



CAREER LIFE STORIES

S1E3

Interview with

Gareth Jones

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Presented and Produced by Nick Price

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Interview with Gareth Jones, hosted by Nick Price

Nick: [00:00:00] Today I am joined by Gareth Jones, Chief Innovation Officer for the Chemistry Group. Gareth started off his career in HR before finding that his true passion was in combining people and technology. Joining Chemistry five years ago to build their technology platform, he has helped take the business from a small management consultancy into an international global technology business. In this interview he shares a very personal story of his life and career. It's a pleasure to introduce Gareth Jones.

Nick: [00:00:35] Gareth, you were born in Ireland before moving to the Midlands at a young age. Just tell us about those early years.

Gareth: [00:00:41] Yes, so my father worked as an engineer and it just so happened -He's Welsh my Dad, as Welsh as you can get- He just so happened to do a spot in Ireland for a few years. Then we moved back to the UK, we moved to the Midlands and we moved to Melton Mowbray which is a market town like many of them in that area and I'm not sure why, but we moved in and took over the main pub in the town. My Dad continued to work, so he had the day job, but they also ran the pub, so my mum ran it during the day and they were together at the weekends and in the evening they both ran it together. But then we moved when I was six, only seven miles away, and we went to a little village called Somerby and we were me and my brother, were the outsiders. We were the townies moving into this very parochial environment and that I think was fairly instrumental in setting up the way that I am as a person, in terms of you're coming into an environment where you're clearly an outsider. So I just learned to fine tune my skills of 'fitting in'.

Nick: [00:01:59] There's a period of time from six till thirteen and then you moved again? So what was that like?

Gareth: [00:02:08] Really bad, really bad timing. My dad had got a job over in Telford. Could have been again another thousand miles away, but moving at that point I think, really unsettled me because it brought all of this stuff back about, changing at this critical time and when I was trying to grow up, basically.

Nick: [00:02:30] What else is going on around that time your Dad moved to take a new job and there was a period where he was out of work wasn't there?

Gareth: [00:02:36] Yeah. So he'd been out of work couple of times when we worked in the village, when we lived in Somerby. The second time round got to me because it was at that



point where we were going out as friends. So there were times when i just couldn't afford to do it. At one point I think I only had one pair of workable trousers, so I'd be at school in them and I'd be out in them- and a jumper my mum had knitted for me, so there are moments like that in your life, when you kind of feel crushed by that circumstance, or very limited by the circumstances.

Nick: [00:03:15] That period of your life probably shaped a little bit how you are?

Gareth: [00:03:20] Without a doubt. When you grow up like that you were aware of what it takes to do stuff and what the concept of work is. But it also knocks your confidence. It can - we're not all the same. And I think I went through my early stages of the career carrying that, groundedness, but also a fear. It is fear that stops us doing anything isn't it? I guess a fear of that could happen to me. That sense of me I'm building, I might lose it.

Nick: [00:04:01] What was the moment you realized you wanted to go in to HR? What drove you towards HR?

Gareth: [00:04:05] So when I was at school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. And so when I then, I scraped my way through A levels, I wanted to try and avoid going into work and ended up getting into doing a business and finance HND. And then somebody, the Course Tutor said, you know, why don't you do an extra year of the actual HR exams? So I thought right, nothing ventured, nothing gained. So I did for the year. But the notion of being at the heart of a business and the people side of it really got to me. So by the time I finished that year, I'd already got two job offers. Whether it made that much difference in my ability that extra year or not, it certainly made a difference in marketability.

Nick: [00:04:54] You had two job offers tell us about those and which one you took.

Gareth: [00:04:58] I'm not quite sure now why I plumped for one over the other. But that turned out to be a great, great first job.

Nick: [00:05:08] It was in a factory environment wasn't it?

Gareth: [00:05:11] Yes so we had, it was out on a big industrial park and we got a big Ford unit there. You know the classic manufacturing is huge. But on my first day I was taken down to the shop floor, because I was the factory personnel officer then and being on the shop floor was a very humbling experience. It teaches you humility.

Nick: [00:05:33] So at what point did you leave and move on to your next role?



Gareth: [00:05:35] So I left after about four and a half years. So I'd moved up from being the factory personnel officer, to being the one that sat up in the office, which is obviously the bigger job. There was me and then there was the HR Director, so there was clearly no interim step for me.

Nick: [00:05:51] So your next big job was?

Gareth: [00:05:53] It was HR Manager at a company called 'EverReady' which was the battery business.

Nick: [00:05:58] So you come from not knowing what you wanted to do when you were leaving school?

Gareth: [00:06:01] Yeah.

Nick: [00:06:02] Now you've gone through the process of joining a factory in a very corporate environment. Did you enjoy that?

Gareth: [00:06:09] Yeah I did. It kind of spoke to my ambition. I was... stretched... almost too much. I thought I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

Nick: [00:06:25] When did you think that, was it like your first day?

Gareth: [00:06:27] Yes first day and I just kind of got myself together and thought, 'This is what you wanted to do. This is what you've been trained to do. How difficult can it be?' And it taught me to, if you do move roles, when you go and do something else, do something that you know you can't do easily, stretch yourself. So again I think it was the confidence thing. Right? You know I'm kind of on the one hand I've got this great job. And yet I felt a fraud. You know that sort of lack of self-confidence thing, coming back from I was a kid that this will go horribly wrong tomorrow. But I kind of fought past it and did what I did several times before, when I was at school and growing up, I fitted in. I built relationships, I got stuck in. If there's a gap in my knowledge I just made sure I filled it before someone was going to come and test me on it. I guess, I had a fantastic time in so much of the work that I did was great, I got promoted really early. So by 28, I was the HR Director for Northern Europe, it was again awesome. But what I found was that I bought in to HR, because I felt people were the only point of difference in companies. I remember one of the Lecturers at college going: 'If you're in this HR, coming into personnel because you like people, you want to engage with people, think again, this isn't the right thing, you'll



fail' And I remember listening to him thinking, that doesn't sound too good, that's not what I thought it would be like! And actually I think the essence of some of that was true then, because I felt at the time, I'm either naive and I've just been drinking the people Kool-aid too much, or whether this is what is right. You just need to go and get with the programme Jonesy, so that ultimately, I think the doubt, ended my hands-on HR career.

Nick: [00:08:35] So you've reached a point in your career where you've almost become disillusioned with HR.

Gareth: [00:08:39] Yeah.

Nick: [00:08:40] What did you decide to do next?

Gareth: [00:08:42] I was contemplating what to do next. And there was an option to go and work in Geneva for the European Chairman and I didn't want to do that. It was decided to go that route which would have meant another commitment and I'm sure great things would have come from it. But again it was disillusionment. And as it turned out I was working with a group of guys who worked and ran a boutique search outfit, executive search outfit, they were doing some hiring for us. The guy who owned that said why don't you come come and work for us? And that was the starting point, of that sort of, the second two thirds of my career, the direction change that came from that. So I worked with them for about 18 months. I loved it because it was about going out meeting Heads of HR. I was just staggered at how backward the search industry was. So I moved ultimately through through the process of moving into another recruitment job into technology.

Nick: [00:09:59] This is your first foray really into HR Tech....

Gareth: [00:10:02] It was. Yeah absolutely.

Nick: [00:10:03] So how did that...

Gareth: [00:10:05] I got sacked from that job. That had been the first time I'd been fired. And that was quite a sobering experience. So when I went into the search job I was with a partner living in Fulham. That relationship eventually fell apart. And in the interim, that whole interim period I met my future wife. We got married and we kind of got a kid on the way. So we actually got married in Poland. She's Polish by origin, we jumped in the car, no honeymoon, came back, full on work all the time, got back to Virtual Village and within two or three months, just as Renata was 'with child' as they say. I'd been out at the show on a Friday, a HR tech-type show, doing product demos. Came in on the Monday, David called



me and Sean the sales guy - he was a great, great guy - into the office and said, 'Right guys it's all over'. But he was a very difficult man to deal with. The challenge with leadership I think, one of the challenges with being a leader is- which is why humility is so important - that you can become, you become a monster if you're not careful. I've seen it. I don't mean that in an exaggerated sense. I mean if you're, if you're a strong person with strong opinions and you lack some sense of humility, then very quickly you live in a world where most people don't challenge it because they're afraid you're going to shout, or scream, or disagree, or fire them. And I was kind of ignorant to that and we got in building the technology and David had a view of how long this would take. With only one developer sitting in Manchester and we kind of clashed over that and then we would go out take the raw minimum viable product, which wasn't used then -but that's what we tried - to beta and we were having real trouble demonstrating it because it wasn't working properly and that Sean was trying to sell it, I was trying to work with him to sell it and also to implement it and it was a nightmare for both of us. So he just saw that as I guess, as a blocker to make it happen.

Nick: [00:12:19] So you are at the stage in your career where you started off in HR, you've done a few different things, you're starting to get an understanding of what it is that you really enjoy and what you want to do.

Gareth: [00:12:30] Yep.

Nick: [00:12:30] How has this led you to the path that has now taken you into the role at Chemistry?

Gareth: [00:12:36] The technology and people path kind of, was the thing I'd kind of landed on and I'd continued to do that until I think the end of 2002. And at the time I was talking to the founding guy and a couple of the directors of a HR search and selection company and it was a boutique business. It was really successful. So I'd spent some time with them just kind of talking about my taking on Exec. role there. But that turned pretty quickly into actually, you know if you take a share would you come and help us turn it around. And I jumped at that because for me that was the job that I was kind of aiming for when I left HR. A commercial job running a business and being able to challenge my own perceptions as to whether I would be able to succeed at that and whether I would end up paying lip service to people are our most important asset, because you just need to get the job done. And I really enjoyed that commercial job. It wasn't in technology. It was literally running that business and earning my spurs which we did, turn the business round- sold that to a much bigger business called Stopgap, which was about 140 people, it's a big marketing agency and worked with Claire there for another four years. But, we kind of fell out. So I



got sacked for the second time in my career by Claire. We're good mates now, but you know I think I became as the business was becoming more challenged, I became more challenging and probably became a bit irritating.

[00:14:18] And so I sat down and thought right, well obviously let's get another job. And I gave up after 20 minutes because I realized that the kind of person I was: I hadn't done 20 years of HR so I couldn't just walk into that. I've built and run a sales team within the consultancy, a partner sales team but I'm not a 20 year sales leader so it was really just pointless. I felt I gave up because I just thought none of these people were going to know who I am if I apply for one of these roles whatever it is, I probably don't have the track record that they think I should. So in preparation of that going to take quite some time, I set up a company so that if I needed to I could do interim work. I'd got into social media pretty heavily back in 2008 and built some tremendous relationships through that. And it was that network that came alive when I was out of work. My curiosity took me to events where I met more start-up technology companies. I ended up working for them helping them get the proposition right and get a story, get development, get expertise because they were failing to find the right development partners and raise funding. So I got sucked into this world of, partly into this world of new technology in our sector and start-ups. I absolutely loved it. I loved working with them. I loved being that sort of independent person in a way coming into the business and because it gave me control I could challenge without thinking I'm going to lose my job.

Gareth: [00:15:59] It was a real coming of age confidence thing for me. So I'd go into business I'd look at what they're doing and I'd think, 'Shall I tell them'? And I'd think yes, I'd stick all this stuff down and they would come back to me and say it's great!

Nick: [00:16:08] Now you're in Chemistry, combining technology and people. How do you feel about your role now, what is it that really motivates you?

Gareth: [00:16:17] I love my role now. So when I joined Chemistry it was very much hands-on to build the technology and we've fully invested and we've grown the business, we've doubled in size in a year. And I've now moved to this innovation role which is around, 'what next'?

Nick: [00:16:36] So would you say you're quite career focused?

Gareth: [00:16:41] That's a really good question. I would say that no I think, I'm in the last third, I guess, in my career, though maybe we'll be working till we're 90, in which case I'm probably only halfway through it! And so I think less about the career. I've moved obviously



and changed direction several times. That doesn't faze me as much anymore. So I'm really more focused on being somewhere and doing something that really feels natural- can stretch me but it feels like I'm doing what I should be doing. Having my opportunity to be brilliant as Chemistry would put it. I think it's just really important that, that's where I am. If you're not doing the work that is giving you that opportunity to be brilliant, you're not functioning fully as a human being. So just as if your personal life isn't in the right place, you're not functioning fully as a human being, which is why it's really important to have both of those in the right place.

Nick: [00:17:53] So how has your career fitted within the context of the rest of your life?

Gareth: [00:17:59] I think my personal life and my work life are just deeply entwined because I'm an emotional person. So the things that happen in both, have an impact on both. And yeah, probably when I was younger and lacked some of the experience that helps build confidence. I over rotated on some of those things and I think you know, one of those things would have been, how much energy and effort I put in to work, believing that was the salvation, that was the answer to the challenges that I might have been feeling in my personal life and that's my biggest life lesson is that - no. I know I put a lot of energy into work thinking that as the bread winner that I had to make that work, because I had a family to support and to bring it up and to do all those things. So if I managed to keep this together, then we'd have everything that we needed to make the family life right. And you know I've learnt that is actually totally counter-productive. What you need to do is you need to put this right first, you need to put everything into the family and making sure that the personal side is stable and you know is enriching, because then you'll be a whole better person. Totally. And a whole lot more productive engaged and useful at work. And I got that mix the wrong way round in my own career without a doubt.

Nick: [00:19:38] What impact did that have on your life outside of work?

Gareth: [00:19:41] I think it made our personal life when things were, you know, the most stressful work-wise, difficult. And so when we were trying to sell the Courtney business, again I'd never sold a company before so it was quite an eye opening job to do. But very stressful and you know at the time. It just felt like I've got to get this right, because if we don't get this right then everything else we're doing will fall apart. And so it created issues within my relationship with my wife and the marriage which it's hard to say started the writing on the wall of ultimately being separated and currently divorced now. But I can probably say quite confidently that it didn't help. During key years when the kids were young, lots of stress on us both. You know it's those years when you, you know it's bringing up kids can be a challenge in you're trying to fit in work, you're trying to fit in all these



things, plus you're trying to work each other out because you're stressed. It creates, it just created another distraction. And the more I ground down over here to try and solve this problem, the more it kind of popped up over here in a consequence in the personal life. So. They talk about bringing your whole self to work and I think you just have to be your whole self. Otherwise you end up, well I do, because I'm that kind of person, it ends up eating away at you.

Nick: [00:21:28] Is there anything you would do differently?

Gareth: [00:21:32] You know what? That's a really, really interesting question that I have run through my mind many, many times. And if I think about on the one hand, you know, I didn't expect at 51 to be effectively a single dad living away from my kids, um, they're only five minutes around the corner.. but you know it's quite sobering when you come home at night and there's no noise, that you can't hear. Even if the kids aren't in the room engaged with you when you walk into your house, you know that they're there right? You know they're doing stuff. So I look at that and I think that's not where I wanted to end up. In fact that's completely opposite you know, how did this happen? And at times like that you could sit and think, yeah, should have done something differently to not end up being a single Dad and putting all that extra stress on work again because I've kind of rewound financially thirty years, that's what happens, that's what it does to you. And I could look back and say well yeah, if I didn't perhaps hadn't put that before that, perhaps if I would have come to that realisation earlier and invested more time. But the thing about turning 50 is, that you do realise that at some some point you're going to expire. And when you're young you can push that off, you can forget it. But my father died last year and my mum died when I was in my twenties. There's no getting away from it. You're kind of reminded of your own mortality when you lose those that are close to you. And so, to me what surfaces when I have those thoughts is, you know, time is precious. And wasting it going should I, shouldn't I, it's counterproductive. You know I did enough of that when I was young, I left the HR job. And struck out onto a different career you know should I, or shouldn't I, should I, shouldn't I. And you could do that with life. And I figure for every 10 minutes of brain time I devote to doing that is 10 minutes that I'm not devoting to spending time chatting to the kids, or doing something. And at the time it was like the end of my life you know, when our marriage ended. It was like I couldn't... I couldn't deal with it. I couldn't process it. I was gutted. It's not what I wanted. Four years on? I'm really happy. I'm happy where I am. You know I've come to terms with it. You do, you look back on it eventually and go, you know that wasn't really that good you know and I was feeling it. So you can see hindsight is a wonderful thing, it's 20:20 vision, but it does allow you to look back and think actually things were going on there that I was hiding from.



Nick: [00:24:50] So do you ever look back and take any lessons from your parents and think about what they did and how it might have even affected the way you live your life?

Gareth: [00:25:01] The lessons I learned from my parents were... there were as many things that I looked at and thought, I don't really want to do it like that. So, a real goal for me was that we would find somewhere to live and have kids and they would stay, we would stay in that area. They would go to the same school they would grow up with the people in the environment, their friends, over time, we wouldn't move unless absolutely was necessary. And I've done that and I also wanted to be more engaged and more involved with my kids. And I've done that and I've got a great relationship with them. Ironically I didn't have a great relationships with my Dad when I was younger, because at the time I just saw him as this guy who worked really hard, but came home and was generally like, miserable. They both were social drinkers so they would drink every night and he'd end up usually falling asleep then going to bed and then getting up and going to work. My Mum was very, she was a true Bow Bells cockney and a very positive person, incredibly fiery, huge temper at times. And so they would argue a lot and it wasn't until him and my Mum separated that my dad sort of reached out to me and said, 'If you still want to talk to me I'm happy to talk to you,' kind of thing. I said, yeah, OK. And that's when I literally, the first week I went away to study when I was 18, 19, he moved out. And it wasn't until then, that I got to know properly, oddly, I was 18, 19, years of age and I went to spend some time with him and he talked me through it and he was a completely different person you know. And it dawned on me that he was just a good guy in a marriage that he wasn't happy with, in a life that he probably wasn't happy with I guess. He probably, probably, had that combination of work and life stuff going on. And so we developed a completely different relationship after that and luckily I spent more years with him knowing him and him being a proper dad and a friend than I didn't. But it was those kind of things that I took from my upbringing that I wanted. I majored on the things that I didn't, that, not felt so good for me that I wanted to change when I was an adult and a father.

Nick: [00:27:31] So how do you feel now that your stage of your life, your career, you spoke about, you're in a good place.. Where, where are you at now?

Gareth: [00:27:38] I found the place through this crazy sort of leaping from one stone across and feels like I've decided to cross a river and somehow ended up at the other side choking and splurting a bit, but I made it. And so from a career point of view I'm absolutely in the right space right now. And I love the job and I love the business. And personally although it's very, very different, I'm in a really good place too. So those two things are in balance. I work for a business that is interested in more than me as an individual, doing a job and I've got a personal life which is vastly different from what it was, but one that I'm



really, really happy with. I'm happy with the fact that I'm doing the journey as I am now doing, largely on my own. And I'm in control of it. I think that's part of it. I'm in control. And I don't have the fear anymore. But I guess that happens when you get older.

Nick: [00:28:48] And what's important to you now in the future?

Nick: [00:28:52] Doing more of that, I mean from a work perspective, to continue to challenge myself and stretch. So I still am an incredibly curious person. So I'm thinking always about what's next, which is why the job is so good. And I still want to learn more. I still want to do more. I don't feel energy wise any different from what I did in my 30's. So long may that continue. So I think that's my journey from a career point of view. You've got to be driven by those sort of things and it kind of works now. And from a personal perspective, my kids are growing up. I want to be there for them. I want to be there for that. You know for when they go and do A'Levels and uni and go to their first party and all of that sort of stuff, that's important to me. To be present, rather than not. You know it's been easy for me not to be present in the past.

Nick: [00:29:57] Gareth, it's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

Gareth: [00:29:59] And you Nick. Thanks very much.



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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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