

That charming man

Neil Tyler meets Ed Coady, the eternal optimist who's sales director at the specialist distributor Charcroft

With its headquarters and a manufacturing facility in Llanwrtyd Wells, Wales and a sales and procurement office in South Carolina, North America Charcroft Electronics is a specialist, distributor of passive, interconnect & electromechanical components and a CECC-approved manufacturer of commercial and CECC-release passives.

With nearly thirty years of experience as an approved supplier to leading defence, aerospace and industrial OEMs Charcroft has proved a great success and at its heart has been Ed Coady. Coming up to retirement Coady has helped guide the company to a position whereby it truly does punch above its weight in what is a very competitive market.

An eternal optimist Coady has a very easy going manner about him and he certainly can put you at your ease when you talk with him, but I think that belies a very determined man. We met in Oxford and he immediately began to work his charm.

"This is very nice, it's lovely to be able to talk about myself," he laughs.

Coady originally came over to the UK in the early 1970s from Ireland determined to get a place at university.

"I'd always wanted to go but I had to work and therefore study in my spare time. Naively, I was under the impression that the qualifications I'd obtained back in Ireland would mean I was well placed to study the A levels I needed to get into university - they weren't. I studied physics, applied maths, pure maths and English and basically failed the lot."

Coady is nothing if not honest and admits that leaving Ireland and coming to London had opened up a new world to him with the associated distractions of sport and women.

"Far too many distractions," he says with a smile.

Family expectations had been high so he went back to studying and despite another disappointing set of results he eventually got into Surrey University where he obtained a physics degree.

"It had been a goal I had set myself and I'd achieved it. Once I graduated I went to get a job as an engineer. After a number of interviews I was encouraged to drop my

attempts and instead go into management. I needed to get a job so when a position as a graduate trainee became available with Union Carbide I jumped at the chance."

Taken on as a trainee he spent several months working in different departments before ending up in sales and marketing.

"I think I learned that I'd never be an engineer, I just didn't have the patience. And while I wrote a couple of papers and had some technical ability I always felt more comfortable selling and interacting with people. Originally office based I ended up out on the road."

The challenge of a lifetime

A success on the road and in his mid twenties Coady now confronted what most people would consider the challenge of a lifetime - literally. Initially diagnosed with high blood pressure, despite being perfectly fit and active, he found that he was going into renal failure and was facing a lifetime of kidney dialysis.

"I had no symptoms, not an inkling that something was wrong. I'd seen a consultant in Newcastle, where I was working, and was led to believe that it was just a problem with my blood pressure. In fact my kidneys were failing."

"Renal failure is a slow process and when I knew that I may need surgery I looked to move to Cambridge where the best hospitals for this kind of operation were located. I was on dialysis for six months in hospital and then at home before I ended up having a kidney transplant at the tender age of 28."

The kidney that saved his life came from his brother with whom he was understandably close.

"He went through an awful lot to help me and sadly he died in a car accident ten years later." For the first and only time in the interview Coady is lost for words but he's soon back to his normal self when he suggests that the illness helped him win more orders. "How could they turn someone down when they could barely walk up stairs and carry a briefcase?"

Within twenty four hours of having the surgery Coady was transformed. The greatest pleasure was "simply being able to go for a pee!" he laughs.

I ask him whether having to deal with

this changed him in any way.

He ponders before answering. "Beyond becoming an ardent supporter of organ donation not a lot. I'm an eternal optimist. I didn't worry about things as I'm always of the opinion that they will turn out right. In fact I just continued as before. And despite not having an illness to rely on to bring in the business I was successful. And as a bonus many of those customers became friends."

Two years later Coady moved back to the north of England where he was made distribution manager.

"I think they felt I had management potential, I'd been very successful on the road which made me confident and put me at ease when I was dealing with people. It certainly boosted my confidence. Most people talk and don't listen. If you're going to succeed in this business you need to do both. People must want to spend time with you."

As distribution manager Coady was expected to grow the business through using distributors.

"It was certainly easier than being on the road and we won a number of very big orders as a result."

Coady talks about being lucky but I think you make your own luck based on hard work and putting in the time and effort. Being open and honest are vital assets when it comes to doing business, according to Coady, as well as having a "company that backs you."

"Working with distributors was an eye opener for me. It was a lot easier than dealing directly with customers and the distributors I met were dealing with a much wider variety of products. I was limited with what I could sell at Union Carbide, they weren't."

Changes

As the 1980s unfolded Union Carbide sold out to STC and despite being made UK marketing manager it wasn't a happy experience.

"Too many review meetings and people being bullied and berated in front of their colleagues. A culture of 'sod the customer' prevailed and after a year I'd had enough."

However, his decision to leave and join Thomson CSF didn't go as smoothly as he'd hoped.

"I joined as a senior product manager with the intention of becoming the company's sales manager. Unfortunately the existing sales manager didn't know that this was going to happen and I found myself in a very difficult position. I actually really liked the guy and we became close friends. It was a very uncomfortable time for me."

Having spent twelve very happy years at Union Carbide Coady had now spent several years at two different companies that he hadn't really enjoyed.

"I'd thought I'd spend my career at Union Carbide. A global business it offered so many opportunities to develop. I was toying with the idea of starting up my own business but that takes a lot of courage to do."

"In 1986 I had a meeting with Paul Newman, the managing director of Charcroft. We'd known each other since 1974 and he'd transferred business to me as I moved from company to company. I liked and trusted the guy and when he suggested I join Charcroft, he'd only just set it up, I jumped at the chance. For me this was the next best thing to starting up my own business."

Coady took a financial stake in the company buying shares and started to work his contact book.

"Paul had no franchises and I was able to bring with me a pretty extensive list of contacts. Working from home I met with everyone I'd ever worked with, many were good friends and within four years we'd grown the business from just over £200k to £1m in terms of turnover."

Since then the company has grown steadily and consistently.

"I don't think there has been a year when turnover hasn't gone up. We're ahead almost 30 per cent this year and that can be attributed to the products we sell and the markets we're in. There's plenty of business out there despite competing with some of the biggest distributors in the business."

So if he had a recipe for success what would it be?

"Team work and employing the right people. That can depend on good luck and...people knowing that they have the pleasure of working with me."

I can't disagree with that. ■