

Interview: Tim Hill (KPMG/Peat Marwick 1970-1974)

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Tim talks to us about his inspiration to build his financial game app, providing children, staff and company directors with a fun and easy way to learn the basics of financial accounting. He also shares his memories and stories of his early KPMG career and his following years in Jamaica.

Tell me about your time at KPMG?

Initially it was challenging. In 1970 I graduated with a degree in economics which was for the most part understanding theoretical concepts and suddenly my working life was dealing with minute detail – the discipline did me a lot of good! As I progressed I gained more business knowledge and these years have been an excellent foundation and invaluable guide throughout my assorted career.

What are your fondest memories of the firm?

The people I met, camaraderie, celebrations, staying away on assignments (memorably The Blue Bell, Heversham) and building friendships several of which have lasted over 40 years, amongst them Chris Statham who was my best man. I was in turn best man to John Davies; both Chris and John visited me in Jamaica. It was a privilege and enlightening experience to serve articles under the inspirational Alan Pownall.

Clients were varied such as Hawker Siddeley, Lostock where they developed the Blue Streak missile, Lines Brothers at the time of the selling on of Meccano, and the audit of Border Breweries Wrexham was always fun. John Holt, which was part of the Tiny Rowland empire was an interesting experience with different bands of gold circled tea cups depending on seniority, prints of the slave trade from West Africa on the walls and excuses for noncompliance such as ‘documents have been eaten by ants’. I learned the foundations of business and I have been able to apply these across the hundreds of organisations I have been involved with since.

Is there one thing you learned at the firm that has served you well in your career?

Always keep an open mind as things are often not as they first appear

Since leaving KPMG, you have had an interesting and varied career. Can you tell us more about your life after KPMG?

After leaving KPMG I spent a few months travelling around South America before returning to Jamaica as Financial Controller of Club Caribbean. I was straightaway managing 40 people and demanding accuracy and precision from those in accounts in particular, and trying to impose tight deadlines soon led me into trouble. After 9 months the MD sent me off the island and I travelled round Central America. It was in the Mayan ruins of Palenque that I received the inspiration that made my life in business rewarding and enjoyable. Instead of expecting everything to be right and on time I decided to accept that things would be wrong and I would work with staff to ensure things were correct going forwards. The welcome I received from the staff when I returned to Jamaica was overwhelming, they thought I had moved on and expressed their emotions openly. At Club Caribbean I continued to introduce new systems as many of theirs were seriously lacking, and successfully trained Harvey to take my place as FC after he had not succeeded in the post on two previous attempts prior to my arrival. In Jamaica I rediscovered the happiness I knew as a child growing up in Montgomeryshire, Mid Wales, before going away to boarding school. My time in Jamaica was a wonderful lesson in life. There was a free spirit and despite the tough conditions many staff lived in there was no hesitation in cracking up to a joke from a comedian or rocking to a reggae band; the bar staff were part of the entertainment.

The economic climate was grim in Jamaica following the 1976 elections when it was believed in certain quarters Michael Manley was courting Fidel Castro too closely.

I relocated to Miami to help put together Passkey a forerunner to timeshare, as well as returning to Jamaica each month for financial duties. From our experience running Club Caribbean and being faced each year with a decision as to whether to close the hotel for the summer to reduce losses it was obvious that the marginal cost of an additional room night was minimal once the decision had been taken to keep the hotel open. We contracted hotel space with 36 of the top golfing hotels throughout the World from The Rose Garden in Thailand to Sandy Lane Barbados on the basis that golfers want to play different courses and are happy that this is out of season. We were selling 12 weeks of vacation which could be taken at any time over a 12 year period at any combination of hotels at up to 50% discount of current prices. I was also involved in opening Bacchanalia, Coconut Grove, the first wine bar in Florida before returning to the UK in 1979 for family reasons.

Soon after arriving back in North Wales Michael, who also worked for KPMG during my articles, asked me to join him and I became a 40 % equity partner in M D Coxey which he had already established. I looked after the larger clients including Ifor Williams Trailers, Gerrards Bakery, Cable Services and Badley Ashton and Associates Ltd, preferred suppliers of high quality geoscience consultancy to the oil and gas industry worldwide. The eight years were exciting as we grew the practice and amazingly there was never a single argument about expenses or cars bearing in mind that while I was in between transport Michael lent me either his Porsche 911 Turbo, Range Rover or Renault 5TS!

It was a sad day when I left Coxey's to join a client who designed and manufactured data communications equipment as FD with the intention of taking it to the AIM stock market – it didn't happen and in August 1990 I started T H Consulting to provide business and financial advice, focusing on increasing profitability through better use of IT and sound strategy, to small and medium sized organisations. The directors of Club Caribbean soon heard that I was working for myself and invited me back to Jamaica to help solve some of their challenges. I was back four times a year for the next twenty years during which time my children came to love Jamaica and my grandchildren are now building up an appetite for the beauty and culture.

Some of my best experiences over the last 25 years with T H Consulting were with David Clapham, an old friend from Chester in the 60s who qualified as a chartered accountant about the same time as me. While I was in the Caribbean he became a Parisian and over ten years we carried out Intellectual Property Verification for Hollywood Majors together throughout Europe. I am godfather to Chris, one of his twin sons and looking forward to attending the other twin Jonny's wedding this September.

Recently I have taught Finance and Risk Management on the higher degree MBA course at the local university and because of the success in this I was asked to teach finance to HNC mature students.

You have recently developed The Financial Game App – can you tell us more about this?

I have created the Financial Game App which teaches financial literacy to non-financial people. The App does this in an intuitive way by turning the learning process into a game that imparts the essentials of accounting. It is a subliminal learning process using familiar environments and work processes to implant financial understanding; fear of numbers and convoluted accounting terminology are removed. The App is based on a tried and tested education programme over 10 years resulting in increased levels of financial understanding.

Over time I recognised that there is a dramatic lack of financial awareness not only in the younger generation and school children but in many employees, managers and directors in all sectors of industry and commerce. In fact the National Numeracy Charity say that £20bn a year is being lost in the UK each year because of lack of numeracy. I believe that these fundamentals should be a Life Skill for everyone.

I devised a game using Lego bricks that teaches the basics of accounts without using the words debit and credit. I have used it successfully in the Care Sector where at the beginning of the session delegates weren't sure of the difference between income and expenditure and one home saved over 30% of their admin costs through allocating costs more efficiently. A Social Enterprise running a supermarket who didn't understand margins and the relevance of stock, BTCV to young people up to the age of 21 who hadn't been in employment and Italian Students wanting to study accounts and had limited understanding of English and of course MBA and HNC students.

The real inspiration for the App came when I had dinner with Chi Onwurah in the Palace of Westminster when she was shadow innovation minister. I boasted that with the game children

of 12 could talk intelligently about finance rather than regurgitating notes to pass exams at the age of 16 and 18. As a result I was given a space before lunch in the local secondary school with a group of mixed ability year 9s. They understood direct costs, indirect costs, margins, bottom line and were even able to produce simple P&L accounts in just 40 minutes. Being in no doubt that I had something very powerful that could revolutionise the understanding of finance while improving numeracy, not only in the UK but around the World, I ran about trying to turn the Lego bricks into a computer game. I had no idea whether this would cost £50k or £250k. I was invited to make a 5 minute presentation at a meeting of ESTnet when Richard, who was less than half my age, approached me and understood immediately what was needed and the problems it will solve for people in business. Thanks to the skills and vision of members of his staff one of whom is a third of my age the first two Apps are now available on Android and iPads.

The primary one teaches the fundamentals of Profit and Loss from sales income, direct costs, contribution to overheads and margins. The knowledge gained from this basic App will help knock chunks out of the £20bn a year being lost in the UK because of lack of numeracy. The Balance Sheet App provides higher level understanding and imparts the construction of Accounts as well as the important Financial Ratios in a fun way via experiential learning. Apps will be customised for any company in any sector using their own branded images and structure of accounts. Broadcasting corporate messages can be sent by using Push Notification features in the App. The benefits go way beyond increasing profitability through the understanding of figures. Team Work will be improved as a result of a common language and barriers to culture change will be reduced.

I visited Baton Rouge earlier this year to carry out further research on the potential for the Apps and I'm delighted to say there is great enthusiasm with members of the Louisiana State University Incubation Centre to commercialise it in the United States.



Video: "The Financial Game" video on YouTube.

What would you say is your greatest professional accomplishment?

Refinancing Club Caribbean after hurricane Gilbert nearly wiped it out. They were well underinsured and had massively overspent on the rebuilding and refurbishment, the relationship with their bankers had fallen apart and there was no clear strategy about how they were going to survive. I didn't realise this was the challenge when the MD invited me back in 1990. I helped bring all this together and continued to carry out assignments for them until after the property was leased to Decameron in 2001.

Which three attributes have helped you achieve success?

Positive mental attitude which grew during my 3 month trip round America in 1970.

As they say in the Shaolin Temple – get knocked down 7 times get up 8

Enjoying different cultures in work and travel and learning from those experiences.

What's next for you?

I'm passionate about making the Financial Game App a success as my family, friends and target audiences will confirm.

I want to spend time with my family and grandchildren, skiing, golfing and becoming a better beekeeper and bell ringer. Following a full thickness tear of my distal biceps tendon playing rugby for the Golden Oldies in Edinburgh in 2008 my boots have been hung up for the last time.

On a voluntary basis as well as being treasurer of the local Christian Aid Branch I'm involved with Erlas Victorian Walled Garden, which is both a charity and a place. The charity exists to promote the health, well being and development of people with a variety of disabilities and challenges

I was instrumental in Hanson gifting their 70 acres land holdings at Fagl Lane Quarry, Hope in Flintshire, to the Park in The Past project. In all 120 acres of land have been acquired which will lead to the construction of a Roman Marching Fort, Iron Age farmstead, a facility for the community with special interest in wild life and biodiversity and a visitor centre. There is also a 35 acre lake for passive water sports.

I have recently been appointed independent examiner for the Bloom Appeal. This charity has been set up in the last 18 months to:

1. Support the care and well-being of patients with blood cancers.
2. Fund scientific research into treating and curing leukaemias, lymphomas and other blood cancers.
3. Enhance the education of patients, scientists and healthcare professionals in the field of blood cancers.

The reason I welcomed this opportunity to offer my services freely is because my son in law Mark has received excellent treatment in ward 7y in Liverpool Royal Hospital since he was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia last October, a few floors above A&E where my eldest daughter Emily works as a consultant.

Other things you may not know about Tim:

Who or what inspires you?

The Rev. O J Hill, who was a Clerk in Holy Orders in the Church in Wales as well as being my father. He had so much love, wisdom and understanding of events and people, especially me. He and my mother Enid set me on the road to a happy and fulfilling life. Oliver was never afraid to fight an injustice or for a cause he believed in.

I wouldn't be where I am today without the Inspiration of Alan Pownall (senior partner Peat Marwick Mitchell Liverpool) who employed and guided me. I wrote to him on the suggestion of the father of a school friend I was staying with in Cornwall who asked what I was going to do. I wasn't sure so he said Peat Marwick Mitchell were the auditors of the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank in Singapore where he was the manager and intimated accounting might be an interesting profession.

Is your glass half empty or half full?

Half full

Motivational phrase or quote that resonates with you

HH Dalai Lama – “If you want others to be happy practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion”.

If you are interested in hearing more about The Financial Game App, Tim would be delighted to hear from you. You can contact Tim directly on enquiries@thconsulting.co.uk.