

# ‘There’s a fertile middle ground, but it can be lonely working there’

Hugh McCredie

Ian Florance met ‘Scientific practitioner’ Hugh McCredie to discuss a lifetime spent working on people issues in organisations.

Hugh describes his career trajectory as ‘unusual’. ‘I didn’t go to university: I’d wanted to study history but needed to cram for Latin O-level and I wasn’t prepared to spend the time doing that. So, I got a job in the Coal Board and worked in HR long before I studied psychology or thought of myself, as I now do, as a psychologist.’

In 1966 Hugh took an IPM qualification. ‘In the first year we took two subjects – combined psychology and sociology was one, economics the other. The psychology lecturer on the course was excellent and enabled me to be the only person, nationally, to get a distinction on that course in that year. I read Ray Cattell’s Penguin book *Scientific Analysis of Personality*. At the time staff selection, which I was quite involved in, was a pretty tacit subject. The word “scientific” in the title really appealed – it suggested that there were rational methods to make people decisions.’

In the mid-1960s, Hugh spent two weeks with the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. ‘I spent a week there studying selection and another week looking at their interesting but (from a contemporary viewpoint) primitive ability tests.’

## ‘Very little research ends up affecting practice’

Hugh was recruited by one of the lecturers from his course and joined a FTSE 250 industrial group. ‘This took me out of selection. I did a job evaluation study and designed a salary structure. Later, I became a reluctant convert to management development. My mission was to raise the skill level of the whole management population. I wanted in-house, rational skills development courses and I worked with Peter Honey, co-author of the world-famous Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire, on an interpersonal skills series.’

When his former lecturer left, Hugh became Group Personnel Manager, but in 1981 he moved to another FTSE 250 company, where he stayed for 18 years. ‘It was a big company with about 50 different businesses. My initial job was to “improve the directorial bloodstock, vetting the candidates who were being put up for the 200 senior positions within

the group. I was using 16PF [the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire developed by Ray Cattell and others] and had a population of 200 real, working managers to gather data on. It seemed too good an opportunity to miss.'

At this stage I suggested to Hugh that his approach, following his early interests, was very much scientific. 'Yes. And I think this is a critical issue for occupational psychologists, managers, leaders and HR staff for the future. If truth be told, very little research ends up affecting practice. Often, it's an idea, or a fad from a presentation or popular book that becomes the leadership flavour of the month. I believe there's a very fertile middle ground in which theory and research affect practice, and practical activity can in turn influence research – it's a two-way process. I really enjoy working there but it can be lonely: academics feel you're too practical while practitioners judge you as too theoretical; though, as Kurt Lewin suggested, "there is nothing as practical as a good theory".

The subtitle of Hugh's 2010 book *Selecting and Developing Better Managers: The Journey of a Scientific Practitioner* shows his commitment to this approach, and the text demonstrates the wide influences on his thinking around management development. Historian Arnold Toynbee proposed hugely influential theories on the growth, rise and fall of civilisations, linking these processes to the level of challenge they faced. Hugh applied these ideas in turn to individual development. In turn, he adapted the ideas of the motivation psychologist David McClelland, Don Binsted's Whole Cycle Learning Model and many other theorists and researchers.

### Recession and opportunity

The 1991 mini-recession offered Hugh an opportunity. 'There was no money for training and I decided to do a research degree at Aston, supervised by Viv Shackleton. I limbered-up by doing an honours-level Social Psychology Certificate at the Open University, then did a Master's by Research in Organisational Psychology.'

Hugh's work is statistically very sophisticated, and he had obviously been doing data analysis from a very early stage in his career. Did he find statistics easy? 'Far from it. I had done a management course and found the subject very difficult. I had time over a few months to work my way through *Statistics Made Simple* and didn't give up till I'd mastered the techniques I needed.'

In 1998 Hugh became an independent consultant. His employer demerged its businesses, so he no longer had a job. He felt that he wasn't going to get another senior HR role, nor did he necessarily want one. Several larger businesses that had made up

the organisation offered him work, a not unusual experience when psychologists do become self-employed. 'I realised I'd been ploughing a narrow furrow in psychology and decided to complete a psychology degree. At first, I tried to get exemptions from certain parts of the course but, lucky to say, I didn't. It opened my eyes and I found I loved areas like social and developmental psychology. I was less enamoured of cognitive psychology.'

In his role as an independent he worked both for selection consultants and directly for clients, training them in various interpersonal skills, including coaching. Simultaneously he obtained a PhD from

Manchester Business School having been supervised by Mike Smith.

### Does what you do have any useful effect?

Since retiring at 67, Hugh has continued to write, research and get involved in his other interests. What advice has he got for people going into occupational psychology or HR work? 'Learn the statistics – not just correlations but issues like effect sizes. Then, use this to analyse robustly whether what you do has any effect and, if it does, whether that effect is large enough to be worth the effort. It's amazing how many people don't do that, continuing a technique without looking at whether its making any difference at all.' Have things got better in the world of work? 'I'm of course distant from a lot of organisational practice nowadays but I'd say that there's been little humanitarian change for the better. We still need to address how people are treated.'

What other areas are interesting you now? 'I'm reading Carol Dweck's work on whether you have a fixed or a growth mindset. It suggests you should praise kids for what they're doing, not for their inherited gifts – and maybe we can learn something from that in business. I'm learning mindfulness and running course in it in the village where I live. Then I'm a theologically liberal-progressive Christian – a Methodist Local Preacher – who is interested in ecumenical and interfaith work. And I've got very interested in personality and individual differences. I have written one series of articles, on the history of personality assessment for *Assessment and Development Matters*, and I have launched a second on the history of intelligence testing.'

Which, I reflect as Hugh heads off to a meeting of The Psychometrics Forum committee, sounds like a very full retirement indeed.

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