

From living in a caravan to helping people into work: Interview of the Week with Tony Osborne

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After a divorce, a near-nervous breakdown and the loss of his high-flying job, a lightbulb moment helped Tony Osborne find happiness again, Jez Davison met him



Five years ago Tony Osborne was in a dark place. His marriage had collapsed and, having quit his lucrative job in the oil and gas industry, he was living in a caravan with little money and even less self-esteem.

In desperation, he sought help from Teesside charity Five Lamps and in a counselling session experienced an epiphany that was to instantly transform his life.

The counsellor asked each member of the group to visualise their life by drawing illustrations on a blank piece of paper.

Everyone came up with impressive pieces of art apart from Tony, who had “doodled a sort of border around the edge of the paper”.

The born-and-bred Teessider recalls the moment as if it was yesterday: “It was like my life was the blank piece of paper and I’d been given the opportunity to start from scratch again. I realised I could create whatever I wanted to and that made my art just as valid anyone else’s. It gave my life some meaning.”

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In the last three years the company has delivered programmes to more than 1,200 learners who have achieved a range of qualifications, from entry level to postgraduate level.

Headed by Tony, the company has developed its Government-approved self marketing and personal enterprise programme and is delivering it through colleges and training bodies across the UK.

In tweaking and fine-tuning the programme, Tony has played a major role in getting people out of the dole queue and into work.

At the end of one trial involving 600 people, 27% who had been out of work for more than two-and-a-half years found employment, while more than 60% of the 16-19-year-olds embarked on an apprenticeship or found a full-time job.

Tony believes it's the philosophy behind the company which differentiates it from other welfare-to-work organisations.

"We try to get jobseekers to think like an employer. If they can understand it from an employer's perspective, they'll be in a much better position to promote themselves and get a job."

With 30 years of industry behind him, he's well qualified to know what employers want. Having completed a technical engineering apprenticeship, he joined Darchem Engineering and rose to senior engineering planner before spending a decade at oil giant Shell.



Tony Osborne

There he supervised major oil and gas exploration projects around the world before moving into business development roles at US multinational Halliburton.

But the constant travel and long hours finally did for him and, mentally fatigued, he returned to Teesside, made that therapeutic visit to Five Lamps and ended up working there as a volunteer, helping vulnerable adults tackle their addictions and break down barriers to employment.

In 2010 he launched SureTrax and helped it grow from an organisation reliant on Government grants to a financially self-sufficient limited company.

Now he's busy extending its reach across the UK and exploring links with overseas education providers.

He's also penned a new book with business partner Dave Wilson to motivate people to find work, keep their job, get a promotion and improve their lives.

Due to hit the shelves within weeks, Think Like An Employer includes a foreword by Tony in which he recounts (in the third person) his life-affirming experience in that counselling session years ago.

The doodler is described as "Mr Blue Sky" who inspires the group with his life story and its influence on his art.

The key message is that, even in the depths of adversity, people can start afresh with a blank canvas and turn their lives around by creating their own masterpiece.

Judging by Tony's upturn in fortunes, it can be done.

Q&A

Who has inspired you most?

Steve Jobs - a creative genius!

Biggest achievement (personal or professional)?

Witnessing my two young sons develop into independent young men.

What car do you drive?

Toyota.

What's your favourite restaurant?

I'm a regular at Carpaccios in Stockton (50 yards from my office).

Favourite tipple?

Double shot skinny latte (I'm tee-total).

Favourite book?

The Power of Now by Eckhart Tolle

What's the last thing you listened to on your iPod?

Get Over It by the Eagles

Who or what makes you laugh?

Re-runs of the Office, Del Boy & Rodders and Friends.

What's your ideal job, other than the one you've got?

A session musician.

What's your greatest fear?

Losing my sense of humour and the ability to laugh at myself.

What's the best piece of business advice you have ever received?

Predict, adapt to the market and focus on sustainable and balanced growth.

What's your business mantra?

Refer back to what I last listened to on my iPod: "Get Over It" and then move on!

How much was your first pay packet and what was it for?

A weekly gross salary of £19.26 working as a technical apprentice at Darchem Engineering in 1976.

What's your biggest extravagance?

Stringed musical instruments and electronic gadgets.

How do you relax and unwind?

Playing my guitar and listening to music.

Where is your favourite Teesside place?

North Stand at the Riverside Stadium on a clear, sunny Saturday afternoon with a view of the Cleveland Hills.