



## A message to my younger self

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...As I approach my 45th birthday and almost 30-years at the Cobus Communications Group, since leaving school in 1991, I take a look back over the years and reflect on the good [what's worked out well!], the bad [what's not worked out quite so well], and the ugly [any mistakes that I've made along the way!] both in and outside the workplace!

I can clearly remember my first day at work – following my first ever job interview at the age of 16; I started a few days later and was thrown in at the deep end! I already had a keen interest and natural flair for anything electronic and although I didn't yet appreciate the complexities of business I was quietly [well, maybe not so quiet!] confident about the technology of the day and basically anything with a wire hanging out of it. I was thoroughly excited by the prospect of work and even after my first day not finishing until around 8pm I loved it and could not wait to get stuck into the unknown challenges that laid ahead.

Having quickly proved myself to be more than capable and knowledgeable regarding the 'electronic' elements of the role I was keen to expand on my skill set and learn more about the other areas of the business so that my value and worth would extend beyond that of the electronics trainee/ apprentice that I was at the time. Working long hours and weekends was standard – it was a fledgling company and it needed all the help that it could get in order to establish itself, I remember it being tough, challenging, yet rewarding at the same time – I've always liked working and getting stuck-in and never had a problem with Monday mornings as I felt lucky that I was doing something that I enjoyed doing, and I even got paid for it!

Outside work I was interested in sports and actually did my work experience at a gym, I was considering a career in the forces and had enquired with a friend about the royal marines before 'this' opportunity presented itself.

My chosen sport was rugby league that back-in-the day was huge in Hull, I played for HKR and enjoyed the professionalism of playing all over the country and some appearances on Sky TV. I was not the best player as I wasn't naturally talented, but I was committed to being the best that I could be and had good strength, speed, and fitness that earned me my place in the starting 13.

As the years progressed I continued to upskill myself in any and all areas that presented themselves and never let an opportunity pass me by, obviously I attended endless technical training courses that enabled me to carry out my primary job role – whilst striving to achieve nothing less than a 100% distinction at all times. In addition I actively pursued further personal development by attending night school/college and day release to become qualified in business development and leadership, finance and accounts, as well as sales and marketing while not losing focus on my technical abilities and needs.

My interest in rugby and fitness in general, along with my increased social elements, did present themselves as a real challenge as I often struggled to make training and sometimes even missed important games due to work commitments. I really struggled with this as I was totally committed to my work and developing career, but I was also committed to my chosen sport and did not want to miss out or let the team down! Unfortunately, I had to learn that sometimes difficult choices had to be made and quite often this meant missing rugby for work.

What initially started off with just the proprietor, supervisor, and myself, had now grown to a capable size and with a positive work ethos, grit and determination, we'd established a decent reputation, customer base, and credibility of a small but more than capable communications company. Over the years I became embedded in all aspects of the business and in 2007 I brokered a management buyout that resulted in me becoming a director and shareholder with the founding proprietor retiring. Fast forward to December 2013 and I completed a total share acquisition to become the sole shareholder and managing director. What followed was compounded year-on-year growth across all departments and business sectors resulting in a strengthened balance sheet and increases in gross profit as well as bottom-line net profit.

I've learned a lot of skills, and picked up a lot of knowledge over the years, and I'm a strong believer in that there is no substitute for experience but that it still needs to be balanced against academic qualification/formal training.

Have I made mistakes along the way? Of course I have, but like most, I just don't like to admit it – but I can say that I strive for excellence and that 'trainee or MD' I've always judged myself against myself in that if I don't gain a 100% pass rate I judge me against me, not others.

So is that the advice I'd offer to you now?

One of the most difficult things in business is that you need to accept, more than accept - you need to embrace, is change because the only constant in life/business is change! You need to assess/plan/do/review and ensure that you are continually aware of the potential changes and other factors that could affect the business performance from an operational and/or financial perspective, ideally reacting before it happens as delays can often mean that it's then too late to mitigate losses.

Once I felt that the business had reached a level of financial security I found myself spending time on other projects such as my charity and community work as I felt both a degree of obligation and a feeling of reward from helping others. I set-up the Cobus Foundation in 2010 and find the support provided to others returns a great feeling of self-worth as its good to give something back to others that have experienced real difficulties and challenges in life and need a helping hand – for the past few years the Foundation has supported Hull4Heroes, amongst others, that help support veterans adjust to civilian life. As a Chair of governors at a local primary school for the past 10 years I'm tasked with providing support via constructive challenge to make sure that the school are accountable and that the children, from all backgrounds and abilities, are given the best possible start in life and the ability to achieve their dreams – and quite possibly become the business leaders of tomorrow.

Unfortunately, I often see the youth of today, that I was once - and it really does not seem that long ago, quit far too early in their endeavours of achievement. Unless you have received a significant 'leg-up' then it's going to take a degree of hard work and some personal sacrifice to achieve something that is a bit better than the average. Life doesn't simply owe anything to anybody – if you want that bit more then you're going to need to roll up those sleeves and be willing to give more, do that and I promise that over time efforts will be rewarded, as mine were.

Be willing to work hard, be disciplined, be patient, be honest with others and yourself, be firm but fair, and remember to give something back ...do these things and you'll give yourself the best possible chance to succeed in work and in life! - Good luck.

Yours sincerely

Michael Smith