

Making Waves

By Stuart White
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I have never been fired from a job. I guess most of us haven't. I think I may have come close a number of times but I really don't have a 'chop' under my belt that I can boast about. The nearest I came was while I was in the US as a keen thespian and had auditioned for two shows simultaneously. Chances are, in acting, you're lucky if you get even one gig but it seemed the Gods were on my side and, as luck would have it, I landed both roles. As the performances would be a month apart I was sure I could juggle my rehearsal schedule, without either show being compromised or becoming suspicious that I was dividing my loyalties. But, as you know, thinking you can do something and actually doing it are two different things. Eventually I was as stretched as a Masaai's earlobe, and couldn't commit to the rehearsal times of both shows and was duly axed, as fate would have it - from the bigger and better of the two - ouch!. I was left in a crappy little production and missed out on the big blockbuster performance. So dispirited, disheartened and disappointed by the experience, I never performed on stage again after that.

Some of us respond better to adversity than others. While some crumble and fall others bounce back harder and faster than Federer's return and none more spectacularly than Peter Saville previously of assessment giant, SHL fame. Under Saville's direction, SHL became a global powerhouse in the field of executive assessment in the 1980's. Backed by extensive research, the company introduced the concept of psychometric tests into the organisational world. The company's solutions were then acknowledged globally as the greatest innovation in workplace psychology and began enjoying unprecedented success. But it wasn't all rosy for the Saville, who was the 'S' in SHL. A furious boardroom row, politics more befitting a soap opera, Saville's concerns over the use of unsupervised testing on the internet, which he felt would inevitably lead to cheating, and ultimately being ousted from his own Board was the background for a once good relationship turning sour. It even went as far as Peter Saville legally battling it out to have the Saville name, by now synonymous with successful psychometric methodology, removed from all SHL material, allowing him the freedom to use the famous name in a new company to promote its even more innovative products and pursue market growth.

I know this only because my company has recently entered into a strategic partnership with Saville Consulting. I was intrigued by the story as over the past years Saville's company has reportedly developed revolutionary assessment tools much more geared up for the 21st century than SHL and other competitors. Concerns which Saville had over unsupervised internet testing have been largely overcome by new products and the offerings they have can be carried out in a quarter of the time of other similar products take with superior validity – meaning it's more accurate, much quicker and costs much less. The in-fighting, back-biting and ultimate boardroom coup had left Peter Saville bloodied but decidedly unbowed, He bounced back to take SHL head on, and emerged bigger, brighter and better than before.

In a 2007 article in Psychologist magazine Saville cited his success as down to "energy, enthusiasm, bloody mindedness; I'm very competitive. Like many entrepreneurs I have a go, take calculated risks, I learn, and I listen." He said that he had steered SHL to grow from 2 employees to a workforce of some 1300 people. 'We worked hard, we were proud of what we did.' Businesses using psychology should be run by psychologists and this he believes is where SHL went wrong. And now he is out to beat them at their own game – isn't this fun?

He has been called an assessment guru and a genius and has had more industry recognition than Michael Jackson has had hits. But I think the real motivation with the Peter Savilles of this world is how their passion for whatever they take on, their personal and professional integrity and determination in overcoming adversity is just part of their psyche, something they have to do – regardless of what gets thrown in their way.

From humble beginnings, struggling with dyslexia, a ten year battle with seriously misdiagnosed health problems and then losing a company that took 25 years to build, for the rest of us that would have been more than enough to call time out, retire and reminisce about what was and might have been. Not for this man who rose from the ashes, reinvigorated and refusing to accept defeat. And to think my chance at fame as an actor was struck down simply because I over-committed my talent and time. And having burned my fingers once by being dropped, my acting ego was so badly bruised it never recovered.

There's something to be said for not letting the past dictate your future, otherwise, who know, it could have been me hosting the Golden Globes the other night as opposed to Ricky Gervais. And what did Peter Saville call his new suite of really groundbreaking products? Wave. Now I am not 100% sure why he chose that particular name. I suppose it must be connected to the fact that what characterises them is that they are transforming the world of testing as we know it and thus it's quite literally a new wave – a fresh approach sweeping across the industry and washing away its competitors. Or I wonder if he secretly was showing the finger to SHL, waving goodbye as he leaves them in the dust?

Saville is launching in Botswana this week – I will ask, and let you know the real reason. I can say one thing about the name, though, which is that such a tailor-made range of innovative and effective testing materials could only have come from one place - Saville Row.

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