

Transcript – Preparing yourself for a successful career – development and challenges in a fast-changing world.

Host: Alana MacLeod

Guest Speakers: Paul Glass

Look up, look forward, and be in the know.

Alana MacLeod:

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre. I'm Alana MacLeod, and in this episode, I'll be talking to Paul Glass, Founder and Director of Evolvereia, an Inverness and London-based consultancy specialising in business and people transformation. Paul, welcome!

Paul Glass:

Thanks Alana, pleasure to be with you.

Alana MacLeod:

It's great to have you. So we're gonna be talking a bit about you, your business and your experience to date. So, would you like to kick off and just tell us a little bit about yourself and your career up until this point.

Paul Glass:

Yeah, for sure. Em...well I'll start with who I am personally. I'm married with two young boys and I've got huge passion in motor sport, with a collection of cars. In recent years have not really had much time to compete with them but I hope in the coming year to address that, and to get back out with them, but I came back to the highlands late last year, you know after quite a few years away. The Highlands is where I was brought up and that's really where I wanted my home base to be for the remaining part of my career, and you know I've spent a lot of time travelling the UK and Europe working for sort of international global businesses so...you never felt you had your true home, so it's nice to return home to the Highlands. And, I studied, before I started my career in business, I did the consumer marketing studies course in Glasgow and followed that up with an industrial administration postgraduate diploma, actually in Galashiels, so there I got a little bit of rural... And after that period I joined Kingfisher as a graduate trainee, I was very fortunate to be offered a chance to join them and I worked for B&Q as a graduate trainee, and then eh...the reason to join b&q was, I hoped, to give me some insights into retail because I was interested in retail and wanted to start my own business actually...but that ended up being just a lifelong journey working for retailers and big businesses in retail, something I'm happy to have done. And during my time with B&Q, I was headhunted by this little furnishing company from Sweden that you might have heard called IKEA – the company with the big blue boxes, and that was a real pivotal point in my career, joining this organisation. It's a company I have a great affection for a company that's given me so much during my career, and that meant that the longest part of my career, just about 15 years I spent with IKEA. Of that, I spent about nine years in the Netherlands with IKEA where their corporate headquarters are in Delft Netherlands, so yes a Swedish company but for legal reasons and tax reasons they are based in the Netherlands, and that was really a dream when I joined IKEA to work for that part of the organisation. With IKEA I mainly focused and commercial management, supply chain logistics – these were the kind of sectors as it were – although it's a furniture shop, would we call it that, but a huge value chain, and they've got a huge organisation in manufacturing and distribution etc. So the great thing about working for IKEA was that no matter what you did, you're never bored. There was always something new to learn and there's many great opportunities and maybe one thing to say to students is, sometimes these big organisations can give you a real career path where you can experience completely different things within the same company, and

that was really my experience with IKEA. So it was very difficult in 2018, I made the decision that I wanted to back to my original ambition of having my own business, particularly based in Scotland, and leave a key was really heart-breaking for me, it was really only because of the excitement of something new coming that it made it possible for me.

And literally when I was packing my boxes to return home to the Highlands, I had a phone call from an old colleague saying, I think we've got a great opportunity for you, and the company she worked in, and this was to join a company called RHI Magnesita, not many people have heard of them but they're a big FTSE listed company and they make refractory products and again not many people know what refractory products are, but you need refractory products in any manufacturing process. It heats steel, glass, cements, all these kinds of materials...to manufacture these, you need these products, so they're very much needed in everything that we do in life, and it was the supply chain transformation programme for them, to lead that.

They were two companies joining to become one, and it was a fascinating experience for me. It was a job opportunity I couldn't say no to, So I put my plans to return to Scotland on hold for a little bit of time feels knew I wanted to return home. But between IKEA and RHI Magnesita, really my expertise started building in change management and business transformation and that was where I decided to park the idea of having more retail stops and move more into consultancy where the experience I've built up over those years, I could offer to other businesses and companies. So that's a little bit of my background I guess it's a bit local to global and back again, you know, and I'm very proud to be from this part of the world, and it was also a long term ambition was my family to be based here for the future.

Alana MacLeod:

Thank you very much, Paul – what a really interesting career journey. Just fascinating. So, businesses obviously have to embrace change and transform. We want our students also to be adaptable and embrace change. How can embracing change and taking that approach to life, how can we use that to reach our potential?

Paul Glass:

Really great question. It's interesting, the only constant we have in life is in fact change, yet it's the thing that we often fear the most. And actually when we have fear, it blocks us expressing our potential...that's sort of a pedagogical approach to it...and if you think a little bit, that whatever today's knowledge is, it will be outmanoeuvred, as new knowledge will replace old knowledge, new skills will replace old skills, new best practices will replace old best practices. I find it fascinating that the rate of change accelerates with time, so the rate of change today is about 20 times the speed of the Industrial Revolution, for example, so we're in this perpetual environment of fast increasing change. Therefore, you've always got new opportunities and new potential for change brings with it, and I really believe, particularly for this generation of students the ability for them not only to adapt but to lead in times of change, is going to be one of the most important competencies and capabilities, you can have for a successful career. It wasn't so important when I started my journey but nowadays it is extremely important. It's interesting to me that, despite a lot of knowledge on the topic being available, it doesn't seem that that capability is widely or deeply covered academically, I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see degrees or MSc in business transformation or change management. It's always seen to be an additional skill that you bring to your intelligence. But, if you look at any adverts for jobs today, the vast majority of stress this requirement of being able to survive and work with change, and that's for me the link between expressing your potential and being able to thrive in this increasing environment of change.

If you look back to IKEA, they have six core leadership capabilities. So a company that's very much about simplicity, they have design six leadership capabilities that were essential to be successful in that organisation. Two of them are interesting. One was to enable change, and the other one was to find better ways, so you can almost say for this hugely successful organisation, 30% of their

capabilities and what they valued in leadership, was thriving in change and being able to innovate and develop new ways. And I think that is a good signal that students could take for what businesses might actually need in the future. I'm sure many organisations similar to IKEA think like that. I also find interesting that there's been many studies carried out in the coaching world, but generally people express only 40% of their potential at work. It's quite a remarkable figure, so it means that most of us have got untapped potential and removing fear would be my advice to unlocking the key to using all your potential you know don't have the fear of making mistakes, for example, because if you're fearful of that you're not going to find the secret sauces. So, I think just in having a relatively basic knowledge of change and transformation, it can be a real aid to accelerate your career by using your potential.

Alana MacLeod:

Yeah, absolutely. It's a key skill and you're right, it's something that really we should be embedding. So, your business deals very much with change and transformation of businesses, and you've got loads of great examples, I know that. Why is the ability to change and transform so important for businesses? You've touched on this a little bit.

Paul Glass:

I do believe it's an essential business capability. With this accelerating rate of change in the world, the world is creating an evolving new business environments, which bring new opportunities, or new challenges also, for businesses to be successful. If you just look back in the last 24 hours from when we're recording this interview, we've seen a spectacular collapse in retail of 25,000 jobs. I mean it's a very sad situation, but if we really look at the root cause, these were businesses which failed to recognise and act in a changing consumer environment, and their competitor landscape as well. And in the rapid changes that we see today are mainly focused on technology, economics, society, but also increasingly environmental demands, which I'm very passionate about. These all drive change but they can also enable change so you know these new environments may pose problems, but they can also pose an opportunity. I think any business that decides to standstill is actually going to go backwards in such an environment, so that's why I think it's really important for business to be active and be on the leading foot when making change happen.

And interestingly also most business transformations or change management programmes fail to meet their objectives, it's not that the change doesn't happen...but they tend to not reach the objectives. The success rate is about 33% would you believe, which means there's a huge opportunity to sharpen our knowledge and our execution of change in order to be more successful without reinventing new ways of doing it. Just tapping into the things which have been proven to be successful. And I find it fascinating that 80% of the reasons that change fails, is actually related in some way to people. and that means the key to being successful is actually how you work with people in an organisation to make change happen.

Transformation moves, you know businesses from an existing situation to a new situation but more and more with this acceleration of change, we see the transformations becoming a constant in business life. So Long gone are the days of having a strategy for 10 years, and then we'll see in 10 years' time if we have reached it. No, businesses have got strategic development on the agenda, all the time, and you really need a strategic change in order to deliver business transformation. You know, nobody reinvents a strategy to do the same old thing.

I think the other downside to businesses that handle change badly, is it can actually affect the business worse than the situation they were in. I use, quite often in seminars, the example of Kentucky Fried Chicken. I don't know if you recall that there was a time the restaurants shut down because they had no chicken, and this was through a very ambitious but badly delivered change management in their supply chain. So, I think no business has got the ability *not* to be forced with working with change...and that just means that the people inside the organisation need to have improved capabilities and improved experience of making change happen to be successful.

Alana MacLeod:

Yeah, people are key. What do you think it is about people and why is their potential so important as part of an organisation's most valuable assets?

Paul Glass:

I really believe, and my experience has been, that it is people who build business success. We can have a brand of a business – a nice logo and all the rest of it – but actually it is the people that live up to that brand ambition and aspiration and make it successful. Also we can have the most high tech technology, digital technologies, going, but if people are wanting to work with it with the right motivations or ambitions to use it, then you're never going to realise the actual potential of that technology. So for me, I keep coming back to people all the time. I was also interested throughout my career, and how companies work with the potential of people. If you look at some of the most successful companies today, they all have a common thread of having a culture that nurtures and invests in the talent, and that potential that comes with talent. Those businesses don't have to be tech businesses to be like that. But the businesses that recognise that different generations actually bring different capabilities and skills...and, many established businesses may not have the depth of young talent and potential that brings, em...the generation Z technology and innovation, as a second nature. So, I think a good tip for students when they're considering career opportunities is really to understand the businesses that they are joining. Look a little bit beyond the job opportunity as such. I think it's very sad in the downturn that we've seen many companies not invest in new talent coming in, they're protecting the experience that they have already in the business. I think the most progressive companies have got a healthy blend of old and new experience because the old experience can really bring on the competence of the young potentials and new people in the business with the new ideas and the fresh ideas. And that takes a long time to establish. So I recognised, particularly in IKEA where they've got a huge track record of promoting early very high potential capable people, I've also noticed that they've have a real culture of mentoring from the older experience. Like he's been in or around for a long time as a company, so you'd have the old founder Ingvar Kamprad for example, always selecting his personal assistants – so not, let's say secretarial assistance – but the people that work with him in the business...and, em...there was always this exchange of highly capable 20-30 year olds working with this 80 year old guy. And those people went on to be super successful in the business. So, I think that is one way to answer your question.

Alana MacLeod:

Yeah, I mean we often talk about the value of mentoring, both for students in connecting them with employers but also internally I mean we've got great mentoring options for staff, too. And it's recognised as a very valuable way to learn and develop, so it's interesting that you've touched on that as well. Paul, we hear the words knowledge and competence banded about quite a lot from we are talking about training and learning. What are the differences between these terms, in your opinion?

Paul Glass:

One of the most fascinating topics, I love this...these words...quite often people get them confused and they are quite different. So, how would I explain it...well...I think the differences between knowledge and competence are quite simple. I mean you can transfer knowledge quite easily, you can impart and give knowledge quite easily, but competence is a different beast altogether because for competence to exist, you need to have that knowledge. You need to be able to apply that knowledge, you know, so it's about also understanding your attitudes and motivations in applying that new knowledge to be successful. So, it's a little bit like yes you can pass your driving test, but that doesn't make you a particularly good driver! It takes a little bit more than just the technical

know-how. Experience really does help build competence, so therefore it's difficult sometimes for younger generations of students coming through to be able to display competence to a new employer or, you know, I think that's a very difficult. So it could be more important for them to explain it as *how* they would approach developing competence and how they have the right attitudes and motivations. IKEA, for example, were very very good at saying 'we don't recruit people on their previous track record, we recruit people based on their potential for the future' – and their attitudes and values with the most important criteria to get into that organisation. So even though you don't have competence, through experience I think you can quite easily highlight how you have the right approach and attitude to develop that.

Training and learning are very closely related to this, you know training is about, for me, the environment of transferring knowledge. So it can be a classroom, it can be reading a book or whatever, but learning is really about the environment where you're applying that knowledge and to deepen it in a way that you can act on. So, we all learn in different ways. And I think, again, a piece of advice I would impart is...I was staggered to find out that you could actually analyse how people best learn, a thing called learning styles for example, and I think when I was a student, I remember how I tried to learn, and it was not the way I learned in business. So I think it's very important to recognise that when you go into the commercial world, it'd be very helpful for people to understand how they best learn in a way where they can *apply* knowledge. Because, the knowledge that you get in universities is just the start of your path and learning is a constant in life for me, it always has been. I think how you learn, and your attitude towards learning, is an incredibly valuable asset for an employer who's going to invest in you. They want to know that that's going to transfer into something that brings a benefit to their organisation.

Alana MacLeod:

That's fascinating, Paul. I never really thought about compartmentalising them but they're so closely related but they are different. Thank you. So, a key point that we try to get across to all of our students is the importance of networking and making connections and given your experience you've obviously got huge professional network and likely varied, as well. Why is having a good professional network important and how, in your experience, do the experiences of others help you to develop. I know you mentioned mentoring...

Paul Glass:

Yes, well it can be more than that, of course. Genuinely if there's one thing to take away from today's podcast from anybody listening, I really hope it will be to encourage students, and others to be involved in networking and to be active in networking. I think it's important to do that by being motivated with the right reasons. So I can honestly say that my career, it has never been based on applying for jobs. It honestly has never been that. It has of course maybe involved a job application form, but that's not how the jobs have come about and not how I've been successful in reaching new positions.

My career has been based on establishing and engaging with a network of people, and it's often the smallest things that you do with others that lead to the greatest opportunities. Just being kind can leave such a huge impression on people, for example. I didn't value networking enough in my younger part of my career to have to be honest, you know, I thought I was okay, I was in my job and I was the boss and all the rest of it that was fine...but I think it's really important to recognise what networking is before you really embark on it and make it a passion. It's more of a giving than receiving, and that can often be where the wrong motivation comes from. People want to benefit from networking, rather than thinking about the benefits they give by being active in mentoring. I think you should give freely, and you'd be amazed over your career I think, how the value of that will repay itself. But you've got to go at it with the attitude of giving rather than to receive, I think.

I said, I didn't put enough emphasis on this, but when I look back, I think the things I'm most proud of have always been achieved together with people, or through people. I mean results evaporate – you can have a great result one day, but tomorrow's another day.

The results that I'm most proud of, and have had greatest satisfaction in my career from, is when I've seen others, develop and grow. I do think there's a time in people's career, where satisfaction comes beyond direct achievements or track records. And...I see that in so many out in the business and commercial world. These people are actually relatively available, because they also see the benefit of learning new things and new insights from others, so they're curious...and I think that there is an onus and a responsibility on experienced people to offer the next generation, the experience to help others make things better. There's so many challenges, and I think people may be surprised just how many people are open to wanting to help, if it's for the right reasons.

I explained that I didn't spend enough time in my early part of my career networking. We didn't really have the same technology to support that back in the 80s and early 90s, and now it's accelerated really beyond the realms of a physical network. So we've got platforms like LinkedIn, that's easy one that you can develop a network from, but there's also other types of networking that's achieved through events. The benefits from networking, for me are...you get a wider exposure to knowledge and experience, and you also get a wider exposure to people that you can learn from. What it gives you by networking, and the people you network with – provided you've used the right motivations – is a degree of trust in you as a person, that might exist otherwise. So that's, for me, the real important 'nuggets' of networking.

Alana MacLeod:

Yeah, that's really interesting. It's all about, sort of, putting yourself out there, isn't it? Taking the first step and then seeing how you get on.

Paul Glass:

Absolutely, I'm quite often fascinated by so many people are so passionate about being involved in charity work, for example, from a business background. And sometimes I thought cynically that might be the reason why, but actually I understand more and more that people do that because it is about giving back. So there's many, many successful people that want to give back. I'd encourage everyone to reach out and doing it with the right motivations as I say, is key. People smell a mile away if it's not for the right reasons.

Alana MacLeod:

Yes, yes. So, Paul, thanks for your time today. To round it off, I wanted to ask you for five hints and tips for our students and graduates based on your careers and experiences to date, maybe some things that you wish you'd known when you were a student?

Paul Glass:

I could easily give you 50! I would summarise perhaps four or five top tips, let's put it like that... I can actually illustrate and visualise where these tips come from, but in no particular, the first one is probably the most important one, is the importance of being positive in your approach. I really think that negativity is destructive and you can always find the positive, even in the worst or most challenging of situations. It means for people it's important to be aware of how you come across, and understanding how your behaviour can affect other people, and it's really vital in leadership roles that you can portray a positive approach to everything. It's actually easier to be negative. It consumes less mental energy, but this is seen by others who could perhaps advance your career, so the power of positivity, is huge.

Another one would be about the balance of being a perfectionist, and an activist for the balance between perfection and action. It's really important to be conscious of the level of output that your input is going to give. I've wasted so much time and energy in the past, producing properly perfect,

beautiful work – really great stuff – but for one reason or not, it's not gone anywhere. And it's not because of the work itself, it can be for other reasons. I think it's really important to always check the impact importance of what you're doing and invest your time and energy wisely based on this simple thing; input, and output. It's a balance, you know. Perfectionism can be very expensive, and that is not actually what is demanded to be successful.

Another one would be that simplicity is a virtue. There is a value in less being more, and we can often over complicate things. It's easier to add stuff than take away, and it also takes twice as long to say half as much, or to write half as much. One thing I've noticed is that the successful leaders I've worked with, and you see them, even, in the public domain...they all have a capability of keeping things as simple as possible. By doing that, they bring as many people as possible with them by being clear on what to say and what's expected. So really it does take time to attune to that; so really, less is more, if you go with that as a starting block. I think you can be quite successful.

Another one would be, going back to my belief in people being the driver of business and commercial success...I actually believe EQ is more important than IQ. So emotional intelligence is the greater importance. I think people will find in their careers that their ability to relate to people will be much more important in their career than IQ. I think it's important – and if you've got both strengths, fantastic – but, not...we tend to have a dominant side. If your tendency is to the IQ side, try to take the time in developing your people skills. Take time to do simple things like smiling at people, remembering names, taking an interest in the person, what's going on in their life and being available for people, I think, are really key qualities which will see well in your career no matter what it is and what field.

And perhaps the last one then, is to be bold. What I mean by that is, be bold in your ambitions and in taking opportunities, in your thinking and just in general. I genuinely am humbled and amazed by the professional experiences and journey that I've had! This little man from Inverness, you know, going out to the big bad world. Sometimes it's been luck, and sometimes it's been just about being open to new things and new thinking. And you can create both your luck and your thinking. I've found that one door will always lead to another, and I think everything happens for a reason also...or that's been my experience, you know. Whenever I've had a downside, it has always been followed by an upside, so don't get negative if the tide is against you at a given point in time, because it will change. Nothing lasts forever. Don't over plan your future would be a bit of advice from me. It's easy to try and map it all out but it just takes a small thing for that map to go wrong. And try to keep a balance of professional and personal ambitions in check. I put too much of my time at points into my career and not enough time into my personal life, and I think it's important to keep both of those things healthy on your way. Be prepared to fail – celebrate failure. That's what I enjoy the most. You've got to fail to be successful, you've got to be open to new experiences, you've got to be prepared to be a bit crazy from time to time and enjoy a bit of craziness. But try to make sure that there's as much fun as hard work in your career, and in the environment you're working in, and you'll have a richer careers and a richer life, I think, if you can tap into those things.

Alana MacLeod:

Fantastic takeaways for all of us there, Paul, thank you – that's been fantastic. So, any final remarks that you'd like to impart on students, graduates, staff...anyone else who's listening?

Paul Glass: 24:52

Well, you know, coming back to Scotland and I living in the Black Isle, I've actually been quite impressed with UHI, I have to say. I also recognise that many many successful businesses have natural alliances towards their local universities. IKEA for example, Lund University, very close working relationship in Rotterdam all these huge companies are all working with the authorities there. So, it's so important that we work together to develop the next generation of capabilities, and

the challenges we face within Scotland, particularly in the future, em...I think the more that we can join forces together, the more successful we'll be wherever the future takes us.

Alana MacLeod: 25:30

Good! No that's, that's great to hear. Em, and it's something certainly that the university is putting a lot of emphasis on, is employer engagement and working closely with businesses from all sectors, of all sizes. So Paul, thank you so much for joining me today, it's been great!

To our listeners, thank you for tuning in. After completing your qualification at UHI, you are a graduate for life and this means that you can access careers and employability advice and guidance at any point. Students and graduates can get in touch via the FutureMe system, which is targetconnect.uhi.ac.uk, or by emailing careers@uhi.ac.uk. Visit the website to find out more!