

“QUALITY AND A RELENTLESS FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE”



In 1993, leading international business executive **Sir Peter Bonfield CBE FREng** was invited to take on the role of Vice-President of the then newly formed British Quality Foundation. On the occasion of his decision to stand down after 18 years, *UK Excellence* took the opportunity to catch up with Sir Peter to reflect upon his time at the BQF and consider the future challenges facing UK businesses

By Jack Kibble-White

How did you come to join the Board of the BQF?

I was running ICL and Michael Heseltine, who was the President of the Board of Trade, got the idea that we needed to try and increase the competitiveness of UK industry. This led to the formation of the BQF. It was at a time when the EFQM Excellence Model was just starting to get traction and Sir Denys Henderson, who was running ICI, was signed up as President and Chairman of the board. Sir Denys asked me to get involved.

Were ICL using the Model at that time?

Yes we were. While I was at ICL, I had a big push on quality. I was pretty vocal regarding what we needed to do and how we were going to go about it, and I think that's why Sir Denys contacted me.

So you've been on the board since the creation of the BQF then?

Yes. I am the last of the original board members.

How would you describe your role in those early days?

We were evangelists. It was a time when Europe was worried about competing against up-and-coming countries. We had to get businesses focusing on excellence or else we would slowly lose our base, not just in manufacturing but in service as well. So I thought it was important.

To what extent do you think the role remained an evangelical one?

When the BQF formed it was a high priority on the Government's agenda. The Department of Trade and Industry, as it was then, was pushing it hard and so we were going with the grain. As always, priorities change and people focus on different things, and so the BQF had to learn to fend for itself, which meant making sure it stayed relevant, something I think it has achieved.

Why are you standing down now?

18 years on any board is a very long time and these days I spend a lot of time travelling, which means it's difficult to attend board meetings. We've got a new Chairman in place now, and so it seemed a good time to take my leave. I am proud that the BQF is still going after 18 years and has stood the test of time, by keeping focused on its core.

How did you get started in business?

I spent 15 years with Texas Instruments, who were my first employer. I am an engineer by trade, and they hired me straight from Loughborough University. I spent a lot of time with them out in the USA, and came back to the UK to work at ICL, where I stayed for another 15 years, and then after that I was Chief Executive at BT.

I would probably describe myself as risk averse. I've stayed pretty much within my

area of expertise and am essentially into technology and the management of technology businesses.



When Sir Peter became CEO of British Telecom in 1996, most of us still used call boxes rather than mobiles. But technology stands still for no one

"I am proud that the BQF is still going after 18 years and has stood the test of time"

Sir Peter Bonfield, outgoing Vice-President, BQF



Is an interest in quality common across the roles you've had?

There is definitely a commonality. It's about quality and a relentless focus on excellence and then measuring that. It's also about understanding what the competition is doing and refining it. This philosophy was in place at BT when I joined, but I made it a much bigger focus.

In the time you've been working, there have been massive technological changes. Are there any particular developments you can identify as a major challenge for the businesses you were in?

The change in computing during my career has been completely profound. When I first joined ICL we were designing mainframes. Now tablet computers use semiconductors that just 20 years ago would have been completely unthinkable. But through all of this, my view on business excellence has remained much the same. You measure your inputs from stakeholders and employees and look at your profit and loss and keep trying to improve.

What about the businesses you are currently involved in?

I chair a semiconductor company in Holland, I'm on the board of Sony in Japan, TSMC in Taiwan, Ericsson in Sweden and a software company in Oregon. I'm also involved in private equity advisory work in Hong Kong, New Jersey and the UK.

Looking ahead, what's your view on how 2012 is going to be for UK businesses?

It's obviously going to be a very difficult year, because the world economy is having some troubles. But good managers can manage through such issues. My concern is always the longer term – how



Sir Peter sees cloud computing, social networking and broadband mobility as "mega trends"

are we going to ensure success in the years ahead? To me it comes down to human capital. Have we got enough people in the UK focusing on maths, science and technology who can operate at a world-class level? Are our schools and institutions producing people with enough attitude and grit to compete against the Asian tigers, especially China?

And what would your answer to that question be?

I would say we have a lot more to do. I spend a lot of time in the Far East and have witnessed a relentless, singular focus on education, particularly in the technology space. When you say 'China' to some people they think of cheap labour, but I think of smart engineers. That's what we've got to focus on.

Is there a new technology coming down the pipeline that's going to have a big impact?

Obviously there are the normal trends in electronics – things are going to get smaller, faster and cheaper. However, I think the three mega trends are cloud computing, social networking and broadband mobility, and we're just seeing the early stages of these. If you look even further forward and consider things such as nanotechnology, super sophisticated software and flexible displays, I think you can see the future by looking at those old science fiction comics.

As the last of the original board members, do you have any parting words for BQF members?

The world is changing rapidly and we need to change to compete. This nation has a bedrock of skills, but these need to be continually honed. The BQF is a beacon that says excellence is the end point, and if you're not there, and you're not continually improving, you're going to be passed by. **UKE**

SIR PETER BONFIELD began his career with Texas Instruments in the USA.

After various design, manufacturing and management roles he joined ICL PLC in 1981, as Group Marketing Director and member of the main board.

In 1984 he was appointed Chairman and Managing Director of ICL PLC after its merger with STC PLC. In 1987 he was appointed Deputy Chief Executive of STC.

In 1996 Sir Peter was appointed CEO and Chairman of the Executive

Committee of British Telecommunications PLC, where he served until early 2002.

He is currently Chairman of NXP Semiconductors in Holland.

Sir Peter's career has included a Non-Executive Directorship of Dubai International Capital, membership of the Citigroup International Advisory Board, a Senior Independent Directorship of AstraZeneca PLC and Directorships of BICC PLC, DESC Ltd, mm02 PLC,

the Department of Constitutional Affairs and the Ministry of Justice. He has also been a member of the Trilateral Commission, the European Round Table (Steering Group), the High Level Working Group of the European Information Society, the EU-Japan Business Dialogue Round Table and the Civil Service College Advisory Board.

Sir Peter is currently on the boards of Sony in Japan, TSMC Taiwan, Ericsson Sweden and Mentor Graphics USA.