

6th Floor, City Exchange
11, Albion Street
Leeds
West Yorkshire
LS1 5ES



0113 3200 750
www.webanywhere.co.uk

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The Business Desk interview with Sean Gilligan: The education entrepreneur who wants to make headlines

ENTREPRENEURS may come in many shapes and sizes, but there are some characteristics that almost all of them share. Among the most important is relentlessness.

And Webanywhere's founder and chief executive is definitely unrelenting. At least three times during the interview he asks what the headline to the piece is going to be, what the angle will be, before suggesting what he thinks might work.

"Do you think people find it hard to say no to you?", I asked, in a rare pause in his stream-of-consciousness narrative which combined corporate vision with self-analysis.

He said: "My bark is louder than my bite. I might throw my toys out of the pram but I won't fire people."

Which is probably reassuring to the 120 people he employs, predominantly in Leeds and Katowice, Poland, in his e-learning business. While the 12 years he has been running Webanywhere might not have mellowed him, he has adapted his style.

"As you grow in a start-up business you can be quite autocratic. When you're bigger, you need to be consultative," he said.

"A good leader is never the finished article. You have to be self-reflecting all the time - 'is it something I need to learn?', 'do I need to hire someone?'"

Education is important to Mr Gilligan, as befits a business that splits its focus between schools and workplace learning, and he spends time identifying his own strengths and areas for self-development. For example he talked me through his DISC personality profile, which assesses dominance, influence, steadiness and compliance, although it didn't require test results to know that he is direct and impatient.

"I am very much a creator," he added. "Anything new where there isn't repetitive work - I can concentrate on my strengths.

His entrepreneurial spirit emerged, he said, after five years of working for other people, when he spotted an opportunity to build school websites, starting with his old school Holy Family Catholic School in Keighley.

"There was a gap in the market and I could produce the websites for £600. Thereafter there was the realisation that I didn't want to be selling all my life."

The business went from producing school websites into e-learning platforms, becoming a Moodle partner, and then moving into workplace learning and international markets, targeting America.

In deciding what is the right thing to do, he calls upon a list of eight values which he wants to be ingrained in his staff and his company.

"Three of those values are: people need to be intellectually curious, they need to be pro-active, and they need to treat everyone as you want to be treated yourself," he said.

"I think the most difficult values for anyone to learn is the curiosity and being pro-active. If you are curious you find out the problems. If you are pro-active, you are contributing."

Those values have led Mr Gilligan to be running a business which he feels is on the cusp of an exciting period, driven by becoming a Moodle USA partner 18 months ago which has seen Webanywhere "flooded by inbound enquiries" and enabled the business to start scaling up in Chicago.

"The American opportunity is scary, it will transform the business," he said. "We have a number of European opportunities coming in, opportunities with Microsoft in Asia-Pacific. There will be more internationalisation but with a real focus on America."

He added: "I have personal goals. The goal is to be a £20m business by 2020.

"The business is undervalued. We have got a fantastic brand name. The biggest dilemma is whether I organically grow the business or whether we take on VC money - I do get approaches.

"On the one hand we could create more jobs, but lose control. I have got the funder's dilemma going on."

Before then, his immediate focus is more local as today Webanywhere is hosting Ed Tech 15, an education technology conference in Leeds, where Educating Yorkshire's Mr Mitchell is among the speakers. His warm-up act is Mr Gilligan, although the star of the education reality TV show will have to be at his best to match the enthusiasm and drive of Webanywhere's founder.

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For more information:

Stephanie Girard

Marketing Team Leader

Webanywhere Ltd.

Tel: 0113 3200 750

Email: stephanie.girard@webanywhere.co.uk

www.webanywhere.co.uk