

Piers du Pre; pilot to telecoms pioneer

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Piers du Pre's first career began while loitering in the hallway at his parent's home as a teenager. As his mother spoke on the phone, a deafening roar from a plane flying overhead drowned her conversation. She turned to du Pre and told the directionless lad that he should be an airline pilot, as he also enjoyed making noise. He thought that was a brilliant idea, and from 1969 to 1983 flew around the world for BEA and BOAC, which jointly became BA.

Today, du Pre is the founder and head of du Pre Plc. The idea for this business came about in 1979 as he lounged at a poolside in Dubai inbetween flights, sipping a beer and flicking through a UK newspaper. A story mentioned that the telecoms market was opening up so hardware could be provided by those other than BT. du Pre had been in need of an answering machine for some time, and had found a supplier for them in Hong Kong. This was just the break he had been waiting for, and he soon began importing answering machines to the UK.

That year, du Pre sat at his dining room table, which became known as 'the office', and composed an advert for answering machines for his local newspaper. This ad would make his fortune and in a week he would be rolling in cash, he decided. However, disappointment struck as only one person rang following the advert the following week. Undaunted, du Pre began his mission to bring answering machines to the masses with this sole enquiry.

"I was so naïve!" du Pre states. "My one enquiry was a guy from a hotel in Newbury. He asked if my answering machine had certain functionality; I had no idea, so I said I would find out and call him back. I hung up, read what was written on the box and found out it did indeed have the functionality he wanted. But when I went to call him back, I realised I hadn't taken his name or his phone number! I was completely naïve in business and in selling," he says. Yet du Pre did manage to track down the hotel and the man, and finally made the sale having learned a short sharp lesson on taking notes.

Despite this rocky start, du Pre soon grew his business to the point where his wife had to turf him out of the house. The sitting room had become 'the demonstration room' and the laundry room was known as 'the packing and distribution area'. By then it was 1983, and phone systems were about to be released onto the market. du Pre saw the potential for really being able to expand his business in that event, so moved the

business to its own premises, left the airline, and employed a secretary and a salesman.

Twenty five years later and du Pre is one of the largest resellers in the trade. It has three key markets: schools; BT; and reselling telecoms equipment. In Newbury, there are a high number of independent schools. In the late 1980s, de Pre received a call from the bursar at one school who he bonded with, who put him in touch with another bursar at a different school. Over a decade later, and du Pre celebrated its twenty fifth birthday party at the BT Tower surrounded by key industry players involved in its education division. At this party, the company announced it had been awarded Microsoft's highest accolade in the education sector as Microsoft Education Solutions Partner, of which there will eventually only be around 10 in the UK.

A major part of du Pre's education division is Hebron, which was founded in 1987, and acquired by du Pre in 1996 to complement the company's already successful moves in that sector. Hebron is a software development company for school management and administration software. Its latest development is hebron.Net, a complete management information system for schools, based on Microsoft's .Net platform. Including Hebron, which du Pre expects will take du Pre into a new stratosphere of financial growth on the back of hebron.Net, its education division covers 40 per cent of the company's turnover.

This move with Hebron and .Net is taking du Pre deeper into the world of convergence and applications than many other resellers and vendors. Already, hebron.Net's popularity has seen it taken up by two of the largest independent school groups in the UK, Asquith Court and The United Church Schools Trust. Yet this is not simply a case of good fortune; as a company, du Pre has been involved in convergence since the late 1980s.

du Pre started an IT section at his company for the cabling of local area networks, and began to grow the idea of convergence out from there to servers and routers. Now, the business is split between data and telephony expertise, with around 30 per cent of its staff purely dedicated to T and data. This suits it ideally to the convergence of those two areas, plus the growing demand for business applications over telephony carrying data infrastructures.

However, du Pre comments: "A lot of people are very frightened of convergence, and rightly so. The move into convergence is hugely costly; there's an absolutely vast amount of upfront cost. It's good to have an engineering department that knows what it's doing, and those people are expensive. This isn't just about screen popping, which

is very elementary CTI. It goes so much further beyond that. I think we'll tend to see companies acquiring IT companies to get into it, at this stage of the game.

Du Pre warns that all resellers must find a way to move into the convergence arena, whether they can afford an acquisition or not: "If resellers don't move into convergence, they're dead. If you don't know data, you will not sell. Look at the people that are into IT and see what's happening to them; anyone that's into IT is growing. If companies are into IT, they've certainly got more potential to grow than those that don't. For companies that aren't into IT, it's going to be very hard for them."

This company has ploughed on through the last two recessions without missing a step, according to du Pre. He states: "In the first recession, an engineer of ours met with a client and was asked how we were being affected. The engineer said, 'Oh yes, our directors have heard about that. They had a board meeting and decided to have nothing to do with it'. And that's exactly what happened."

On the latest recession to hit this industry, du Pre continues: "There will always be an area of your business that isn't affected by the recession. Concentrate on that."

He relates that philosophy to the way he treats his staff. "If a member of staff is strong in one area and weak in another, don't invest loads of training in the weak area. Invest in the strong area to make that really strong, and find someone else strong in that person's weak area to take away that part. We're endlessly training here. It's never complete; you have to keep on training staff."

du Pre adds that it's vital an employee is coached, rather than managed. "Staff have to be better than we are at their jobs. You can't stunt someone's growth like a manager, who fears someone becoming better than them and taking their job. You have to make them better than you, like a coach."

Growth for du Pre is not about expansion over 2005; it's about making more money. He says: "We're very excited about the future. If the company has to grow, it has to. But it's always about the bottom line. You can't measure by turnover, people and cash terms. It's profit that counts."