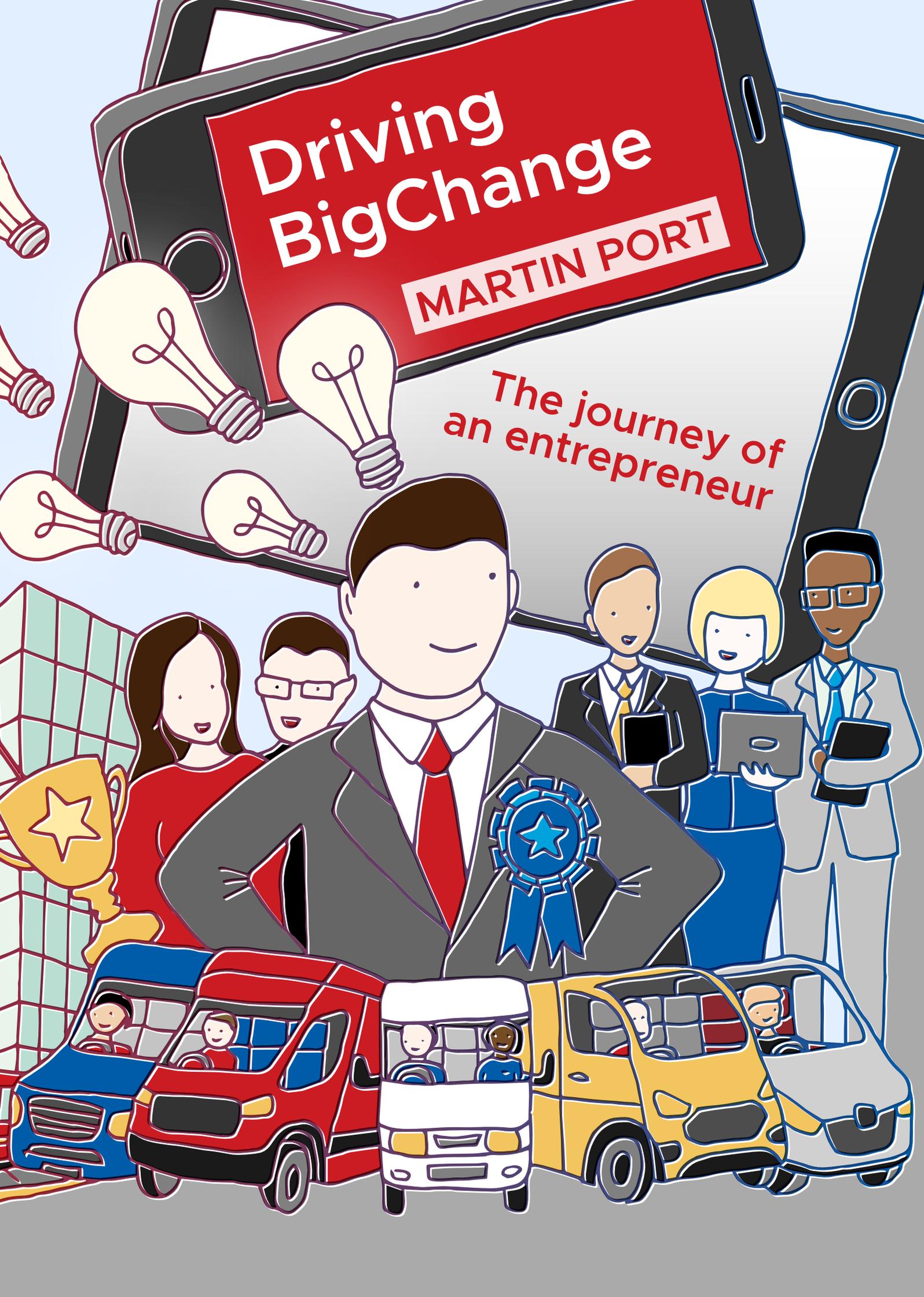


Driving BigChange

MARTIN PORT

The journey of an entrepreneur



I have been in business since I was 11 years old. I started out working for my father, an auctioneer, before growing my own bakery business in my twenties. Now, aged 56, I run technology start-up BigChange. I don't know many entrepreneurs who have experience across such varied industries, so I thought it would be a good idea to share all the lessons I've learned over the years.

If I can help any other business owner avoid mistakes I've made, and help them build on strategies that have worked well for me, then it's been worth all the hard work putting pen to paper – I'm dyslexic, so it's not easy for me.

The following is a compilation of blogs I posted on LinkedIn over the past couple of years. They range from management advice to updates about my fast-growing firm to my take on topical issues.

If you take one thing away from this, it's to place the needs of your people and customers above everything else in business. It is also to appreciate your family and understand the power of your network.

I hope that you enjoy my posts – and my unusual take on the world. I truly believe that the best way to get ahead in business and in life is to help others. That's the ethos behind BigChange, which succeeds only by making others successful.

Walter Sak.



Life as a teenage entrepreneur

Both my mother and father worked day and night when I was a kid. People sometimes ask where my work ethic comes from, and it's from them, 100%.

From the age of 10, I would be with them, travelling all over the UK. My dad ran an auction business, and we'd be in Glasgow one day, London the next. My mum worked as the cashier. It was a true family business.

Dad would put an advert in the Evening Standard, offering TVs for £5, fan heaters for 50p, and so on. Up to 1,000 people would come to these auctions, and bid for the goods. That was my introduction to the world of business: seeing my dad up on the rostrum, commanding the audience. He was a great showman.

My dad let me have a go selling a few lots. It was late in the day, so there were fewer people left in the room. I remember getting up on the rostrum, and learning the patter: "If you miss this, you will miss your way home..."

This is how I learned the basics about business: buy, sell, make a profit. It was also how I learned to be a salesman. At 14, I started my first business. My best friend and I bought a printing machine for £500 from Exchange and Mart, the old classifieds magazine. We bought some card and some pens and offered to print promotional flyers and goods for small businesses. We used to hop on the train and go to Leeds, Sheffield, Blackpool – all over, trying to convince restaurants and shops to buy from us.

We got some orders, came home, and tried to print the things. For people who don't remember these old machines, you put the type into the jig, and the machine would warm up, the type would hit the foil, and the words would be stamped onto the card. But our machine was faulty from the start. The type would just melt onto the jig. It was a complete con. This was my first experience of what entrepreneurs now call "a barrier to growth". It was also the moment I knew for sure that I was a salesman and not a manufacturer.

Instead, we took the orders to a printing company and had them made. The customers never knew about the faulty machine, which we eventually managed to sell back to the manufacturer. We ran that business for almost a year. We even had our own little office in Leeds. But the money wasn't great and it wasn't a business we could scale.

I left school when I was 15 and started working Saturdays at an upmarket menswear shop called Cecil Gee. Next, I moved to a high-end jewellery shop. Then I was a blue coat on the shop floor at Comet, the old electricals chain. All of these early experiences helped me to understand the customer, anticipate what they needed, and work out the best way to solve their problems.

That's when I began working with my father full-time. This was during the Thatcher era, when imports were starting to flood into the UK and factories were stuck with loads of stock they couldn't sell. Interest rates were as high as 15% in those days so companies would sell £500,000 worth of stock for £100,000 just to get some cash back in the business. This is where I learned the power of market forces, and how the economy can work with you or against you.

I learned a lot of entrepreneurial lessons in my early teens that stood me in good stead for the rest of my life. But it's remarkable how often we have to remind ourselves to follow the basics. 'Buy at one price and sell for a profit' seems obvious, but when you have a new business, you often undervalue your services just to get the deal. I'm grateful to my parents for giving me an education in business from such an early age. I feel like it's always been in my blood.

In my next post, I'll talk about how I ended up going to America, and starting up my bread business – the first company I successfully sold. But for now, I would be grateful if anyone would share stories about being a teenage entrepreneur. What were the first lessons you learned in business? Did you have entrepreneurial parents, like mine, or did you learn everything for yourself?



The next chapter: a new life in America



In my last post, I talked about my first experiences as a teenage entrepreneur, finding my way in the world. But that was only the beginning.

I think that a real turning point in my life was when I decided to stop working for my father and start a new life in America.

I was 24 at the time, and yearning for my independence. I wanted a clean break, so moving to the United States, where no one knew me, seemed like a good idea.

Providence helped me get there. I had a contact over in Germany who had a speciality bakery business. He asked me to go with him to sell his bread in New York.

So there I was, living in a small apartment next to the bakery in New Jersey. This was the making of me. I learned to keep a clean apartment, iron my own shirts, and be completely independent. I came out from my dad's shadow. He was such a character and a well-known businessman... it was a relief to be able to just be Martin, rather than Jeffrey's son.

I used all my sales skills to build up that business, and I ended up selling speciality German bread to some of the world's most famous hotels, including the Waldorf Astoria, Plaza Hotel and even the United Nations Dining Room.

Hard work really does pay off. This was the lesson I learned back then. This was also the time when I learned to survive on just four hours' sleep a night. It's incredible what you can achieve during those extra hours.

Three years later, in 1989, I decided to come home and start my own bread business. I launched Kroustie in Leeds, and started making gourmet bread. We grew and grew, until we were supplying bread, patisserie and cakes to restaurants, hotels and delicatessens all over Yorkshire.

These were the days when most people were eating those mass-produced, plastic-wrapped loaves of Mighty White. Imagine what people thought when they tasted our gourmet rye and pumpernickel loaf? It went down a storm.

That business never went bust but it didn't make much money either. I used to get up at midnight and work 18-hour days. It was relentless. But I just couldn't get the right kind of scale into the business. I decided to sell Kroustie in 1998.

My BigChange came in 2002, I bought some hardware from a French firm and launched Masternaut, which helped customers with fleets to track vehicles. Masternaut became one of the fastest-growing businesses in the UK and a market leader. Then, five years ago, I started over again when I launched BigChange, which is an all-singing, all-dancing mobile workforce app and job management tool.

I've told the story of my early experiences as an entrepreneur to show others what can be achieved with a bit of determination.

Imagine you want to get a table at your favourite restaurant. You head there and see a queue going around the block. The manager says there are no tables. What do you do? I would always get the table. If someone says it's impossible, I make it possible. Once this happens a few times it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I'm a strange mixture of optimist and realist. I always think my ideas will fail, which forces me to work three times harder. That attitude keeps my feet on the ground. But I'm also really good at celebrating successes and appreciating the little wins.

The three customer service secrets to my success

There's a lot of advice out there for entrepreneurs. Every day there's a new '21 ways to supercharge growth' or 'Four ways to be a better leader'. I enjoy reading all the weird and wonderful tips but, in my experience, being successful just requires one thing: great customer service.

If your customers love you and value your business, every door opens. They buy more of your products or services. They reward you with long-term loyalty. You get more referrals – and word of mouth is the best customer acquisition tool because it's meaningful (and free). Your reputation soars, which helps you recruit better employees, and attract investment. I could go on.

I've run all kinds of businesses over the years, and there have been three lessons that have ultimately helped me to be successful each and every time. It didn't matter if I was creating a bakery, selling white goods, or building a bold new technology venture – I've always stuck to these three simple rules. I'd like to share those with you today.

1. Be the landlord

With any business, the founder should feel personally responsible for its success. Like a pub landlord who puts their name up above the door, you must take pride in your venture and never hide behind the organisation, even as it grows.

I see myself as personally responsible for everything that goes on at BigChange. My phone number is on the internet, and I take calls direct from customers at all times of the day or night all week, except the sabbath. If my customers experience any pain using our service, then I feel that pain too. I get copied in on all emails and I make sure that I'm involved until the issue is resolved.

Customer service goes beyond the customer; it's about how you treat your own people. If I get an email in the night, and I don't see that someone else has handled it, I'll phone the driver or engineer back. Doesn't matter if it's 2am or 3am, I'll phone and ask what I can do to help.

Some of the business leaders that I admire most have a similar strategy.

It was a great shame when Dido Harding stepped down from TalkTalk, the telecoms business, following its cyber security issues. I remember when my mother had a problem with her TalkTalk internet service and I emailed Dido. She was genuinely interested in my mum, a woman in her seventies, and personally fixed the problem – even though TalkTalk had millions of customers at the time. Whatever she decides to do with her career, I'll remember that interaction – that's the power of great customer service.



2. Spend more than you think you should on customer service

From day one, in all of my businesses, I have invested in customer service. People have always called me mad: spending money on a department that wasn't directly related to sales. But it's always paid off for me.

At BigChange, we have at least one customer service representative for every 50 customers. We are creating a brand-new piece of technology, so we have always offered free webinar training and free support. We don't even charge people to call us – we take on that cost.

Great entrepreneurs make it easy for their customers to get in touch. That means offering online, phone, and offline options. If one of our customers is really struggling with something, we will send a person over to their offices to help them resolve it face-to-face. I think it's safe to say that's a pretty unusual strategy for a software company.

When you spend on customer service, the return on investment is massive. We have really low customer churn – only 3% ever leave us. And some of those were due to company liquidations rather than cancellations.

3. Love your difficult customers

When you are building a business, you will come across difficult customers from time to time. They are never satisfied, and are always demanding more from you and your team. I've learned that a customer who is difficult at the outset of the relationship will often be difficult for the duration of the contract – that's just the way it is. I should know: I'm a difficult customer myself and it takes one to know one. But the great thing about these people is that they help you to learn, and they drive your team to perform at a much higher standard.

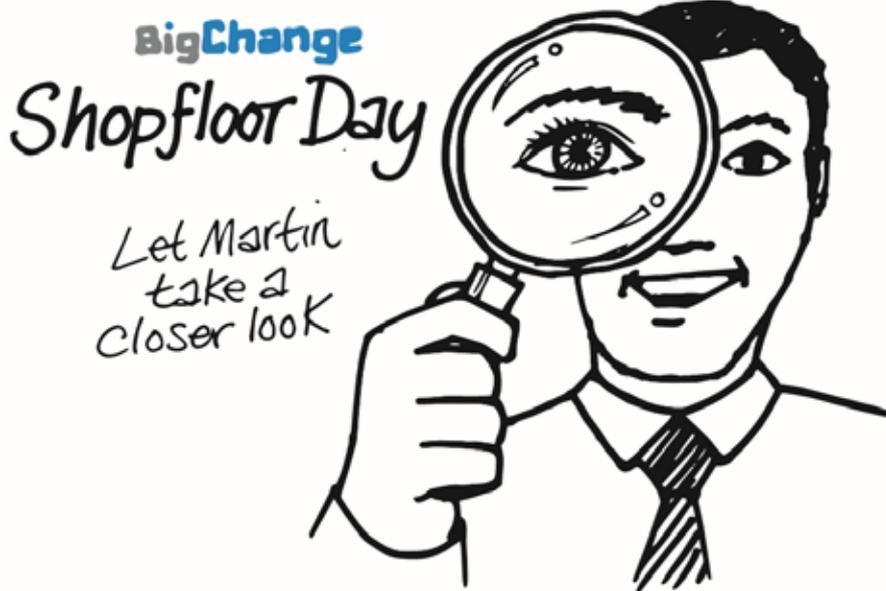
If every customer was passive and no one gave you a hard time, how would your business improve? It's better to be challenged: a customer service team learns a lot as a result of dealing with difficult customers – they often speak a lot of sense. Many of our customers have been with us for years, whereas some employees might be brand new, and could learn a lot from the customer's insights.

It's important to train your team to love tough customers. I take the time to explain that our customers come in all shapes and sizes. I like to use the analogy of the NHS. When a nurse is on the ward, some patients will complain that they haven't been seen fast enough, others will apologise for taking up a bed. The ward is full of all sorts of people but the nurse has to make them all better, and make sure each patient leaves feeling they have received a good service.

I hope these customer service lessons will be as valuable to you as they have been to me. If you've got any great tips to add to the mix, please leave a comment. If you enjoy these posts, don't forget to follow me to receive updates. See you soon for the next instalment.

Shop Floor Day.

Let Martin take a closer look



I've spent my entire life starting companies and building brands. One of the most important things I've learned is that the moment you get complacent, you're in trouble.

It's easy – especially when you find a bit of success – to stop thinking like an entrepreneur, and to rest on your laurels. But you have to fight complacency at every turn if you want to build something of true value.

This week, I'd like to share with you one of the ways that I make sure I never stop innovating, and keep moving the company – and myself – forwards. It's a little strategy that I call my 'shop floor days'.

As often as I can, I take myself out of the office and spend the day with one of my customers or prospective clients. No, I don't mean I have a fancy lunch with the chief executive. I get up at 5am and go to a customer depot to spend the first half of the day riding around with their engineers, contractors or delivery drivers. Then around 2pm, I go and work in their offices, sitting with the people answering calls and making bookings.

The shop floor idea isn't all mine. It was inspired by the time I spent working with GE, the American conglomerate, back when it was run by the visionary leader Jack Welch. Back then, GE leaders spent a lot of time analysing the way things were done.

They were always looking for a way to make small but consistent improvements. The strategy is known as "six sigma" – you can find more about six sigma here: <https://www.ge.com/en/company/companyinfo/quality/whatis.htm>

These shop floor days have had a profound effect on the businesses I have built, and have informed so much of the new products and features that I have created. This is how I find customer pain points, and learn how to solve huge technical challenges.

I build a rapport with the people I meet, and they share their experience of their job, and I take notes. It's that simple.

You'd be surprised how easy it is to get customers to agree to a shop floor day. I'm treated like an extension of the company. The people I meet are always open and genuine – they don't think I'm there to catch them out. They know I want to help, and that anything they say will be treated with absolute sensitivity.

One heating and plumbing customer had no racking units in their vans, so thousands of pounds worth of stock was just piled up in the back. Another bakery chain was

sending drivers to stores at 2am to deliver fresh bread, but when I came along for the ride, I saw that drivers were being mobbed by homeless people who wanted yesterday's leftovers. These kinds of issues are often unknown – or, worse, ignored by middle management. It took me speaking up about it to bring them to the attention of the top brass.

Over the last 15 years, I've done over 100 of these shop floor days, and they are among the most interesting and inspirational ways that I can spend my time. I have even branched out, and now spend the odd shop floor day with my own employees too, sitting with the team or out on the road with a member of our sales team or installation engineer.

Of course, my shop days help me to sell BigChange. I can explain how our technology would allow the driver / engineer to do away with all the paperwork lumped in the passenger seat, or how stock could be tagged so everyone knows where every part is at any time. For the bakery driver, who battles the homeless every morning, he is able to check into the system and reassure the company there have been no issues.

But my feedback also saves these companies money: we've helped remove unnecessary driving time, making workers much more efficient. Our booking service also helps them offer a much better customer service. People know exactly when someone is coming to deliver their washing machine, which means they're not waiting in all day. These things add up, and have contributed to BigChange's success.

Every business owner should take the time to get out of their office bubble and spend time with the people who use their product or service. No business is ever fully optimised; there is always room for improvement. See you next week, and good luck fighting complacency. It's a battle we all must wage.

Lend me your ears: how I made it in business, despite losing my hearing

When I was 11 years old, my brother and I went for a hearing test at school. We got the results a few weeks later: my brother had failed the test. He was asked to go back and take it again. But when he had his hearing checked the second time, he passed with no problems. It was only a long time later that I realised what must have happened.



My brother is only a year younger than me, and our results had been mixed up; it was I who had failed that hearing test.

Looking back, it's not surprising that I always struggled in school. I found it really hard to concentrate in classes, and was always fiddling with my pen or distracted. I couldn't hear what the teachers were saying but even I didn't realise there was a problem. I just thought that it was normal to go into a sort of trance during lessons. Teachers were frustrated with me. They thought I couldn't be bothered to try. At home, no one realised I was losing my hearing. My parents were often away and I was brought up by my grandparents. The one clue was that I used to listen to my music really loud. I had two massive speakers above my head, and another two on the sideboard, blaring out Michael Jackson or 10cc, or Earth, Wind & Fire. The noise used to drive my mum wild but it's hardly unusual for a teenager to like loud music. It was only when I got married that I realised there was an issue. My wife saw that I was mishearing words or completely blanking out whole

conversations. That's when I finally went to see an ear, nose and throat specialist. I found out that I had lost 70% of my hearing, and would need to wear hearing aids. In some ways, it was a relief to know that I was hearing impaired because suddenly so many things began to make sense. I never felt sorry for myself – there are people much worse off than me. On the contrary, it made me even more determined to succeed. People are like cars – some can run forever, without breaking down once.

Others need servicing all the time, and that's me. I started working out ways to cope. In the workplace, it was always hard for me to focus. I found meetings especially hard. My wife advised me to start carrying a notebook and pen, and that revolutionised my work life. It forced me to keep my attention on what was being said - and to check if I hadn't heard or understood anything. Even now, in this age of smartphone, you won't catch me in a meeting without my trusty pad and pen. And I always take someone I trust in to meetings with me – usually Andrew, my managing director, who is a very

good listener. It's helpful to have another pair of ears in the room to catch anything I miss. I wear hearing aids, which comes with a unique set of challenges. There is a slight delay between words being spoken and reaching my ears. I also speak much more softly, because my own voice sounds loudest in my head. Travel is a nightmare because I can't hear announcements. These challenges are frustrating but I have learned to deal with them. I don't make a big point of telling people that I am hearing impaired. I just get on with it. If I miss something or someone is speaking quietly, I will say that I have a hearing problem and wear hearing aids. It means that if I need to ask them to repeat something, they know why. Most people start speaking a bit louder too, which is great. Except that the extra volume usually lasts for about two minutes and then they forget.

Over time, my hearing has worsened but I've been very lucky – technology has come on leaps and bounds. I have 80pc hearing loss now but I wear Bluetooth-enabled hearing aids that are connected to a microphone hidden behind my tie. It means I can hear myself when I talk. It also means I can take phone calls direct to my hearing aid. People stop and stare when I do it, because they can't see who I am talking to and think I've gone mad, which I rather enjoy... In business – and in life – I've always been very solution-orientated. If there's a problem, I want to find a way to solve it. I tackled my hearing in the same way. My hearing problem has also made me very aware and accepting of other disabilities.

We need to do more for people who are struggling with something they cannot control, whether it is a physical or learning disability. This is a cause that is close to my heart - I hope to talk more about this in a later post. For now, I'll just say that any disability opens your mind to the world in ways that most people don't see. As an entrepreneur there are many mountains to climb.

My hearing loss was just another mountain, so I climbed it. My next mountain? Learning to lip-read. Wish me luck.

9 secrets for building a happy, engaged team

Many bosses pay lip service to the importance of looking after their people - but often that's as far as it goes. It's easy to say, 'employees are the lifeblood of my business' but if you really, truly value your team, and want to ensure your employees are happy, healthy and engaged, you need to work at it. At BigChange, we invest heavily in the wellbeing of our people. This week, I thought I'd share some of the initiatives that have worked really well for us - many of these strategies are cheap or free, yet we see an incredible response from the people. It's not just about the great feedback we receive - the numbers speak for themselves: employee retention rates stand at 97%.

Have a huddle

We have a "huddle" twice a month. These informal meetings start at 9am and involve every member of the team; even remote workers out on the road dial in to take part. During these huddles, we talk about how the business is doing, and share any milestones or announcements. This is also where we introduce new hires or work experience people. But our huddles aren't boring and staid. They are noisy, boisterous affairs, with lots of banter, laughter and applause.

Party hard

As well as our annual Christmas party, we also have a summer party in July. BigChange lays on all the food, drink and entertainment, and it's a great way to bring people together. We have a small office in France, and we fly over those employees so they can spend time with their UK colleagues.

Motivational Monday

On the first Monday of every month, we invite amazing, interesting people who have overcome some kind of challenge, or have faced adversity, to share their stories. Tomorrow, Bob Champion is coming to talk to us about beating cancer and going on to win the Grand National. Everyone in the company is invited to attend, and it's an incredibly motivating way to start the month. We invest significantly in these monthly events.

BigChange birthday

Everyone gets an extra day off on their work anniversary. It's just a little gesture that shows people we care.

Fit and healthy folk

It's really important to me that my team feel well at work. That's why BigChange pays for a gym membership for all our employees, and brings in a massage therapist twice a month to give head, foot, or back and neck massages. We also encourage people to take a walk at lunch time, and stretch their legs - there's now a regular walking club. But it's not all about exercise, we try and help people to eat healthily too, providing fresh fruit and healthy snacks each day,

and offering subsidised, calorie-controlled meals to anyone who wants them. That said, we don't force people to eat like gerbils. Each Friday, we order in Italian for the whole team. If they want to have pizza, they can have pizza!

Stars of the week

People thrive on praise and I like to create opportunities to tell people they're doing a great job. Each week, employees vote for the person they feel has gone above and beyond at BigChange. There's no financial incentive. It's simple recognition of a job well done. You'd be surprised by how much joy our 'star of the week' initiative brings to winners. I think it helps that the prize doesn't come from me, but from their peers.

Employee of the year

At our Christmas party, we announce the Employee of the Year - the person who has contributed the most to the success of the company, and is most appreciated by the team. The winner gets £1,000 and the runner up receives £500, so it's a nice thing to win. We also award prizes for Department Employee of the Year and Team of the Year. Our most recent Employee of the Year is Joe Goiti. Here's what he had to say about his win: "With the employee of the year being voted for by colleagues, it really is the proudest moment in my professional life to have won it. I am very fortunate to work alongside such fantastic colleagues and friends who continuously support and push me to do my very best and also to maintain the highest standards possible."

Family days

Every year, we invite our employees to bring their partners and kids for a fun day out. Last year, we went to Flamingo Land and 100 people came along, this year we are going to Yorkshire Wildlife Park in Doncaster. I want BigChange to feel like a big family, so I really enjoy meeting people's loved ones.

Charity days

This year we'll give £100,000 to charity. I think that my team really value working for a company that wants to give something back. And now we're moving beyond donations towards a model whereby employees can give up a day to help a charity and receive a day off in lieu. Today, we went to Living Potential Care Farm, an amazing place where people with disabilities can connect with nature. We planted trees and cleared the ground to make way for a new orchard. It was a fun and worthwhile day out for all of us.

All of these initiatives are for nought if you don't create a positive culture around them. We let people be themselves at BigChange and embrace all kinds of personalities and quirks. I have an open-door policy, which means that anyone can come and chat to me if they have a question or a comment. And we always promote internally when we can, giving people the chance to grow and flourish. Employee incentives never work in isolation. It's only when you put all these small efforts together that you create a powerful culture.



My mission: helping entrepreneurs to build empires

BigChange. The name of my company is no accident. What's the point of aiming small? I want to make a big difference in this world, and I'm not shy about telling everyone about it.

I created this company five years ago, so BigChange is now moving beyond start-up to become an established business. It's time for us to move into the next phase of growth. Today, I'd like to tell you about realising my vision for the company in the first 5 years of trading. Safe to say, it is a game changer.

My ambitious plan for BigChange was to build collaboration into our technology. Imagine that you run a plumbing company in Scotland. Your local customers love you and want to work with you on a nationwide basis – but you don't have the resources to take on contracts in Wales or down in London. Through BigChange, you can now collaborate with other plumbing companies in other areas, and subcontract out the work.

Our JobWatch technology not only allows companies to allocate jobs to their partners, it also tracks all the paperwork, monitors issues like health and safety, takes care of billing and scheduling, and updates all parties on the progress of the jobs in real time, giving a sense of control and transparency.

I can't overstate the potential of something like this. Small businesses can act like big companies - at the touch of a screen. They can reach almost unlimited scale, bolting on other services and growing their empires. Think of the savings in travel costs



if you could subcontract out work at the other end of the country?

Virtual companies could be created, which draw on the expertise of other firms, and use their sales and marketing expertise to grow and thrive. Just imagine, the next Uber could be created this way – after all, Uber doesn't actually own any taxis.

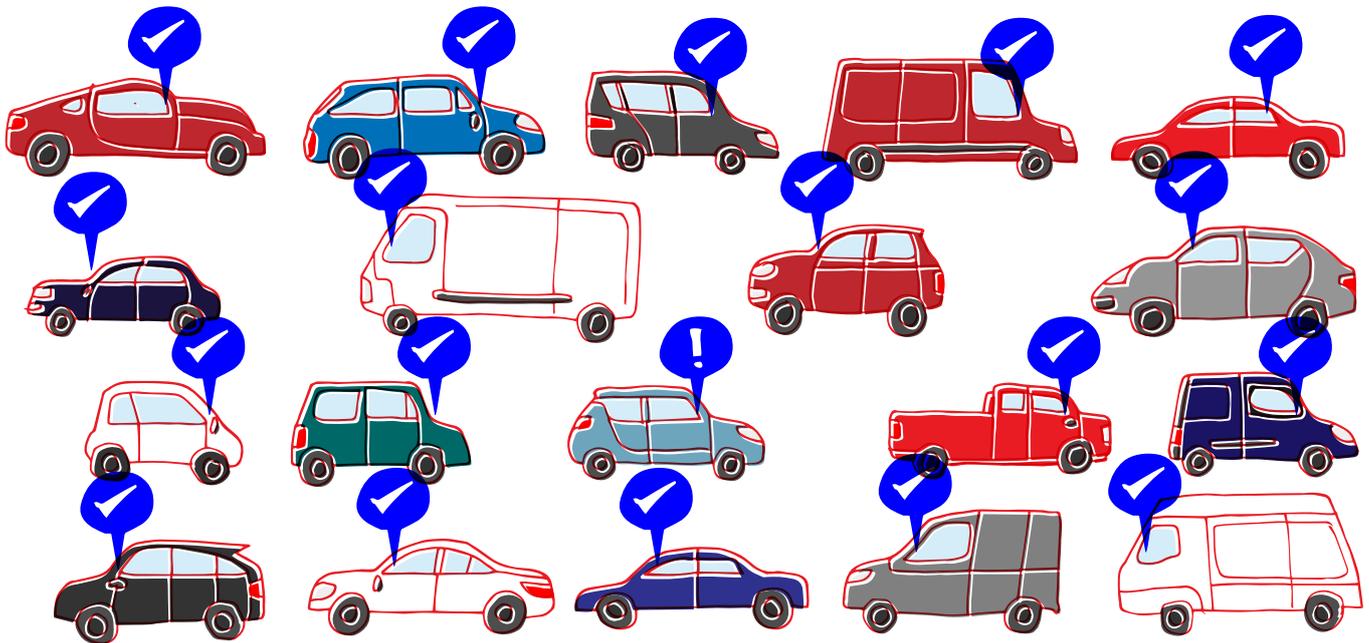
We could help UK businesses to expand overseas using this system – something that many entrepreneurs may find useful post-Brexit. You could find a contractor in Australia for your customer and watch the job being done in real-time.

In the past, collaboration like this has been bogged down in paperwork, email and endless phone calls. The mist falls over Paper Town and it's hard to know what's going on. With JobWatch, it's all clear and paperless, and your partners appear like an extension of your own firm.

Your customers even see the same screen if they log into the booking portal to check which jobs have been done. Your partner company invoices you, and you invoice your customer as usual - all through BigChange. Easy.

We don't charge our customers anything extra to collaborate, but we benefit because we believe that the collaboration feature will encourage more customers to join us. That's the beauty of a business like this: by focusing on making our customers more successful, we succeed too.

“I want my freedom, and I like to drive fast.”



Over the years, I've met lots of senior executives who want tracking technology installed in the commercial vehicles driven by their employees – but refuse to have it in their own car. They want to slash fuel bills and insurance premiums by ensuring their drivers and engineers are tracked but they see themselves as above it all. It's terrible.

I have been working with Brake, the road safety charity, for over 12 years. First at Masternaut, the company I sold a few years ago, and now at BigChange. I'm proud to be a corporate member, and raise money for the charity through initiatives like Drive for Life, the world's largest safe driving competition, which I created eight years ago. It monitored the driving habits of 50,000 drivers – a world first.



I recently attended a Brake charity event at the Houses

of Parliament. It was an incredibly moving evening. We heard about the special officers who are despatched by the police to inform families that their loved one has died in a road traffic accident. They have to comfort the bereaved, it's a tough job.

Jesse Norman, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Department for Transport, spoke at the dinner. As he finished his speech, I raised my hand and said I wanted to ask an important question. He asked if it could wait but I just keep on going, and said, “Why aren't you or the health and safety executive making sure

that company bosses fit tracking devices to their vehicles to set an example to the rest of their employees, and promote better driver behaviour?”

He took me by surprise when he agreed with me. He said, “You're exactly right, we need to start at the top.”

At BigChange, we track the driving habits of 20,000 drivers across the UK. I'm acutely aware of my responsibility, as the founder of this business, to make a difference. I have it in my hands to promote safe driving and save lives.

At least a third of road deaths and a quarter of serious injuries are from crashes involving someone driving for work – whether it's a company car driver, a professional driver of a commercial vehicle, or someone driving their own vehicle on company business. This is why every single one of our company vehicles has a tracker, and every person who claims mileage as an expense has to be tracked by our system. I'm on the system, even when I'm driving my wife's car, and my profile is open to view – you can watch me driving around later today.

Each month, we name and shame the worst driving member of the team, and encourage them to improve. We also have an award for the best – and most improved – driver. Next month, launching Driving BigChange, and hope to have around 25,000 customers signed up to the initiative. We'll measure their driving for six months and announce the winner in December.

I'm also planning to launch the 100 Club, a group of 100 company directors and bosses who will compete to beat their peers at being the safest boss on the road. It's about creating a group of ambassadors who can set an example. Unlike the executives who just want to reap the financial benefits of a tracker, these enlightened leaders want to help save lives.

I can't stress enough how important this cause is to me. If we get this right, there is the potential to make the roads so much safer. Thanks for reading and get in touch if you'd like any more information about Brake or the work we do with the charity.

The personnel challenge: this time it's personal

I had a tough day last week. I received a critical email from a member of the team. It's the only downside of having an "open-door" policy... people will genuinely tell you what they think!

The team member made a number of observations about how I could be a better boss. It's never easy to hear people outline your flaws – especially when you don't necessarily agree with them all.

One of the points was about how I show appreciation for a job well done. Whenever a member of the sales team signs up a new customer, I whoop and dance around the office. It's something I've always done. "Why don't you do that when a RoadCrew Customer Service or implementation member gets praise?" I was asked.

This isn't the first time I've had to take criticism on the chin. Back when I was growing my last business, Masternaut, the economy turned. We made it through the 2008 banking crisis, but we needed to reduce headcount. Out of a team of 220, we had to lose 50 people. It was tough.

Needless to say, employees weren't happy, and weren't shy in telling me that morale was low and people had lost motivation. To try and tackle the issue, I brought in a neuro linguistic programming (NLP) expert, who worked wonders.

NLP helps you retrain your brain to aid communication and resolve conflict. I sometimes wonder if I should appoint a company doctor here, an expert to act as a middleman and hear gripes from both sides and help to resolve them – without me getting any critical emails. As much as I hate to admit it, I always learn a lot from criticism.

I don't think I can stop dancing round the office when we make a sale. I'm like the Premiership footballer who gets carried away in the moment. You shout at the TV, asking, "Why did you lose control?!" The answer is passion. The adrenaline takes hold and I just want to dance. That same passion drives me when something goes wrong. It motivates me to solve every problem.

But that email showed me that I need to work on how we praise people who don't work in sales. Many organisations struggle with the resentment between sales and the rest of the company. The sales team may get the orders in but everyone else has to deliver the work, yet they have the big salaries and nice holidays.

Maybe we should buy a company sports car and let the Star of the Week drive it around... Could that work?

As an entrepreneur, people will always be your greatest strength, but they may also be your biggest weakness. We are all human. I'm trying to learn how to cope with criticism. I've learned that I can take anything as long as it's delivered face to face. I can't stand it over email. I've also learned that I need to be better at communicating some of the pressures that I face. Perhaps, employees will go easier on me if they know all the things I am juggling each day.

I emailed all my team asking them to arrange a 20-minute chat with me by booking a slot. There is nothing better than a face-to-face meeting. It is so much better than emails, telephone calls and second-hand conversations via other parties.



60 pounds heavier:

The reality of being a start-up founder

You sacrifice a lot when you decide to build a start-up. Money. Time. Sleep.

Over the last few years, it has been a relief to see more coverage of the mental and physical toll that creating a business can take on you. It feels like a stigma is being slowly eroded, and entrepreneurs are more able to discuss issues such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

In some ways, I've been incredibly lucky. I've built several businesses over the years, and managed to hold on to my sanity and good humour throughout. But I do have one vice. One that poses a real risk to my health.

When I'm under pressure, I eat.

The first five years of building BigChange were a total rollercoaster. First I had the idea, started raising capital, and built a business. Pretty soon, I started running out of cash, which meant I had to go out and raise more money, all the while accelerating sales to stay afloat.

During that crazy period, there were times when I was unsure how I would make payroll. We'd buy in new hardware, and it wouldn't be quite right. And despite all these problems, I had to maintain my energy levels. I worked hard and stayed late at the office.

I started over-eating to cope. It creeps up on you. First, you eat to stay awake. Then, as you get more tired, you feel hungrier. Over the last five years, I've put on four stone.

Carrying around all that extra weight is horrible. You feel uncomfortable.

When you wake up in the mornings, you're sluggish: you don't feel ready for the day. I developed mild sleep apnoea, which can affect people who are overweight. This means that while sleeping, your breathing becomes irregular and your brain can be starved of oxygen. This, of course, made me feel even more tired, and my concentration was affected.

"Go on a diet!" It sounds obvious, doesn't it? Every day, you plan to start eating more healthily but then an issue arises, and you order two main courses at dinner. Or you take a prospect out for lunch, and eat the whole breadbasket. I just love bread.

When my blood pressure started to rise, my wife and children had enough. They were on at me constantly to sort out my weight. I felt like Aunt Marge, the woman who Harry Potter accidentally inflates in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. I was ready to float away.

Then, at the end of December last year, I finally decided to start my regime. I set myself the challenge to lose 60lbs in six months. I started a JustGiving page and pledged to donate £60 for every pound lost to Cancer Research. Other people started sponsoring me too. Every donation helped to focus my mind on my goal – I didn't want to let anyone down.

Right now, I've lost over 30lbs and raised £2,813 plus gift aid for charity. I'm delighted to say I've lost 4 inches off my waist. I've also got bags more energy and feel great.

It's going to take me much longer than six months to hit my goal but I hope I'll be my target weight by the end of this year.

I lost the weight by using a meal-tracking app called MyFitnessPal. I promise I'm not being paid to say this, but it has transformed my life. My daughter told me about it, and it's helped me stick to my target of no more than 1,500 calories a day. Friday nights are hardest because we keep the Sabbath and have a big dinner. I break bread but skip the roast potatoes – and only fresh fruit for dessert!

Every start-up founder ends up punishing themselves in some way. Some smoke, some drink too much. I'm grateful I've never drunk alcohol – although I'm partial to the occasional cigar. Eating became an addiction for me, and I'm so proud that I've regained control. I hope this post is helpful to other over-eaters, who use food to deal with stress. There is a light at the end of the tunnel.

If anyone fancies sponsoring me, as I continue to shed the pounds... it's for a good cause. <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/martin-port>

I'll keep you updated.

Sharing this post is another way of holding me to my promise.

Thanks for reading, and take care.



Go on. Admit it. You've been watching Love Island too.

I got into the show for the first time last year. My wife started watching it, so I was hooked. It's overtaken Coronation Street and EastEnders as the top show watched in my house.

I just love the concept. It's so light-hearted and upbeat. There's no violence or real despair. Between Love Island and the World Cup, I genuinely feel like people across the whole country are waking up looking forward to the day. They feel the future is full of promise and entertainment.

I don't have time for the people who say Love Island is "low brow" or un-PC, but then my kids are all over-18 so I don't have to worry that they'll be too influenced by the show. My sons watch it with me but my daughter isn't such a big fan. I think it's strange for her to see her dad watching girls in bikinis on TV – even though my wife is just as addicted!

This year's hopefuls are an interesting bunch. The girls strike me as really vulnerable. There are often tears and outbursts. They seem so young. The boys, however, unless they truly have feelings for their partner, seem better suited to the villa environment.

Over the past few weeks, I've been watching the personalities develop on screen. We employ a lot of young people at BigChange, so I have been trying to work out which contestant – if anyone! – I would hire off Love Island. And who I would avoid like the plague. I'd like to know what you think of my choices.

I've decided that out of all the hopefuls, I would definitely hire Samira. When I listen to her speak, she sounds so well-reasoned and sensible. That's probably why she

hasn't been getting off with anyone; she thinks before she acts. She seems a more "together" person than many of the others in there.

I could definitely imagine her working at BigChange, either in sales or project management. I think she would be able to understand and communicate even complex technical products. I'm a big fan of Dani too, but she's a bit too happy-go-lucky. Her head seems in the clouds.

As for who I'd kick out of a job interview, it's got to be Josh. He has no restraint. He's just like a puppy, always after the new toy. I'm also not a big fan of Dr Alex. Don't judge me but I think he's a bit of a wimp. I'd hate to turn up in A&E and get patched up by him. He's probably a nice guy but seems so naïve.

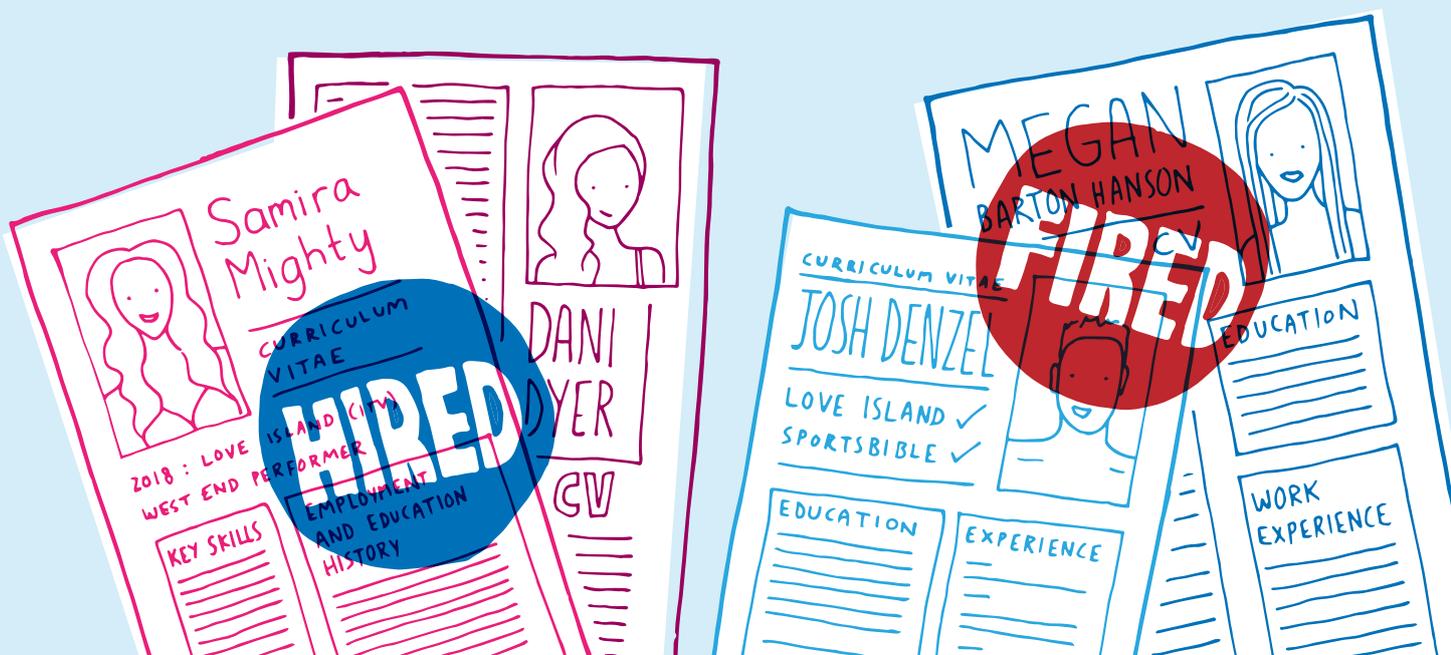
As for Muggy Megan, she is getting a hard time from the public. I wouldn't hire her because she's a bit too much like Josh – easily distracted. But I do worry about what will happen to her when she leaves the show. I think she will be completely unprepared for what's awaiting her on the outside. I hope she has people she can rely on to shield her from the worst of it

I wonder how much of the show is manufactured and how much is genuine. Alex Epstein, who was on The Apprentice, has worked at BigChange so I know from him that things aren't always as they seem in reality TV. It's easy to get stitched up in the edit.

Whatever you make of the show, you can't deny that it has become an economic juggernaut. Online clothing brands are making a fortune from being associated with the show. Companies are vying for product placement on the programme. It has created its own fashion economy.

Can you believe that 3.4m people watch the show? I love that everyone, young and old, rich and poor, from every walk of life, seems to be into it. I was at the Dorchester at an awards ceremony last week and heard Andrew Marr talking about it. I bet that they're chatting about it at Chequers. Theresa May will be arguing with Boris Johnson over their favourites, and Philip Hammond and Michael Gove will be butting in with their tuppence worth...

Ultimately, I think we all know who's going to win this year. It's got to be Jack and Dani. But don't worry, Samira. If you miss out on the £50,000, there's a job waiting for you here at BigChange!



How will you be remembered?

When I was a kid, building my first business selling artisanal bread, I met someone who made a great impression on me.



Back then, I was on the Government Youth Opportunity Scheme, which gave young people £80 a week to put towards setting up a business or learning a trade. I was exhibiting at one of the events organised by the scheme, and all my bread was on display.

This man, who was involved with the scheme, came up to my stand and said: "What you need is to find someone who can varnish your bread for you. That will really make it glow. I know someone who can help."

I didn't know it at the time, but the man's name was Arnold Ziff OBE, and he was the boss of a £100m property company called Town Centre Securities. Yet, off he went, this millionaire entrepreneur, and two hours later he returned with a piece of paper. "Give this guy a call," he said. "He can help varnish your bread for you."

Arnold Ziff MHDS RIP, who passed away in 2004, was an incredibly successful businessman but that's not what he is remembered for. He was a renowned philanthropist, who gave away much of his fortune – mainly to projects and good causes around Leeds. And he wasn't flashy about his charitable work; he did most of it under the radar, helping anyone who needed it – even me.

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Last week, I was lucky enough to receive an award from the Institute of Directors (IoD). Not being big headed but I've won a lot of awards over the years. This one was different: it was for corporate social responsibility (CSR). It felt like my greatest ever accomplishment.



Charitable work is so important to me. At BigChange, we currently support 18 different charities, across mental health, cancer, education, and careers. These are all causes that are close to my heart.

There are many reasons that I love to help charities and support my local community. It starts with my faith, which is all about sharing and giving. We call it "Tzedakah" in Hebrew and it underpins my whole view of the world.

All my colleagues at BigChange get it. I've been so touched by people's generosity and commitment to our charitable causes over the years. It creates such positivity within our organisation.



Ultimately, when BigChange reaches a certain size, I would love to be able to spend more time working in charitable organisations. Not sitting on committees or joining boards – that doesn't work for me – but driving real change. I'd like to run projects and deliver on goals, and help charities cut costs and be more effective.

Some time ago I did some work with Age UK, which receives a lot of donations from supporters in the form of bags of unwanted goods and clothes. But when they were taking these donations, they weren't asking for names and addresses, which meant they couldn't claim Gift Aid (which allows charities to claim 20pc extra back from the government). We advised them to change their policy, and now the charity makes an extra £2m a year through Gift Aid.

I'd love to do more projects like that, and I hope that other company bosses follow suit and turn their entrepreneurial talents to the third sector.

It brings me great joy to have built a profitable company that can give back, and to have become an entrepreneur with the skills to help charities build better organisations.

I hope that Arnold Ziff OBE MHDS RIP would be proud, and I hope that, one day, I too will be remembered. Not for how much money I made, but for helping others.

A love letter to Leeds



Every year, I read articles claiming to know the best place to start a business in the UK. The same old cities always get a mention. London. Bristol. Cambridge. Edinburgh. Today, I'm here to tell these researchers they're wrong. It's Leeds.

Five years ago, I founded BigChange. It's my second tech start-up based out of the city. I knew this was the best place to do it, because I'd seen the benefits growing my last business, Masternaut, here. In fact, I couldn't envision building a company anywhere else.

The city is home to the most incredible and diverse workforce in the UK. They come from our top universities, or are trained up by all the ambitious companies based here. Whether we're recruiting for back office, commercial, technical or marketing employees, we've never struggled to find great candidates.

When building a team, you want as many different kinds of people on board as possible. Every perspective or experience helps to build a better product for your customers. Leeds is a cosmopolitan, vibrant city; this is not something that's unique to London.

People here are happier than those in the capital. Their wages go further each month, and there is such quality of life here. You need to earn a minimum of £30,000 a year to live in London, and have any spending money left over after rent and bills. You'll probably have to share with others though.

In Leeds, you can have your own flat for that money, plus have money to spend on fun things and save. My colleagues all live in neighbourhoods they like, and feel that everything is within their grasp. Those that like the city life have their choice of restaurants, bars, cinemas, music venues, shops and stuff to do. We even have our version of Greenwich Village it's called Chapel Allerton. Those that want a quieter life can live in the countryside, and yet Leeds city centre is just a 20-minute drive away.

A few members of my team have spent time in London. They lasted about five years before coming back here. They saw that the grass wasn't greener after all. It's easy to burn out in London, especially for younger people. You feel compelled to go out and be seen to be living a certain kind of life, which involves burning the cash.

I can't even moan about our infrastructure. Leeds Bradford airport may be small but I love how quickly you get on and off the plane. Trains take a couple of hours to London but it's time that I really value.

I clear my inbox or spend the time doing

some creative planning. I'm not a fan of HS2 – it will be too expensive and cut into my valuable thinking time.

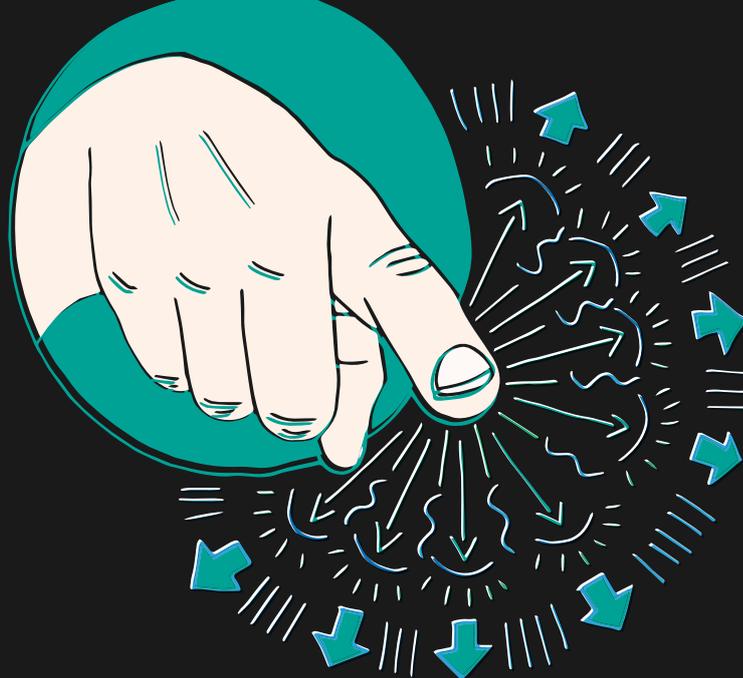
The only downside to Leeds is the football club. But let's not talk about that.

Some incredible businesses have started life in Leeds. From M&S, which was founded in the city back in 1884, to Next, which began as a tailoring company in Leeds in 1864, to supermarket giant Asda, this place has been the launch pad for many bold and successful entrepreneurs. It is now the second-largest financial powerhouse in the UK, second only to London. And the tech scene here is thriving. Who needs Silicon Roundabout when you have Future Labs?

I love being a West Yorkshire entrepreneur building a business that employs people in the local area. But I don't just do it because it feels good, I do it because Leeds is the best place to find great people, have a great life, and build a world-beating business. My last business ended up employing 500 people, which is something I'm really proud of. With BigChange, I hope to create something even bigger.



Five time management tips from a dyslexic, one-finger typist with zero attention span!



Ask my wife if I should be giving time management tips, and she will probably laugh. Here I am, a man who still types all his emails with just one finger. She jokes that I run my whole business with that finger – and she’s not wrong. But over the years I have learned some productivity tricks that help me be a much better businessman – even if I’ll always be slow at one or two things...

Get up at 5.30am

I get up at the crack of dawn each day. It means I’m up and productive at least two or three hours before most people. Don’t get straight on the laptop – take your time. I actually take at least an hour to get ready in the morning. This isn’t as terrible as it sounds; I do some of my best strategic thinking with a spoon of porridge in one hand and my phone in the other. This is one of the benefits of getting up really early – it’s quiet and calm and you can think in peace. I’m usually at the office with a clear inbox by 8.30am.

Cheat at emails

I’m dyslexic so writing emails can be a struggle. I can spend a long time using spell-check and a thesaurus to get messages just right – but automatic corrections can result in more errors than they solve. So these days I let Google do the heavy lifting. You can search for readymade messages online. I lift paragraphs and then just have to edit them slightly to make them work for you. It’s an amazing timesaver.

Be brutal with meetings

Every meeting must have an agenda, clearly stating what outcome we are trying to achieve, and listing the topics we need to cover. This helps keep everyone on track. I’m also getting better at knowing which meetings I actually need to attend – once you have your ego in check, you realise you don’t need to be present for everything. I find that whenever I’m called away for something urgent, and all my meetings have to be moved or cancelled, I know pretty quickly which ones need me and which ones I can remove from my schedule entirely. Sometimes I arrange meetings, turn up just to make sure everyone else is there, and then leave them to it. When you’re running a business, it’s important to be ruthless with your time when you can.

Hack your inbox

I use Outlook and have a system in place, which sorts my email into conversations. This means that my long list of unread messages is grouped by subject line. So even though I may have 200 new emails, they come up as just 15 conversations, which is much more manageable. Any email I need to keep an eye on is given a red flag, which means it’s easy to sort the urgent ones from the low-priority. Unlike many business owners who will limit the

time they spend on email, I’m on it all the time. I have no attention span, so you’ll find me sneaking a look at my inbox during meetings or when I’m with my family. But that level of obsession has helped me grow my business – I know what’s going on with my business every moment of every day. I think you need that level of focus to be successful when your company is young and growing fast.

Find thinking time every day

I don’t drive and I travel two or three days a week, so I get a lot of thinking time on train journeys. I absolutely love it. I’m dreading the arrival of HS2, which could slash my thinking time by half. Growing a business is like climbing a flight of stairs. Each year, you ascend another step. Gradually, you get higher and higher, which means you can look back, and see where you’ve come from more clearly. This is when you really need your thinking time, to assess what you’ve done well – and badly – and plan for the next step.

I hope you’ve found these tips helpful. I certainly have... Writing this post has made me realise I need to take a typing course. It’s never too late to start using all 10 fingers! I’d also love to hear your time management tips, so please leave a comment below and help me to keep on learning.



My top tip: take off the blinkers and demand a 360-view

I'd like to share a little secret with you. Every five years, I do this one thing, which helps me to maintain the growth and success of my business.

I started doing it at my last company, Masternaut, which became Europe's largest vehicle tracking company, and I've just done it at my latest venture, BigChange.

I call this process the "360". It involves taking a comprehensive look at the health of your company.

I can't stress enough how transformational this simple exercise has been for me, and I can't recommend it highly enough. Any entrepreneur who wants to truly understand their business, their customers, their employees, and realise their aspirations, needs to do this.

So, where do you start?

The exercise usually takes me about four weeks, from start to finish. I tend to work with an external agency – you could pay anything between £5,000 to £100,000+ for this kind of brand overhaul, dependant on your business size. I feel it's well worth it, as this investment generates a minimum of five years' worth of benefit.

You also need to prepare for the 360 in advance. At BigChange, we collect a lot of data and customer feedback, which means we have a lot of information to work with. If you want your 360 to be effective, you need this kind of data too.

For example, we ask every customer for their thoughts on BigChange at least

once a year. You shouldn't ask too many questions – we don't expect clients to waste an afternoon on this. We just stick to four things: What product did you use before? Why did you choose us? What benefits do we bring to your business? How could we improve?

It takes them five minutes but helps add a lot of context to the 360.

Next, you need to assemble an internal team. Usually, these are people from every department in the company. You (or your agency) hold briefing sessions with these people and talk about the following:

- Where you've come from
- Where you want to be (in the next five years and shorter term)
- Latest growth figures
- The challenges you face
- How to overcome those challenges.

The aim is to then distil all these conversations down into some key learnings. These are:

- The Vision – The ultimate ambition for your business
- Our Big Vision – Making every economy we work in stronger through innovation and world-class service.
- The Mission – Your purpose and reason for being

- Our Big Mission – To liberate businesses from paperwork and plate spinning so that they are free to do what they do best – and grow stronger.
- The Promise – And expression of what your company stands for
- BigChange Promise – Make a Big Difference
- The Pillars – The pillars that deliver your promise and the foundation for your mission.

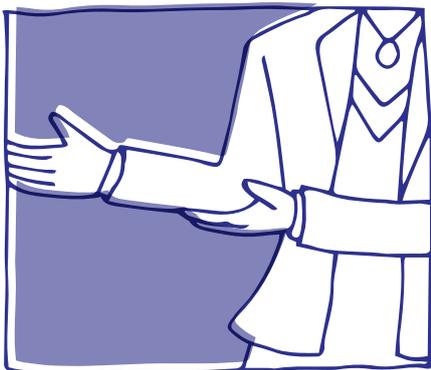
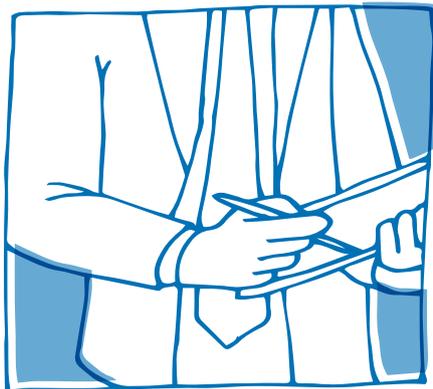
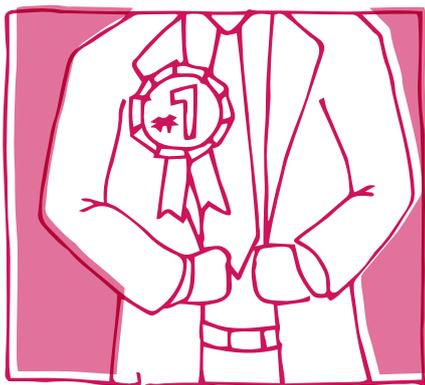
We have five pillars at BigChange – including: Being Big on Service, Big on Innovation, Big on being dynamic, Big on determination and Be the big difference – but you can have as many as you like.

This information is all crucial. It will help influence your marketing, the budgets you give to different departments, your areas of specialism and focus, and will provide a hard target to aim for over the coming years.

The process has helped reassure me that we're on track to become a £100m plus company in five years. I now have this incredible document which helps focus everyone's minds on the task ahead.

You probably use a SatNav or navigation app in your car. The 360 is a navigation tool for your business. It's benefitted my business, and I hope it helps you find the right road to where you're going.

In defence of the salesperson



We need to stop bashing our salespeople. They are the engine room of the economy.

“I work in sales”.

If I said this line in America, people would smile and look interested. There, salespeople are held in high esteem.

There is an understanding that a great salesman is extraordinarily useful, both to the customer and to the company they work for.

Here in the UK, it's a different story. It's a uniquely British thing to hate salespeople. I don't know where this irrational dislike comes from. Perhaps it's tied into the British fear of talking about money. We find too much success and sky-high earnings somehow distasteful.

Today, I'd like to talk about why I love the sales people, and why you should too. This is my call to arms for British business to start re-educating staff and the public over the value these hard workers bring to the economy.

There's a major misunderstanding about sales. People immediately think of cold callers or used car salesman but did you know there are an estimated 2.2m sales people in the UK? Think of any successful person you know; I guarantee they sell. A top accountant doesn't spend his time balancing figures; he's out meeting new clients and winning business. A successful lawyer isn't sat behind a desk all day; she's the face of her brand.

It takes an enormous amount of skill to sell well. Top sellers are methodical, organised, tenacious, they know their product inside out, they are fantastic at presentations, they are empathetic and understand what people need. Sales people build relationships that can last years. They are the go-between that manages the relationship between customer and brand.

It can take years, decades even, to get really good at sales. So why can't you get a degree in sales from a British university? It's crazy that you can get a degree in marketing or business, but not sales. The ability to sell – and sell well – is not just a professional skill, it's an ability that helps the individual in every facet of their life.

Some organisations have woken up to the power of sales training. Forward-thinking firms like P&G and Unilever have programmes that give bright, skilled staff the tools to become great salespeople, because they know that the future of the business relies on this talent.

I want sales, as a profession, to be treated with the same level of respect as a doctor or a dentist. I want it to become commonplace that anyone who is struggling to make good money in their chosen career can think, “I'm going to move into sales instead and provide for my family”.

Company bosses like me have an obligation to celebrate sales people. We also need to champion organisation-wide education about the value they bring. Yes, sales people can earn a lot of money, but the revenue they create is also shared by the rest of the employees in the form of pay rises and company incentives.

This is not a second-class profession so let's stop putting people off this important and useful career.

Sales people are to be treasured, not trashed.

How about a bit of love for the White Van Man?

They travel the length and breadth of the UK, fixing our broken pipes and delivering our shopping. Have a heart, and hug a White Van Man.

Last week, I wrote about my frustration with Britain's enduring dislike of sales people. It drives me mad. We need to treasure our salespeople and understand the value they bring to the economy.

This week I'm back on my soapbox. This time, in defence of the White Van Man.

On Wikipedia, I found a definition. It says that the White Van man is 'typically perceived as a selfish, inconsiderate driver who is mostly petit bourgeois and often aggressive.' Where the hell does this misconception come from?

I spend a lot of time with the tradespeople and engineers who drive Ford Transits. This is because of my regular "shop floor days" [read more about them here: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/shop-floor-day-let-martin-take-closer-look-martin-port/>]. I've spent 100 days on the road with White Van Men in my time, and every single one of them has been a decent, kind person who goes the extra mile for their customers and does a difficult job with long hours.

These engineers and drivers are absolutely vital to the UK. There are around 2.5m white vans out on the road. These people are delivering parts, fixing our broken

equipment, bringing our shopping, and keeping our utilities running smoothly. They go out in the rain and snow, all hours of the day and night, to do their job. Yet they do not get the respect they deserve.

The rise of internet shopping has put a lot of pressure on the couriers that deliver all our parcels. So yes, some of them may be pushy drivers, but only because they have up to 100 pick-ups and drop-offs to make in a single day. Don't blame them, blame the managers and office staff that send them on poorly-planned routes and overload them with deliveries. But, according to the Renault Master White Van Man study, couriers account for just 22pc of vans on the road. The typical driver is actually: "a service engineer, a fishmonger, a roofer, an exhibitions erector, a picture framer or even a theatre director", it explained.

The WVM experiences a lot of prejudice. "People look at me like I'm dirt," one, Patrick, told me. He spends up to 25 hours a week driving in his van – double that if he's on call – covering a catchment area that reaches from Romford to Acton, all the way to Cambridge. "Often we are doing the

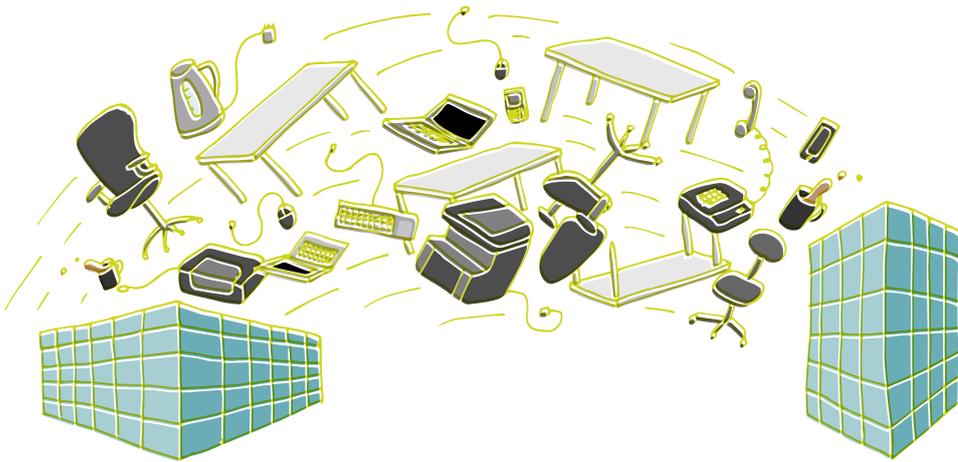
nasty little jobs that people don't realise are getting done but which are essential to their lives. Yet people have a bad attitude towards us.

"People do not want to let you out when you're driving on the road. They especially won't let you out when two lanes merge into one. People do not want to let you go ahead of them, especially in the centre of town. Many people wouldn't dream of doing my job. They'd hate it. But they'd miss us if we were gone."

In my experience, WVM can drive between 15,000 and 25,000 miles a year. Who would want to spend that much time behind the wheel, often stuck in traffic? It's time that we truly appreciated the White Van Man. They do an amazing job, often under tough conditions. Let's stop putting these people down.



I, survivor of the office move



We've just moved office – BigChange's third move in five years. Each time has been more painful and expensive than the last but this latest relocation – a stone's throw from our last site – is more than just a new address.

It's a new chapter for BigChange.

We've invested in a lot more space, giving us the room to grow from 80 people to 150. The building is bright, painted white, and tastefully decorated. It's the kind of place I'd been happy to invite any customer – from a small business owner to the chief executive of a FTSE 100 company.

In total, I've spent nearly £250,000 on this move, which has taken about three months to arrange. Having survived this hugely stressful process – which is second only to moving house – I thought I'd share a few lessons that I've learned along the way.

Negotiate your heart out

If you are signing a five-year lease, you should be able to negotiate for 20pc off the rental price. This will cover all the money you'll spend on the fit out and relocating all your employees and IT. I think this is pretty standard, and most landlords are willing to offer this as a rent-free period at the start of the lease.

Call the council

When you are moving office, you could be entitled to a rates holiday of up to six months. We have now vacated our last building, although we still own the lease till January. So we called the council and took advantage of the rates break, which means we're slashing that overhead by half. We're also deferring rates on the new building until we're fully moved in, which will be towards the end of September.

Never commit for more than five years

There are two reasons to avoid long-term leases. First of all, you don't know how quickly your company could grow over

the next few years. Five years is probably the maximum you can plan for with any accuracy. Also, a long lease is a liability that weighs down on your business. If you want to raise or borrow money, a 10-year lease could make you less attractive to backers.

Invest in great chairs – but buy second-hand

I want my people to feel comfortable at work. It's important to me that they feel their best. That's why I decided to buy in top-of-the-range Herman Miller chairs to ensure that everyone is sitting comfortably at their desks. But these chairs are not cheap... they can cost £1,000 a pop. This is why we found a company to source them second-hand, slashing the cost by at least 75%.

Consistency looks professional

We have created an open-plan office here, which means all our desks are on show. We've invested in new desk tops for the whole team but used the same second-hand sourcing partner to get the bases for us. An added bonus: these desks are adjustable so that my colleagues can choose whether to sit or stand.

Create a space that works for you

The new office has been crafted around the needs of our people. It is open plan but has secluded pods for when individuals want to call customers without being distracted. We have bought in two amazing coffee machines, and created a chill-out area, which feels a bit like our own Starbucks. We have also invested in frosted windows. We're on the ground floor and the new rules around GDPR mean that we have to ensure there is no way passers-by could glean customer data through our windows.

Remember to budget properly

We opted for a move that was about half turnkey solution – managed by the landlord – and half sorted by us. It was the best way to ensure that the office looked and felt exactly as we wanted it to. About a quarter of our budget went on technology – sorting out the internet, installing the right cables etc. Another quarter went on desks and furniture. A quarter went on partitioning and painting the walls. The final quarter was spent on presentation, everything from the signage to our video wall, which will be used for demonstrations. A local artist created our signage. It's cool but understated and we love it.

Stagger your move

We didn't try and move everyone to the new office overnight. We moved one department at a time, starting with the teams that have the least direct contact with customers. It was incredibly important to me that BigChange's day-to-day business was not disrupted by this move. By the time we moved our customer service team, we knew there were no glitches, the wifi was up and running, which meant there was a seamless transition.

We're all moved in to the new premises now, so why not stop by for a coffee and a look around? We'd love to see you.

Don't let anti-social media ruin your day

I've had two issues last month that have taught me a lot about the weird and wonderful world of social media.

My first shock came last week, when I spotted a post from a colleague on LinkedIn. To spare everyone's blushes, I won't give too much detail but it contained an expletive, and tackled a controversial theme, referencing both me and BigChange by name.

The second post was also on LinkedIn. This one was published by a valued salesperson, who was frustrated after several appointments had been cancelled. This individual was asking if anyone wanted a last-minute meeting, and gave specific times when they were free.

Neither of these were major issues. They weren't defaming the business. There were no sexist or racist comments. There was no nudity. Yet they both worried me, and I asked for both to be deleted.

Social media can be a brand wrecker, and I haven't spent five years building a business I love to see its reputation tarnished by a thoughtless remark. The first post contained a swear word, which could really put off some of our clients. It was also being purposefully controversial, in a bid to get more views. That's fine, but it wasn't BigChange's battle to fight, and as I hadn't

been asked permission, I was deeply unhappy about it.

The second post made us look like some small, flighty outfit just at a time when we are looking to win enterprise clients. August is always a tricky time because so many people go on holiday, but salespeople should never moan publicly about that, or tout for appointments: it just looks desperate.

I don't monitor my employees on social media, and never will. It's not my business what they post about their private lives – unless they reference BigChange or circumstances related to their employment. You just trust that people will use common sense, don't you?

I've started questioning myself too. I recently posted about Love Island on LinkedIn – who I would hire from the show. It was a light-hearted commentary on a topical issue but again, I have to ask myself, does it show BigChange in a frivolous light?

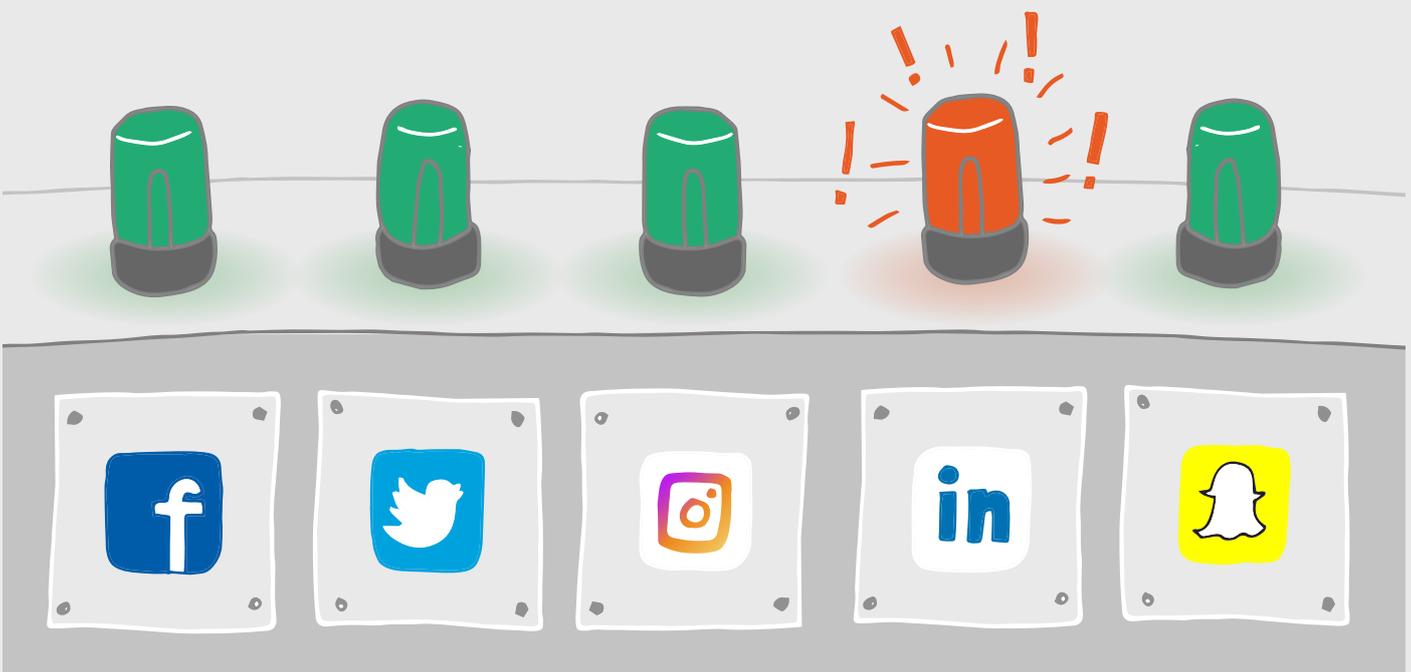
This has all been a major wake-up call. I have enlisted the help of my employment lawyer Richard Parr from Blacks to change our terms and conditions to ensure that

social media concerns don't keep me up at night.

We now have an eight-page document that outlines what we expect from our people. It's all pretty straight forward: no defamation, no bullying or harassment, no misuse of company information, and nothing that could damage our reputation. But having a document like this protects both BigChange and the employees, because we all know where we stand.

A few years ago I met a man called Gerald Ratner at a health farm. He became famous after calling the jewellery sold by the Ratner Group "total crap" at an Institute of Directors conference. After the speech, the value of the Ratner group plummeted by around £500m. This was back in 1991 but imagine how much faster a faux pas can spread on social media today.

I feel like we've just had a watershed moment at BigChange, and luckily, we've acted fast enough to prevent doing a Ratner ourselves.



Your problem isn't a lack of ideas – **it's too many of them**

Focus. This is the most underrated term in entrepreneurship today.

Concentrating on your core business – consistently doing what you already do well – may sound easy. The reality is that it's very hard.

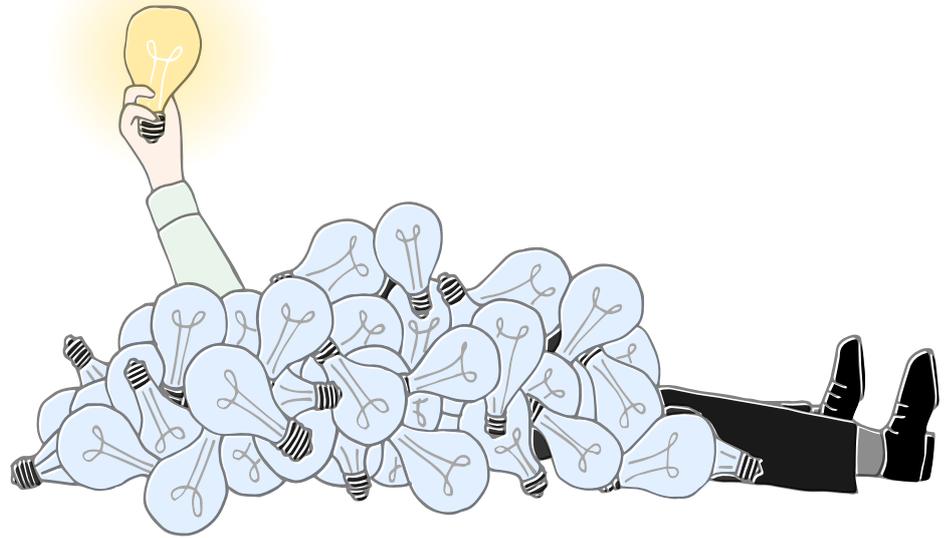
There are always distractions out there. Sometimes, these distractions are disguised as great business strategies or innovative projects. They rarely are. They are follies that suck up time and money and make you and your business less efficient.

I was reminded of the importance of focus recently, when reading about the woes at John Lewis. This is a business that is beloved by customers and employees alike. It's been going for years, has an incredible track record, and is generally seen as the 'rock' of the high street. But suddenly, it's making losses and posting 1,800 redundancies.

The management has blamed Brexit but I think there's a different reason. John Lewis has been distracted from what it does best: selling goods that people want to buy to customers who want to buy them.

If you look at John Lewis' model, it's become confused in recent years. The business made an investment in Ocado over a decade ago, sustaining losses that – luckily – ended up in profit when it sold its stake in 2011. This once-in-a-blue-moon success seems to have convinced John Lewis that it is a venture capitalist, and it's been backing lots of start-ups through its accelerator programme, JLABS. In the last year and a half, it has even moved into the service engineer space. It is my opinion that they've totally lost the plot there.

Can you imagine British Gas opening a department store? Or Homeserve selling wallpaper? John Lewis has no experience running a home services business. It's completely foreign to the industry they know.



I think that all business owners, me included, should heed John Lewis' cautionary tale. It's easy to get carried away with a new idea. When you have shareholders to please, it's tempting to keep announcing clever things that lift the share price that day. But it's nonsense: long-term, the business will suffer.

I do some mentoring through Connect Yorkshire. There have been many times I've found myself sitting in front of someone turning over £1.5m, making £300,000 profit, with just 15 employees, who says to me: "I've got this great idea to do something completely different with this business." Why? It's because we entrepreneurs bore easily, and we love a challenge. But that's the antithesis of good business practice.

I'm not infallible either. At BigChange, I nearly lost focus recently. A company approached me, offering to add drones to our product set. It sounded so exciting: hi-tech drone deliveries! I was tempted for about an hour but something kept bothering me: none of our customers have ever asked about drones. And I don't believe in first-mover advantage in business. The pioneers often fail and it's a later mover that wins the day – the second mouse gets the cheese, as they say.

As an entrepreneur, when you are considering a major move outside your comfort zone, ask yourself three questions.

- 1.) If the time and money it will require to launch this new idea were instead invested in your core business, listening to customers, and making improvements, would the return be higher?
- 2.) Have your customers said – explicitly – that they would pay for this new product or service? Not that it would be nice to have, or that it's an interesting idea, but that they would spend cold, hard cash?
- 3.) Is someone already doing this better than you ever could?

I'm not trying to squash innovation. We need to be imaginative and keep trying to improve things for our customers. But we need to do that while maintaining focus on the sweet spot: the thing we are good at that customers consistently want to buy.

Right now, we're selling our software to 25,000 mobile workers in the UK. But the UK market size is an estimated 7m people. That's our focus, and I shan't be getting distracted from that.

What's yours?

Turn your business into an empire. **Plug into the BigChange network**

BigChange collaboration allows companies to allocate jobs to their partners, and it tracks all the paperwork, monitors issues like health and safety, takes care of billing and scheduling, and updates all parties on the progress of the jobs in real time – giving a sense of control and transparency.

Imagine that you run a plumbing company in Scotland. Your local customers love you and want to work with you on a nationwide basis, but you don't have the resources to take on contracts in Wales or down in London. Through BigChange, you can now collaborate with other plumbing companies in other areas and sub-contract out the work.

I can't overstate the potential of something like this. Small businesses can act like big companies – at the touch of a screen. They can reach an almost unlimited scale, bolting on other services and growing their empires. Think of the savings in travel costs if you could sub-contract out work at the other end of the country?

Virtual companies could be created, drawing on the expertise of other firms, using their sales and marketing expertise to grow and thrive.

UK businesses could expand overseas using this system – something that many entrepreneurs may find useful post-Brexit. You could find a contractor in Australia for your customer and watch the job being done in real-time.

In the past, collaboration like this has been bogged down in paperwork, email and endless phone calls. The mist falls over Paper Town and it's hard to know what's going on. With JobWatch, it's all clear and paperless, and your partners appear like an extension of your own firm. Your customers even see the same screen if they log into the booking portal to check which jobs have been completed. Your partner company invoices you, and you invoice your customer as usual – all through BigChange.

It's that easy.

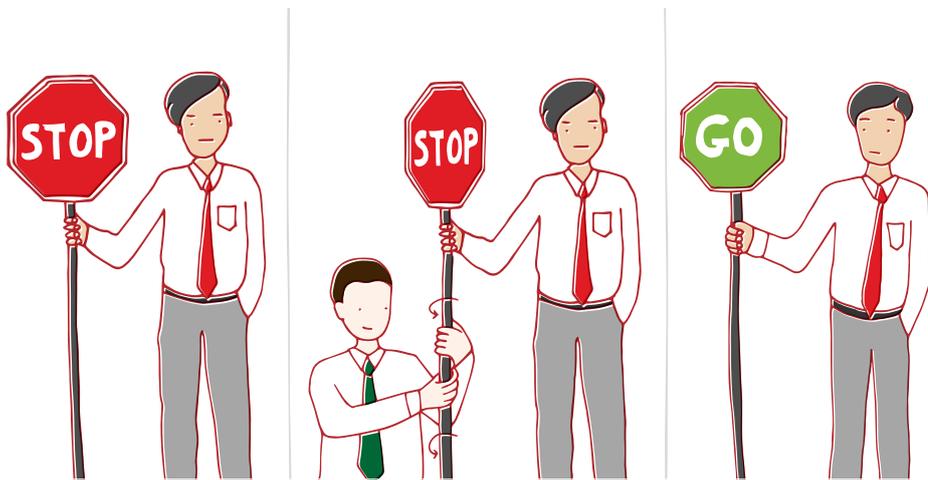
We don't charge our customers anything extra to collaborate, but we benefit because we believe that the collaboration feature will encourage more customers to join us. That's the beauty of a business like this: by focusing on making our customers more successful, we succeed too.

If you are interested in receiving more information on how you can expand your network please email info@bigchange.com for more information.



Don't let the blockers hold you back

In business, as in life, there are always people who are resistant to change. Now that I'm on my third business, I have realised that these obstinate individuals pose a real risk to the growth of an innovative company. They are far more dangerous than they may at first appear.



You know the kind of person I'm talking about:

"We've always done it this way and it works fine."

"It can't be done."

"We're too busy to try that."

As a leader, it is my job to make sure that everyone in my team is pulling in the same direction, and that they are united by a common goal or dream. It is also my job to help my colleagues deal with blockers on the customer side. Here's how you do it.

Spotting a blocker

If only this were easy. Unfortunately, blockers come in many guises. The most obvious is the "negative" blocker, who always finds a reason why something can't be done. But there are also "silent" blockers, who hinder change simply by withholding an opinion or refusing to engage. "Agreeable" blockers are by far the trickiest customers to deal with. They will agree with your plan for change and even seem to be fully behind you... Then do all they can to block you behind the scenes.

Remember that blockers often think that they are indispensable to the business. Look out for arrogance or stubbornness. One common thread amongst blockers is that they refuse to be transparent about their role – they may be lax on paperwork or process, because they feel they are above these petty tasks. If they seem

mistrustful of other departments, and are quick to criticise colleagues, that may reveal a tendency to block. If their idea of what constitutes their role is too narrow and intractable, that's another dead giveaway.

Blockers rarely have original ideas, so ask your team to suggest innovations that could improve the company – or tweaks that would improve current processes. Individuals who consistently fail to contribute any new ideas may be blockers.

Avoid hiring a blocker

You can weed out blockers at the interview stage, if you know what you're looking for. Ask prospective colleagues to tell you about a time they have effected change at their previous company. You want to gauge whether this individual is someone who gets excited about bringing new projects to life.

Ask how they have dealt with resistance from others – and make sure questions are open: nothing that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'.

It's great when you find a new member of the team that isn't afraid to question the status quo – but be wary of people who are simply argumentative or intolerant. Body language can be revealing: arms folded, or sitting back in their seat? This could be evidence of a disengaged individual.

Can you rehabilitate a blocker?

Not every blocker is a true blocker at heart. You can't change people's nature but there are instances where someone who isn't a blocker may behave like one. They may lack motivation, or need more responsibility.

One way to tackle a blocker in your midst is to give them an opportunity to talk about why they are frustrated in their role. Allow them to make their own suggestions for ways to improve performance. It may seem counter intuitive but sometimes, giving a blocker more control over the change – and incentivising them to be invested in its success – can help.

Some blockers are simply insecure and reluctant to let others shine in case it draws attention to their failings. Training that helps the blocker address gaps in their skillset can help. But it's important to know when the case is hopeless. Watch out for individuals who say things like: "This place would never survive without me" or "What I say goes".

Encourage new ideas

One way to ensure that you don't start harbouring blockers in your organisation is to create an environment that encourages new ideas and collaboration. A great way to do this, according to one of my senior managers, is to hold regular problem-solving meetings that involve people from across different departments. By throwing people together in this way, they learn a new appreciation for the challenges and stresses faced by colleagues.

As a leader, we also have to guard against our own blocking tendencies: don't let 'no' be your first thought when new ideas are presented. If someone suggests an idea that has been rejected before, take the time to explain why – but maintain an open mind. Maybe the situation has changed?

Blockers exist in almost every organisation. Don't let them hold you back.

I'd love to hear your views and strategies for managing those who are resistant to change.

The pain and sorrow of recruitment

As an entrepreneur, you face new and complex challenges all the time. But however hard you try, there's just one problem that never goes away. How to consistently find enough brilliant people to meet the demands of a growing business...

I know this is an age-old problem but it's one of my biggest sources of frustration right now. I don't think there's ever been a tougher time to recruit people. Unemployment is at a record low in this country; just 4pc of the population is out of work. That's great but it also means that competition for staff is at an all-time high. No wonder wages are rising at their fastest rate for almost a decade right now.

I feel as though I'm personally responsible for a good chunk of that salary rise, by the way. Not because I'm paying over the odds for our people at BigChange but because of the sheer number of people who have applied for a job here, only to be offered an extraordinary pay rise by their current employer to keep them. Around 60pc of the people we try to bring on are lured back by an offer they can't refuse: more money; a better job title; and very little extra work to do to earn it.

It takes a very special kind of person to leave a steady 9-5 at a big company to work at a fast-growth start-up like ours. I don't sugarcoat it for prospective staff either. The hours can be long, and the role is always varied. We pay well and there are great perks, but if you just want to clock off early, this isn't the place for you.

We need to recruit three or four people a month to meet the needs of this growing company. These roles are across the business, from customer services to sales, development to professional services. We're even trying to recruit a HR director to help expedite all the other hiring we need to do (does this sound like you? Drop me a message).

Right now, we are spending around eight hours on each new prospect, which is a huge waste of time when they go back to their existing employer, who panics and promises them the earth.

I'm trying to work out how to solve this problem, and increase the proportion of candidates that turn into team members. So this is my new strategy. I'm going to throw money at the problem. If we don't use an agency, which means we can raise our salary offers by 15-20%. We currently incentivise our team members to recommend new people by giving them £500 for each new hire. I'm raising this to £1,000. I've got a copywriter putting together a full-page job advertisement to run in the local paper. We need to be better at shouting about all the opportunities here: many of our people have gone from a starting salary to £50,000 within four years. That's got to be attractive idea, right?

We have also started hiring more people than we need for certain roles, and opting for starters who are bit more junior or less experienced, and training them up in-house. I'm planning to start attending more job fairs, and using social media – like LinkedIn – to source great talent. We already give out a wave of share options to existing employees each year but perhaps that would be a sweetener for new starters too? Am I missing anything? If you have any ideas, I would be delighted to hear from you.

There are 90 people at BigChange right now. These people are my priority. I don't want them to get stressed out and overworked because we can't hire enough new team members. At the same time, you only want to employ the right people for the business. We don't want people who are being forced out of their last job because of issues there. We want the people who are at the top of their game, and excited about the next chapter of their career.

Recruitment is a major challenge but I'll tell you this: I'm not revising any of my growth plans for BigChange. We're going to keep going, winning new business and punching above our weight in our sector. I just hope that we find the solution to our people challenges soon, or I'll just have to start cloning the stars in my organisation... Actually, is that an option?



Sound the good news klaxon – BigChange celebrates record quarter

Reading the headlines in the newspapers you'd be forgiven for thinking that the UK is going to hell in a handcart. Brexit. The spectre of recession. Talent shortages. Britain's economy is under siege. This is why I am delighted to announce that BigChange is bucking the trend to post a record third quarter.

So far this year, new contract wins have surpassed the £10m mark, a 50% increase on 2017. We have welcomed 170 new customers into the business over the last nine months. Our existing customer base remains loyal and committed to our service too: we now have a total of 800 customers in the UK, Scandinavia, France, Cyprus, Australia and the US.

We couldn't have done it without you!

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank all our customers, existing and new, for your faith in us and your continued commitment to BigChange. Over the past few months, I've been blogging regularly about the ways that BigChange hopes to make a difference to your business. Here are some of the highlights:

- Turn your business into an empire
- My mission helping entrepreneurs build empires
- Shop floor day let martin take closer look

You can read some of our customer case studies, featuring incredible brands like Housing Unit, FSH, Complete Business solutions and GAP Group on our website www.bigchangeapps.com/about-us/news-blog/

I also want to thank the spectacular team at BigChange, who have worked tirelessly to support our incredible growth. We now employ more than 90 people between the UK and France. As a testament to our internal talent, we have promoted many team members this year, helping them to progress in their chosen fields and careers. We continue to introduce lots of new talent to the company to make sure we can support our future growth.

As mentioned last week in my blog Pain and sorrow of recruitment, we are looking to recruit another 25 people over the next 12 months. These roles include: developers, project managers, business advisors, and RoadCrew customer support. Finding great new people is always a challenge so if you, or someone you know, are keen to join a fast-growth tech company in the UK's greatest city – Leeds – get in touch!

Our commitment to innovation

I'm excited to announce the launch of our new Business Advisory team, which will focus on helping our customers to meet their growth goals, helping you to get the most out of the BigChange service offering.

This team will offer regular review meetings, workflow integration optimisation, training, report writing, custom reports and automation to help deliver further return on investment to our JobWatch customers. Interested? Contact the RoadCrew team for further information.

The innovation doesn't end there. We have now launched our booking app, and have seen an excellent take up. It will revolutionise the way your business manages both planned and reactive bookings.

Our lab development team has been hard at work developing new features such as our new Collaboration tool, which allows two separate companies to share a job. Collaboration manages the whole process, from booking to scheduling jobs, and even takes care of health and safety and workflow using the managing company's own templates. At a recent shop floor day, I connected two companies in the door industry using our new tool.

I look forward to posting an update on how that relationship benefited both firms. Other developments include:-

- Rating Tables – will allow users to price jobs based off worksheet questions, allows bespoke pricing and quoting on site.
- Worksheet icons answer type – hugely popular for faster worksheet completion and easier to understand for users moving from paper systems with tick sheets.
- User event logging – enhanced audit trails of users log in activities, exports and various other interactions.



- Collaboration – ability to pass jobs from one customer to another and passing worksheets via this method.
- Photo history and multiple file upload on devices – view all historical photos on device at job location and upload multiple photos or files on devices in one action.

Other notable changes; Incoming call popup. Shared credit limit to descendent contacts. DSAR – data subject access requests now possible in one simple action via admin section. Enhanced Sage 50 link

A great place to work

We are also excited about our new office at Thorpe Park Leeds. We were getting a bit cramped at our old site so it's been a dream to move into this 10,000 sq ft modern building. Moving was a headache read my blog I Survivor office move but it was worth it to have this great working environment for both the team and our customers.

We must be doing something right. We keep winning awards for our success!

Recent notable awards include: The Deloitte Technology Fast 50, The Sunday Times Tech Track 100, The LinkedIn Top 10 Startups to Watch Outside London, The Brake Fleet Safety Innovation Award, SHD 2018 Logistics Award “EDITORS CHOICE AWARD” BigChange in partnership with Silentnight Beds. We were also shortlisted for the IOD CSR award this year, and hailed as “one to watch” in the LDC Top 50 Most Ambitious Business Leaders programme, supported by The Telegraph.

Charitable work

Last but not least, BigChange continues to support many charitable organisations that are close to our hearts. We now donate to more than 25 brilliant charities that do incredible work in Leeds and beyond.

I was proud to be made an ambassador for Transaid after personally visiting Zambia with the charity earlier this year. I saw for myself the incredible work done on the ground fighting malaria in Serenje and visited the driver training school in Lusaka. If you want to support this great cause, find out more here: <http://www.transaid.org/>



Join me in banishing phones from the meeting room

Technology is amazing.

It can make us better people, help us complete tasks faster and more effectively, and has brought about incredible opportunities that would never have been possible a decade ago.

But it can also be poisonous.

This week, I've been talking to my wife, Amanda, about this contradiction. She is increasingly worried about the effect that too much technology – an overdose on smartphones and social media – has on young people. If you're interested in what sparked our conversation, it's this video by Simon Sinek on "The Millennial Question" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vudaAYx2lCE&feature=youtu.be>

The statistics are quite shocking. Young people's anxiety levels are going through the roof. Loneliness is a major concern. The younger generation seems to be getting more and more isolated.

I've started noticing some alarming trends in the workplace too. People always bring phones to meetings and are constantly distracted by new messages or social media posts. Team members tend not to pick up the phone and call clients; they want to do everything over email these days. They are increasingly sleep deprived because of staring at the "white light" device screens emit late at night. This not only creates stress, it also means that many people struggle to focus.

I've been in business for over 40 years, so I have seen the impact these trends are having over time. It worries me. So I've decided to do something about it.

Ban phones from meetings

I'm initiating a new campaign at BigChange to ban phones from meeting rooms. Unless someone on the team needs a device for note taking, or to demo an app update, all phones will be going into a box at the start of the meeting, and they will be returned at the end.

The world will not end if we are separated from our phones for an hour or so. I really

want to encourage people to focus on the matter at hand during meetings, and to break the hold that devices seem to have on my team members. It's like they're physically attached to their smart phones.

Recognise that social media and phone use is an addiction

When we think of addiction, we think of gambling or alcohol but phones and social media can be just as problematic, and just as bad for our health. I was shocked to learn that getting "likes" and texts can give the brain a surge of dopamine, which is the brain's "reward" chemical. If you don't get your hit, it can cause a chemical imbalance, which manifests as depression and anxiety.

From now on, at BigChange, we want to recognise that too much technology can be damaging. I want to help educate my team about the importance of "unplugging" and having time away from devices each day. I'm looking at ways that we can use coaching and workshops to reduce our dependency on our phones.

I will be part of the change

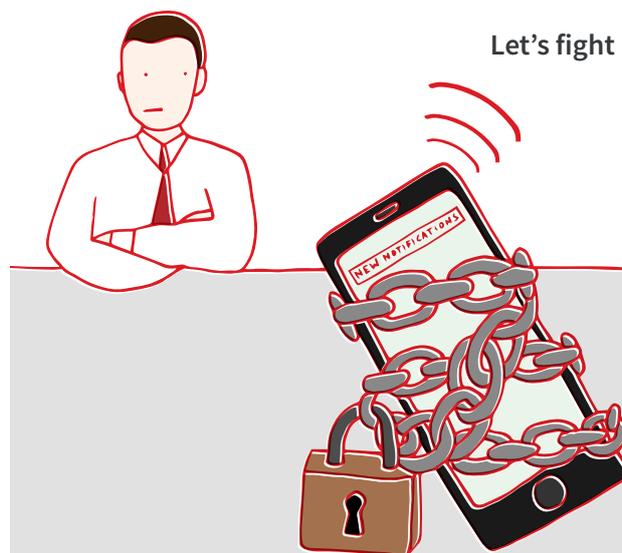
I have to hold my hands up. I'm a big part of the problem here at BigChange. I often check my phone late at night and send emails at 2am. There is also a total lack of separation between the workday and our downtime, because we carry our emails and Whatsapp groups (that's one I don't do) with us wherever we go.

I thought that it didn't matter when I sent emails as long as I made it clear that I didn't expect an immediate response. But I understand now that it's not that simple: when you see that nagging red bubble above your inbox, telling you there's a new message, it's hard to ignore.

I'm going to work hard to change my email habits so that I'm not contributing to my team's work stress. I already take a phone break for 25 hours each Friday night / Saturday, because I observe the Sabbath, but I'm going to try and take a break from emailing through till the end of Sunday too.

This really is an urgent issue. I would like to start a movement and encourage more company bosses like me to help their people conquer technology addiction. Not just because employee productivity will soar if we look after our team members' mental health and help them to focus at work, but because we risk damaging a whole generation of young people if we don't act now. The phone was invented to encourage conversation but now it seems to kill it dead.

Let's fight back.



Have I offended you yet?

First, a warning: This post is going to be divisive. Half the people who read on will think I'm talking sense, and the other half will think I'm completely wrong. It probably says quite a lot about me that I'm going to write it anyway.



I want to talk about political correctness, offence, and the modern workplace.

This all started when someone from an agency who works for BigChange came into the office. I meet everyone who works for BigChange, whether they're on the payroll or external. I like to know who I'm dealing with.

I did what I always do. I asked about her background. What is your family like? Are you married? What have you been up to recently? She was shocked and complained to a colleague that I'd been asking about her private life. "What's it got to do with him?" she asked. "Doesn't he know it's illegal to ask personal questions?"

I'm going to come out and ask what I've been thinking ever since that meeting: What is the big deal?

I've been in business all my life. I never went to university, so everything I've learned, I've learned my own way. When I'm employing someone, I want to know as much about them as I can. Every scrap of information they give me helps me build a picture of them as an individual, their strengths and weaknesses, and how best to manage them. If someone is married with a stable family life, that tells me something about that individual. That's not to say I wouldn't give the job to someone who was struggling or had personal

problems; on the contrary, that knowledge would help me understand and get the best out of that colleague.

I believe in creating a fair and fulfilling work environment. I would never discriminate against anyone. I don't care about gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability, as long as you work hard and do a good job for me. But, these days, I'm starting to feel that I – and other company bosses like me – are instantly judged to be prejudiced dinosaurs. The revelations about Harvey Weinstein and now Philip Green haven't helped. But we're not all like that.

If I'm trusting a person I've never met before to join my business, why can't I ask a few probing questions? We're a family here, and I want to make sure that you're going to mesh well with colleagues.

I'm sure that when we eventually take on a full-time HR person – we're recruiting right now – they will have a quite a bit to say on this. But, for now, I stand by my interviewing style. Business is based on relationships and relationships are based on trust. How do you build trust without getting to know each other? If you want to ask me anything, go ahead. I won't be offended.

Other companies go about this the long way round. They set psychometric tests and check people's Facebook and Instagram pages for personal information. I don't do that. I come straight out and ask what I want to know.

I feel we live in a time where political correctness is merging with the new culture of offence, which means that people are more likely to be upset and insulted than ever before. How can we live in a time where people are free to be whomever they want to be, yet as a society we aren't allowed to notice or ask questions about it because that's too personal or discriminatory? Surely openness should go both ways?

In business, the contradictions are coming thick and fast. We are told to aim for a diverse workforce but god forbid you say you're looking to hire a woman for a role. If I'm emailing in a hurry, and send a one-word reply to an urgent email, suddenly I'm a tyrannical boss. If I don't reply because I don't have time to compose an essay, I'm negligent. Everyone wants laughter and banter in the office but if a joke isn't to an individual's taste, suddenly managers are forced to mediate, which is a total waste of everyone's time.

Am I alone in finding all this slightly ridiculous? Do people have nothing better to do than become obsessed with small slights these days? What happened to giving others the benefit of the doubt?

Sometimes I feel like I can't say anything without offending someone. Maybe I should say I'm offended that people find me offensive, and see where that gets me...

I'd love to know what my fellow business owners think. Please get in touch, whether you agree with me or, even better, if you don't!

Theresa May deserves respect for handling of Brexit rebels

It's been a hell of a week for Theresa May. It was like watching a political soap opera, seeing her MPs mount a full-scale rebellion. On the 15th November, seven ministers resigned, citing her draft Brexit deal as the final straw.

The letters calling for a vote of no confidence are piling up. Despite all of this pressure, she has coolly and calmly pressed on with her deal as though nothing's happened.

Whatever your feelings about Brexit, the fact is that we've had two years of uncertainty because of the decision to leave the European Union. May clearly doesn't want to have two more years of sluggish growth and muted productivity. She's a Remainer, but she is also a pragmatist and wants to do the best thing for this country. I'm watching her systematically cut out all the noise – the noise of resignations and political dissent – and focus on her strategy.

I think that a lot of business owners like me will have a newfound respect for the Prime Minister after events of the past week. As an entrepreneur, you are the captain of your ship. You ask questions, and listen to what people think but at the end of the day, the buck stops with you. May is acting like the chief executive of UK plc and you have to respect that.

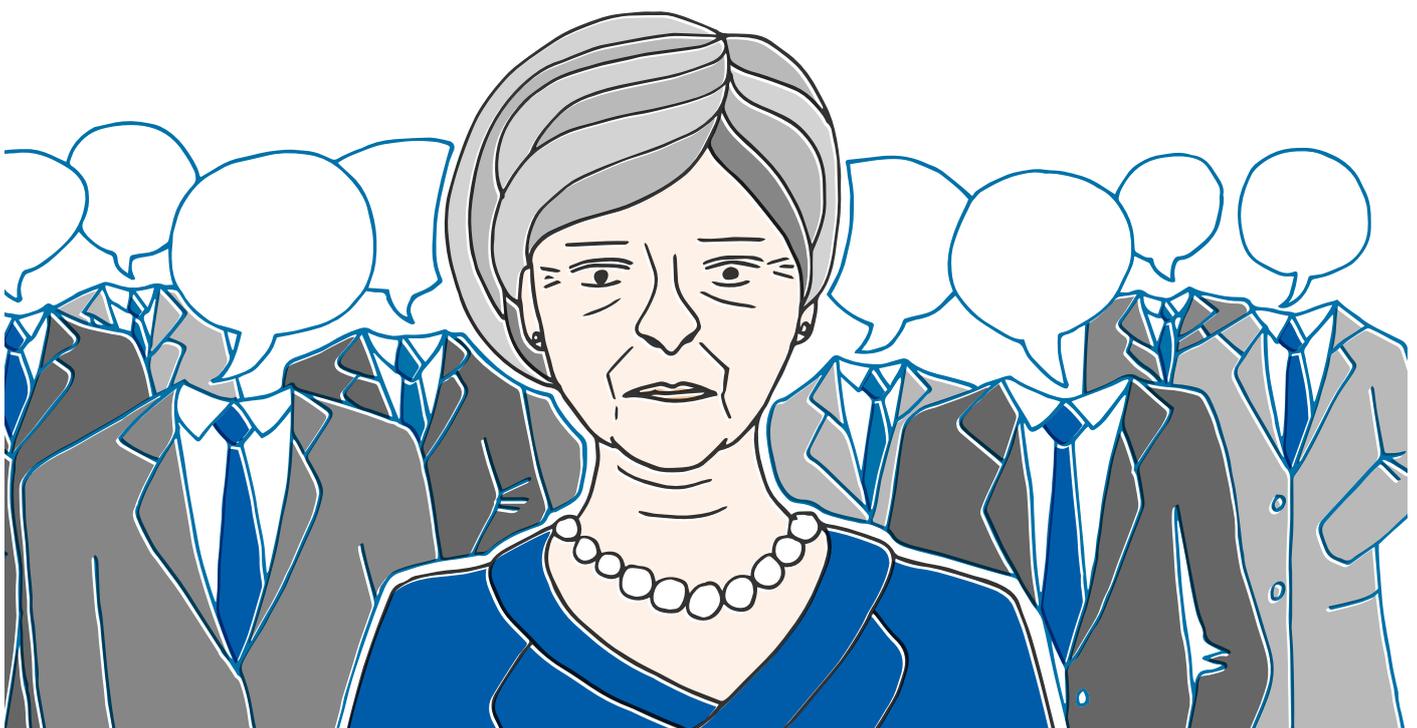
As a business owner, you need to bring people on a journey with you. You need to inspire and lead your team. May tried to do that, when she presented her deal at Chequers. But if they can't get on board with your plans, then they need to go – either to resign or be fired. Again, she has accepted the losses without batting an eyelid because she knows those people don't belong on the journey any more.

Watching Boris Johnson in his dogged pursuit of power has showed May in a new light. She's not putting on a show. She doesn't care what people think of her. She wants to do her best for this nation, no matter how much she suffers in the process. Our politicians should be in power to serve the nation, and not for personal gain.

In business, you are similarly committed to the health of your organisation. This is why you see entrepreneurs making huge personal sacrifices, even stepping down if they are no longer the right person to lead.

As a nation, we need to accept that May probably knows more about the ins and outs of Brexit than any of us do. She's had face-to-face meetings with all the major players in this saga. She's been in the thick of it for two long years. And she believes that this is the right course of action. When you run a company, you have to go with your gut feeling. At BigChange we have rules and process and governance but if I need to make a quick decision, I can.

I have met May once, and heard her speak, so perhaps I'm biased. She struck me as a very determined woman. Not the kind of person who does things on a whim. I feel that this is a turning point in the Brexit drama, where the nation gets behind her as a Prime Minister. At the very least, she has perhaps earned our respect as a leader.



Scouting the world's top start-up talent



When was the last time you packed a bag, said goodbye to the office, and went in search of the truly exciting new ventures that could change the world?

That's a trick question. I know that most of us are far too busy. And anyway, how would you know where to start? This is why I was honoured and delighted to be invited on a recent technology mission that made that dream come true.

Last week, I joined executives from MasterCard, British Airways owner IAG, and Citibank on a trip to Israel to meet some of the entrepreneurs building outstanding businesses there. The two and a half day trip started in Jerusalem and ended in Tel Aviv. It was a whirlwind tour, organised by UK Israel Business, packed with meetings and seminars designed to foster new trade links and show off the nation's top talent.

I must have met about 30 brilliant entrepreneurs over the course of the mission. I can honestly say it was one of the most inspirational things I've done in my life.

I'd like to tell you all a little about the people I met and the incredible ventures that I discovered on this journey. I hope that you too will feel inspired – and perhaps pack that bag and go in search of your own inspiration too.

The Startup Nation

Israel is an extraordinary startup ecosystem. With a population of just 8.7m, the nation achieves twice the level of startup investment than any other country in the world. The unique Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) model means that conscripts are trained in all kinds of skills that help spur innovation. Professor Eugene Kandel, chief executive of Startup Nation Central, explained to me that IDF also has an unusual approach to military training. People are encouraged to question the status quo and make suggestions. No one salutes his or her superiors in the Israeli army, so it's a hugely different culture. Crucially, soldiers are encouraged to develop their innovations once they leave the army, which helps explain why between 1,100 and 1,380 startups are established in Israel each year.

Tomorrow's healthcare giants

Dr Yossi Bahagon is the man behind Qure Ventures, a venture capital vehicle that aims to back the start-ups that will revolutionise healthcare. He told me about one new company, which will help

make virtual doctor's appointments even more useful. It has invented a medical device that doubles as a stethoscope and thermometer. In future, you'll be able to send your readings straight back to the doctor, over Skype, in real-time, to get a precise diagnosis. Imagine how much time and money that could save our NHS?

Then there was Ziv Aviram, whose hi-tech glasses are about to significantly improve the lives of the blind and visually impaired people across the world. The glasses can sense colour and describe the outside world to the user – they can even read a newspaper. Orcam Technologies is Aviram's second venture; he sold his first, Mobileye, to Intel for \$15.3bn.

When business trumps politics

Nothing saddens me more than the ongoing clashes between Israel and the Palestinian people, which is why I think the work of venture capital firm Sadara founded by an Israeli Jew and Arab Palestinian is so important to publicise. It's a \$30m fund that invests solely into Palestinian tech companies, helping to combat unemployment – in the West Bank & Gaza – and building links between the two. It has already made six investments and is backed by the likes of Google, George Soros and Cisco. This was an important reminder of the role business can play in international relations and helping to make the world a better place

As an entrepreneur, you only know your own business and your sector. This was a rare opportunity to step outside my comfort zone and see what brilliant innovations are out there. If you can, talk to embassies, trade bodies and start-up organisations and see if you too can take part in a delegation like this one. I promise you won't regret it.

These are just a handful of highlights from the trip. To find out more, drop me a line or visit <https://ukisrael.biz/>

Nailing business travel: an entrepreneur's guide

I am always on the move. Whether it's by plane, train or automobile, rarely a week goes by when I'm not travelling to some foreign country or new city.



This lifestyle has led to some pretty hair-raising situations over the years. On a trip to Bucharest in Romania a few years back, the cab driver rigged the meter to charge me double the going rate, and then proceeded to offer me every illegal drug under the sun, and tried to drive me to a brothel.

Last week, I caught an Uber in London. The driver was either drunk or under the influence of some other substance, and suffered from chronic road rage, getting into fights every passing motorist as he weaved in and out of traffic. If that wasn't bad enough, the car's warning lights were on. A message on the dashboard said clearly: "Check hybrid system. Stop the vehicle in a safe place." He just kept on driving.

Some of these horror stories were unavoidable: I was in the wrong place at the wrong time – or just unlucky. But it's got me thinking about some of the business travel hacks that I've picked up over the years, which either make journeys cheaper, easier or safer. Some, I wish I'd found out about years ago.

So here is my early festive gift to you all: a comprehensive list of all the tips I've found useful. May all your journeys be fruitful, safe and enjoyable.

Beware hotel booking platforms

As a VAT-registered business, BigChange is able to claim VAT back on certain expenses, such as booking hotel rooms for business trips. But platforms like Booking.com,

which is based in the Netherlands, do not allow you to claim back VAT. This means that even though you might get a 15% discount on your room, you're still out of pocket because that's less than the 20% VAT you can't claim. My tip? Find the room and hotel you want and then call the hotel and see if you can get the same rate. By booking direct, you could both land a discount and be able to make the VAT claim. Win, win.

Airport lounges

If you're a start-up founder, or you're bootstrapping your business, it's unlikely that you are flying first class when you travel. But this doesn't mean you have to miss out on the benefits of the airport lounge. For between £20 and £30, you can buy one-off access, and work in peace before your flight with proper wifi and a decent meal. When you arrive calm and refreshed for your meeting, you'll know it's worth it.

Get an Amex

Use your personal Amex for all your business purchases, and then claim it back, or get a dedicated business Amex. American Express lets you collect air miles as you spend, and these can come in useful for both business travel and the odd holiday. Best of all, these air miles don't count as a "benefit in kind" according to HMRC. Here's the paper on it, in case you don't believe me: <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/employment-income-manual/eim21618>

One colleague at BigChange has amassed over a million air miles to date. His top tip: only use the Amex for purchases where there's no card fee, otherwise you end up landed with unnecessary charges.

Credit, not debit

When you check in to a foreign hotel, never hand over your debit card at the reception desk. When they run their pre-authorisation transaction, sometimes putting as much as £400 on hold from your account, you then can't access that money. Even worse, when you come to pay for your room, the charge is processed on top of the pre-authorisation amount, and you may have to wait up to 10 days for that money to be unfrozen. That's fine if you have lots of cash but if you're not feeling so flush, you're better off using a credit card.

Never pay full whack for rail travel

If you haven't heard of split ticketing yet, this is your lucky day. On sites like raileasy.co.uk or trainsplit.com, you can plug in your journey details and it will charge you a fare that is up to 30% cheaper than booking direct. You can often travel first class for the same amount as a standard fare. It does this by allocating a series of tickets, rather than one direct fare. This means you may end up with as many as 12 tickets when you go to print out your order but it's worth the extra hassle of more tickets for the saving.

Disability perks

I recently found out that being hearing impaired (I have 70% hearing loss) entitles me and another person to 30% off our rail travel. You simply have to register for a disability card, and then you can access the saving. Apply here: <https://www.disabledpersons-railcard.co.uk>

I hope you've found these tips useful.

Anna, from Hungary, you're a customer service hero

On a flight back from Marseille last week, I experienced some of the best customer service of my career. It happened while flying EasyJet to London Gatwick.

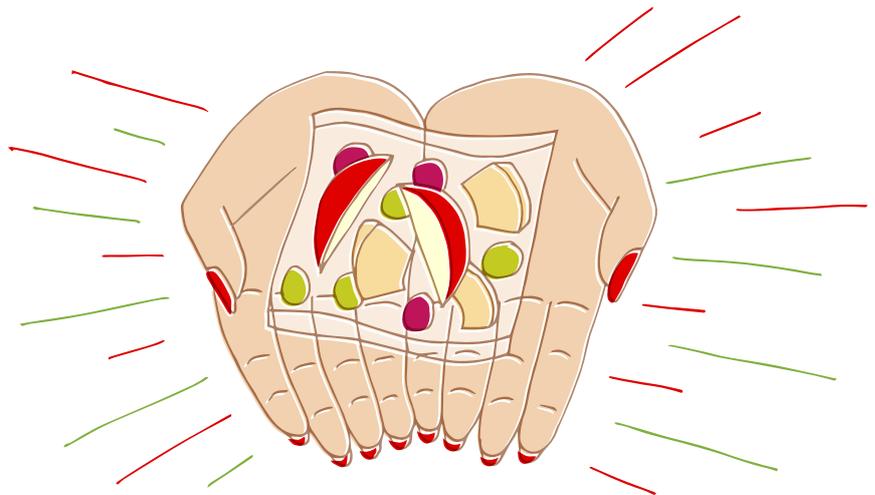
I wanted a snack but, as some of you may know, I'm on a diet <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/60-pounds-heavier-reality-being-start-up-founder-martin-port/>. When I scanned the menu, I quickly realised there was nothing healthy on offer. I called the stewardess over to complain. Her name was Anna and she was (rather fittingly) from Hungary.

I asked why there were no low-calorie options on the menu and she apologised and said that was all they had. Any other day, that would have been the end of it, and I would have gone hungry. But she returned a few minutes later, carrying a fruit pack with sliced apple and grapes. She'd taken it out of her own lunch box. She wouldn't accept any money for it.

This was an example of a tricky customer – me – asking for something out of the ordinary. I warned Anna when she came over that I wasn't going to be easy to please. She laughed and said there's no such thing as an easy customer these days.

The experience got me thinking about customer service, and how we at BigChange can go even further for our loyal customers. In this digital age, you must never say "no" to your clients, or ignore feedback. But it can be hard, as a medium sized business, to accommodate difficult requests.

For example, we are constantly looking to improve our mobile workforce management software. According to a recent Gartner report, 70pc of organisations will cite customer satisfaction as a primary benefit derived from implementing field service management by 2020, up from 50pc today. This is why we maintain an open dialogue with customers about the kinds of tweaks



they'd like to see implemented. We get a lot of praise for the system we've built but that doesn't mean we don't want to make it even better.

No two businesses are exactly the same, so we have compiled a wish list with about a thousand different ideas from across our customer base. We have an incredible development team that works wonders, considering our size, but we can't always action these tweaks as fast as we'd like.

This is a hard thing to communicate to customers. I recently intercepted an email from a colleague regarding one of their development requests. My colleague was polite but firm, telling the client that their request was unlikely to be actioned any time soon. I almost had a heart attack. I quickly responded, thanking the client for their feedback and saying instead that we consider all requests and will update them when their idea moves to the development phase. I added that if I could be of any further assistance, they shouldn't hesitate to email or call me.

We have lots of "Annas" here at BigChange and I want to help these stellar individuals to go the extra mile. This is why we have a new policy whereby a software development can be boosted to the top of the pile if customers vote to prioritise it. It's a way to help my people explain the development process, and help customers to feel engaged and involved along the journey. It's just another way to show that we're serious about customer service.

I learned about meeting unique customer demands the hard way. When I ran my craft bakery business, Kroustie, each order was slightly different. We baked rolls to order and some chefs liked them flat, some puffy, some dense, some light. This meant I had to divide up each batch to ensure each customer got exactly what they wanted. It was an important lesson in keeping everyone happy.

Just like those bread rolls, none of our BigChange customers are identical. We continually improve our service to suit their individual needs as we grow but it's an ongoing challenge.

I could write a book on this subject but I have an important task to complete. I need to go to EasyJet's website to write a letter of recommendation about Anna from Hungary. I'm hoping that her quick thinking and compassion will be recognised by the company, and that a promotion or bonus is on the way. After all, to truly build a great customer service culture, we need to help the Annas in all of our organisations.

She made a real impression on me. From now on, when faced with a tricky customer request, I will always ask myself: what would Anna do?

The BigChange year in review

As this year draws to a close, I'd like to post an update about all we've achieved at BigChange in 2018.

Our financial performance

I'm delighted to announce this has been another year of stellar growth for the company. Sales are up by an incredible 65% year-on-year and we now have more than 20,000 active subscribers on our platform.

We signed an impressive £16m-worth of new business contracts this year, which is bang on target. Our lack of customer churn also brings me great satisfaction. We have lost just 1.5pc of our JobWatch subscriber base in the last 6 years, which proves that we're consistently delighting clients existing and new. On average, we deliver a return on investment of £15 for every £1 spent.

Our sales performance has landed us some great awards. I was very proud that BigChange came 49th in the Sunday Times Tech Track this year. We are also one of Deloitte's Fast 50 yet again, a ranking of the fastest growing technology firms in the UK. As BigChange moves from start-up to scale-up, we've also managed to boost profitability by nearly 300% to hit £1.4m.

Charitable work

Building a profitable business has enabled BigChange to make significant charitable donations. We don't stick to a set figure each year but I like to give a minimum of 10pc of profit to great causes. This year, we managed to do a little better than that: we gave more than £200,000 to charity in 2018.

One of my personal highlights this year was visiting Zambia with Transaid back in March. BigChange is a corporate partner and I visited Serenje, where Transaid is doing life-saving work, improving road safety and facilitating the transport of crucial medicines. Bicycle Ambulances can now get people to medical centres quickly and easily, reducing deaths dramatically.

My time in Zambia reminded me to be grateful for all the blessings we take for granted. The people there live without luxury and yet were some of the happiest individuals I've ever met.

I've also loved working with racing driver Nic Hamilton on Leaders for Life www.bigchangeapps.com/leadersforlife, an initiative to help encourage road safety across the UK. I'm excited to sponsor him next year, as he moves into the next phase of his racing career.

Our people

We've expanded our team by 60pc to hit more than 100 people in 2018. I've been so impressed by the calibre of our new recruits, but it's also important to say that the colleagues who have been with us for years – some since day one – continue to flourish and learn new skills as the company grows. It's given me immense pleasure to see great people rise through the ranks here. Our office move ensures we have space for many new team members, as we start to work with larger and more complex customers. We have also now appointed a new head of HR, Sonal, who will help us to continue finding and hiring great people in 2019.

The future

The end of the year is a great time to reflect on all we've achieved but let me assure you, my feet are firmly on the ground. I'm already looking forward to 2019, and all our bold plans for growth. We're hoping to hit £25m in new contract wins next year, and we want to invest even more into charitable activities. We're expanding geographically all the time, and next year hope to announce a new presence in the US and Germany, as well as our operations in France, Israel and Cyprus.

Not all smooth sailing

This has been a tough year for me personally. I lost my mum recently, which hit the whole family very hard. As any entrepreneur will know, it's hard to grieve when you're also building a fast-growth company. My wonderful wife and children were a great comfort to me and encouraged me to cut down my working hours, which was the right thing to do. One of the most important lessons I've learned this year is

that family is precious, and we all need to do more to make sure we're making time for loved ones.

I was also very sad to hear of the passing of Jayne Gray, the Transaid fundraiser who was tragically killed during a charity bike ride in September. My thoughts are with her family.

A message to our customers and colleagues

I just want to say a massive thank you to all our loyal customers. Your support and feedback has been the secret to our success this year. I see you all as our partners rather than customers. I promise to keep doing all I can to make life easier for you, and help you ditch that inefficient paperwork, and cut down on all your plate spinning. That's the vision that underpins all we do here at BigChange.

To my incredibly loyal team: where to start? You've all gone above and beyond this year, and I'm so proud of all we've achieved together. I'm consistently impressed by the way colleagues go the extra mile. Even during tough times, everyone pulls together and treats every challenge as an opportunity to learn and improve. It's inspiring to be around you all.

And finally, thank you to all of you who have been following my posts on LinkedIn this year. I've loved hearing all your comments and feedback. Since I started this blog series, my posts have received more than 3,000 likes and shares. Thank you so much for the ongoing support.

That's all from me for now. Season's greetings to you all. Have a happy, healthy and prosperous new year.



The BigChange Collaboration Network

BigChange collaboration allows companies to allocate jobs to their partners, and it tracks all the paperwork, monitors issues like health and safety, takes care of billing and scheduling, and updates all parties on the progress of the jobs in real time – giving a sense of control and transparency.

Imagine that you run a plumbing company in Scotland. Your local customers love you and want to work with you on a nationwide basis, but you don't have the resources to take on contracts in Wales or down in London. Through BigChange, you can now collaborate with other plumbing companies in other areas and sub-contract out the work.

I can't overstate the potential of something like this. Small businesses can act like big companies – at the touch of a screen. They can reach an almost unlimited scale, bolting on other services and growing their empires. Think of the savings in travel costs if you could sub-contract out work at the other end of the country?

Virtual companies could be created, drawing on the expertise of other firms, using their sales and marketing expertise to grow and thrive.

UK businesses could expand overseas using this system – something that many entrepreneurs may find useful post-Brexit. You could find a contractor in Australia for your customer and watch the job being done in real-time.

In the past, collaboration like this has been bogged down in paperwork, email and endless phone calls. The mist falls over Paper Town and it's hard to know what's going on. With JobWatch, it's all clear and paperless, and your partners appear like an extension of your own firm. Your customers even see the same screen if they log into the booking portal to check which jobs have been completed. Your partner company invoices you, and you invoice your customer as usual – all through BigChange.

It's that easy.

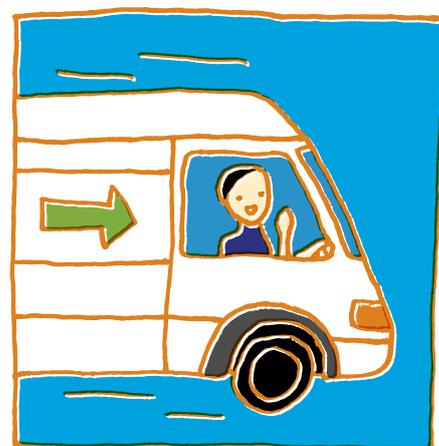
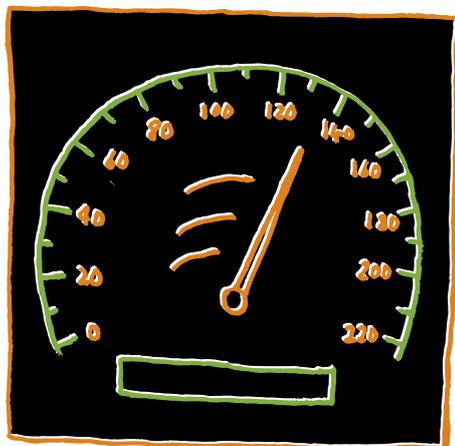
We don't charge our customers anything extra to collaborate, but we benefit because we believe that the collaboration feature will encourage more customers to join us. That's the beauty of a business like this: by focusing on making our customers more successful, we succeed too.

If you are interested in receiving more information on how you can expand your network please email info@bigchange.com for more information.



My 2019 scale-up secrets – revealed

This is going to be a big year for BigChange. The year we expand overseas. The year we double our turnover. The year acquisitions supercharge our growth. Taking your business to the next level is never straightforward so I'm sharing my three scale-up strategies to help anyone on the same journey.



1. Strategic acquisitions

Many companies tend to wind down over the holiday season but here at BigChange, we had a busy end to the year. We have made our first acquisitions as a company, buying two complementary businesses that will help us double revenues year on year.

The first, Labyrinth Logistics Consulting, is an award-winning supply chain, logistics and compliance consultancy. We also acquired Trace Systems, a creator of fleet, garage and workshop management software, which will be integrated into the BigChange system to make our platform even richer.

These businesses will give BigChange a strategic edge and neither distracts from our core market. We're still 100% focused on our platform, but these companies will help us deliver an even better service to our customers.

Acquisitions are a great way to scale faster with very little risk. These companies are both small – employing 10 people between them. That means that integration shouldn't be too difficult.

I have quite a lot of experience acquiring companies now, which means I know how to manage professional fees a bit better without reducing the quality of the advice. Make sure you know when you need to use a lawyer and accountant and when you don't. If you're not careful, doing deals can get crazy expensive.

My other tip for acquisitions is to make sure you have a great right hand man. That meant that I wasn't too distracted from the core business while the deals were being done, and also sped up the process. It took just three weeks from heads of terms being signed for the deals to be done.

2. Go international

We will open our first international office in Paris in February. We decided to create a European operations hub to both take advantage of the weak pound and mitigate Brexit risk.

We have recruited a French national to help expedite the European expansion. Our new VP for Europe, Frederic Dupeyron, will be our man on the ground. I've known him for over 10 years: he bought my previous company, Masternaut, so it's a wonderful twist that he is now coming to work with me at BigChange. There is no substitute for hiring local talent when expanding overseas: they understand cultural differences and tend to be much better at troubleshooting.

France is just the beginning for us. From this launch pad, we will move into Benelux, Germany and the Netherlands. Later this year, we'll move into the US and Asia. Australia comes next on the international roadmap. We don't know what's going to happen with the UK economy over the next few years so having an international outlook is a good way to hedge.

3. Get the basics right

I launched BigChange in 2013 and the company has grown organically since then, which has enabled us to build up our cash reserves. We've had to be patient to get to this point, where we can invest in new acquisitions and international growth. Scaling is expensive: we have invested in new acquisitions and a new international team. When you have cash in the bank, you can move quickly to take advantage of new opportunities.

In 2018, we turned over £11m, and – with these acquisitions – we're on course to hit £23m in 2019 – more than doubling revenues. Profitability will also double, which proves that our growth model works.

It's really important that we don't take our eyes off the ball here in the UK as we grow overseas. That's why we're investing in more sales and customer service colleagues right here. BigChange will employ 150 people by the end of this year.

As we grow, we also need to make sure everyone is moving in the same direction. This is why I just had a huddle with the team to explain the deals we've done, and ensure that everyone understands the transformation plan for this year. It's important that everyone keeps doing the basics right, and doesn't get distracted.

These three pillars make up our 2019 scale-up plan. If executed properly, BigChange should be a much bigger company by this time next year. Wish us luck!

Shooting the messenger has become a popular sport in customer service

People often assume that I am a disruptor and rule-breaker because I'm an entrepreneur. But here's the thing: I have a huge amount of respect for rules, and have always seen the value in process and order.

Rules exist for a reason. They are put in place for the benefit or safety of customers, and to protect companies and their employees. I was reminded of this recently, when I visited a hotel in the North East.

A member of staff brought out my bill to sign. I tried to explain that I observe the Sabbath, which means I couldn't use a pen. She was having none of it. It took a lot of self-control to keep my temper but I asked to speak to the manager and eventually they agreed to waive my signature.

At first I found the whole episode infuriating but then I realised how easily scammers could abuse the excuse of the Sabbath to get out of paying their bill. Of course the staff were wary. Especially as the bar attendant hadn't experienced this issue before and was unsure of the rules governing the Sabbath in Judaism.

At BigChange, we try to be as flexible as we can. When customers want something, we bend over backwards to accommodate them. But there are cases when we need to be intractable. For example, sometimes customers try to use our hardware without installing our software. We tell people till we're blue in the face that they need to install our platform to ensure it's safe, and running as it should be, but people love shortcuts, don't they?

We now have a rule in place, which states that customers who fail to use our software will not be covered by our warranty on the hardware. It's not been the most popular decision but it's important to stand by the rules that matter.

Entrepreneurs may challenge the status quo and shake up traditional structures but that doesn't mean we don't respect the rules. You need to have rules and process if you are going to build an efficient organisation.

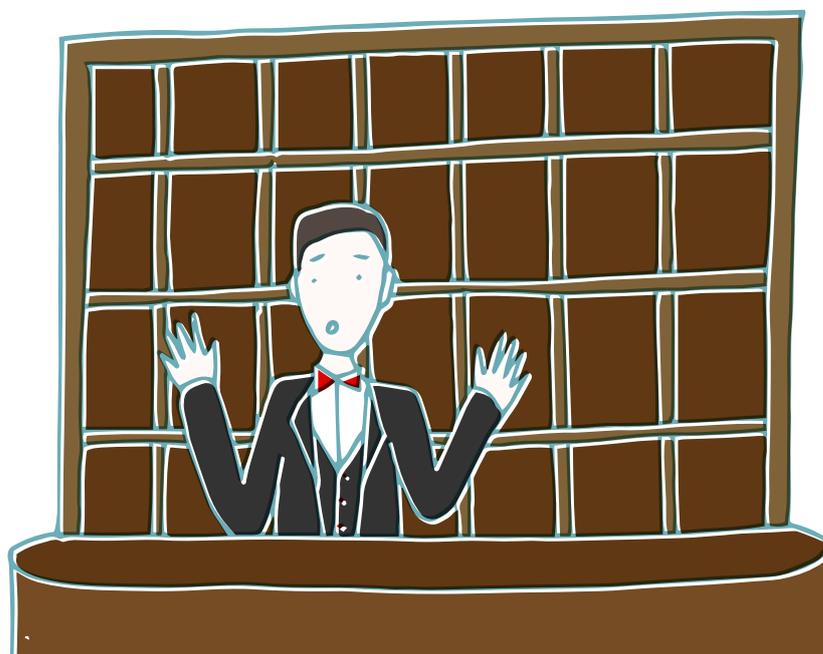
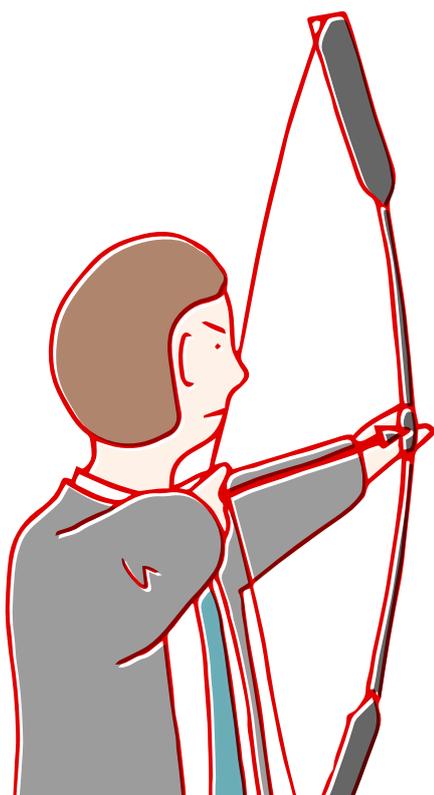
When I come up against a customer service wall in future, if I'm told that rules are rules, and there can be no exceptions, instead of losing my temper, I'm going to remember that it's not the employee's fault. They are just doing their job, and we, as customers, need to try and understand that.

In this age of "the customer is always right", this may be an unusual – even unpopular – perspective.

There should always be the option to escalate a grievance to the manager. And companies should be willing to revise rules if they are no longer fit for purpose or could be improved. But that's no excuse to take it out on the member of staff who is just trying to follow company guidelines. Don't shoot the messenger: there is usually a good reason you can't get your way.

In the meantime, I'm looking forward to the introduction of fingerprint recognition in hotels that works without electricity!

Agree with me? Think I'm completely wrong? Let me know your opinion in the comments.



Every entrepreneur needs vision



When I was a young entrepreneur, I used to be obsessed with the present. How's business right now? Are we hitting our targets? Have we solved immediate challenges?

But, having built several businesses, and listened (Audio) to hundreds of books on business and entrepreneurship, I've learned the error of my ways. To be truly successful, you need to look beyond the now. You need to have a vision.

Your vision is more than a goal or target. It's an aspiration that seems so far away that you may never get there. It's a bold plan that most rational people will scoff at, or say is impossible. Crucially though, it's a vision that has a clear path to achieve it. And you have to believe you can get there within five years.

At BigChange, I decided on my vision very early on. I wanted to create a platform that would allow service and transport companies anywhere to collaborate and win more business.

I knew that it was just the right level of ambitious because when I told people, they either didn't get it, or told me it wasn't possible. Yet here I am, just a few years later, and I'm so proud to announce that we have actually achieved that vision.

BigChange JobWatch Network platform is a seamless environment where two companies can work together to win more customers and deliver brilliant service. It enables our users all over the UK – or even the world – to work together on contracts,

share work, and find partners. It's a truly collaborative tool that creates a powerful network effect. Ultimately, it helps other entrepreneurs to be more successful. You can read more about JobWatch here. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/bigchange-collaboration-marketplace-martin-port>

This platform was finally launched on Thursday night, and within 48 hours, we had over 50 requests from our customers.

I have realised my vision.
It feels amazing.

What happens after all your dreams come true? You have to come up with the next vision, even bigger and bolder than the last.

I want BigChange to become the market leader in our industry, providing the technology that underpins the global service and transport industry. The number one choice for any gig economy business or firm that uses a mobile workforce. Making every economy we work in stronger through innovation and world-class service.

It's a big ask, but I truly believe that we can do it.

You have to have vision if you want to be successful. Importantly, you have to shout about your vision so that customers,

colleagues and partners all buy into that plan and that mission. I have signage all over my offices that explains where we're going and how we'll get there. I've done that at all of my businesses, and find that it focuses everyone's mind on the task at hand.

To achieve my new vision, we have to leverage the sole trader. We have to tap into the gig economy. We have to reassure consumers that we will provide them with a better level of service than they've experienced before. We need to disrupt our target markets. We also need to create a deeper connection between the work that needs to be done and the order jobs are completed, while boosting efficiency.

All of the world's most successful companies have vision. If I say, who wanted to build the world's supreme search engine? Or become the market leader in flat pack furniture? Or build the biggest consumer technology company in the world? I bet you can name all three.

I hope that, in three to five years, I will be able to post that we've achieved this latest vision.

In the meantime, please share your vision for your business. Let me see if I can help you on your way.

My entrepreneurial triumvirate

“Who’s in your orbit?”

The theory is that we are the average of the five people we spend the most time with. Look at the five people that are closest to you: can you spot their traits in yourself?

Firstly, my wife, Amanda Port nee Green. She is a savvy businesswoman in her own right. She grew up working in her family business, a menswear manufacturer. We got married 24 years ago and she has been my right hand in my last two businesses. At BigChange, she deals with marketing and inbound leads. She’s brilliant with people so these roles are a natural fit.

I’m so lucky that I met Amanda all those years ago. And not just because her advice is invaluable. Her two siblings are also entrepreneurial successes – and they have become great friends of mine.

Her brother Daniel Green is a serial entrepreneur. He sold one business to Moss Bros, the menswear giant, and another was acquired by Sky; he became the managing director of retail for BSkyB after that deal was done. He sold his last business, a solar panel company, to Aviva for around £100m.

Since then, he has become an angel investor: one of his investee companies was just sold to Centrica.

Karen Harris nee Green is also a serial entrepreneur. She set up Geronimo PR in 1999 and sold that for £11m. Her next company Karen was involved in sold to the Economist in 2012. Then Karen went on to build the world’s first virtual shopping centre which she sold to Intu PLC and Karen is now Managing Director of Intu’s Digital arm.

These three inherited not only their entrepreneurial flair from their parents but also they are all extremely charitable working hard for great causes and I have benefitted from their combined genius. They are all great listeners and always make time to hear problems and give advice. Success generates a halo effect.

I’m grateful to have such a powerful sounding board so close at hand. It’s important that all of us recognise how important our nearest and dearest have been to our success. My entrepreneurial journey would have been a lot harder, packed with many more mistakes, without these people. I want to take the time to thank them for all they’ve done.

Who’s been supporting your entrepreneurial dreams? Is it time to recognise their contribution too? Tell me who has been the wind beneath your wings.



“How do you work with your wife, Martin?”

Last week, I wrote about the power of surrounding yourself with entrepreneurial people. I'm lucky to have some seriously talented and successful family members around me, supporting and advising me at every step of my journey. This week, I'd like to focus on one of these people: my wife, Amanda.

We have been together nearly 25 years and she has been a driving force behind the success of both my businesses. Yet people still ask me: “How do you work with your wife?” as though working together would put a strain on our relationship.

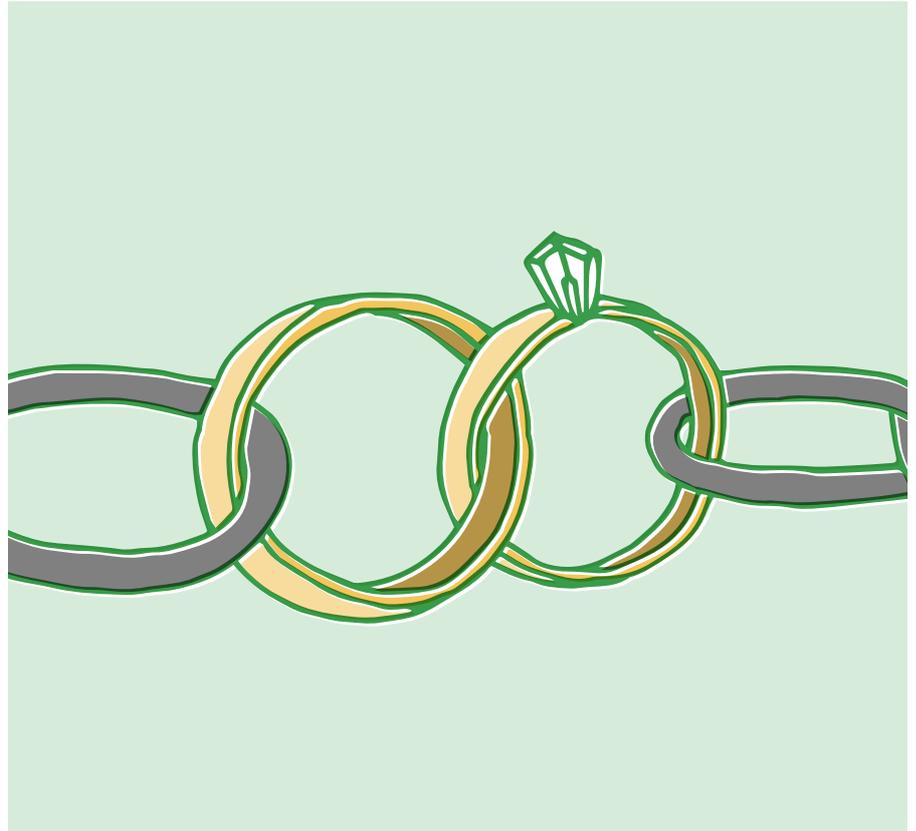
The fact is that I could not have been nearly as successful without Amanda by my side. This is because of her flair for business, but also because she has taken so much responsibility for our family life.

At BigChange, I never have a big idea that I won't bounce off Mandy first. She's a good listener and often sees a new or unusual way for me to realise my scheme. I make better decisions with her on my team. She's a voice of reason when I'm losing my head.

According to Amanda, our relationship mirrors that of her parents, who were also entrepreneurs. She says: “My parents were very much ‘yin’ and ‘yang’: my father more fanciful and open to ideas; my mother more practical and commercial. I think we share those traits.

“We both bring something different to the table. When we discuss an idea, I am more sceptical initially. We'll go back and forth discussing the pros and cons, sometimes quite forcefully, and eventually we'll find the way forward. You are very driven, always thinking of new ideas, new ways to market. My job is to filter them.”

She's also a keen cost-cutter, and keeps me in check when I have ideas that are too expensive or risky. She's a very good judge of character, which helps me when



I'm recruiting people or doing deals with prospective partners. She always knows when someone is worth doing business with.

When it comes to our home life, she gives me the ability to work long hours by managing the family. We have four children and she provides the stability for them when I'm travelling around the UK or further afield. That has been crucial in maintaining harmony at home. It has been tough at times.

When I asked Amanda whether our kids have ever felt hard done by, she reminded me of this story: “We were once on holiday in a hired car driving to the beach when our kids started screaming at us. I turned to ask what the problem was... “If you talk about work once more, we're going home” said our daughter. “We're sick to death of it.” We hadn't even realised that we'd been discussing work for the entire journey! I must admit it's hard for us to switch off. We have to make a conscious decision not to talk about work sometimes.”

It's amazing watching Amanda juggling family and work; she does the same hours as everyone else but she's often making

calls in the evenings or early mornings instead of during traditional business hours.

I find her attitude inspiring. When I ask her where her worth ethic comes from, she told me: “I think the most important business lesson I learnt from my parents was that ‘Nothing comes from nothing’. It's a quote from King Lear, and means to be successful in life you need to work hard. There are no short cuts. My parents acknowledged and admired hard-working people who had become successful in their own right. My mum would say as long as you are willing to work you will never starve.”

When people ask me whether they should go into business with their spouse, I always say, ‘Go for it’. It was the best decision I ever made. Amanda (thank goodness) agrees: “I think the secret to a successful husband and wife team is respect. I think we both know that we are very different but we recognise and respect each other's strengths and opinion's. Ultimately, our family is everything to us and we would never jeopardise that.”

The BigChange entrepreneurs' club

Sometimes, in the service and transport sectors, your best customers can be your toughest critics. They are your super users, testing your technology to its limits. They have thousands of ideas for improvements, and little patience for development cycles.

How do you make sure these super users feel valued, and harness their enthusiasm for your service? I think I have the answer.

I have just created a new club for these elite customers. It's a forum where they can meet and discuss ideas with fellow like-minded business owners. I have called it the BigChange Entrepreneurs' Club.

The club will meet once a month but members will only attend once a quarter. No one likes meeting fatigue! At these roundtables, we will discuss business challenges and swap tips. The idea is to both share BigChange's journey with our most valued clients and to help them reach their business goals. Win win!

At each session, a business coach – our BigChange Entrepreneurs Chair – will host the proceedings and ensure that

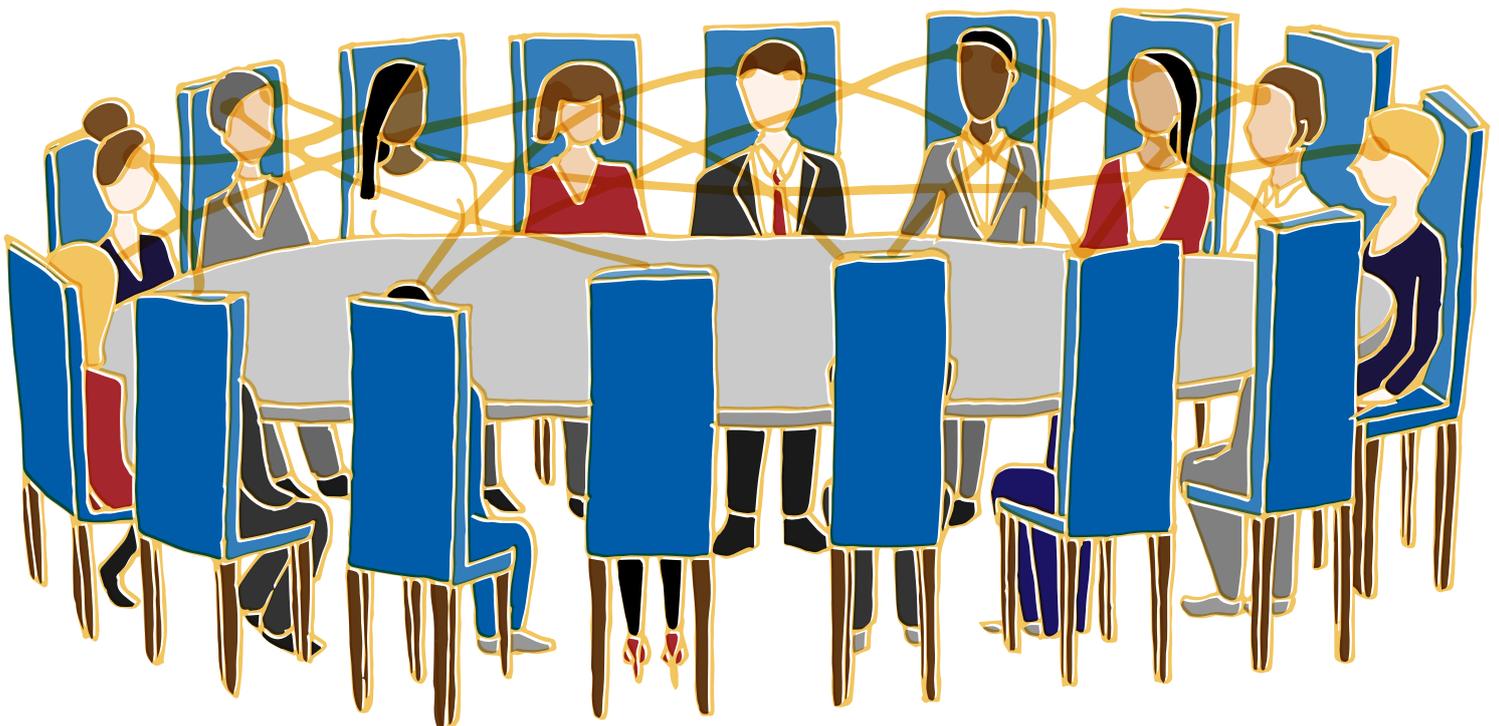
everyone gets the most out of the day. We want business owners to feel free to talk about barriers to growth, and really challenge each other. We will ensure that all attendees hail from different industries so there will be no risk of running into a competitor.

I've been inspired by the American entrepreneur clubs, which offer a ready-made business network. Those groups will charge you £4,000 a pop for the privilege while ours is free.

I have big plans for my monthly event. I want to bring in speakers and mentors and coaches to help attendees learn new skills and broaden their horizons. To start with, we will have about 100 members in the club. I hope it will grow in size and scope over time.

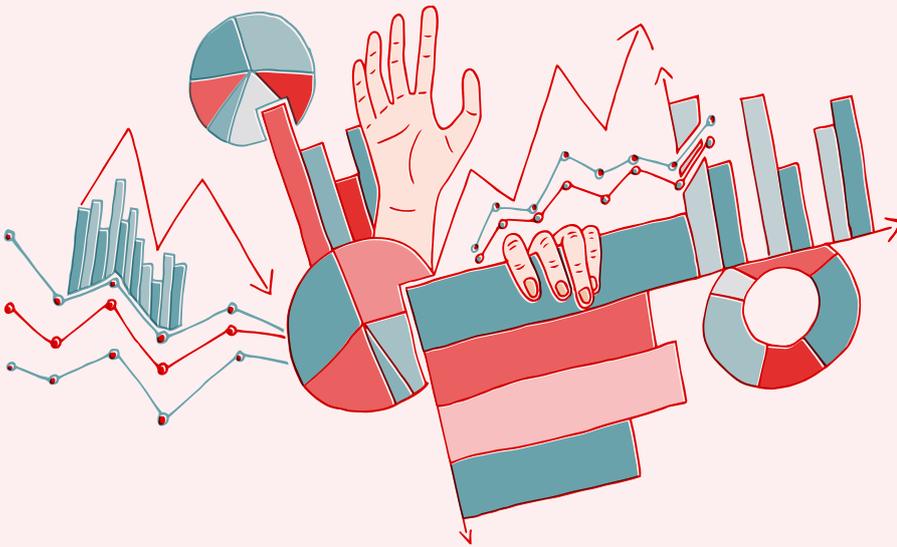
Of course, BigChange will ultimately benefit from the creation of this club. Members will become evangelists for the company, spreading the word about us to their networks. And as they become more successful, we will grow with them. This is the ethos behind BigChange: the more we help you, the more you help us. It's a virtuous circle.

If you wish to join the BigChange Entrepreneurs Club please email events@bigchange.com



Don't let the data junkies destroy your business

Meetings are a necessary evil. They take up a lot of time, and can be an excuse for people to talk a lot while saying very little. Yet they remain fundamental to keeping on top of your business' performance. How else can you share important information with the people who are driving the company forwards?



I have spent a lot of time in meetings, and almost as much time trying to work out how to make meetings more effective. Finally, I think I've cracked it.

One of the greatest strengths and the most debilitating weaknesses of the modern age is our ability to collect data on anything and everything. This data is then poured into PowerPoint presentations and delivered, slide after slide, at management meetings.

I've lost count of the number of three-hour meetings I've sat through, as each person shares their KPIs or whatever other metric is the flavour of the month.

Don't get me wrong. I understand how crucial it is to collect and analyse data. BigChange is built on the understanding that we will harness customers' data and use those learnings to improve their efficiency and customer service. But there is a fine line between using data to make smart decisions, and letting data drown those decisions.

Time and time again I see data used as a smokescreen in meetings: a way to prove that someone is aware of a problem, while allowing them to avoid actually thinking of a solution. Individuals will come to a

meeting with an agenda as long as my arm, listing 20, or 30, opportunities or problems. The following week, they're back, touting the same list, with only one or two items completed, and another 10 to add to the pile.

It's time to stop letting the data manage us and start managing the data.

I have come up with the solution.

1. Exceptional reporting

It is important to review the data but I'm not interested in hearing the numbers unless you're presenting exceptions. To explain: when you review your bank statement, you're not interested in the regular outgoings that don't change month to month – rent, your morning coffee, etc. You are interested in the unusual activity. The big bills that were unexpected. Or the sudden boom in earnings. Those are the details you need to study in order to repeat or avoid a trend. As a business, I want to know if I'm not on forecast. I can't rewrite the past so I need to know what I must do to avoid x, or make y happen, in the future. Department managers need to review the data and make sure the patient's heart is beating at right rate, reporting only erratic behaviour.

2. Start the timer

Management meetings must last no longer than an hour. Any more than that and people's eyes start to glaze over. By setting a time limit, we force everyone to be succinct and to prioritise the issues that are most important. If you don't raise it in time, you are out of luck.

3. Slash the agenda

Everyone is allowed to promote a maximum of two ideas or things causing them pain. Those issues must be dealt with within an agreed period of time. You can't raise the next issue until you've completed the outstanding tasks. Don't bring five things to discuss at a meeting because it's impossible to deal with that volume of problems at once. No company can do that. And then you see people returning with the same problem, again and again, like Groundhog Day. Teams only have a certain capacity to change each week or month, so you can't hurl millions of ideas their way and expect them to instantly adapt anyway.

This new approach to meetings and data could have huge implications for BigChange. If you complete just one task a week, that's 50 improvements to the company over the course of a year. That's huge.

The team here is on board with this new approach and everyone is excited to see whether we can deliver some incredible results. Wish us luck – and share any of your data/meetings hacks.

Call me old-fashioned but I love a suit



BigChange is a technology company, so many people assume that my colleagues and I come to work in jeans and a hoodie. We don't. This isn't the West Coast of the US and I am not an 18-year-old coder who lives on Huel and Pop Tarts.

BigChange is a technology company, so many people assume that my colleagues and I come to work in jeans and a hoodie. We don't. This isn't the West Coast of the US and I am not an 18-year-old coder who lives on Huel and Pop Tarts.

In fact, I'm still a stickler for the suit. If any of my colleagues in sales or customer service are meeting clients or attending any kind of external meeting, I expect them to dress formally. A suit or smart outfit is mandatory; ties, for men, are optional.

Just one in 10 men now wear a suit to work, according to research by Travelodge. That's an enormous shift from the 80s and 90s when every professional I knew wore one. This study said that 70pc of respondents felt more comfortable in their own clothes. I get it: suits are more confining than a t-shirt and chinos. But, in my opinion, it's worth it for the gravitas that comes with wearing a suit.

I realise this may make me sound old-fashioned but I believe dressing smart is a way to show respect – respect for your customer, your company, and yourself. Things got a bit out of hand here recently when I realised people were wearing t-shirts and jumpers to meet customers. I don't care if the person you are meeting runs a plumbing firm and turns up in overalls. You are my representative when you go to meetings and you will be suited and booted.

I am in the minority these days. The FT recently reported that even Goldman Sachs has relaxed its dress code, and allows its people to wear smart/casual attire.

It is getting harder and harder to police my dress code rules. Many of my colleagues aren't based in the office full-time – they are on the road, selling. I'm thinking of asking every remote worker to submit a time-stamped selfie every morning to prove

they are dressed to impress. Overkill? Sure I don't mind if people wear smart casual clothes to work if they aren't meeting clients... But then what about the times that last-minute meetings are scheduled? Or when you find yourself sitting opposite a prospect on the train and you're in old jeans? That is just unacceptable.

'Casual Friday' is an American import and it looks like informal work attire is the latest trend that we've adopted from the US – but this isn't America. Can you imagine if they relaxed the dress code at Wimbledon and allowed players to wear jogging bottoms in any colour? Those tennis whites denote professionalism and respect.

Am I the only one who still believes the suit belongs in the workplace? Let me know what you think

When was the last time you visited your shop floor?

I don't have to read the FT to know that M&S' sales are in trouble. You can judge the health of any business from its shop floor. So when I visited the M&S flagship store in Marble Arch and found myself in the dirtiest, dingiest changing room I have ever seen, I knew that the chain was struggling.

I had gone in to buy a suit and was shocked by the state of the place. I talked to a sales assistant and asked why the changing area was so filthy. She apologised but was clearly not too fussed about the issue. So I found a manager and asked him what was going on. He was appalled and promised the issue would be sorted.

There was a massive disconnect between the management and the shop floor staff at that branch – and the business has suffered for it. Lo and behold, when M&S published its annual results back in November, clothing sales were down.

When was the last time you spent some time on your shop floor? You don't have to physically own shops – this just means spending time with your frontline employees. I run a clinic, where I spend

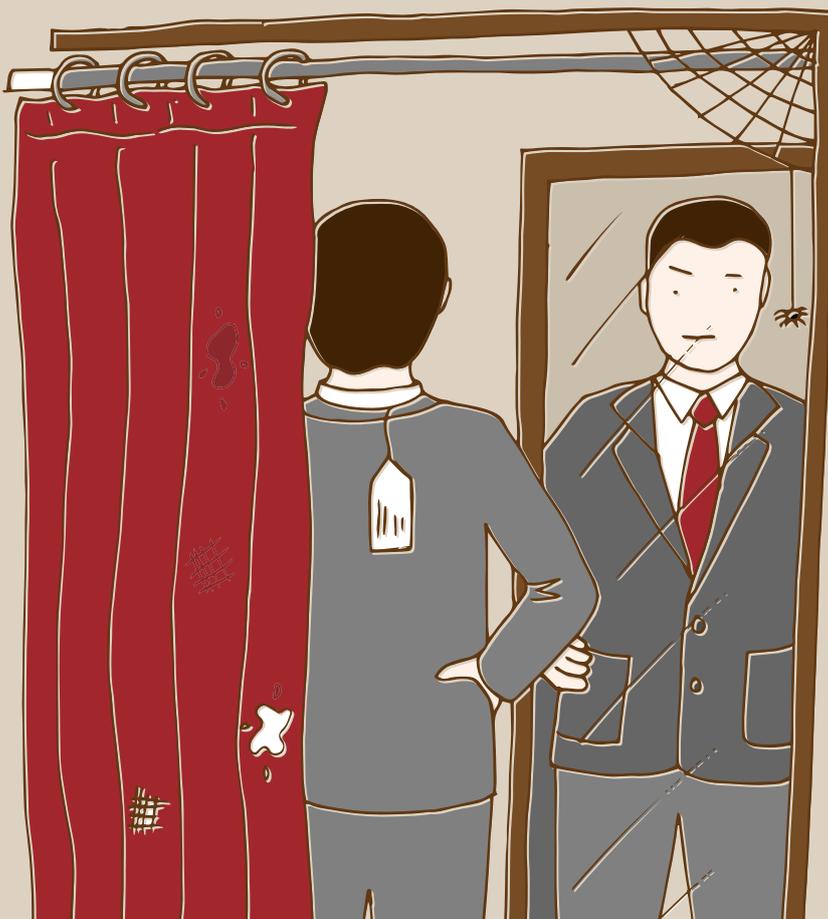
20 minutes with people from all over the business. Some days I'm with customer service, another day sales or software development.

There is absolutely no substitute for speaking to these colleagues. They will tell you things that your managers can't or won't. It's the only way to truly judge what's going on at the coal face and understand what your customers see when they interact with your company.

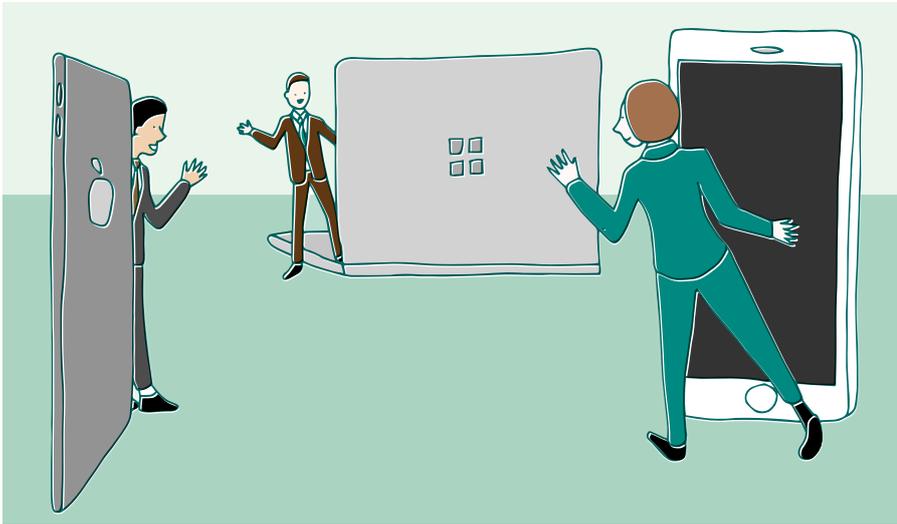
I have spent a lot of time in many departments sitting with team members and helping to identify bottle necks, improvement opportunities and also ways of streamline activities. You can have the best technology, but you must complement this with humans. Take everyone on the journey with you get everyone being leaders.

The key to generating insights – insights that could ultimately make or break your business – is to formalise the process. Host clinics like mine every Friday – that's the day when most people like to unwind before the weekend, so they're more chatty than usual. Be respectful of people's opinions – hear them out. Most importantly, promise confidentiality. People won't talk to you if they think you'll reveal your conversations to their colleagues.

Do this, and believe me, you'll save yourself hundreds of thousand in consultancy fees. As your business grows, this process will also help you keep your feet on the ground and your mind focused on what's important. What are you waiting for?



Advice that will supercharge your business - and it's free



I'm the guy that's all about face-to-face communication. I am always telling my fellow business owners to get out from behind the screen and go talk to their customers and colleagues. But I know also how hard it is to make time for those kinds of interactions. So imagine how happy I was when I held the first Network event for BigChange customers (find out more about the network here [Join the BigChange Network](#)) and found it to be every bit as useful as I'd hoped.

The event brought together 30 of our customers, and was facilitated by Kevin Keegan OBE, the former England football player manager. He is very business-focused, and did a stellar job creating a feel-good factor in the room. Everyone introduced themselves and their businesses and talked about how their sales have grown since adopting BigChange. It was so validating to hear these stories, and to hear what everyone loves – and what they would change – about our offering.

I can't reveal the insights that our customers shared about their businesses, because the event took place under Chatham House rules, but I can tell you how these conversations have influenced the future strategy and direction for us. It was, honestly, one of the most valuable interactions I've had for a long while.

The new BigChange charter

One of the concerns that customers raised was around trust. How can they trust that if they collaborate with other businesses on our system, the contractor won't steal that client. There is also the fear that the work might be inferior, or unprofessional. This is why we are looking to introduce a code of conduct, the BigChange charter, to hold users accountable. We are about to hire a Network Director, who will draw up this charter and make sure that all our customers understand the rules of play, in order to get the most out of BigChange and the JobWatch system. I am delighted to tell customers that they can now have absolute trust in our system, because any abuses will lead to special measures. This way, every individual and company on JobWatch can focus on collaborating and growing their revenues with confidence.

The mighty sole trader

To date, BigChange has been focused on working with companies and over the coming year, I was planning to target larger corporations too. But our network event has shown me that we also need to make sole traders a priority as well. The gig economy is enormous, and many of our customers use sole traders and freelancers, so we will be reaching out to more independents. For example, there are currently 150,000 gas engineers in the UK; 75,000 of them are one-man bands. We want them on our network. To help bring companies and sole traders together, our BigChange app – which will launch soon – will act like a modern Yellow Pages, helping businesses and users book jobs with registered and vetted engineers.

Boost the buying power

Procurement is a massive issue for any growing company. You want the best deals, and you want them now. We have 1,000 customers - with combined revenues of £59bn, 142,000 employees, and an average business age of 20 – on our system. That is a lot of buying power. We want to help our customers to club together for deals on everything from insurance to vehicle rental and fuel. It's the next frontier for JobWatch and will be another major benefit of our collaborative system. It will also be another reason for customers to recommend BigChange to their suppliers, clients and contacts.

These three major changes to BigChange's business plan have all come out of a single network event. I can't wait for our future meet-ups. Who knows what I'll learn next!



Yorkshireman Martin Port, 56, is a serial entrepreneur, philanthropist and business advisor. He founded his first business, the bakery chain Kroustie, 30 years ago before making the switch to technology, founding telematics firm Masternaut in 2002.

After selling this firm in a multimillion-pound deal, in 2011 he started BigChange, a Leeds-based technology start-up that helps companies plan, manage, schedule and track their mobile workforce. BigChange is now profitable, boasting over 20,000 users and employing 100 people.

Sales grew 65% in 2018, taking turnover to £11m, and securing the company a place in the Sunday Times Tech Track and the Deloitte Fast 50. Martin is also an angel investor and a supporter of many charities; the business donated £250,000 to worthy causes last year. He lives in Leeds with wife Amanda and his four children.

