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HOW I BECAME A

CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

BARRY NEILSON

The Post: Chief Executive,
Construction Industry
Training Board Northern
Ireland (CITB NI)

The Post Holder:
Barry Neilson

Barry Neilson has
worked his way up in the
construction industry
from an apprentice to a
chief executive.

Give a brief outline of your career to date.

I started work as an apprentice draughtsman with a consulting engineers practice in Glasgow where I also went through my ONC and HNC qualifications. I was encouraged to go on to do a degree in Civil Engineering and returned to a consulting engineers where I became a Chartered Civil Engi-

neer. I went on to join the National House Building Council (NHBC) in Scotland which gave me a more strategic view of the sector and was very much involved in setting and monitoring building standards as well as moving further towards a managerial role. My move to the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) reinforced this direction. It showed me a UK-wide view

of the industry in terms of both skills and the strategic nature the construction sector plays within the economy. I then moved to work in London for a number of years as their Divisional Director for Policy and External Relations. After CIOB I moved away from the construction sector to become Director for Scotland and Northern Ireland for Cogent, a Sector Skills



Council for the Petrochemical and Polymer industry. The opportunity to return to construction as Chief Executive of CITB NI arose in 2010.

What was your favourite subject at school?

Technical Studies and Physics.

Did you go on to further/higher education, if so, what did you study and where?

Yes. ONC / HNC Civil Engineering at Glasgow College of Technology and BSc Civil Engineering at Paisley University.

How did you get into your area of work?

I started as an apprentice and from there progressed my technical career. I managed a team and became more involved in the management and development of people. I moved away from being a practicing Civil Engineer to focus on managing people and then on to the strategic development of skills within the Built Environment.

Is this what you always wanted to do?

I was always keen on a career in construction but in my younger years I always thought of myself as a technical person. However, in each job I had I looked at those who were my managers and thought 'I could do that'. I kept looking for the next step and thinking about what skills and knowledge I would need to develop my career.

Were there any particular essential qualifications or experience needed?

My current role requires a balance between understanding the industry, understanding the complex world of skills and qualifications, and the ability to work with others. All of these skills are common to many sectors and there are many management qualifications you can undertake to learn this, but most of what I know has been developed through my experience and learning from those I have

worked with.

Are there alternative routes into the job?

There are thousands of career routes available within the construction sector that would prepare someone for the job that I do. In my experience the only limit to progression is your personal ability and drive. I started as an apprentice and could easily have followed a thousand different pathways depending on ability and opportunity. You need to be prepared to make the changes and invest in your own skills and competence.

What are the main personal skills your job requires?

I think the main skill is listening and understanding. It's a bit of a cliché but even if you don't agree with an approach or viewpoint, it's important to understand it from the perspective of the person, or people, you are working with. The other main skill is working with others in an open and collaborative way – but also being prepared to make a decision and follow it when it is needed.

What does a typical day entail?

I wish I knew but that is what makes the job enjoyable. Like all jobs, particularly if you are involved within the public sector, there is a lot of compliance administration. But the really interesting bits are when you are working with the team to help solve issues. In a diverse organisation like CITB NI this can vary from long term industry strategy to coordination of facilities maintenance. Construction prepares you for dealing with unknown things occurring whether it is unforeseen ground conditions, the weather or the myriad of issues that coordinating people brings.

What are the best and most challenging aspects of the job?

The best aspect is easy – seeing people move and develop their skills and competencies. There is nothing better than helping someone to achieve their potential. The challenges? Forecasting for what's ahead and planning for it. The current situation, trying to predict what impact Covid19 and

Brexit will have on the construction sector, the skills it will need and the role of CITB NI in ensuring the skills the industry will need are in place.

Why is what you do important?

Employers and individuals are, in the main, focused on what they want now, to deliver in the short term. The role of CITB NI, along with others, is to look into the future and try and prepare people and the sector for what they will need in the future.

How has Covid-19 impacted your business/role?

The impact on the construction sector as a whole has been felt but we have seen training in the sector continue. Our staff have been fantastic throughout with keeping the industry updated, supported and sign posted. We have been providing lots of online training sessions and webinars. We have also been supporting the retention of apprentices and providing access to training on-line. We are also encouraging construction employers to help support both new and retained apprentices and claim up to £11,700 of funding. The funding available is a combined financial offering from CITB NI training grants and the Department for the Economy's new Apprenticeship Recovery Package.

What adjustments have you had to make?

There are many negatives to Covid-19 across all businesses but there are a few positives as well. We are finding that the industry is more accepting of flexible on-line learning, backed up with workshops either on-line or physical. We



are looking at the learning points so far and some will carry on long into the future and change some of the training provided permanently. From an operational perspective we have made huge changes in how we operate from our location at Nutt's Corner. It is a mix of staff working from home and using a rota for use of the building in order to adhere to the Covid guidelines and keep everyone safe.

What advice would you give anyone looking to follow a similar career path?

Never stop looking ahead. There are a thousand routes to any role.

If you weren't doing this what would you like to do?

I've always had a dream to develop and open a camping and caravan park. I've done a fair bit of both and my wife and I think we have the perfect model in our heads. Maybe once we retire!

What is the one piece of advice you would give to yourself on your first day?

Ask questions and listen to the answers.

Describe your ideal day off.

I'd head off to a nice part of the country for a long cycle and dinner with my wife.

And finally, what's the key to any successful job search?

Most employers are looking for people who will embrace and enhance their organisation. So get to know the organisation's values and goals, identify the skills and abilities that you have that will contribute to their business and focus on what you can add rather than what they can give.



Barry Neilson

