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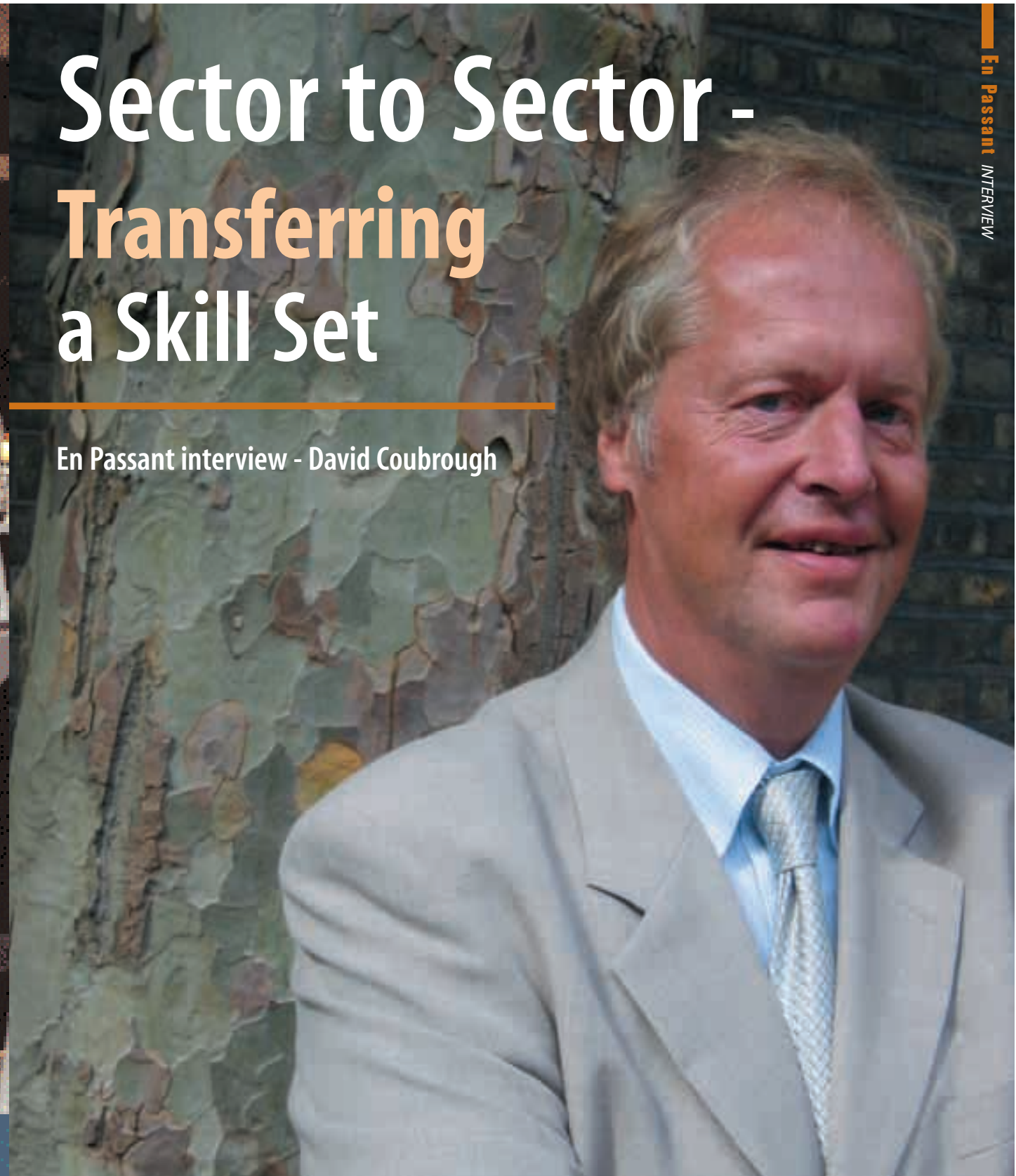
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Sector to Sector - Transferring a Skill Set

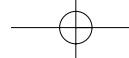
En Passant INTERVIEW

En Passant interview - David Coubrough



As the scope of the Hospitality Industry is so broad, it is a strange fact that there are very few who have been able to display successful careers in more than one sector. There are many who have tried and many that have failed.

Pictures: Joanne Aldridge





David Coubrough

En Passant wanted to look at this issue further and therefore, went to meet one person who has possessed a rare career record - a person that has founded, built, and sold their own business, who has been a Chief Executive of a PLC and who is now working and managing in sectors away from their original area. It is an interesting story of a proven individual still driven with an enthusiasm for the industry.

David Coubrough was the founder of Portfolio, one of the industry's leading recruitment companies. He graduated from Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University) with an HND in Hotel and Catering Administration in 1977. His first professional role was at The Goring Hotel before moving into the world of recruitment joining HOCAPS in 1980. He founded Portfolio in 1985 and over the subsequent eighteen years built it to become one of the true market leaders for executive management recruitment within the Hospitality Industry, twice selling the company to PLCs - once in 1987 and once in 1995. In between times, he had reacquired the company in 1990.

In early 2003, David took his leave from Portfolio and today works with a range of businesses including the Executive Chairman's role with Bespoke Hotels, and non-executive director roles with Brazz (with Kit Chapman), Holroyd Howe (one of The Sunday Times top 100 employers) and as a Director of the Maldon Crystal Salt Company Ltd, where he chairs the Board Meetings.

One of the initial fascinating points is that most people who found a business find it so very hard to let go and work for another business and yet for David this appeared to be a very conscious decision and one that he knew that he had to make, for himself as much as for the business.

Sector to Sector - Transferring a Skill Set

"I needed to reinvent myself. I was very proud of the business that we had built but it was just time for a new challenge. I knew that I had lost my desire to take the business to the next level and I was finding it harder to provide fresh inspiration. Eighteen years is a long time. My final year at the helm was a good year in which we delivered a profit of over £500,000 to the PLC, so it was a good time to move on."

At the same time, I had been approached by a number of companies and it was just a natural step. I think that we all face the danger of becoming stale and I didn't really want this to happen to me. I was forever advising others of the need to find new challenges. It was time to do it for myself."

One of the companies that had approached David was Bespoke Hotels. A key Director at Bespoke was Robin Sheppard who had been a friend of David's from college days. Robin is renowned for being a highly creative and innovative hotelier and the idea of working with such a character to help develop a new hotel management business appealed to David.

"It was a natural step. My career had started in Hotels with The Goring Hotel and I always worked closely with the Hotel Industry. Robin Sheppard, who was one of the Directors of Bespoke Hotels, is a good friend of long standing. We had always worked well together and complemented each other. On top of that, they had ideas and plans. We would like to take it to the AIM market in about 3 years' time. We are still a young business. We would like to take the market position vacated by Hotel Du Vin since Malmaison acquired it, in terms of becoming the innovative hotel group that is fun to work for. In the two years since I joined we have gone from 2 to 7 hotels, including Home House, Lords of the Manor and The Feathers at Woodstock."

From a personal point of view, it would be a real challenge to take another company onto the AIM."

As David spoke about his new challenge, one could visibly see the enthusiasm he has for this new chapter in his career.

"It has been refreshing and reinvigorating. I have found myself working longer hours again, and facing all kinds of new challenges."

For example, I was leaving Wimbledon a few weeks ago and I had a phone call from one of our General Managers telling me that the hotel had been struck by lightning and the restaurant had flooded. The next day, I went to the hotel and reassured them that these things happen but once. Famous last words - lightning then hit the hotel that very moment. The restaurant roof collapsed and the place was flooded again, all this on a day with full occupancy and 200 delegates in the conference rooms."

Although, David is clearly enjoying his new lease of life it must have been still psychologically hard leaving a business where he had been seen as a big fish and moving to more supporting roles. After all, many Chief Executives relish being the leader rather than a member of the team.

"When it was announced that I was leaving Portfolio, I received a number of calls from senior people who said they admired the fact that I was breaking away from my comfort zone and taking the leap. They wished they could do it too. There has to be more to it than just leading a business for the sake of it. It is about enjoying what one does and I am fortunate to work with a number of highly successful businesses. I can add value to these businesses in a variety of ways, which is what I enjoy. Furthermore with Bespoke I have both a strategic and a day-to-day involvement and in recent months our main investors, in both Home House and Hawkwell House in Oxford, have taken a 50% stake in our company. Their goals are a flotation and they have stated they would like me to lead this. With Robin's creative flair, Haydn Fentum's financial skills and the recent promotion of our Operations Director Iain Shelton we feel we have a powerful team. We also have some very able General Managers."

Kit Chapman is another that is well known throughout the Hotel Industry as a creative character that only works to the highest of standards. Was David motivated by working with passionate, colourful characters such as Robin and Kit?

"Yes, absolutely. Both are actually quite similar. Both are very creative and standards driven, as are Rick Holroyd and Nick Howe who are

totally passionate about their business. However, I find that I can bring other dimensions to these businesses in a range of ways and that is the fun of it. I wouldn't want to just do a role for the sake of it."

For example, when Brazz opened in Cardiff, we needed to ensure that we had a sounder financial footing and this is where I have been of help. With Bespoke, I am responsible for all recruitment as well as working with the senior team on developing the current business and winning more hotel contracts."

From listening to David, it sounded like he relished the variety of his roles but he was quick to point out that his ambitions had not lessened.

"I don't feel that I have any laurels to rest on. I want to feel that I am constantly achieving new things. I think that I will continue working all the way through to the end of my days. Creating and developing businesses is what gives me a buzz."

David's work schedule is clearly full as beyond working with Brazz, Bespoke, Holroyd Howe, The Maldon Crystal Salt Company, he is also a Non- Executive director of a property company, is on the Board of Patrons of the Academy of Culinary Arts and also actively supports the Lord's Taverners.

"The Lords Taverners are doing some really good work raising funds for the disadvantaged and I enjoy supporting such causes, without wishing to sound like David Brent in "The Office's" Red Nose Day episode!"

David is one of those characters that are seemingly able to work in a variety of environments. Most people prefer to work for either privately owned businesses or more publicly owned concerns. Each brings

their own culture and characteristics to the fore and few enjoy both. But just as David has moved from sector to sector, he seemingly has enjoyed working in both these business cultures.

"I like both. They both set different challenges. You can do more within private companies and be far more entrepreneurial. Public companies are a different challenge but I have enjoyed my time in this environment too. One just has to remember that the City is very unforgiving and one has to deliver on expectation. However, I believe hotel companies can do as well as public companies and it will be interesting to see as to whether or not we could succeed in this environment."

So why is it that David has been able to move from sector to sector and from culture to culture? Why is it that he has been able to do this and others have struggled to adapt far more?

"Determination and self belief are important, as is an ability to recognise when you are treading water and do something about it. It is difficult to leave something that you know well and feel secure in, but you owe it to yourself to set new challenges."

The Dome inside Home House, Portman Square, London