



# MEET MR SPOC...

Sam Hawcroft talks to Martin Lauer, founder of rapidly growing Hull IT and telecoms company The One Point.

It's often said that Hull is a bit of a student trap – that is to say, many people who come to study here like the city so much that they stay, put down roots and are eventually lucky enough to call themselves naturalised Hullensians. Martin Lauer is among them.

Originally from Warwickshire, Martin arrived in Hull 25 years ago to do a degree in fine arts – one of his many passions outside the world of technology. He achieved first-class honours and two years later founded Hull's first contemporary art gallery, Red (this grew into the Red Contemporary Arts organisation that was picked to be part of Hull City of Culture 2017). And, while business leaders often talk of talent leaving Hull for bigger cities such as London and Manchester, Martin is a great example of someone who did the opposite.

"People generally find that quite interesting," he says, "in that a lot of

people complain that talent leaves the city, and businesses don't set up here. But I chose to come here, and I fell in love with the area – I'm a bit of an ambassador for Hull, really. I am always promoting the good in the region, trying to change perceptions."

After graduating, Red Gallery was really Martin's first business initiative, though he didn't see it as such at the time. He says: "It relied on funding, it relied on organisation, it relied on business plans, the bank and things like that. Just because it was not for profit, I'd never considered it a business."

Where does the technology bit come in, I wonder... how does a fine arts graduate end up running a leading IT and telecoms business? It all began for Martin at the time of the dotcom boom, in the early 2000s, when the worldwide web exploded into mainstream use and hundreds of internet firms sprang up as a result. Martin worked

for various companies, commuting to Leeds, Manchester and London, although he never moved away from Hull.

"That was where my creativeness met technology," he says. "And as a result, I started selling the idea of the internet, solving problems and developing online products. This was back when the internet was a new thing 20 years ago, we used to spend a lot of time trying to convince businesses and investors who said the internet would never catch on. To think now that I run a technology business that thrives as a result of the internet and connectivity...."

As many of our featured entrepreneurs tell us, Martin's journey into business "kind of happened by accident". During the dotcom boom, he was working for the magnate Giles Clarke whilst at StepStone, who is perhaps best known as a former chairman of the England and Wales Cricket ►

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Board and one-time owner of PetsMart. But where there's a boom, there's usually a bust (and we're not talking the alabaster kind). It was the era when, Martin remembers that, "one minute you were employing loads of people and taking receipt of low-loaders full of BMWs, and the next you're sitting down with them and making them redundant".

Despite being moved from venture to venture and always being "the last man standing", there came a time when Martin had had enough. His first wife was pregnant with their first child, and he needed to look out for himself and his family first. "At that stage I felt that I needed to back myself," he says. "I'd always been successful for other people, so now I decided that I wanted to become self-employed. So that's what I did – and the rest is history, as they say."

His company's first trading name was The Mobile Point, focusing, as you may have guessed, on mobile phone services, initially. But as their reputation grew, customers were asking Martin whether he'd consider providing wider telecoms services in the Hull area – and here we approach the elephant in the room... KCOM.

Except it's not, really. Martin points out that The One Point works in close partnership with KCOM, and the only thing his company has ever relied on KCOM for is connectivity in the ground – but this, he says, is simply an "enabler" – no different from, say, the many train operators that use Network Rail's lines, or the bus companies running services on the city's roads. "We've managed to break the perception that there was only one supplier in Hull and East Yorkshire," he adds.

Off the back of the telecoms expansion came a move into general IT services (networks, servers, computer maintenance), again by customer demand. This prompted Martin to draw together all of his sub "brands" – the Mobile Point, the Telephone Point, the Tech Point, etc – and The One Point was born, doing what it said on the tin, being a single point of contact, or SPOC (not to be confused with the pointy-eared Star Trek character), for all of a business's IT and telecoms needs. Refreshingly, there is still just one local phone number that customers can call for help with any aspect of their services. "We want to be easy to do business with," he says, "which is why it's one company, one number, a single point of contact."

"We've always been customer-first," adds Martin, "and we've always been leading edge, not bleeding edge. I think there are a lot of technology firms that want to be on the bleeding edge all the time, in that they want to have the latest this, the latest that – but really, your average business isn't ready for it. If you're a widget factory, you want to make sure that you're dishing out widgets, not dealing with software compatibility issues every five minutes. So, we've always been leading edge, we've always been mobile first, and cloud first – and we've always focused heavily on security."

The One Point now employs more than 50 staff directly, and it also has offices in Gateshead and Barnsley. "We're growing at a fast pace," says Martin, adding that the company is investing in subsidiaries and a software business. "We plan on growth, which will continue to be organic, but we are looking at acquisitions as well. Those will be done in a controlled fashion to make sure that we don't leave any customers behind."

Martin is keen to stress these values extend to his staff, too. "Our ethos of 'helpful, responsive and trusted' sum up how we feel and how we behave – and also how we behave internally. We spend a lot of time and resource on our people. I'd be surprised if many companies are spending as much as we do on staff development and wellbeing."

As the company has grown seven-fold, I wonder what that has been like for Martin personally – it's a tricky thing to maintain a happy ship when you're taking on more and more hands. "One of the things I've learned," ►



he says, “is you don’t hire somebody for their skills and then tell them what to do. You’ve got to let go to grow. Allow other people to flourish, and surround yourself with bright people. I came to realise that I didn’t have to be involved in everything. I do a fair bit of business mentoring, and quite often people will prepare three or four pages of everything they do. And I say, yes, but what one thing would see you go bust or get sacked if you stopped doing it? Why have you got a list of 50 priorities when you’ve only really got one or two – why don’t you just focus on those? I think people like to think they’re always busy – but being effective is what matters.”

A further boost to the business came in late 2016, when The One Point took up residence, alongside sister company IT@Spectrum, at the new Bridgehead Business Park in Hessle, giving the company more room to accommodate its ever-expanding team. “We are still innovating, and we’re not complacent,” says Martin, “and we’re going to see a lot more people in the building over the coming months. We pride

ourselves on always doing the right thing.”

Speaking of doing the right thing, this leads me nicely on to the company’s charitable work. This goes back about a decade when Martin was approached by Jim Dick and Andy Barber to help support the Smile Foundation, of which The One Point was a founding partner – but he always had the dream of setting up his own foundation. And so, 18 months ago, The One Point Foundation was born.

Martin adds: “Every year we get a set of annual accounts that determines the performance of our business financially – but we also now run a set of social accounts, which measures our impact as an organisation on our local social environment. We have a set of objectives, which mean that we’re always busy out in the community, whether that be in schools, bringing schools into the KCOM Stadium to work with Run With It, or to Hull Truck Theatre to see shows.” The One Point team also take part in regular charity challenges, and back in November, along with team members Danny and Ben, Martin completed

the 80-mile Hardwolds Ultra-Marathon (“that’s 80 miles, not kilometres,” he stresses), raising funds for the foundation – and to date they’ve distributed more than £20,000 to good causes in the local area.

Martin is constantly looking ahead – he has a five-year rolling business plan, and says that if he hits his targets, the company will be more than double its current size. “The smaller you are, the easier it is to double,” he says, “but we’re now getting quite big – and to think that I’m still talking about doubling that again... It’s exciting. I get out of bed every morning and am excited about the challenges ahead.” He admits there have been dark days – these come with the entrepreneur territory – but, as he politely paraphrases Churchill, “when you’re going through hell, just keep going”.

He tells me he still has time to regularly play in a band – Hull covers outfit the Skylarks – as well as visiting art galleries now and then, he was instrumental in the rescue of North Ferriby FC last year, and he’s a big family man, too. How he fits it all in is anyone’s guess... ●



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