



How did we meet?

We met on a delayed flight from Prague to Charles de Gaulle over a year ago. I was actually travelling on from Paris to Madrid and was worried about missing my connection. What started as a quick “hi, how are you?” conversation quickly evolved into an interesting conversation about our businesses and passion for our work projects. We didn’t stop until we landed in

Paris. I did make my connecting flight, after a lot of Home Alone-style running!

Would you introduce yourself, Simon?

Sure. I’m an internal communication, change and engagement consultant. Which basically means I work with clients to create inspirational organisations through **purposeful** communications. I’ve intentionally worked across a range of sectors and have partnered with the likes of E.ON UK, Transport for London, Deloitte and IKEA. Over the thirteen years I’ve been doing this I reckon I’ve seen pretty much every internal communications or engagement challenge there is! From business transformations and system implementations; to office moves, regulatory changes and crisis communications. I even got to manage communications for part of the transport challenge of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

But it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been doing this job, there’s always something new to uncover. That’s where the fun is.

If you had to pick your favourite industry, which one would you choose Simon?

That’s a tricky question, it’s like picking your favourite child! But, it would be E.ON UK – it was my job, the place I learned my craft. I worked with so many great comms professionals and learned so much.

How did you get into internal communication in the first place?

Like a lot of people, I kind of fell into comms. I've always been a bookworm and English was my best subject at school. I studied English Literature and Language at university, which was great preparation for a life in comms! Knowing how to take something complicated, analyse it, and break it down into something everyone can understand was the basis of my degree.

I left university knowing that I wanted a job that paid me for writing, so I thought I wanted to be a journalist. I quickly realised how difficult it was to get paid journalism work straight out of university – especially as I wasn't living in London at the time.

I couldn't afford to move to London for unpaid apprenticeships that essentially involved making the tea, so I fell into a job with a company called Powergen, who were an energy supplier in the Midlands in England. They were bought by E.ON about a year later. After a few weeks of receiving internal communications I started to think, "I'd like to do that."

I had an excellent boss who knew someone in the Internal Communication team, so when a vacancy came up, I applied, and learned as I went along. The rest, as they say, is history.

Now it's increasingly likely that someone will study communication at university, so it's a much more conscious choice! When I was at university it wasn't really an option.

I understand that you have your own business. What made you to leave corporate world a start on your own?

Good question. I'd always said that I wanted to be a consultant, but kept on talking about it being something I'd "do later". I thought I had to be older. But I had ten years' in-house experience when I found myself with a couple of months off work, thinking about what I wanted to do next. My fiancé, who has always been my biggest cheerleader, encouraged me to explore consultancy. I decided I'd take one contract and see how it went.

I think it was only about three months before I realised there was no going back! I was hooked. When you're hired as consultant, you're hired for specific skills and experience and you can focus on the project straight away. I have more confidence and passion, and I feel much more in control of my career. With a permanent role, it takes time to establish yourself in the business before you can really start adding value.

Have you considered teaching?

Well, not teaching precisely; but I am a mentor. I mentor people either from my clients' businesses, or through official associations. I was fortunate to learn from some amazing people, so I'm very keen to pay it forward. I love sharing what I've learnt and supporting professionals.

What is your main focus now? What keeps you busy?

My focus is and always has been on my clients. So far, I've generally worked with one client at a time because I like to really get into the detail and the inner workings of organisations. But this year I've been thinking a lot about how I want to grow my business and I took the first step by working with two clients at once. That little experiment has come to an end – successfully, I think! I've been able to juggle the competing priorities. I know a little bit more about what I want, and don't want, my business to be.

From a subject matter perspective, my focus is on people. It doesn't matter how many fancy communications channels you have, or how good your written copy is; if your people aren't engaged and onboard, then it'll all lead to nothing. Whatever I'm working on, I'm always asking myself, '**Why should anyone care? What's in it for the audience?**' One good practice is to take each audience in turn and ask yourself, '**What do I want them to know, feel and do as a result of receiving this communication**' – whatever it is. It's the people who drive the change, so failing to focus sufficiently on them is ensuring failure.

Based on your experience, what do you think is important in retail?

The same as for any business: a clear purpose, well-articulated. It's obvious to say, but in retail you have customers – and lots of them. If your employees are to provide truly exemplary customer service, they need to believe in the business and what they do. At IKEA, for example, it's "**creating a better everyday life for the many people**". Everything that they do is geared towards making life better for everyone – from the products they sell to the environmental credentials of the offices and stores they build. It's so embedded in the organisation. It's even coming out in the way they're managing the current coronavirus pandemic. They don't just sell furniture. They make everyday life better for everyone in all their actions.

We all know those shops that you go into and instantly know you're going to have a poor experience. But they normally get people in by having low prices, for example. Those companies that are truly purposeful will always have more engaged employees and therefore offer a better customer experience. Think of Apple: people happily queue around the block in the rain to get the newest phone on release day; even though they could go into the store the week after and pick it up with no wait. That's because both customers and employees are united by a shared purpose, whether they realise it consciously or not: to be innovative, ahead of the curve, the first to have the new technology.

What books are you now reading, and would recommend us?

I tend to read fiction more than work-related books, although that's something I should do more of! But an obvious one for me – and I know we share appreciation for this individual, Lenka! – is Simon Sinek's **Start With Why**. It's been around for quite a while, but it's brilliant and still relevant. Perhaps more than ever now. People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it. If you understand why your organisation exists, and you find people who share your 'why', that's when the magic happens.

How do you keep the balance between work and your private time?

I'm really disciplined! You should see my calendar – it's a multi-coloured work of art! I stick to my working hours and, generally speaking, when the day is done, I stop. Of course, if something urgent needs doing, I'll work late to complete it. But if it can wait until tomorrow, I'll do that. I've had some less-than-ideal experiences in the corporate world where I've worked 80-hour weeks. I'm not ashamed to say that I didn't do my best work in those circumstances.

Balance is key. Working with lots of Europeans has encouraged me to find joy in the humble lunch break. I always stop for lunch now. And on those rare occasions when I do have to eat lunch at my desk, I'll stop for a coffee in the afternoon. Taking a break is not weakness. It doesn't mean you're not committed. It means you're self-aware enough to understand what energises you and to take the time to make that happen.

And this extends to holidays. When I go on holiday, I am on holiday. I don't check email. I don't take calls. It's my time to recharge.

It's even more important in the current coronavirus pandemic, where I've been working from home for the past ten weeks or so. I have fixed hours. I take regular breaks, as I'm not getting those informal "do you want to go for a coffee?" chats. I've got a pretty good routine right now and I'm spending a bit more time on professional development. Now everything is online and virtual, it's easy to find the time to attend networking events or webinars.

Who inspires you, and why?

I find Walt Disney massively inspiring. Walt's motto was: Dream, Believe, Dare, Do. His constant quest for absolute perfection has created a 223,000-strong organisation that touches pretty much every person on the planet in some way. There are so many great stories about Walt, in particular about how he approached building Disneyland in California, and later Walt Disney World in Florida, which he sadly didn't live to see completed.

One of my favourite stories is that Walt sat and watched how guests behaved when they visited theme parks. Walt was obsessed with cleanliness and he counted the distance a guest was prepared to walk before they dropped a piece of rubbish on the floor. It was a little over 30 feet (or nine metres). So, he put rubbish bins at 30 feet intervals across the parks. He even invented the modern push-lid rubbish bin we're familiar with, but never patented it. His attention to every detail is what makes the parks so amazing. And everyone who works for Disney shares that attention to detail. Purpose, inspiration, and perfection. This is true legacy. Nobody does customer service like Disney!

I read the book by Robert Iger "The ride of the lifetime" at the end of last year, Simon, and I know it is on your list too. I believe that you will find it interesting and inspirational with great insight into Disney's business for the past 15 years under Robert's leadership. I think that he sets amazing example for true leadership. And again, the storytelling is powerful. We both agreed that it is an essential part of communication.

What does the future of internal communication look like?

I expect we'll see a much greater shift from content creation to curation, and less policing of content being produced by people in organisations. At the moment there's often a desire by senior leaders to moderate what gets written on intranets or in Yammer groups, but this really shouldn't be the case. We should trust our employees. And if they're thinking it in the business, isn't it better that you know about it than carry on oblivious to a potential problem?

Remote working is likely to become more prevalent, but I don't think we'll see everyone at home any time soon. Digital will become even more important, but I also think face-to-face will remain a priority. We're social animals and no amount of video calls or social media will ever replace the need to be with other people.

Internal communicators will also need to keep fighting for our spot at the table. There will always be people who say they don't "get" internal communication, but I'm pretty sure a similar number of PR and marketing experts would moan about the same issue! It all comes down to being able to demonstrate the value that you bring. If you can measure it and show how it helped, people will value it.

Is there any question you want me to ask you?

Ha! A good question! I would perhaps say, "***What advice would you give for someone looking to become a consultant?***" To which I say: do it! It's the single most satisfying thing I've done. It's terrifying at times. It's a lot of responsibility. But it's also totally freeing and puts you firmly in control of your career. Don't sit there wondering 'what if?' It feels appropriate to finish with a Walt Disney quote: "**We keep moving forward, opening new doors and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.**" Never stop wandering down those paths.