



CAREER LIFE STORIES

S1E2

Interview with

Johnny Campbell

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Presented and Produced by Nick Price

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Interview with Johnny Campbell, hosted by Nick Price

Nick: [00:00:00] I'm joined today by Johnny Campbell. Johnny is the co-founder and CEO of social talent an online learning platform that is being used in 90 countries by more than 1000 companies and 70,000 recruiters. The path to the success of the business has not always been an easy one.

[00:00:15] In this interview, we learn what has driven Johnny in his life and career and how his tenacity and resilience along with the support of his family and his business partner, Vince being has enabled them to create a globally renowned company that has shaken up the world of online learning and recruitment.

[00:00:28] It's a pleasure to introduce, Johnny Campbell.

Nick: [00:00:34] Johnny, tell me a little bit about growing up, what was that like?

Johnny: [00:00:38] It was fun. Like most kids, I grew up in a family of six: four kids. I am the second youngest, older brother, two sisters. I had a happy childhood. We had our troubles like everyone else, my Dad worked for himself and didn't always have work. Worked in construction, tarmac and sometimes there was work and sometimes there wasn't work. And my mother had to go into work, when I guess I was probably about nine or ten and she'd go get a job and try and bring in the income and from then became probably the main breadwinner for a while and I went into work with her, she used to merchandise in shops. As a ten year old I would run and help my Mum after school and she'd pick us up and yes, so I kind of loved that, I loved being busy. You know, I had this dream of being a businessman, when I was younger I always thought I want to have a job with a briefcase. That was it. By 11 I got my first job in my local video store. I used to hang around the video store, we couldn't afford a video player. Nobody could then and we used to rent one on the odd Friday night, it was an indulgence back in the day and I just used to go up the video shop when I was out of school and just hang around and watch the videos they were showing. And eventually, the woman who owned the shop took pity on me and said 'Do you want to help out tomorrow night'? And that was it, I was 11, that was my first job I started helping out three, four days a week in the video shop and I was known, am still known by anyone who comes from the area that I'm from, as the video shop boy. You'd come into me, I was 14 and you'd ask me what recommendations I'd have. I've seen every film that was released in the 80's and 90's. Umpteen times. But yes, that was my first job.

Nick: [00:02:24] You're someone now that I think comes across as having a lot of energy. Have you always been like that?



Johnny: [00:02:29] My teachers hated me. The odd teacher loved me, but I was disruptive. I'd try and be the class joker. I'd give lip back to my teachers. I just constantly tried to be talking and buzzing, but I've always liked the limelight and you've got to have energy if you want to be somebody who likes the limelight and likes to be the centre of attention on things like that and I liked that. I loved the buzz of being a 12 or 13 year old that people would ask for video advice, adults in the video shop and that I've always worked for customers in that way, like I've always been from 10, I was out with my Mum working in shops and you'd be stocking milk on shelves and people would ask you different questions, you'd have to talk and in the video shop you obviously have to converse all night long, all day long with people. Into, by I'd say by my mid teens, I had seven jobs, seven employers. I was getting up on my racer and cycling to the local Tesco to stock milk before school. I'd go to school, leave school, stock bread and crisps in another shop and all those jobs were customer facing you know, where you have to talk to people and I think if from a young age you are always being forced to talk to strangers, you kind of have to have that high energy.

Nick: [00:03:42] So what were you like at school in terms of your academic side?

Johnny: [00:03:47] I've never struggled with academics. I guess I am naturally bright in that way in that I can do exams. I can get high grades. I got a scholarship into secondary school. And I wouldn't be, but I'm not academic in the traditional book academia, I don't study, I'm lousy at study. I'd probably do better now but I never studied for exams, I just got away with it, I'm mathematically minded, I'm good at English. But when I got to the point where I could actually choose my own subjects, as soon as you got to about 15 years of age, I wanted to do business and I had three subjects I could pick and I said I'll do all business and I was advised, don't make it all business. I did physics and I did business studies and commerce accounting I think. And probably by 15, I had realised that the degree to go on to was business studies or commerce. And so I was always, right I've got to save up, if I'm going to do this I'm going to have to pay my own way and I'm going to go and go to university. I'm gonna get the points to go to University College, Dublin which is what, I would say, the two leading colleges and I would do business there. But I kind of got lost in my day to day in the university, my jobs and everything else and been so busy with Ents and so on and so forth. I kinda didn't tackle that question of what do you want to do when you finish. But I knew that being in university was important, to me. But then I got to all of a sudden, it was my final year and I was doing my final exams and I hadn't actually studied. In fact of the 16 subjects I had that year I only met, met I think five or six of the lecturers, literally never seen the other nine or ten lecturers, never been in their classes never been to tutorials. I spent a month where I slept every second night. And I basically had a diet of Red Bull and I went through it all in a haze, because I can't remember that



time because I was so sleep deprived. I got my degree. I came out going right I've got to get a job now. I had literally had no idea what to do. So I applied to everything, every graduate job, I applied to jobs in the UK with breweries and graduate schemes. I applied to insurance companies, sales companies and I was still working nights in the nightclub. Meantime I'd been interviewing, going into different companies. I'd been working till four in the morning one night in the nightclub and the next morning I had an interview with an agency at, like 9:00 am. I rocked up to this interview and the two women from the agency sit me down - and normally what happens is I'm at the desk of someone in an agency and they're going what will jobs do you do, what skills do you have, writing notes and then just sending me out - and they sat me down and start presenting to me on who they were, what Recruitment's all about, what their vision is, how they're growing, what the team is and why they're looking for someone new in the accounting and finance team to recruit accountants. They stopped every ten minutes and said, so tell me why you want to be a recruiter? I go: Oh crap. I didn't research this and I've got it all wrong. So let's go for it: 'Well actually Sarah, my best friend is a recruiter and he's told me all about it those things you just said. Yeah, he told me that too'. I bluffed it. Four interviews later I had a job offer. Which I accepted. And I spent three and a half years with that agency and I've worked in recruitment ever since.

Nick: [00:06:57] So your early career you started off in recruitment. You stepped out of recruitment, went back into recruitment and then you spent some time when you moved to the Cayman Islands. Just tell me about that phase of your life?

Johnny: [00:07:10] So, I left recruitment after three and a half years, 24 years of age, thinking I knew everything. Did hardware sales for a year and that taught me a lot about, just a different perspective on sales and taught me that I also wasn't done on recruiting. That I had a lot more to learn and got a job at a recruitment agency through a friend of mine. His friend had set up a small agency doing accounting recruiting and that was a business called Accurate. I got back into recruiting then, spent three years with them. I was very happy. But one day in the middle of that, I got a phone call from a headhunter. In fact, I had actually got two phone calls in one day, one from a headhunter in the U.K. asking me about a job. The other headhunter, well it was a lady who worked in an agency in the Cayman, the Cayman Islands saying that her boss, the owner, wanted to hire a Deputy MD. And would I consider? I kinda laughed and said, thank you, I'm flattered but I have just bought a house. I'm engaged to be married. I have two dogs. And you know that's not for me. And I went home that night and I said it to Gill, in passing over dinner, my fiancée: I got these two headhunter calls, I'm proud of myself. And on the Cayman one she said: So why do you say no? And I said well, because, we have a house and we've dogs and you know we're getting married next year and she said, 'Well we can come back and do the



wedding here, we can bring the dogs with us and and rent the house. So why did you say no?' I was kinda stuck. What, do you want me to ring them back? And she said yes. Then we said where is the Cayman Islands and we went 'no idea', so we got a map (it was pre-Google maps days) We looked and said oh there it is, kinda below America. Interesting. And we rented 'The Firm' with Tom Cruise because that's the only reference I had was, that's in the Cayman Islands and saw a snapshot of the beach at night. That's all I got. So I called the next day. Long story short, four months later I arrive in the Cayman Islands, on my own off a flight. My wife and two dogs were to follow on. A month later they arrived in Cayman, to join this company I'd never heard of, on an island I hadn't previously known, to run the recruitment agency.

Nick: [00:09:16] So what was that like?

Johnny: [00:09:18] So Cayman was life changing for me. Cayman and my wife now, Gill, I had at that point Nick, you know very focused on the briefcase and by the way I had a briefcase and my first recruitment job. You'd look foolish bringing a briefcase to a meeting these days but I used to love it. But I was in business and I wanted to be a millionaire. You live in a Caribbean island with endless sunshine and you hang around with great people and you get married and you find the right person, you change. And I softened for the right reasons. I kinda learned that there's more to life, but our life in Cayman was amazing. My wife had got a job at the local school. She's a special needs teacher and she had a perfect job there. Our dogs had settled in, we lived on the beach, we had this amazing lifestyle and you can imagine.... Every holiday you've ever had. That's every weekend and every night.

Nick: [00:10:13] You talked about how the Cayman Islands changed you. Why did you want to become a millionaire?

Johnny: [00:10:18] To me it was a measure of success, of effort, that millionaires and the people who work the hardest then come out on top. I'm a big fan of entrepreneurs I'd heard about when I was growing up, like Richard Branson and I thought, that's amazing, look what they've done. And my dad's business hadn't been the success he had wanted it to be for tons of reasons. I wanted to have a successful business and I actually wanted to create jobs. I wanted to be a millionaire but I want to create jobs. I had this thing about you know, creating enough money and wealth that I could set up a homeless shelter in Ireland, in Dublin, and anyone who needed help could come in and you could give back and I'd create jobs for other people and good jobs.

Nick: [00:10:57] It wasn't all about material items or having money for material purposes?



Johnny: [00:11:02] No. Material purposes were a big part of it, don't get me wrong, at the start, but in your lifestyle in Cayman, I wanted for nothing. I shifted my priorities and realized that yes I don't want to be poor. I don't want to have no money. I want to run a business and have impact on lots of people's lives by employing them by doing things that helps them and working in recruiting, when you're in it a long time, I'm sure you get this Nick as well, you could be in a sales job and I could sell computers right, I could sell computers for a year. Nobody, nobody's life was changed because they bought our brand of computer. Right. It was just a computer, but in recruiting and I can always use the example of the butcher we hired actually, a butcher we hired when we set up our first agency after Cayman, to go back to Cayman. And I called the guy I found online randomly his name that he was a butcher in some butcher in the south of England. I got his phone number and rung him up and said, 'Do you want to work in the Cayman Islands?' And like me previous to that, he'd no idea where the Cayman Islands was and through all the conversations he relocated with his wife, he still lives there today and has a family, he lives in a Caribbean island, and I imagine his family and friends go, how did our mate the butcher, end up working in the Cayman Islands? And he doesn't remember me or Vince, or the fact that we rung him and I know that, but we changed people's lives because we, we connected them with opportunities and I must have hired hundreds of temps that came to work in the Cayman Islands. I'm connected to most of them still on Facebook. People I would have hired over the years and actually you forget that we had that relationship that I would have helped them get a job. But I look and go, they marry people they've met there, they've kids because they moved the Cayman Islands and the impact you can have a recruitment is amazing.

Nick: [00:12:42] You've got this great life in the Cayman Islands. Did you see that was your future?

Johnny: [00:12:47] No. Funny stuff. I was meant to come back and set up a business with my old boss. He was on an earn out from the company that he'd sold that I'd resigned from. And after about a year and a half, I was due to come back we're going to set up a new recruitment agency together. And that was all set to happen January 2008 and the week before Christmas, December 27 2007. he gave me a call and said, listen the partnership which was going to be 60:40 in his favour, he was changing it, he was inviting another old colleague of ours to join. Anyway, I was sitting in my board shorts and havanas and a T-shirt in the sun, outside Kirk's supermarket in Grand Cayman, sitting on the ground with my phone. I said well I'm not going into business with you anymore. And he said 'what?' He wasn't expecting me to go nuclear on this, my flights were booked. I had given notice on my house in the Cayman Islands. My wife was going to be moving in with friends of ours so she could finish the school term up till June, we told our tenants back in



Ireland that they had to leave our house and they'd vacated it. I just cancelled all those plans. I came home and told Gill, I'm not moving home anymore.

Nick: [00:13:44] Why did you want to go back to Ireland, did you not want to stay on the Cayman Islands with this great life you were having?

Johnny: [00:13:50] It's funny... I stayed that Christmas and I had a B.A. flight booked that I never used to go home. We found a new apartment, a place to stay. Couple of friends of ours came over to visit us at Christmas. I wasn't meant to be there. I was meant to be home in Ireland on my own in the cold January and I wasn't. Accidentally I was stayed in Cayman and we got pregnant that January/February. Which shouldn't have happened and that kind of changed very much my wife Gill's perspective on things. She loved the lifestyle as well, but she was like, I don't want to raise a kid here with no family, no friends, we're two flights away from Ireland, it just feels we are too far and our friends in Cayman, none of them had kids, so we were the first. So we moved home. And we were due our first child in September so we moved home in July but I didn't have a plan. My plan was changed, I was like, I've got to set my own agency up then. I didn't like the idea of doing that, it sounded lonely, because I liked the idea of a partnership with somebody else.

Nick: [00:14:50] Are you somebody that thrives off having other people around you?

Johnny: [00:14:53] I need various muses and people, other people bring out the best in me. I'm probably not as good my own. I was looking for a partner and I had remembered this guy who I knew from Cayman, Vince. He's been in sales, Head of Sales for Digicell. And coincidentally we'd just announced we were pregnant to our friends, my buddy said, do you hear that Vince is coming back to the Island? Really, I thought, he didn't want to come back to here? Well, he's been made a big offer, a huge package, he's going to come back to Digicell. Don't tell anyone. I said all right. So I rung him, how are you? I said, I heard you are coming back, and he said yeah, because of the money, I couldn't really turn it down he goes. I said, 'Would you go into business with me'? He said, 'Doing what?' I said, 'I'm gonna start up a recruitment agency' He goes 'Well, what's that like?' I said, 'You'll make millions' and he goes 'Really?' and I said, 'I'll send you a spreadsheet'. In my head this all made sense. He goes, 'Yeah I hate my job let's do it.' So I moved home in July. We moved back into our house. We were two or three months out from having our first child. Vince quit his job and we set up 'Select People' which is our first recruitment agency and we said we'd recruit people to work in the Caribbean and overseas, because I still had my clients connections and I felt they would still work with me. But by September the world had collapsed. Recession.



Nick: [00:16:16] This was 2008?

Johnny: [00:16:17] 2008. Yeah, I hadn't, I don't say I saw it coming, I didn't see it coming. And we set up this new business. We put I think, five or 10 grand in each that we've saved to set up an agency. I was working out of my house and by September I'd to work out of a portakabin in my back garden. I'd a two bedroom house and we needed the second bedroom for the new child. I had no money to rent an office space, we already knew the world was ending, economy wise. And so I rented a portakabin that was lifted over my back garden wall and that was my first office and Vince was working out of an office, he worked out of, literally a dilapidated old farmhouse that he had a 20 metre flex running from his barn house to power it. A heater on one side, one fingerless glove to keep this side warm, whilst the heater kept that side warm and then during the day he'd swap the heater over and have a fingerless glove. And we worked together by turning on Skype at 9am in the morning, me from my portakabin, him from his old house, and we'd leave it on for 10 hours in the background as we worked and tried to fill jobs, but the jobs weren't there to be filled. More precisely we had jobs to fill. But nobody was interested in paying an agency fee, because there was a recession on, people were cutting back and the model of having a database or advertising on job boards wasn't gonna cut it, it wasn't going to get us a fee. And so within a couple of months we were facing a crisis. We were running out of money. We both had small children. I'd a new baby, no money. We were not even paying ourselves, all the money we invested was gone. We had to figure out a way to survive.

Nick: [00:17:46] So let's talk about that period then from, you set up as a recruitment agency. The market had collapsed. You had a few clients, but it was quite tough wasn't it?

Johnny: [00:17:56] So we had to find a way to deliver a service that was worth paying for in a recession. And so if you're in a recession, what are the only jobs you'll pay an agency for? Really hard jobs. So we said right. We stopped working the jobs that people were giving us because they felt sorry for us and they knew us and we started saying what's your hardest job? Is there one job you just can't fill that's been open for ages. Can we have that please? One of the first customers that came back to us was an insurance company in Cayman, who had this open role they couldn't fill for a long time and this subsidiary we replaced for, I didn't know there were a subsidiary for a bigger company and the CEO of their biggest company, their parent company called us and said can do more work for us. For our other sister companies. It was a guy called Ted, and Ted still amazes me. Ted changed us, he was that one customer who brought us a new direction. All of a sudden, we were specialists in insurance.

Nick: [00:18:50] Was that a pivotal moment?



Johnny: [00:18:52] A pivotal moment and you know what it's funny. We've had loads of pivotal moments. We are always just about to go broke, just about to close, just about run out of money when something happens and you look back and there's been so many moments have been pivotal. You kind of go, well are they really accidents or do we just create the opportunity for that. And I think we create the opportunity, because we recently took on a new Chairman in our business and he said that we are the best listeners he's ever met and the one thing that myself and Vince do well, I think, is that we never assume that we've got the best answer. We will ask everybody else and listen for openings or opportunities and we hear something good, we'll jump on it and try it out. It may not work but we will try it out. We know we don't have all the answers, we don't have that cockiness to go we have all the answers, but we do have the balls to ask everybody else what they're doing and we're not afraid to steal or borrow from the best. And I guess that's what we did. We said here's an opening we can make money in insurance let's go for it. Let's go after this client and give them loads of love and we kind of found ourselves a new niche, we started hiring some staff. And we discovered what we now call 'social recruiting' our sourcing. And we found a way to use leverage LinkedIn and you recall that 2008 social media was only beginning to break out back then. I remembered that I used to set up Facebook pages for loads of things and I'd get excited when we get to 100 fans and Vince would go, 'It's brilliant Johnny, how many placements did we make?' and it kept us focused on how do we leverage digital not for the sake of it, but it has to make money, it has to make money quickly, because we were literally running out of cash. We said we can grow a business around this, this is amazing. Keep hiring loads of people, but we also realised that what we did wasn't proprietary, anybody could do this. And we also reckoned everybody would start doing it pretty soon. So we decided to hedge our bets, and we said let's set up a company that does it for other companies and keep our agency and let's give it a year or two and see which one is more successful after that period of time. So Vince stayed running the agency. I separated myself and the agency and stopped working jobs and started working on what we called 'Social Talent'. Actually what we called 'Social Business Process Outsourcing Limited'. That was our first name. We had done a bit of consultancy and we had to invoice them and we needed to have a company name to send the invoice and we had no money so we had to think of something. So we were Social BPO limited actually for the first year, with trading name 'Social Talent' which came two months later and now we're 'Social Talent'. But we set up this business consulting around social recruiting and in that year we learned that doing people's social recruiting for them wasn't the idea. Teaching them was the idea.

Nick: [00:21:27] So you're effectively splitting the risk? You've got the traditional business still going whilst you experiment in effect, with the social talent side. So, just explain what



happened next?

Johnny: [00:21:43] After a year we built up a client base who had retainers, monthly retainers of a couple of grand to run their social media. Now, we tried to go after recruitment companies and we had a couple of them but we also did a pub, we did telecoms company, we did anything we could get to get money. Very laborious and we had to do this, you know. I needed to have people to help me, so we hired two, our first two interns. Two great people who came to work for us for nothing. One a blogger and one, someone in video. We'd make videos for, we made a video for a meat packing company on how to use their machines. We made a video for a car dealership on why they're a great car dealership. Just because they hadn't and we could get money coming in and what we quickly changed the model to training people to source and to recruit, was actually more interesting than running their Facebook pages. And that led us into kind of teaching people how to be more effective about internet sourcing and recruiting and we gave it a name. We called it initially the Bluebells in Internet Recruitment, to be fair we didn't call it the Black Belt yet because we are not finished and we started doing classroom training in agencies and in companies in the UK and Ireland and that became our business.

Nick: [00:22:52] In those early days, selling this service and product, did people understand what it was?

Johnny: [00:22:59] Nobody knew they needed what we offer them. We knew that we could teach them a way of recruiting that was much more efficient, much more productive. They just didn't know that yet, so we had to get this, I guess what is called now, thought leadership, by going, 'Did you know that you can do this? And people go, I don't know we can do that, what else can we do? We can do this. And then they go what else? and I go, well we have a course and we can train your guys. But I was so busy delivering it, we had no time to sell it. That's when we made the decision that Vince needed to come on board in this business. And the agency hadn't really grown that much, it was still wetting its face and it paid my wages for the first six months of Social Talent. But it wasn't growing. And we could fix that or we could grow Social Talent. We couldn't do both.

Nick: [00:23:43] And when you say it paid your wages, what we're talking about is sustenance really, aren't you?

Johnny: [00:23:47] Sustenance. I gave us, back in the day myself and our first child, myself and Gill would literally go and find the cheapest bread we could buy. We made decisions on you know, it is an extravaganza to have a bottle of wine. We've been brilliant at finding the best cheap Tesco wine, but we were broke when everyone was broke which made it so



much easier. Because everyone around you doesn't have money, but it also helps you be lean. We've never been funded in Social Talent. I don't know whether its a good or bad decision, we've never had funding. We've grown organically and when it's your own money and you don't have much of it you make smart decisions. You make wrong decisions all the time, but you've got to make them quickly, learn from them, so you don't overspend on stuff. You ask yourself, 'do we really need that?' And we always have had this lean approach which is, you don't spend money you don't need to spend - when it's worth it, spend it, but spend it and make sure it's back to Vince's quote: 'Johnny do we get any placements from that Facebook page?' It's always whatever we've spent money on, you've got to quickly realise a return and were not getting it. Kill it and move on.

Nick: [00:24:51] How important is it to have the right business partner?

Johnny: [00:24:55] Having a really good business partner is unbelievably important. I nearly had the wrong business partner and now I have the best business partner in the world, who brings out the best in me and I hope I do with him. We're different, myself and Vince, have very different traits, very different qualities. We've enough the same to make us work brilliantly as a team, but we bring completely different things to the table. When I was up, he was down and when I occasionally get down, he'd bring me up. And Vince is more of a, he describes me as being the front man, I love the limelight and he has no interest in that. He likes being in the background and doing the stuff. You know we've worked together now for nearly 10 years and it's probably the best business decision I ever made in my life was to go into business with Vince and we could probably be in any sort of business. What's most important is we have the partnership to help ourselves get through the tough times and make good decisions together.

Nick: [00:25:51] So we've got to the point where you're throwing everything into Social Talent effectively. What happened next?

Johnny: [00:25:58] We had figured out that scaling the business by being, by hiring 20 trainers wasn't going to work. So we thought, let's, let's put it online and we started filming all our knowledge, all our training courses, our first eight hours of filming on the platform and hosted it and structured it and said, well how do we sell this? And accidentally, just as it was ready to go live, I got a phone call from a friend of mine who worked in Oracle and she called and said, 'listen, you've got good ideas about recruiting and social. Our Heads are recruited from the different global Geo's are in Ireland today and you could come meet them'. So, I met these hands and they said, 'Show us your presentation' and I said, 'I don't have a presentation, I've just come here to have a chat.' They said, it's OK, well these are our challenges we're trying to use this world of LinkedIn



and sourcing and social, how does it all work? And I said actually funnily we're launching a platform next month that has all this online and I opened up my browser, put it on the screen and showed them. And a month later they became our first customer.

Nick: [00:26:56] Had you given a lot of thought to how that would be sold?

Johnny: [00:27:00] We knew what people would pay for a person to come training for a day and we kind of made up a price. We were charging one hundred and ninety five euros per licence for first iteration, and we're approaching 10 times that now. We had mis-priced and actually it's funny you want to try and impact as many people as possible. I wanted a million recruiters in the world to learn this overnight and I figured the only way to do that is make it free. But if we had made it free for a million recruiters no body would have paid attention. When it became premium, when it became a quality product that only people were serious about investing in would buy, or could buy, they took it seriously. They made sure their teams took it seriously. They implemented it. And I've learned you need to bring a high quality pedigree product to the market that is charged a premium price before anyone takes it seriously.

Nick: [00:27:53] You've just got to this point where you're establishing in the platform, got your first big client with Oracle. Is that the point really where it's started to take off?

Johnny: [00:28:04] It started to become more serious then. And yes, we pushed hard to grow. We never wanted to be this tiny business. But back then even, we struggled to pay the bills. Myself and Vince would have regularly get into overdraft territory. We had our max overdraft back then was 20 grand and we'd regularly to get to nineteen thousand nine hundred fifty negative on payday. And we'd put our wages we had for the three or four people we had working for us the time, would go on my credit card or Vince's credit card. We'd skip payment for the month, it was tight, and we used to hide that from the team although we are as open as we could be, we don't want them stressed. It's tough, it's lean and then you get cash in and you go, just slow down and we'll be ok. I didn't let it. Vince would try and pull me to a more sensible position. I'd go but we're not done, we've so much more to go and we'd go and hire another person just as we're getting slightly comfortable again or we'd spend money on another camera, or we'd go on a trip somewhere, whatever it might be, hire another developer. And it's hard because you got a balance this. You can grow without growing for broke. So easy to grow, grow for broke. And we doubled and doubled and doubled and doubled and doubled and doing that with no investment is tough, it's a strain on the business.

Nick: [00:29:32] Were you ever tempted by that, to get investment?



Johnny: [00:29:35] Yeah we've talked to several: a couple of our customers did due diligence with us, to try to invest into us. We got to a very close stage one with one and we realised towards the end that they were probably going to be more 'buy us and assume us' than let us continue to live our vision. And it all came down to, we were talking to one of our staff about their browser, it sounds like a silly story but they couldn't install a chrome extension and they told me they had to get IT to approve and it would take three months. We said, are we seriously going to work for a company that takes IT to approve us having a chrome extension on our laptops by next month? No. And we said that it's just not us, that we liked doing our own thing, we liked being different.

Nick: [00:30:20] Talk through the last few years and where Social Talent is at now?

Johnny: [00:30:25] We've got like 60 odd people now at time of filming; we, gosh, we sell in 100 countries maybe. We've got users all over the world, a platform in three languages at the moment and adding more all the time, our own development team. We were a sales machine, marketing machine, content production machine.

Nick: [00:30:44] When did you start to see the acceleration in the growth?

Johnny: [00:30:48] So really it was..so we're 2017 now. End of 2015 it really kicked into gear and that's when we started getting serious and then started hiring more sales people and more marketing people. Last year we exploded in terms of hiring people, we doubled 30 odd people at the start the year, to closing over 60. It wasn't the right way to do it though. And what happens is when you are scaling like that, it isn't a linear trajectory of we just keep doubling staff and doubling growth and everyone's happy...You double staff, some of the staff are wrong. You hire them for the wrong jobs. Your product's wrong. The way you market no longer works, the product you built is not the one that suits the customers you now have. And things break and they break about every six to nine months, I've learnt and they break hard. They break in such a way that you could go under and you can disappear overnight. And you don't have the cash in the bank to survive big problems like that. So even though you grow in scale, you create new problems.. Your payroll isn't... it's now the size you could never put it on a credit card. So you have to have that, you have to look after those people. And we, we had a big wobble midway through last year that no one outside the business would see the wobble. But we did internal wobble, wobble with our culture, we'd a wobble with the way we sell. We had a wobble with our product and we've come out of that learning what we're really good at. I remember a phrase that I learned for my lectures in commerce when I was 19 about, about innovation. It was about 'stick to the knitting'. It's a principle that was down somewhere and have you ever heard



that, 'stick to the knitting?'. It's about doing what you do best. And we've had to figure out what we do best. I realise what it is we do and what it is we don't. When you're starting off, you're building your own business you're taking money from anybody. You say 'yes' to everything, but you create a company and a product that mightn't be actually brilliant. You don't stick to the knitting. You just take what's available. That's really great when you're growing to have that attitude, to be flexible, to be open. But once you have responsibility for a staff, a team, a business, product users, customers, you have to take more responsibility for what it is you do. And do that really, really well.

Nick: [00:33:03] How different is your job now to what it was three or four years ago?

Johnny: [00:33:07] It's very different. My job three or three four years ago was, I wrote all the content. I was very heavily involved in the design of the product, intricately involved with the marketing, the blogs, where we're going, how we sell, meeting customers, driving the leads. One of the things that myself and Vince have learnt, we struggle with this, probably will always struggle with this is, you've got to learn to give away your Lego's. That's an expression we stole from an article that was sent around the company last year. How do you learn to give away your Lego's? As a founder you do everything. And you began to hire people to support you. Then you began to hire people who run those departments. And I learned from some of the people I worked for over the years that you can only get a certain size if you don't let go. I mean totally let go. Which realisation that today, you're the best person to do this. And probably for the next 6 to 12 months you can do it better than everybody else. Even the people you've hired. But that's not scalable. And you will never scale unless you give autonomy to other people to do it. And you got to walk away and stop butting your nose in. And you gotta accept the fact that the quality isn't what it would be, had you done it yourself. But you'll know in a year's time it's gonna maybe meet your quality and in a year and a half, it's gonna exceed anything you could have ever done.

Nick: [00:34:26] Just looking back then, over your career, what are the key lessons that you've learnt?

Johnny: [00:34:33] I started my career interviewing people who knew more about their subject like I never know: accountants. I had to figure out what they knew and I had to come up with great ways of asking questions. Best thing I've learned is to ask questions. I have asked questions of everyone I meet who runs a business involved in technology, purchases stuff, has a recruitment team, has a sales team. And then try to think about how you can use that. So one has to ask questions to be open minded and to have a really wide source of influence, way outside just your industry. Second is to, to experiment, take risks. I love taking risks, but they're calculated risks. I know how much risk I'm willing to



take, as in I know where, I know where the cliff edge is and I'll run as fast as I can, as close as I can to that cliff edge, without falling off. But falling short of that's not good enough. You need to take calculated risks and don't get comfortable. Break things, challenge things. That's really important. But also give back. We now get asked by other companies who are much smaller than us, who were us four years ago, for advice. And I would cancel meetings to go meet those people, because I still do it for companies who are ahead of us. And I'll keep doing it. Give away your best knowledge. It's free. It is. Ideas are free, ideas are easy. Execution is really difficult. And, I told the world when we first started out Social Talent how I felt they should recruit. And I gave it away for free and loads of people didn't, didn't listen, didn't read it, didn't implement it. Only when we developed a solution that we could work with them, did we help them actually implement it. The ideas are always free, your innovation, your new thing, I'm gonna be the whatever of whatever, someone else has already thought of that, trust me. But executing on that is really hard. And only a small handful of people can execute and follow through. Take the risks, have the grit to survive. Have the, you could call it, the confidence, foolishness or whatever, to follow through and take those risks. But it's kinda going, you don't have to have the ideas and your ideas aren't that precious or unique either. But your ability to follow through and even if you need to change course, if the idea you start with isn't the idea that ends up working, the pivoting, your tenacity to follow through with that, to keep asking for advice, to ask for help, to take help, to follow through, that's going to make you successful.

Nick: [00:37:10] When people think about starting a business and you've shown that you have to throw your heart and soul into it. You have to keep going when it's tough. How do you balance that with the rest of your life?

Johnny: [00:37:21] The 28 year old me would have worked 80, 90, 100 hours a week endlessly and maybe would have had a business much bigger than ours is today. The post-Cayman me, when we realised that you've gotta see your bigger picture in your 'why?' Just like you looked at your customers why. Why do I want the big business? Why do I want to be successful? What do I get out of it? Not monetarily. What do I get out of it satisfaction wise? What I get out of life and work is a subset of life. It isn't an alternative to life, it shouldn't be balanced against life. Work-life-balance is crazy. You have work and it's part of a much bigger thing called life, that's much more important. Although your work is obviously part of that life, I go home when I'm in Ireland, I travel a lot, but when I'm in Ireland I'm at home sitting at the dinner table six o'clock. I've three kids. Aaron is eight, the twin boys Jake and Archie, are two. They're a handful. My wife's amazing. I want to go home and spend time with her and the kids. I don't work weekends. I don't open my laptop in the evenings. I might check the odd email, but I try not to, and Vince is the same and I don't know how much more successful or less successful we would be with a different



attitude. But we kind of go, do everything you can, work smarter in the hours you put into your job. You should not celebrate people who work 70 or 80 hours a week. You should say, ok, when are you stopping? That's ok in the interim. What's your plan to stop and get back to 40 hours by next month, because you're foolish to work 80 hours a week? It's crazy we all are. You get unhappy. I don't like people in our company working crazy hours. We try and say, 'go home'.

Nick: [00:38:58] And what's important to you now?

Johnny: [00:39:00] Important to me are bringing my three boys into the world. What world are they coming into? How will they be set for success? What's their way of, well, how they grow up. Will they have manners? Will they be polite? I love meeting different people, I love, I get to travel a lot. I travel about every week around the world, have seen amazing countries and meet brilliant people. I still like spending every night in my own bed, my own family, putting the kids to bed, reading a story. I like my time to go running and my time out to go for a run and keep healthy. I spend time with my wife doing stuff. When I'm not working, I spend it with friends. Myself and Gill are terrible for just spending time together. We'd rather go for a meal with a bunch of friends than just go out together, because we love to chat and hear what else is going on with other people's lives and do that stuff. So my perfect life is, always being challenged at work in something that I can see real impact in, but being able to do everything I can for my kids and have a wonderful life with my wife and my friends.

Nick: [00:40:03] And what's your greatest achievement?

Johnny: [00:40:07] My greatest achievement is bringing three boys into the world. We had - and hopefully any other kids we bring into the world. Our first came as an accident, it shouldn't have been our first kid. I was meant to be in Ireland not seeing my wife for six months and by an accident of a phone call made outside a Kirk's supermarket in Cayman one night, my first kid was born and our next two kids didn't come easily. We went through years of not being able to have kids. Turned out that we probably shouldn't have been able to have our first kid and when Jake and Archie were born it was after years of hard work and tribulation that myself and my wife went through, whilst I was trying to grow a business and not go broke in the middle of it. And that was really, really tough. So I see, I see you know, how lucky I am to have three wonderful kids and to be able to have the opportunity to influence what they do in the world and I now have three boys that I can help make an impact three times where I can - and they can hopefully through their kids or nieces and nephews that they influence in their lives, have that exponential impact in what they do.



Nick: [00:41:11] And finally what does the future hold for you now?

Johnny: [00:41:13] My wife jokes about, aah, sell the company and we could you know, we could retire and we can do all these things together. I'd go nuts if I wasn't working and doing my thing and we now have a comfortable enough life. Myself and Vince, use an analogy, we have this analogy from years ago of 'pots and pans'. So we say that when you get successful and you've sold your company or you grow and you pay ourselves more. What do you do with that money? Well you buy fancier pots and pans. Your pots and pans are more expensive than you used to have and they buy more expensive stuff, but you don't really have the same value. I'm fine with what I have right now, it'll do me absolutely fine, I don't spend much money on anything. But what I'd like to do is travel, do stuff with my kids, my family, bring them on trips, do stuff with the boys. We love doing stuff together as a family getting out. I kind of drive my wife nuts at weekends 'cos I don't like to sit in and sit still and relax as she says. I like to get out and do things, so hopefully the future has more fun, more trips, more dinners with friends, more nights out, more people over at our house for, for dinner and chats and more opportunity to do really cool things with Social Talent.

Nick: [00:42:18] Johnny it's been a pleasure talking to you.

Johnny: [00:42:20] Thanks Nick.

Nick: [00:42:20] Thank you very much.



About Career Life Stories

Career Life Stories is a series about people, their lives and their work. The format was created and produced by Working Films Ltd, a UK company founded by the producer and host of the series, Nick Price.

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