programme and have a programme which looks way beyond what we've currently looked at, in terms of computing, and look at this whole area of technology, and what it means. How it's going to change the business, not just run the business with different systems, it's going to change the business, open up new ways to get it to market, new ways to run companies, et cetera. And, I went to New York, and gave a pitch, and said, we should focus the consulting on high-level consulting for both users and suppliers. Because we're going to get new suppliers coming to this business who haven't been in it before. The telecoms companies. We're going to get users now confronting with different changes to the business, far more than we thought of before. And so we should change the company to fit this change in the market. And he didn't buy it. He had a good pitch; John didn't want to know.

Because it wasn't his idea, or...?

Well I spoke to the... I was so depressed afterwards, because I thought, this is overwhelming. And, I came off the back of success in running the company in the UK. And I spoke to the finance director, CFO, and asked, I said, you know, 'Why?' And he said, 'George, it's not what he wants to do. He's got plans for the company in South America, he wants to open up in Iran. You know, this is all a major distraction. Don't take it personally. You know, it's not, it's not, nothing to do with you. He likes you, you know, you're well rewarded, we think very highly of you. He doesn't want to do it.' And he said, 'It's John's train set. If he wants to have all the engines on one side and all the stations down the other side of the track, that's what he's going to do.'

[34:00]

So I came back, depressed. I remember flying back from New York feeling really depressed. Because I had gone out there so excited about this opportunity. And, I chatted to David about it, and David said to me, 'George, if he won't do it, why don't we do it for ourselves?' And that was the first time it had ever occurred to me. And, at that stage, I thought, well I'm not sure that's too wise. I had a family to support et cetera. And... So I, I consulted one or two people I respected, who were very positive. And so, we started Butler Cox. And we recruited five other people at the outset, people we had known, we had worked with in, in different companies. So it wasn't just the two of us. And so Butler Cox and Partners, on exactly the lines that I had proposed to John Diebold. And we launched the Butler Cox Foundation as we termed it, our research programme, and started consulting. And that was it.

[35:00]

So the foundation was sort of modelled on the Diebold Research Programme?

Yah. It was, it was a successor to it, but it, it looked at the... It was, it was a very interesting model. Because, the guy responsible for computing, you can call him IT director, MIS man, whatever, was an individual who was confronted by his board colleagues demanding more; computer companies and everyone else telling him this is the latest thing, you've got to do it; his own staff who have got all their own ideas. The idea of an independent programme, we said, to put things in perspective. This matters; this doesn't matter. This is going to be an important development; this is not significant. Don't deal with this yet, you know? Had a great deal of appeal.

[35:44]

The ideas you were basing this on, the ideas of something going beyond conventional data processing...

Yah.

I mean, to what extent do you think these were original, or were they, you know, were the James Martins of this world, or IBM, already thinking in this way?

Well you were getting bits and pieces of it, from people like James Martin. So...
And it was putting a lot of that together. But it really hadn't, it really hadn't got as much traction at the time at all.

Mm.

And the way we launched Butler Cox was interesting. We had no money. And we were, we didn't realise you need capital to start a company. [laughs] I remember someone saying to me, 'Where does the money come from?' You said, 'Well from the clients, you know, where else?' [laughter] And, so, when we, we launched the company, we launched it with consulting first, because that's an immediate profitable income. And, so we were running, you know, reputation-wise, we quickly got some, some good consulting projects. And then after a few months we launched the foundation. And we launched it by holding a, a seminar in London, invitation only seminar for FTSE 100 and big government department, heads of computing. Invitation only; if you can't come, you can't, don't send a delegate. And we had a whole series of lectures, all on developments in this area. And, what we were doing to the audience, we were telling them about things they hadn't really thought about. The impact of word processors in the office. The impact of telecommunications. The fact they were going to be responsible in the future for computer systems in the, for telephone systems in the company. Things like that. And, it was a free seminar, but we, we asked them to pay for their lunch, which actually paid for the hall, because we hadn't... So. And that was it. So that was the launch. And then you got to the point... Only at the very end of the day did we turn round to people and said, there are so many things happening in this world like this, where it's impossible to see the ramifications, either if you're supplying, or if you're using. And, we are setting up a programme which will independently research these areas, bring in world experts on it, hold conferences on it, private conferences on it, private seminars, and keep you in the picture. Not just with what's happening, but what it means.

Mm.

That's quite a powerful offering. And so people went away. And that was just at the end of the day we mentioned that. It wasn't, no brochures or anything, just at the end

of the day, quite subtle. And then we start ringing round to people. And, people liked the concept, but the first question everyone asked was, who else is a member? [laughs] And that's difficult, because, you're asking people to join a club and there's no other member. And people say, 'Well, you know, move quick, you could be number one.' And that's not terribly appealing. [laughter] So, we didn't say... We agreed we weren't going to discount, you know, David and I, no, they pull the full price. And then, we got a call, it was from the head of computing I think at Rank Hovis McDougall, RHM. Big company at the time.

Mm.

And he said, 'Look, I've got so much in my budget.' I think it was about half what we were asking. He said, 'If you let me join for that, I'll join.' [laughs] We bit his hand off. [laughter] And then it starts to grow.

Right.

So we, we formed the company, and, interesting thing was, once you get the nucleus going, and you deliver what you said you're going to do, and people see it's a good programme, and many people knew each other, it had a nice club atmosphere to it initially, and as it developed, we had one very funny meeting where someone said, it's all going well, 'How many people are you going to have in the programme?' We said, '25,' you see. [laughs] Top of the head. 25. Yah, any bigger than that, it will be, it'll lose its, its nature, its atmosphere, you see. Alan, some years later, by the time we had moved it into several other counties, we were in a Butler Cox conference, and a lot of people had a little tie, and it had, Roman numerals and a graph on it. And they wouldn't tell us who it was. It was the under-25 club. [laughter] The people who had been members when we said we wouldn't let it go beyond 25. And at that time it was up to, well by the time we floated the company I think it was up to about four or five hundred.

[40:02]

Now the interesting thing about the foundation, which we didn't understand at the time, was, it's a very powerful financial model. There's quite a big initial outlay, and there's a big base cost to doing the research. And you've got to do it well. And we

did. We did. I must say, you could read the old Butler Cox reports now, and they don't embarrass me. We might have missed some things, but we didn't misinterpret things. And we never got carried away with things. But once it's well established, every member joining, the money goes straight to the bottom line. You know? It's, it's a big margin.

Indeed. Mhm.

Whereas consulting, it's always a short-term order book, and it's always finite. And any day you don't consult, that's not on fees, that's lost.

Mm. Mm.

The foundation is a very good financial model. The larger it gets, other than there's a step increase in costs when you go to another country, the more profitable it becomes. And you can put more money into research and still do well. The other thing is, people pay a year in advance. They didn't just... So... And we, we would account for the revenue, spread it forward, we didn't take it in as we got it, but it meant, when you go into the next financial year, you'd got a large amount of your income, not just committed but in the bank. And the faster the foundation grows, unlike most programmes... No, most programmes, most products, most schemes, most companies, the faster you go, the problem is funding it. The faster the foundation grows, the more cash you've got in the bank. So pretty soon we were cash-positive, and we were for the whole existence of Butler Cox, and we never took a penny from outside from anybody.

And that model wasn't well understood at the time?

No. No, we sort of, discovered it. We didn't realise it, if I'm honest about it.

Right.

And the other thing about it is, particularly when it comes round to floating the company, this is secure revenue.

Mm.

Consulting is not secure, your people can leave tomorrow. You know, you never have more than a sort of, three-month order book. The foundation is stable, and people didn't leave. People didn't leave.

[42:06]

How do you ensure you could have the kind of staff who are after the quality of the work you demanded of them?

Two ways. Firstly, it was quite attractive to work for at the time, because of the nature of the work. We were very, very careful with our recruitment process. We would only recruit skilled people. We hadn't, we couldn't train people from scratch like other consulting groups, we didn't have that. But everyone who joined us would do a residential programme, everybody, including secretaries, administrative assistants, right up to MDs of a country, you do the same joint programme, where we get across our philosophy, our standards. We were very tight on standards. In Butler Cox there was a standard for how you wrote every word. Every report we did was professionally edited. Every, every report. And the thing that did... And every consultancy report was professionally edited. We had two professional editors. And it didn't just improve the wordsmithing; it improved the thinking.

Uh-huh.

Because, they'd go back, and they'd say, you've introduced the idea here; that doesn't follow from this. So it made much better of that. The research was, when you're producing research, we'd have, our research manager would make you justify everything you said. Why do you say this? Why do you think it's going to happen? Where's the evidence for it? So, we were very very strong on quality, very strong. You wouldn't... If you sent out a letter with a split infinitive in, you'd be called to account. I mean it was, Butler Cox, they had standards for everything. Very, very strong standards. In many areas they were sensible. For example, our standards on expenses, just toe the line, treat the company's money like your own. Don't travel

first class just because you're entitled to. Don't get a cab if it's quicker by taxi. So it was never policed and never detailed, you know, but there were standards for everything we did. It was our way of doing things. We were very... This is our way of doing things.

Was that written down?

Yah.

Mhm.

Yup. Yup. One expense account member said, 'We'll pay a reasonable amount of alcohol with dinner; not with breakfast.' [laughs] You see. And that was in the standards you see. But it was... And, things like that become self-reinforcing. You don't have to police them because that's the way you think. A colleague would say something else, 'No you can't say that.' So, it was very very strong on standards. You know, we're proud of that to this day. And if you pick up an old Butler Cox report, you weren't embarrassed with what it says, and you certainly weren't embarrassed with the way it's said.

OK.

So that was, that was Butler Cox.

[44:33]

Who was the first... I mean obviously you had to finance the business to get it going.

Yes.

Who were first contracts, how did they come about?

Oh people knew us by reputation. A bit of luck if I'm honest.

I mean they would have known you from Urwick or from, from Diebold.

Yah. Yeah. Yes.

Mm. OK.

Yup.

Mhm.

We also did some interesting multi-client studies. We did a very interesting multi-client study on Videotext. Remember, Sam Fedida?

Mhm. Actually I remember that. [laughs]

Yup. And, that was quite interesting. And this is where David's flair... I suppose my, my ability to, to run things, I suppose I was the sort of, strong person on things like standards and that, and David brought an awful lot of flair to it. And, we, we had heard, because we'd had a speaker, all about the Post Office at Martlesham developing this new system to present the information on the television screen, which at the time was, pretty radical. The idea you could actually present information on a home television screen was quite an interesting idea. And of course they did it in the cursor return time, so it was pretty limited, but they came up with Viewdata and Ceefax and those things. But we thought this was a very very interesting development, and worthy of a multi-client study. We had already touched on it in Butler Cox reports. So we launched this multi-client study. And, it was selling well here. You know, anyone interested in that area and felt they ought to buy it. And so, you know... And then we appointed an agent in the United States to sell it. Because it's equally applicable. And we thought, that's, that's how we can get a foothold in America, you know, establish our name. Because, one good thing about doing research programmes like the foundation, it's not bringing you consultancy work, but it is doing an awful lot for your presence and your name. And a multi-client study was going to widen this. So we appoint this chap in America, nice chap, to be our agent, and after a few months he said, 'I just can't sell these.' We said, 'Why not?' He said, 'Well, the concept is great,' he said, 'but when we talk to a client, they say,

“Well who’s developing this?” He says, ‘It’s coming out of the UK.’ So that’s, that’s fine. But when you say the UK Post Office, that’s the end of the discussion. [laughter] You see it’s not a great centre for innovation in American eyes. And, we seemed stymied. And then we had a stroke of luck. Through a friend of the business, we had a visit from the chap who was actually responsible for systems in the White House, a chap called Richard Harden. And he just dropped in to see us, you know, socially, and we had a nice lunch, and we were chatting away. And of course, we mentioned this study. And, the guy gets quite interested, and he said, ‘That’s, that’s fascinating.’ He said, ‘You could use that kind of system to send government information to the public, couldn’t you?’ ‘Yes, exactly,’ you see. So, he’s obviously warm about this. And then he says, ‘Oh. I’ll see if I’ve got enough money in my budget to buy the study.’ And it’s great. I’m going to reach in the desk and give him a contract. David cuts in and says, ‘We won’t sell it to you.’ [laughs] I said, ‘Well... What?’ And David said, ‘No Richard. We will give it to you. And there’s only one condition. At the end of the study, we give the opportunity for the subscribers to send two people to a seminar to meet the researchers. When we hold those seminars in America, I’d like to hold them in the White House.’ And the guy says, ‘Well, yah, I can arrange that for you.’ That’s it. So now we launch the American flyer for this which says, at the end of it, ‘Meet the researchers at the White House.’

Ah.

Sold like hotcakes. [laughter] And, that’s a great example I think of David’s flair. I’m always thinking of a way to sell a study; David’s always thinking of a way to sell 30. [laughs]

[48:15]

Mm. Mm. I was just wondering about this relationship between you and David. I mean, is it a bit like the relationship between Len Taylor and Philip Hughes at Logica?

Could be. I think, if you speak to David, I think it was a, a good blend. Now to some extent we overlap. I think, we both communicate reasonably well, but David has got an originality and a flair which, which I haven’t got. And I’m a much more

disciplined person, partly because, you know, coming out of manufacturing and running factories, you know, I'm a standards and, I'll take people to task, and, I'm perhaps more confrontational than I need be and that. But, but David has a, an imagination and a vision which outstrips most people. So it was, it was a good, good working combination. And that's, that's just good fortunate. I mean we were good friends, which was the basis of it in the first place.

And you're still good friends?

Oh, yes. Yah.

[49:07]

You sold the company, I mean, you closed it.

Yup. Well we... After... We took some money into the company after, about six years, we took in external shareholders. And we did that at the time, not because we needed money in the business. We had money. We bought in... So it was a money-out transaction, they just bought shares off us. And, we sold 20 per cent of the company. And the reason... We had six big, big investors, the Pru, Electra, people like that. And, the reason we did that was twofold. One was, we thought reporting to external shareholders would be a good discipline to introduce. And we also enabled anyone who ever wanted to take any... Up till that point, if you wanted to take some money out of the business... We were paying proper salaries. But on paper, all the original seven people were worth a bit of money, certainly compared with what they had before. So, rather than it always meaning money tomorrow, money tomorrow, money tomorrow, if you want to sell any shares, you can. So it enabled people to raise a bit of capital, cash in a bit, and still run as a company. And so we continued then... We always intended to float, rather than to have a trade sale. And that was for two reasons. One was ego. You can float them unsuccessful.... You can't... You can sell an unsuccessful company, people do all the time.

Yes. Of course.

You can't float an unsuccessful company.

No. No.

And we floated on the main market, the full market of the Stock Exchange

Mm.

So, that was part of it. We always intended to float. And since it was going to be another five years off, the idea of bringing in substantial investors who would call us to account, and, enabling people to take a little bit of money out, seemed a good move. So that's why we did it. And then, in 1990 we floated the company on the stock market.

[51:01]

Meantime we had a setback. One of the few things we got wrong. We, we badly wanted to establish a base in North America, strategically. A lot of argument for it. And, British companies always get this wrong, but we weren't going to. And we suddenly got the opportunity, with, a lady called Randy Goldfield was over here. Randy Goldfield had been the first woman partner in Booz Allen, and had become the leading light, the guru, on office systems. And very good on a public platform. And we had a speaker at a Butler Cox conference, and she's very good. And she announced, you know, she's running a small consulting company in America, very similar in many ways to ours, it was doing research programmes and that. And, we had heard she was thinking of selling her company to someone over here, and we bought it. And, we thought that was a tremendous move. Randy was a very impressive woman, a great travelling companion, could sell anything. What we didn't understand is, she couldn't run a company.

Mm.

And we were so disciplined, it didn't occur to us. We concentrated on winning their hearts and minds. Which a lot of people don't when they take over companies. And we really did. We worked hard at it. And, the year progresses, and, we get a bit worried about their projections. And one thing I found, and this was, I found out in later life, Americans don't like giving bad news, and in corporations they don't like

hearing it. And, you know, if you're in trouble, you really don't say, 'We're in trouble, might not hit the targets.' You know. The answer is, lie and take the pain when it comes round. And so, every time I said, 'Are you sure you're hitting these targets?' they take it as lack of faith. 'Ah, George, we'll do it for you.' By the time we realised they were not going to hit their targets, it was too late, late in the year. At that point we put a team in, small team in, and we find that, all the things we take for granted, they haven't got. There were, there were invoices that are hidden, and you find them in people's bags. What's this? 'Oh, we're not going to pay that yet.' Yeah, but, why isn't it in the accounts? It's a liability. And we un... But we uncovered huge liabilities. And all the predictions of income weren't, weren't there. And so we were going to lose a fortune on the year. So, we, we put a supporting team in there, and, we're progressing. And then, a few months later, about two or three months down the line... Randy, by the way, we made a director on the main board. And one thing we always had was good external directors. And after one of the meetings they, they said, 'George, can we speak to you on your own?' 'Sure.' So I spoke to them, and they said, 'George, the company aren't making up. Close it down.' I said, 'Close it down?' You know, given the strategic significance, after all the investment, you know? And they said, 'Yup. Close it down.' [laughs] I said, 'Look, we're turning it round. It may be taking time but we're turning it round, you can see that, don't you believe it?' I said, 'Yeah, you're turning it round. But it's going to take another year or two before it's back, not losing money. Meantime, being, you know, quite a disciplined person, you stopped all investment elsewhere. We're not recruiting here, we're not developing this. You won't let us bleed in more than one place at a time. George, you put the whole company on limbo while you sort out your mistake. You led us into this acquisition. To your credit you want to sort it out. The price is too high. Close it down.' Which I thought was one of the best examples of non-executive intervention I've ever come across in any field.

Indeed.

And in those ten, fifteen minutes, Alan, they earn their fee for the year. So we closed it down, and shut the company.

Mm.

And, because we were not quoted but had just six major shareholders, we went to them and, and explained it, and they weren't happy when we said delay, but, they understood it. So that set back, probably that probably set us back by a year or two.

Mm.

So we didn't get everything right.

[55:12]

But the, the float was a success?

Oh big success, yup. We went with...

So, perhaps I haven't followed this properly.

Yeah, sure.

Why did you then float? You had these good, faithful shareholders.

They were after, they were after a five-year exit only.

They wanted an out.

It went, from the time they came in, it was always going to be five years till a float.

OK, that's fine That's fine.

And so we floated the company. And it was a, it was a very successful float.

[55:41]

Thereafter, if you recall, that was in 1990, the market turned pretty bad, and partway through that, Computer Sciences came to us and said, 'Can we buy the business?' We had offers before, but, CSC seemed a good mix. They were running a programme called Index, you know, with Jim Champy, and the engineering. Culturally they

seemed a good fit with us. And, they, I got rung up by someone from California, said, 'We want to buy the company. We're serious about it.' And, they said... OK. And I said, 'What are we talking about in terms of price?' Because, when you're a public company, you are obliged to consider everything like that.

Yes.

You can't say, 'I don't want to do it.' You have an obligation to consider it, whether it suits you personally or not. And I said, well, what, 'What would you like price-wise?' And they said, 'Well, what do you want?' And I think at the time we were trading at about, £1.20 or something like that. And I, after a bit of consideration I said, 'Between £2.40 and £2.60.' [laughs] And, there was an intake of breath. And they said, 'On what basis did you say that?' And I said, 'On the basis, you want to buy the company and that's what you're going to pay for it.' That's. that's... Anyway, they, they said, 'We'll think about this.' And then they came back. Because I knew they were keen to buy us. And, they said, very fair, they came back and said, 'Here's an offer. It's in the middle of your range. And we're going to send a team over from California to review the company, and do due diligence. As a result of that we'll either buy the company at that price or walk away. You won't get a penny more and we won't offer you a penny less. So there's no more negotiating. We're going to have to, you're going to have prove to us that it's worth that, as a financial proposition.' And they came across, and that's what happened. And so we sold the company.

How much did you realise for that?

Oh I, I forget at the time. It was... All I know is, not, not vast sums. Because we weren't that large. I guess at today's level, in today's prices it would have been, sixty-odd million or something like that, you know, which was, big money in our terms but you know, not a mega company.

Mm.

But, it was a strategic buy from their point of view. They bought the company. They chose to integrate it totally in the business, and get rid of the name, which we thought was mad. But they had their own views on it, they rolled it in with Index. But my view is, you pay the, you buy it, it's yours, you can do what you like with it, so, no, no hard feelings on that. But, they chose to do it differently. A different philosophy. For example, I remember... And I stayed on for a time, helping the transition. For example, there was a Butler Cox Foundation meeting, because they liked the concept of that. And they said, 'OK, you know, what's the seating arrangements?' And I said, 'Well, free-for-all.' They said, 'Yeah, but, who should we sit next to?' And I said, 'Well, who you like.' They said 'No no. Who are the important people?' 'I said, 'They're all important. Different, but they're all important.' 'Yeah, which ones are big consultancy projects, prospects?' Now we had always been very careful, the foundation was a vehicle for raising the profile and the name, never a sales vehicle for consulting, never. We were, couldn't be stricter on it. And therefore, it was just a different philosophy. They saw it as a sales op. And we saw it as business in its own right. And, so a different philosophy, but, that's it, they bought the company. It's theirs.

[59:25]

You and David stayed on...

I stayed on for, about three months, and they were very generous on the terms, and wanted me to stay on longer. I didn't see a role.

And David?

David stayed on, doing lots of work concerned with the foundation and their programme, you know, chairing conferences and writing papers and, and the like, which... Within a couple of years I think just, all the staff had quit.

I was just going to say, what happened to all your staff? Because that's basically what they were buying. [laughs]

Yeah, they... Just about, most of them quit, about 70, 80 per cent of them quit.

Mm.

Because it, it's interesting, this. It's a lesson you learn. How are similar cultures seen from the outside? It's very different inside. Their projects were all these, business engineering. There are some very bright people. But, they didn't have methodologies. They didn't have the same structure. And we were very disciplined, and, structured like that. And so it was just a different philosophy on running the company, and different environment altogether.

[1:00:33]

So brutally, what did they get for their £2.50 a share, or whatever it was?

I don't know. Not what they could have got.

No.

And I don't say that with any grievance, you know, as far as that's concerned, you know, we, we sold the company, and so, shareholders thought we did a wonderful job. Which they did, I mean they, they, everyone sold out at much more than they bought in at when we floated.

Absolutely.

When we floated there was a good multiple. So, no, that's a, that was great, you know, people did well out of it. And, I don't think anyone fell out about it afterwards. Just, people said, this is not my environment. It's a, it is interesting, that. And the people... And you see, now, later on I've seen many more mergers, big mergers from different things. And it is so difficult to fit cultures. Even where they're the same business, they seem the same, philosophies are very different.

[1:01:22]

George, as you will probably remember, I was one of the first journalists you talked to after the formation of Butler Cox.

Yes. Remember very well. Yah.

So, I've followed your career and David's with some interest I suppose. And, after you left the company with its sale, you became Executive Chairman of P-E International.

Yes.

A software services company.

Yup.

And I thought that was really, quite a big career change for you.

Yes.

Did you see it like that?

No I didn't see it like that. Because I suppose at the time, my, the skills that I had developed if you like, were just running a company. No, .running a services company, a company which you were, you were pretty closely involved with the staff and the clients et cetera. So it wasn't like going to, to run a, you know, a retail company or something.

Mm.

And, also, because Butler Cox had done quite well financially, shareholders quite liked it. And that's obviously important for a plc. What I discovered was, again, the culture was very very different. And, I had the Butler Cox model too much in mind if I'm honest. I also found that the company had quite severe financial problems, in terms of, you know, borrowings were quite high, et cetera. So, it was quite tough if I'm honest, and not what I expected.

Were you able to turn it round?

Turned it round sufficiently where I'm able to sell it.

Ah.

Yah.

Mm, OK.

It would have taken too long to make it very successful, was my view. And that's the thing you always have to, to look at. You think, well if I can get that much for it now, it will take another three years before I could get to that level. If I can get that for it, I've got to sell it.

Mm.

And so, we sold the group, yup.

[1:03:03]

OK. But your next move I think was even more dramatic, to become Managing Director of Unisys in the UK.

Yah.

Now, this is one of the old-established...

Computer giants, yah.

Computer giants, yes.

Well...

Well what impelled you take this job?

Well I was approached. And, what they were trying to do as a corporation at the time was change from being a hardware manufacturer into a services-led company. And, with that in mind, I had a quite a good background. And so, they recruited me to run the UK company. During that first year with Unisys, one began to realise just how difficult that transition was for them to make. The company was very impressive in many ways, very impressive. Their technology was good. Their attitude to customers was absolutely excellent. Terrific commitment, right the way through. Not what I expected. You know, they really did put the client first, and would go to great lengths to solve any problems a client had. What they didn't understand was, the whole dynamics of a service business is different, and what they had done is, they had piled staff in, hoping to sell them, round the world. And, of course, in the hardware business you spend a lot of money on development, but then, every time you sell a machine, other than the sale, there's no cost, and there's a complete margin. In the services business, you sell a project, and all you've got is a ticket in a lottery. You could lose a fortune on it. And they were. A lot of bad projects, insufficient control over bidding et cetera. And so, they were losing a lot of money, across the whole group. And suffering as a result of it. And I had been there a year, and, they decided, this was all getting too much. They were going to split into three divisions; one would be the pure hardware manufacture, the other would be hardware maintenance, which was a great cash cow for computer companies in those days. You know, you'd have engineers parked on all the major banks and companies like that. Very good continuous revenue stream. And the services business, which was outsourcing systems implementation, and so on. And, so they divided it into three, recognising they were now different round the world. And they realised they couldn't get through a change like that with the initial structure. Because, for example, round the world, particularly in Europe, you had all these people like me running countries, who were never going to go, you know, were going to be an impediment to that change. And so they got rid of all country managers, they fired every country manager. And I thought, well that's pity, it's, I like the company, I like the people, I think the business model is screwed but I like the people.

[1:06:00]

And, they said, 'George, would you run the services business for Europe?' And so I said, 'If I can pick the team to head it up, I will.' So, we brought in people from

America, people running Asia Pacific, the Belgium country manager I reemployed. So we put together I think a very good team. And then, in the third quarter of that year we assembled all, for the first time we got our own set of accounts. And, yah, I think I can discuss this now over the passage of time. But it was I think in the third quarter in 1996 or 1995, 1995, I think it was the third quarter, and it was the first set of results we had. And on the quarter, the business I was running had lost 60 million on the quarter.

Six zero?

Six zero million dollars. And, it's getting higher every quarter. So I found myself running a business losing a quarter of a billion a year.

This is an entirely new experience for you.

This is, this, now I've made the big time haven't I [laughter], I mean this is, this is the real deal. And, you know, today's money, it must be half a billion. This is mega. And, so I got my team together, and this, this is, this is shocking, this is a much bigger issue than I thought. Because a lot the loss had been disguised, you know, they'd sold lots of systems, you know, the Swiss Bank et cetera, and they had, all the services losses had been concealed by the hardware profit. So, they didn't realise just how unprofitable this business was.

Mm.

And, in any situation, I've learnt this constantly, several things are important. Only one, two or three matter, never any more. And, two or three things will, are life and death. If you sort those out, you're fine. If you don't sort those out, no other problem matters. And, the three things we tackled on were the following. One is, we had to stop taking on unprofitable work. So put controls immediately on that. Secondly, we had to cut costs. You could not grow revenue fast enough to cover the cost base, which meant firing people across Europe, hundreds of people. And the third was, we had thirteen red projects, money on which we were losing a fortune.

We have to end them. We have to end them. Renegotiate them, walk out and be sued if you have to. And these are in places like Russia, you know?

Mm.

But we cannot, we cannot bleed out of those thirteen. And so we tackled those three issues alone. Nothing else mattered, those three things, you know, above all else. And, over the next eight quarters, things improved every quarter, so that after eight quarters we're back on a pre-tax profit. Which had a huge impact on the group.

Of course.

And we cut other things in costs. We cut, for example, on buildings. You know, we had that big, big place in Uxbridge, we had that big place on the North Circular, the UK headquarters. And, buildings, we had a big building south of the city. And, when I had just taken over, I remember, there was always a problem with space. You couldn't find room you see. And one day I walked round the whole building, before the team came in, and we had a meeting, and I said, 'You're right, we have a space problem.' They said, 'We're glad you realise at least.' I said, 'Yeah, we've got too much.' We've got something like, you know, 1200 seats in this building, and, about 700 arses.

Mm.

You know? That's ridiculous, we've got too space. And we just, totally changed the use of space, to a much different approach to it, you know, with, business centres, very imaginative design, project rooms, entertaining rooms. Got rid of offices for everybody, including me. As a consequence of that, we increased the staff, we were recruiting in the UK, and we, we must have increased the staff over the next year by about, fifteen per cent. We cut office costs by about 30, 40 per cent. Tremendous change around. You're forced, under those circumstances you are forced to think and do things which otherwise you might take time thinking about, that's a good idea. It was transformational.

Mm.

[1:09:57]

And, meantime, I was having quite a, a difficult relationship with the corporation. It had always been quite difficult. I don't think I'm the best, you know, in terms of the corporate reporting side. You'd think, having run your own business. And... But at the end of it, you know, I got the award, you know, for executive of the year or something. So, so, the corporation were very good. And during that time I also had a, a serious heart attack, when I was in America, which was, was quite an interesting interruption to things.

Indeed.

So...

I didn't know about that.

Didn't know? [laughs]

No.

Oh, well just digressing into that one. You know, I had gone over to present the UK's results. You have a quarterly thing which is the quarterly business review, QBR.

Yes.

Which is a ritual, you know, in the bear pit, or in the arena. And, you're going to take a lot of stick, however good your results are, from, from the operating committee and the chief executive. Well we went out there, and I felt, we out on a Wednesday, and I felt pretty good. Because our results were good in Europe. And we were getting up the noses of our American colleagues, because we, each time we went we had rammed that up everyone else's nose, how good we were doing. And, we'd do a little bar chart of how things... They called it the tombstone chart, get it...

Mm. Mm.

And, I went out on the Wednesday with my senior vice-president of marketing from Europe, American, and, Thursday is going to be mooching round and, talking to our American colleagues, and then Friday we present the results. Get on a plane overnight Friday. Went out to dinner on the Wednesday when we got there, it was great. And then, I wake up at about midnight, just after, in the hotel. And I'd got indigestion like I'd never had. So, I rang down to reception, and said, 'Look, I've got indigestion bad. I've got nothing to take for it. I'm sure it's indigestion, but can you just get a local doctor to look me over?' So I sit back on the bed, and, phew, sweating a bit. And then, within five minutes there's a bang on the door. Oh, they've found some Rennies or something. And, it's the paramedics. On the trolley you see. [laughs] And they're putting wires in. Oh come on, this is typical America, they get drama out of nothing. Seen too much television in my view. So we, we go. And, 'Come on George, hang in there George.' Oh God. A little while later I'm in hospital, sitting up. I've got a drip in my arm, but other than I'm like I am now, I'm wide awake, feel great, no pain. And they're asking me all these questions, you know, do you get short of breathing? No, never. Do you smoke? Never, you see. And, what did your mother die of, what did your father...? And then I turned to this guy and said, 'You're not trying to imply I've got a heart problem are you?' And the guy said, 'You are joking aren't you?' He said, 'You know what happened in the ambulance?' 'No.' 'I'll get you the trace.' So they get the trace out, and there's the... 'There's your heart beating. There it goes in fibrillation, that's shaking. There flat line. That spike is where they hit you with electrodes. No joy. The next spike they get your heart going again. Your heart stopped for about a half a minute. You had a cardiac arrest.' So I said, 'Oh. Wow,' I said, 'that sounds pretty serious.' He said, 'Three per cent of people who have cardiac arrests survive and they're normally in hospital when it happens.' 'Oh.' [laughs] So. Wow. So, what happens now? And they said, 'Well, we need to find out what has happened, so we need to take you to a big hospital tomorrow, and do an angiogram.' I know nothing about this kind of stuff you see. And, I said, 'Well...'. They said, 'Something's stopped blood to your heart, and we think it's just a, must have been a clogged artery or blood...' 'But what do you do for it?' They said, 'Well we put up a little balloon, open it up, and put all the plastic tube in.' I said, 'How long does that take?' And they say, 'Oh, we keep

you in overnight.’ ‘Oh that’s great.’ So, I then ring my American colleague. Americans don’t worry about their boss ringing them up at one o’clock in the morning, you know, and saying, ‘Look...’ I said, ‘Kurt[sp?], I’ve got some bad news, some very bad news. Some very very bad news.’ ‘OK George.’ [laughs] ‘I can’t see you for breakfast Kurt[sp?].’ ‘OK George, no problem.’ ‘Kurt[sp?], you’re going to have to give our results on Friday on your own.’ ‘Oh, OK George.’ ‘Kurt[sp?], I’m in hospital.’ [laughter] So... Anyway, next day they do this, take me to the big hospital, give me this angiogram, and they said, ‘Here’s your problem Mr Cox,’ after, you know, after pulling this Dyno-Rod out after half an hour. ‘You have severe arterial blockage. Every major artery is almost totally blocked up.’ ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘oh it’s bad news.’ Well, I said, I had no symptoms.’ They said, ‘No, you’re very, your heart itself is in good shape, and you’re very fit, but... Anyway. So I said ‘Get your little balloon out,’ you know, ‘because I’m on a plane Saturday. I’ve got a wife back who’s seven months pregnant.’ And they said, ‘No, you can’t tackle that without treatment.’ They said, ‘That needs bypass surgery.’ ‘Oh.’ So I said, ‘Oh, that’s welcome news, I’d better look into that when I go home.’ ‘No Mr Cox. Surgery tomorrow. There’s no way you go out of this hospital in that condition.’ So, the next day I had a six-fold heart bypass. Now the interesting thing about this is the company. Despite our difficult relationship, the company were absolutely superb. Remembering that most people who have this problem never go back to work, so it wasn’t cynical, get back. They got in touch with my wife, and said, ‘Look, we’re flying you out tomorrow.’ And she said, ‘I’m, I’m seven...’ They rang round, they came back, said, ‘The only way we can get you out is on Concorde. So you and your daughter on Concorde tomorrow. You’ve got a choice, they’ll let you stay here for a week and then, they say that’s long enough, you go back on Concorde as well. Or if you want to stay in America and have your baby here, we’ll cover all the costs.’ They were superb. My wife was out there, they gave her a, a driver took her around all the time. The company looked after my daughter, you know. And when we got back, when I got back about six weeks later, also flying supersonically back... They had booked me into an apartment with a gym, the company chef came to see me every day. When I got back, we actually got a, sent to us an embroidered book for my daughter, *Louise’s Trip to Blue Bell*, that’s corporate headquarters. Pictures of her in the zoo, picture of the... And, you know, I mean, I choked up. And Laura said, ‘George, you go on about these people. You’ve never worked for nicer people.’ And

it wasn't... It was interesting. You just see a different side to a corporation, don't you. They were superb, certainly when I had [laughs], that interrupted me. [laughter] That's a brief career, a quick spell of death halfway through my career. Yah.

Oh dear.

Sorry, you don't normally cover medical histories on these things, do you?

No. No, well sometimes we do. Yes. Well it's a heart-warming story, pun intended.

Yeah, it's a good pun. [laughter]

[1:16:28]

Well, I'm very glad you got through that anyway. Gosh. You left Unisys in '99?

Yup.

Was that, was that when you retired?

Well, I'd got to the point where, we had turned the UK round, a new chief executive had come in. I think, I had... At that stage I had decided... There was nowhere up in the company beyond what I was doing, and, other than if I got a Presidency role in America, which I wasn't going to do. And so, you think, I've come to the end of that. There's nothing more I can do here. You know, it's turned round, it's, it's stabilised. And that's why I decided to move on.

Right.

I had, interestingly... Another digression, but, just when I joined P-E, I had a very interesting approach, a headhunt, for something which I didn't take up which was quite interesting. I got a call one evening, just when I had left CSC, and, a caller phoned saying, American headhunter saying, would I like to discuss an important role in the States? And I said, 'No, I've just taken a new job.' He said, 'It's a very interesting role. It's heading up all this company's IT related services.' I said, 'I'm

sure it's very interesting.' He said, 'It's a big corporation, but, it's not the MIS director, but , he will report to you. This was a global board position.' And I said, 'Well thank you, but...' And, he said, 'And the basic salary,' and this is going back, you know, 'is well over a million a year.' And, so I said, 'Well, it sounds like it ought to be, but, no, I, I've just got a new job.' So, I didn't take it seriously. And had a laugh with my wife, I said, 'Look, I've just turned down a million-a-year job.' She said, 'Yeah yeah yeah.' A few days later I got another call, saying, 'Look, I know you said you weren't interested, but our CFO is visiting the UK next week would you care to meet him? We have to tell you who the company is.' And he said... And it was AT&T. 'So I want you to meet the CFO of AT&T.' Yeah, so I met him, and we had lunch, and, very nice lunch, put the world to rights, you know, discussing how everything's going. And then he said, 'Do you know our chairman, Bob Brown[sp?]?' 'No.' [laughs] 'No no.' He said, 'You ought to have lunch with him.' 'Oh fine.' He said, 'Why don't you have lunch with him next week.' So I said, 'Oh is he over here?' 'No no. In Basking Ridge.' He said, 'Take a day off from work, you know, get on a Concorde in the morning, we'll meet you in New York, and...' So, all right. So, flew out to... I get off Concorde. There's an immediate call for me to go round. I don't think I even showed a passport. So there was a helicopter there with like, a living room at the back. And they fly me to Basking Ridge. Take me round Bell Labs and that. And, we go in there, and I met the head of research. I remember saying to the, my host, I said, 'Oh, that Arno, he's bright isn't he?' 'Yes George. Most Nobel Laureates are.' [laughs] 'You have a Nobel Laureate?' 'No, we have eleven on the staff here George.' 'Oh.' [So I had a wonderful day there. And it was a fantastic role. But I, I came back, and I didn't, it didn't take long, because, it would have meant living in Baking Ridge, a lot of global travelling, and, I didn't want to live there with the family. Because you're then in corporate life, everyone in the supermarket knows who you are, everybody... That's it. And that's an aspect of corporate America I didn't think I'd fit in. But I remember speaking to the CFO and said, 'What had attracted you?' Because he had been chief executive of elsewhere. He said, 'George, you're part of a team that's shaping the world.' And that was pretty attractive. That was pretty heady stuff. So, you never know how the world might have been different if you'd have taken that, but...

Well, indeed.

[1:20:10]

So, little digressions. Anyway. I stepped down from Unisys. And, I thought at that stage, I'm, I'm going to go a political career. Because by then I'm, 59 I suppose. That's it, I've done the corporate stuff. I've done the entrepreneur stuff. I'd already had some interesting directorships, I was on the board on the Inland Revenue, I was on the board of the London Futures Exchange. And so I, at that stage, I'm going to go, I'm having lunch with a headhunter on a non-executive roles, and she suddenly puts down her knife and fork, says, 'George, I've got it, I've got it.' I said, 'What's that?' 'Institute of Directors. They're looking for a new Director-General.' 'Oh. I'm interested.' So they wheel me in front of the great and the good. And a couple of days later they offered me the role. So I then did five years at the IoD.

Indeed. And I think you did raise the profile of the IoD quite significantly while you were there.

Yeah, it was, it was very very...

You were on the radio and television quite a lot.

Yeah, I did a lot of... But that's, that was the stimulating part of it. Running the organisation is one thing, that you know you can do, but, the representation to Government, and the media stuff, the *Today* programme, that was entirely new to me.

Right.

And, of course, things like the *Today* programme and, *PM* and programmes like that, and *Broadcasting House*, they treat you like, being head of the IoD, you're treated like an MP. You're fair game. You know, you're, you're not, this is not a benign interview. So, that was very very stimulating and challenging. One of the things that I did was depoliticise the place. Because it was quite right wing. Its history was right-wing. And my view is, we're a non-political body, and I worked quite hard to get a relationship with the Government of the day, which of course was the Blair Government, and that worked, that worked well. I got to the point where we were

having regular meetings with the Policy Unit at Number Ten, and you start to form good relationships with ministers, you know, non-critical but, but certainly cooperative, particularly with Brown when he was at the Treasury. And, I found that very very interesting, yah, that was a good, a good period. And then I did a, a review for them.

This is the Cox Review. What was that to do with?

I had gone on about... I went to a... I had just stepped down from the IoD, and I was called along to a pre-Budget meeting at the Treasury. It was a leftover from the IoD days, where you go along in advance and say what you want to see in the Budget. And they were going through various ideas on me. And I said, our problem is, we're just not using our creative talents enough in business. We're great on ideas, we have a great design, huge design capability here. We design for everybody else, you know, Jony Ive, you know, for Apple and that, you know.

Mm.

We're just not getting enough of this creativity into our business. And they said, 'Well, why are you, what's your reason for that, and what can we do about it?' And I said, '[sighs] That's a big question.' 'You can look at it, you've got to study it.' All right. And so, went away. And I had taken with me... I was already chair of the Design Council by the way, I had been asked to do that, and, so I'm chair of the Design Council. So I had taken the head of the Design Council with me. And, I said, 'Well, we made a pitch, at least, that is.' And then, next day I get an email from the Treasury with the terms of reference for the Cox Review, on getting greater creativity in business. And, so I thought, oh well, never mind who's going to do it or what they call it, at least they're taking this seriously. So I went back, and I said, 'I think you need to tighten up the terms of reference and be more specific.' 'Oh fine,' they said. 'But, we've got to finalise it by two o'clock.' 'Why by two o'clock?' 'That's when the Budget Statement goes to print.' So, at that much notice, I suddenly found myself doing a review for Government, which I then spent much of the next year doing, which was very interesting. And, you know, with recommendations, some of which had an effect, and, you know, for example, it recommended more joint programmes at

Master's level at university. Because universities are so silo'd. And it resulted in a programme like Design London which was the Royal College of Art and Imperial College put together joint programmes in a Cox Centre as they called it, and, Cranfield and the University of the Arts did another one as well with a thing called C4. So, it had some effect. Nothing like that changes the world, but it, it wasn't completely a waste of time.

[1:24:43]

George, where were you born and when were you born?

I was born in Hackney in 1940.

Mm. 1940.

Yup.

What did your father do?

He was a porter, a hall porter, and my mother was a waitress.

Mm. Were you happy as a child?

I think so. It's, it's hard to compare it, because you don't know how other children feel, but...

Mm. Well it was the war years wasn't it?

It was the war years, and at first when looking back were, were quite exciting times really. You know, playing on the, after the war, immediately, on the bomb sites. And I mean in those days you, you'd just go out and play. We grew up, we lived in Marble Arch, and my daughters were born in Upper Berkeley Street, and – sorry, my sisters, Upper Berkeley Street, and in Portman Square, where, the Portman Hotel's there. Below stairs of course. But it was a great place to, to grow up, being right in the centre of London there.

Mm.

And, I was talking to a cab driver the other day, I said, we used to... There was a little, couple of streets, Old Quebec Street and New Quebec Street, which run through to Marble Arch, and the cabs use it as a rat run. And we were going down there, it was full of traffic, and the cab driver, I said to the cab driver, 'You wouldn't believe it, when I was a kid we played cricket in the street here in the evening.' He said, 'What about the traffic?' And I said, 'If a car came along, you'd move the dustbin.' And I think he thought I was choking, but I wasn't. So, it was, it was an interesting time to grow up.

[1:26:01]

Yes. Were your parents ambitious for you?

The one thing I will say of my parents, they always assumed their children would go to university.

Ah.

Which looking back was quite incredible. No one in the family had ever been to university. When we moved, in early 1950s, to a council block in Clerkenwell, no one in the buildings ever went to university. But my parents always took it for granted I would. And I sort of scraped through my Eleven Plus and went to grammar school, and my sisters got through their Eleven Plus and went to grammar school, and that was it. So, yes, it's quite interesting how they, it was taken for granted. It wasn't, oh you should try and get to university, it was just taken for granted, that's what you're going to do. Which is, quite surprising, looking back on it.

[1:26:45]

Did your sisters go to university?

One of them did, yes. The other didn't. The other preferred to go off and become an actress, but the other one went to university. And had a very good career with IBM.

[1:26:56]

Excellent. Yes. And you did aeronautical engineering at...

Queen Mary, yes.

Which means we almost crossed over.

Yes. [laughter] Yes. Close.

I would have been there, when, '64 I think.

Great place.

It is.

Yeah.

Have you been back at all?

Yeah, they gave me an Honorary Fellowship. [laughs]

The changes there are amazing.

Amazing. It's like a town now. I took my daughter there for open day, and she said, 'Is this the way you remember it Dad?' 'No.'

No. [laughs]

No. Because, I think when you and I went there, it was about four or five thousand people. Now it's eighteen and a half. It's a town.

I know, it's...

Yeah. And very good.

The whole corridor and labs where I worked have gone.

Yah. Yes.

Anyway. So you did aeronautical engineering. And you rowed.

Yup.

Which was pretty important. You rowed for the university?

I rowed for the university, yup.

Mm. Good.

As well as the college. Yah, that was a big thing in my life, the rowing.

[1:27:50]

And you're still very busy in a whole range of things. You helped to select the GB teams for the World Championships

Yeah. Well...

This is the rowing teams of course.

The rowing. Yeah. Well, having rowed for the university, I, that was it, I mean, rowing's not the kind of thing I found I could do part-time with a career and a family. But, in the Seventies I was asked to, by the university, would I like to go back and coach? And I went back and coached. And then I, it was a time when university coaching was still amateur everywhere. But I coached, and I was chief coach in the University of London, and, during that time I coached twice at World Championships, and then, ended up, once I had finished my coaching, and, I also coached, I coached the Oxford Boat Race crew a couple of years, did spells with them. And then, I was

asked to become Chairman of the Selection Board for British Rowing. So, I did that, which was, very stimulating, and, again one of these things which, you always think you will do it better than, you know, anyone else, until you get the job.

[1:28:52]

What people in your business career have inspired you, or formed role models, or who been particularly influential?

I don't think there are role models. There's no one I've thought, I want to be like him.

Mm.

I think you pick bits and pieces from people. For example, there was, the guy who I worked for when I first went to the factory with Molins was in many ways a dreadful person, I thought, if I'm honest about it, but he was very focused.

Right.

This point about, things that matter and things that don't. What really matters, very focused. A very tough man. Very good at cutting through problems. I was working, as I mentioned earlier, all hours of the day and night. And I was leaving the factory one evening, and I had my briefcase. And he calls me in. He's a very charming man you know. And he said, 'Sit down George.' He said, 'What's that?' And I said, 'Oh it's just some work.' And he said, 'What is that?' I said, 'Well papers I haven't read during the day and I'm going to take them home.' And he said, 'How often do you take work home?' I said, 'Oh, to be honest, I take home most evenings.' And, 'What do you do?' I said, 'Well, I don't always end up but, but usually after I've had my meal, you know, I'm sitting by the television, I'm trying to run through it.' And he said, 'You shouldn't do that. You're coming in virtually seven days a week and you're taking work home.' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'We must, we must sort that problem out.' And I thought, oh that's good, he's going to give me an assistant or something, or a, you know... And he said, 'I can solve that problem for you now.' And he said, 'I forbid you to bring a case in.' That's it. 'Leave it here now, don't take it home.' Now, and he was the kind of guy, that's not a witty suggestion; that

means you just don't... That's it. In other words, if you can't take it home, you will solve the problem. And he was very good like that. A real, a manager who would just cut through issues that didn't matter. Very effective. And a huge impact on output.

OK.

Really. So he was, you know, you'd pick up things like that from him, without a role model, because in many other ways, I think he was a dreadful person. But you learn things from different people.

Mm.

But I think, if I'm honest, it was my colleague David Butler who had probably the biggest impact. Because David was so imaginative, so imaginative. And the story I told you earlier about, you know, seeing an opportunity. David would come at any situation from somewhere else. A very gifted writer. And also, David probably got it across to me, or reinforced it with me early on, you know, you could speak to anybody, and you're never ever overawed. David would go, could go into a meeting with a Cabinet minister, and was quite clear when he went in, he knew as much about the situation as he did. David was never overawed by... Show people due respect, but...

He was also twice as tall as him. [laughs]

He was... [laughs] He's quite an imposing character. But David, no situation would throw David. No situation would throw him. And, you know, he told me later on when I was at the IoD, and you're on the radio and television, you know, I'm there because, because, I'm talking about my subject, you know? My opinion is strong, you know. David really got a lot, you know, in terms of, belief in oneself, understanding, you know, show people respect, but don't be overawed by anybody.

Mm.

And a real, look at any problem from a different angle altogether.

[1:31:58]

OK. What do you think your major achievement has been over your business life?

I think it's... Over business life. I think, two really. One was the Unisys turn-round, was, was quite clear. A very tough period, but... The other was starting a company. To start a company from scratch without a penny, and build it up to where it's got a good reputation, an enduring reputation, and you can float it on the full market of the Stock Exchange, I must admit, that, that's very gratifying.

[1:32:33]

Mm. And your chief failure or disappointment.

If I'm honest, you look back on Butler Cox, I think it had far more potential than we ever realised.

Mhm.

Far more. We should have gone into areas now that at the time we looked down on, if I'm honest. You look at the area that... We, we examined mergers and discussed them with people like Gideon Gartner et cetera. They did a lot of business, you know, trawling lots of information and analysing it. We didn't, didn't think much of doing that. That didn't have enough interest for us, terrific business. A lot of areas of research, we could have gone into, and we did it better than other people. We were more thorough, we analysed it better. There was a lot of potential there which never saw, and we didn't see it because, we were too wrapped up in the interests of the business. I remember talking to one of our very strong external directors, and, he was finance director of a big group, a big retailing group. And I said, 'How do we compare with, you know, the companies you know?' And he said, 'Funnily enough, in terms of disciplines and that, and board reporting, you're excellent. Your board reports are thorough, financially you're really on top of things.' He said, 'You've just got too much interest in what you do.' He said, 'Do you think we suddenly have a, leap up at the board with delight because, someone's, you know, got a, a new bloody

fabric or something? It doesn't....' You know, he said, 'You just... And you'll have a, a big project, which is a bit boring, and get a major extension,' won't mention it. 'but you'll get some small project, because it's got great insight into new sundry development, you're all excited.' And that's it. And I think... So Butler Cox had far more potential of business than we realised at the time. But we were pushing out from the things which really excited us.

[1:34:23]

Mm. What advice would you give to a young person starting in IT these days?

I think, it's very interesting. The world that I've described was going through a fundamental change, and we couldn't see where it was leading. You really couldn't. You look back, there's plenty of things we missed. We missed things repeatedly. You know, some things... And I worked, you know, we did reviews for a telecommunications company. No one ever saw things like texting. You know, it was something that emerged et cetera. And, I think, I'd get across that, the world you go into, don't have a fixed view of it.

Mm.

Yah? It means that... I'm saying, therefore, that you can't plan, or think five years of strategy, but you've got to be flexible. You've got to be flexible. You've got to understand, offshoots will come up quickly and so on. And I think, one of the great skills you can develop in life is to step back and see a situation in its perspective. You know, and, in recent years, you know, I chair Warwick, and we've got a very good business school. If you give to any business school class a case study of, you know, well-known case study of a company that you and I know, and people know, they come up pretty right with the answer. And you think, why didn't the people running the company at the time do that? And it wasn't because they were thick compared with you, or inexperienced; they just couldn't stand back and see what was happening. The ability to stand back and view something the way you will from ten years hence, is a tremendous skill to, to acquire. It really is. And, you need to work at that. To step back and think, right, take the emotion out of it, take the... Yah. And that's it. Same as Butler Cox. At the time you could never have seen... There was great

potential there, we could see potential for doing more of what we did, becoming larger at what did. There was a lateral potential there as a business which we didn't see.

[1:36:14]

It's been a fascinating business life, and in retirement you've done some, are still doing some remarkable things, with Warwick University and with the VSO and with the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants. Sir George Cox, thank you very much for talking to us today.

Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure.

[End of Interview]