



World-Class
Belfast

Nigel Wright, CEO
Converge Technology
Specialists



In every hero's journey, the protagonist has to return home after conquering the world, elixir in hand; otherwise their journey is not complete.

Nigel Wright may be seated when we meet over Zoom to discuss World-Class Belfast, but there's something about his demeanour that can't quite be contained by broadband. It's not a caffeine buzz and the scene surrounding him is like something from a perfect Nordic catalogue. And then it dawns on me: this is a man finally at peace with whatever has driven him and got him this far but that he's also in his pomp.

He's literally and figuratively at home.

"Covid isn't impacting on our expansion plans," he begins. "We acquired a business on Friday and we haven't taken time to celebrate yet as we're trying to acquire another one by next Friday or early the week after. There's quite a lot going on at the minute, but it's very exciting."

"The banks have been good to us," he continues, "really supportive. We went to see seven institutions about this deal and we had five offers, which is great. A sign of confidence in what you're doing."

From his new base in Northern Ireland, Wright explains that he was born just down the road.

"I left home when I was 18 and then came back in my 20s for about four years. I spent a lot of years tire kicking and didn't know what I wanted to do. I even spent a year cutting wood in the sawmill here near home. But eventually, somebody I knew told me that they were earning four times as much as me working in sales in England, and he was being paid another 20 grand a year in commission. And my first question was, where do I sign up?"

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our biggest strength is our people.”

“That job kind of took me on the path where I ended up today. I've worked in telecoms and seen them grow and go bust. I travelled the world aged 29, which was fantastic. Then I came back and decided to start a business in Manchester aged 33. And that's when I started with £2,000 in my back pocket and began to build what is now CTS.”

“Covid has accelerated the adoption of the cloud by law firms and it has definitely shortened the decision making processes. There’s a lot more to be done in the market but we’re proud of the progress we’ve made to date.”

Why did he set up in Manchester?

“Well, it was attractive as there were loads of my mates here and there’s quite the Northern Irish diaspora here. But there’s something about the place. It’s not quite London, but you can set up a business and run with it. I’d love to say that there was a rationale for it but the reality was that it was more lucky and, with hindsight, it was the perfect place for me to start the business. Manchester is a really forward-looking, really entrepreneurial and dynamic city. In Manchester, the audience and the opportunity were both there. That’s why it has worked.”

Couldn’t he have set up in Northern Ireland?

“I would love to start a business here outside of what I do today,” he says, sidestepping the question a little. “But for CTS, if there’s an opportunity for us over the next couple of years to buy a company here, I would. In fact, we’ve already looked, but I haven’t yet identified an opportunity. We simply don’t have the time in this current investment cycle to start something here, so it would need to be an acquisition.”

“I moved back a few months ago, and I love Northern Ireland. I’m very passionate about where I’m from, but I am frustrated quite a lot by things too. It’s an attractive place if you look at the good stuff that everyone talks about: career skills, low operating costs, a business-friendly Government, a great place to live, friendly people, both the countryside and the coast are within half an hour’s reach, everything’s really easy. And the local transport hubs are great, you know, flying to London as I do every week, is easy.

“For me, by a billion miles, our biggest strength is our people.”

And yet?

“Equally, I do think that we need a mindset change. And I’m not talking about the politics and the government stuff. We need to believe that we could do something exceptional. For all the reasons I have just mentioned - the things we have at our disposal - we have the opportunity to be world class. But the first thing that’s needed is a belief in ourselves that we can be world class.

“We’re small enough to be able to do something collectively, and we’re big enough to be able to do something that puts us firmly on the world map. Combining business, education and the Government is part of it.

“I went for a walk with the family yesterday and we spotted the lighting where Nicole Kidman had been filming her latest movie. It makes me so proud that we’re a place where people make world-class movies. We need that, but in industries that we can all benefit from.

“I’ve seen some other examples that I think are probably things that we could scale to benefit the whole of our community and that would give us an edge in international trade. The first is in the food industry, where I think that we’re innovating fast and we have some natural advantages. Finnebrogue has just created some meatless alternatives for flexitarians that show what’s possible. And in the technology sector, I’ve seen Manna in the south of Ireland doing some amazing trials of drone technology delivering prescriptions to people’s homes, along with a take out from a local restaurant.. If Manna get technology right then that could scale pretty quickly to become a multi-billion pound business.

“The whole success of my business has been about specialisation. When I started out as a generalist, I failed. But when I focused on delivering one product to one market and, that’s when we took off. Small and focused means you can punch above your weight and you can be the best at what you do.

“Conversely, without that real laser focus on a given area, it’s really, really difficult to do anything successfully or to make a noise. And so I think we should bet on three or four core sectors, and then really, really commit. The way to do that is around the ecosystem building the growth mindset, and the early adoption focused around those sectors. I’m certain that if we specialise, and focus on a small number, we can be bloody good. Our aim, fundamentally, has to be global. So we have to state very clearly, we want to be the global leader in these areas, not the best in Ireland, or the best in the UK, or the best in Europe, but the best globally.

“They love our honesty, our openness, and the craic.
It’s a really compelling proposition to the world.”

Let’s plagiarise from the countries that do it best: the Nordics. Why are they so bloody amazing at tech?. There’s lots of similarities to us: northern European with a small population on the edge of Europe with a business friendly government. But they’ve got really strong innovation and they really believe in backing their local businesses. They really believe in building those ecosystems, and they’ve obviously got a global growth mindset. They’re already doing all these things. So let’s learn from what works and think about how we can use some of those ideas here. Whenever you have finite resources, you have to focus, and we have finite resources.”

Isn’t it just a matter of encouraging those businesses to flourish in a free market?

“I think it only works if more of our people have a growth mindset. The lack of that ‘yes we can’ attitude is something that I think most people struggle with a bit when they come back here. That’s going to be a challenge to any entrepreneur starting a business here. One of the things I would really love to see, as a country, is us fostering that growth mindset in schools, really early at universities, and with young business people.

“Youngsters get it – my kids watch Bob the Builder and are calling out ‘yes we can!’ at the TV. Somewhere along the way, we lose that ‘yes we can’. We need more of that attitude in schools, in universities, in start-ups, in our businesses. Fostering that mindset will help us to really drive innovation and belief.”

What else is needed?

“I think ecosystem building has to be part of the picture. And I know the government is trying. To be honest, I’m still learning about business locally as we’ve only recently moved back here. But I think that what’s obvious, and is a proven case globally, is that building the right ecosystem will produce the right results. And the stronger the ecosystem, the more innovation is derived from an ecosystem. I know there’s a cyber cluster growing here at the minute, which I think is exciting. We need more examples like that.”

What strengths can Northern Ireland bring to the world stage?

Well, I think our people are at the core of our potential success. Whenever I’m in England, I compare Northern Ireland to the best of how England was in the 1950s, really family oriented. Everybody knows everybody, old fashioned, but in a good way. Our people believe in working hard and in looking after people in the community. And that’s part of the reason why I moved home. I also think that the people that you employ here will be more loyal to making you successful, because you’re bringing them in in a small area and giving them a great opportunity to succeed. So I think you’ll get loyalty, a great work ethic, commitment, hunger and desire.

But people also like doing business with our people. They love our honesty, our openness, and the craic. It’s a really compelling proposition to the world.

Will it take a vision and a force of personality as it has in some other regions and countries to make this happen?

I think we do need some sort of identifiable brand – a great value proposition – for who we want to be on the world stage. Now, I’m no brand guy, but there needs to be some sort of really clear, communal focused aim across the board, whether you work in more food processing, or whatever it might be, that we bring to the table that resonates round the world. I want someone in Jakarta to see something from Northern Ireland and think: “Oh, yes, Northern Ireland, it’s a buy!”

“Do we need a strong, vocal, passionate leader, who could do that? Well, I don’t think it’s essential, but it would be a massive bonus if we did have it.”

The other funny thing about a hero’s journeys is that they never return the same person. Sure, Wright ‘loves, loves, loves rugby and his local club’ and he’s proud of his past including wood chopping for a year before taking that sales job. But don’t be surprised if you see his name in the headlines soon. After all, heroes tend to get restless.



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