

THE BUSINESS Herald

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MEET THE IRON MAN

Former chief executive reveals how becoming a caddie transformed his life

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From driving ambition to happiness in the bag

When CEO Neil Francis suffered a stroke, it was the catalyst for a life change.
By Colin Cardwell

LIFE is fine. Then it kicks you in the teeth. It is a poignant observation coming from Neil Francis, the former chief executive of Company Net, which he had co-founded, sold to a multinational then bought back. Francis was enjoying the life of a successful CEO and, he admits, the status it conferred when at the age of 41 that devastating kick was delivered.

"In 2006 I was invited to a CBI conference in London and during a break from meetings I was walking around thinking about several possible future scenarios for our company. And not one of them included the possibility that I might have a serious health issue."

That in itself is not surprising: entrepreneurs and business leaders tend to be wilfully insistent about forging an image of dynamism, strength and indestructibility. Fragility of any kind is not what the staff, customers or shareholders want to contemplate.

As Francis testifies, it does not always work to plan. In October that year when on a family holiday in Arran he was getting out of his

car when everything changed. "The next moment I couldn't speak or see out of one eye and was feeling incredibly strange."

He was rushed to hospital in Kilmarnock, transferred to Edinburgh and was diagnosed as having suffered a stroke, caused by a deep vein thrombosis that had probably developed during a business flight to Boston.

Francis, in a forthright fashion laced with wry humour, recounts his long recovery and radical career realignment – one that has included becoming a first-time author – in his first book, *Changing Course*.

"I think it's the way my entrepreneurial brain works but during that difficult time I quite quickly thought that there could be a book there, so I kept a log as to the stories. I was discussing the idea with a friend who said: 'Don't do it on leadership; do it on starting again!'"

Starting again meant relinquishing the role of CEO of Company Net – a business consultancy and Microsoft specialist based in Edinburgh that was one of the first web-development companies in the UK – and becoming a golf caddie in East Lothian. Plus finding a logical thread that connected the two careers.

Francis, originally from Cheshire but whose accent is more informed by his years growing up in Durham, came to Scotland to study for an HND in communications studies in Kirkcaldy. After



A NEW DIRECTION: Neil Francis now caddies at his local golf club, North Berwick.

working for two leading insurance companies he "crossed the fence" and joined marketing and design company Shaw in Edinburgh, which, he says, gave him the passion to own his own company.

He co-founded Company Net in 1996, with the aim of targeting large corporate business, private and public. After building the first Scottish Government website Francis received a call from the innovations director of oil major Burmah Castrol, which in 1998 acquired Company Net to form its

web innovation arm and gave the company access to national and international clients that included Disney and Coca-Cola. When BP Amoco bought Burmah Castrol in 2000, Francis and his team initiated an MBO and bought back the company.

However, after his stroke, the formerly self-confident chief executive now found himself "cognitively and emotionally a complete wreck", struggling to articulate words and forgetting the names of his children. He says:

Golf proved a lifeline. After watching a TV programme about Scottish caddies he approached North Berwick Golf Club, of which he was a member, to ask to begin caddying.

"My wife Louise thought it would help my recovery and keep me fit – and also give me the opportunity to meet the types of people I used to work with and help me regain my confidence."

The results were extraordinary. "My speech improved and talking to the golfers, many of them in high-powered international jobs, I was inspired by their stories." Tellingly, for someone who had been a senior executive himself, he describes his new situation as a privileged one. "I could learn how these successful people did things, hear about some of their life experiences and enjoy their stories while I caddied for them."

These people, he says, now include doctors, lawyers, pilots, US senators ... and lorry drivers. "It's a great place to meet interesting people," he says. "North Berwick was founded in 1832: it attracts about 10,000 visitors a year so if you are coming from America or Europe you tend to play here."

As a caddie, he has also managed to get behind the façade of success. That money itself doesn't bring

'THERE WERE SKILLS THAT I STILL HAD THAT OTHER COMPANIES MIGHT BENEFIT FROM'

happiness is a truism those of us not inhabiting the world of the über-rich regard with scepticism, but Francis says candidly one of the enlightening experiences of his second career has been meeting people for whom acquiring huge wealth has not been enough.

His book is, at first sight, familiar to readers of motivational volumes that claim to 'help you change your life' – and Francis does not pretend to literary aspirations. He freely admits to being a fan of the business books you pick up at airports and it bears their hallmarks: pithy, challenging chapter headings, bullet points and highlighted quotations. Unlike others, however, it is underpinned by the experience of someone whose life *has* been changed – not from choice – and displays a remarkable generosity of spirit.

"For me there was no great risk in doing something new because

I couldn't perform my previous role. It's far more difficult to choose to do something new. That takes a different type of courage."

His restless entrepreneurial spirit did not allow Francis to dwell too long on the consequences of his stroke. "I came to the conclusion that, even though I would not be a CEO again, there were skills, knowledge and strengths that I still had that other companies might benefit from."

So he set about forging another career as a non-executive director: in that capacity he remains on the board of Company Net and launched CEO to Caddie, a consultancy that, working with angel syndicates and venture capitalists, aims to help innovative companies implement digital and technical strategies, principally around sales and marketing.

And while business trips to Boston might be a painful memory, Francis still has foreign ambitions, though these are now focused on The Together Partnership, which he co-founded with a group of Scottish business people with experience of Rwanda and the challenges it has faced since the genocide of 1994 in which more than 800,000 were killed.

"I'd heard about Dr Nicholas Hitimana, who had to flee the country and did his postgraduate degrees at the University of Edinburgh. He returned in 2001 and set up Ikirezi, a business that partners with farming co-operatives to produce essential oil from geraniums for the local and export market.

"I thought it was a great entrepreneurial story and a few of us had the idea of setting up The Together Partnership as a social enterprise to help forge relationships between Scottish and



A NEW CHAPTER: Suffering a stroke inspired Francis to write his first book.

TIPS FOR LIFE

- Combine passions with purpose
- Choose the right risks
- Do not let your circumstances control you
- Look only at the facts
- Love what you do
- Do not focus solely on money
- Take intelligent risks
- Do not dwell on what you used to do
- Understand the power of networking
- Do not forget the world of your family
- Break bad habits
- Get back your purpose

Rwandan companies. It's a great company board, all of them volunteers."

Currently he is likely to be found in a board meeting before lunch and striding the links in the afternoon. It is a situation Francis, who appears to be a born optimist, is clearly happy with. "I'm a strong believer in identifying strengths and weaknesses. Suffering a stroke rips your life apart – you lose a big part of it and that causes grief. But by focusing on what you can do, you find an equilibrium." ■

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