

finding anchorage in the unknown

James Hewes discusses his new role as CEO of the PRCA, the twists and turns of his career and finding the confidence to say the words: "I don't know."

Many may recognise James Hewes as the very new CEO of the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), joining early this year at a time when the body was looking for a refreshed sense of identity and direction. Before that, Hewes was president of the global media trade body FIPP for six years. Completely new to the industry, Hewes appears the perfect choice to reflect a fresh start for the organisation. "I'm a clean sheet of paper," he says. "I don't know the PR and comms industry, and I know very few of the people in it personally."

Hewes has wasted no time filling himself in, as he describes a week crammed with back-to-back meetings and introductions – and magazine interviews – as he settles into his new role. This was only after permitting himself a short sojourn in Portugal however, which he considers to be his home. Starting afresh in a new role in an entirely new industry would be a daunting prospect to most, but it is perhaps slightly less so to Hewes, who has spent ▶



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much of his life hopping between cities and planting new roots.

Hewes' father worked for a Swiss company that moved the family across the globe. "I was very much an overseas kid. I moved originally to Switzerland when I was seven, lived there for two years, and moved to Portugal when I was nine," he says. "My family stayed there until I was in my twenties, so I consider Portugal my home. I would say I have a British passport and a Portuguese soul."

"The top-down model of a CEO waving his hand in the air and saying 'this is what we're going to do'... that's with the dinosaurs"

When Hewes uses the expression "citizen of nowhere," there is no hint of regret in his voice. "I think it's an important part of my makeup. It gave me a much more international outlook, which makes you curious about other cultures. You're not scared of diversity or difference. I think growing up overseas is possibly the best thing that's happened to me, and kind of led to a career all over the world."

By his mid-twenties, he was weighing up the possibilities of becoming a journalist or perhaps a lawyer, and eventually – disappointed at having "failed to get into Oxbridge" – found himself studying economics and politics at the University of Exeter instead. When Hewes later emerged from the university bubble in 1996, it was to a world still hunkering under the cloud of a recession. After six months of unemployment and copious job applications, Hewes landed a place on the Barclays graduate programme.

Although this appears to be, when looking at the expanse of Hewes' career today, a short and incongruous stint before discovering his real passions, Hewes considers his time at Barclays to have been a formative experience. He may have fallen into an apparently random career path, but Hewes discovered he had a knack for his role as business consultant at the bank. When asked to share the secrets to his success there, he says: "I think the trick I learned was how to ask the right questions, and how to tease out the answers that you want. I think you have to be a little bit arrogant; you almost have to not give a shit in a way. Because in order to ask the right questions, you have to not be afraid of what the answer might be or that people might take offence."

"It's funny how you see that those early decisions, when you look back on them, have had an impact on your later career," he muses. One such instance was Hewes' firm refusal to work anywhere but London, even as the bank tried to shift him to its Manchester branch. "I had friends in London and my family were overseas, I don't have a lot of - you know - anchorage."

Over the course of the interview, the word 'anchorage' pops up several times. For all the pleasures of spending early years coasting across European borders and feasting on new cuisines amid sun-dappled, azulejo-covered buildings, it is evident that Hewes has felt a niggling sense of displacement. It was after three years at Barclays that Hewes had an epiphany: "My God, whilst this is good experience, it's actually incredibly tedious as an organisation and I don't want to sit here for the next thirty years!"

When deciding where to venture next, the BBC was high on Hewes' list. Growing up overseas, he had long held a nostalgic affection for the BBC's World Service, which broadcasts news in over 40 languages. This was especially valuable in the 1980's, when there was no satellite television, cable or, of course, internet. "I would sit in my bedroom listening to the World Service at night and in the morning because it was pretty much the only way you could have any connection back to the UK," Hewes fondly recalls.

Hewes joined the organisation in 2001 as strategic analyst. When soon asked to make the decision between working in either the BBC's radio or publishing department, however, Hewes didn't hesitate. "I had a longstanding affinity with the magazine business. I loved magazines, and I loved buying magazines."

Hewes recalls this as still being in the heyday for magazine publishing. "There was no sense of any impending disaster," he recalls, when asked whether he had worried at all about the scepticism around the future of the print. Magazines have always been a part of Hewes' life, having been a subscriber to several titles since he was a child; *Private Eye*, *The Road Rat* and *PR Week* – alongside *Communicate* magazine – are a few of the titles that he names as his favourites today. "Look, there are still thousands of great magazines across the world and more of them are being launched every day. It's a very healthy and vibrant sector, it just gets a bit of bad press because some of the biggest bits are dying quite quickly."

Despite beginning in this role at a time when the magazine industry still basked in a luxurious sense of security, towards Hewes' final years this was beginning to change. Before leaving the BBC's Magazine Unit in 2012, he describes how the industry was going through a form of identity crisis as it tentatively dipped its toe into the world of digital: "The print business was suffering year-on-year declines in almost every sector. Thinking of all the new ways that people could access our content was increasingly important."



- January 2024 - present** CEO, PRCA
- September 2017 - January 2024** President and CEO, FIPP
- August 2016 - August 2017** Interim CEO, Soho Consulting
- January 2013 - August 2016** Publishing Director, Gulf News Publishing
- March 2001 - December 2012** Director, BBC Haymarket Exhibitions Limited
- Jan 2010 - Oct 2011** Publishing Director, BBC Magazines
- Oct 2004 - Oct 2011** Head of International Development
- January 2003 - September 2004** Marketing Planning Manager, BBC
- April 2001 - December 2002** Strategic Analyst, BBC
- September 1997 - March 2001** Business Consultant, Barclays Bank
- April 1997 - September 1997** Project Manager, Novartis Pharmaceuticals

To be named among one of Hewes favoured print magazines holds particular weight as, ahead of joining the PRCA, Hewes was president and CEO of FIPP, a trade association for media businesses. “The biggest challenge for me in this role was figuring out what the future of the industry was and finding a sense of self-identity as well, because if you’re not a printed product anymore and you’re not a physical magazine, then – as a business – what are you?”

“And then we became a magazine media business or – in other words – we were trying to say that we were ‘platform agnostic,’ without ever really defining what that meant, because everybody interpreted it in a different way,” Hewes recounts. “For some people, that meant a strong presence in video; for others it meant a strong presence in social or e-commerce; for some, open access; and to others it meant introducing a paywall. The way the industry is evolving is into very strong communities of interest around specialist subjects. I think it is that word ‘community’ that is key.” When Hewes talks about the print industry,

it is with contagious enthusiasm. Despite the sector going through a form of ‘identity crisis’ itself, he easily instills a feeling of optimism. “What FIPP came to understand is that the industry’s future lies in being the home for that community however they want to enjoy, or indulge in, their passion. During times of immense change, [a trade body] not only reflects the industry as it is now, but also provides a guide to the future.”

Hewes describes how, under his leadership, FIPP went from being an organisation that felt fairly outdated to one that was refreshed in its service offering, content, look and feel. With both of his most recent roles being, in his own words, “turnaround jobs,” it is put to Hewes that he may have a penchant for the particular challenge of steering organisations through uncertainty and change.

“No organisation can stand still. It’s very easy, if you stay somewhere too long, to allow yourself to become complacent and think everything’s fine. Sometimes organisations need change.”

“The top-down model of the CEO coming in, waving his hand in the air and saying ‘this is what we’re going to do’ or ‘I know the answer!’, that’s with the dinosaurs,” he continues. “Change comes from the people who are at the front line of delivering service to members and listening to them.”

Being an advocate for the necessity of organisations to remain flexible and malleable perhaps comes naturally to someone who has spent their life traversing different countries and cultures, and walking boldly into the unknown. Reflecting on the role of the chief executive during times of change, Hewes describes the importance of trusting your colleagues. “Often, when you’re younger, you think you know it all. As you get older – that old cliché – the less you realise you know.

“It’s so important to have the confidence to say ‘I don’t know’ to yourself, and then having the confidence to say that publicly. I think it’s really crucial not to have an ego – ego kills more people in business than the plague, right? We need to get rid of this idea as the boss as a superhero. You’ve got to trust your people.”