

David Redpath – Director of IS, HomeGroup

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Following spells abroad in the Netherlands and Australia, David Redpath returned to his native North East in 2012 to apply his strategic and cultural learnings to the UK's 4th largest housing provider, Home Group. In this interview, he talks to Nigel Wright about driving change, why it's difficult to hire in Australia and how he's building the best team he's ever had, using North East IT talent.

Tell us about the change programme at Home Group? What were your key objectives when you came into the role?

When I joined Home Group in 2012 the business had been through a period of organisational change, so my primary objective was to bring stability back into the IS department and establish some controls around change projects and the reasons behind them. Myself and the team set the new strategic direction which focused on going 'back to basics', making sure that we had the right skills and the right numbers in the IS team, to allow us to execute change effectively. Underpinning this was an effort to re-establish trust between IT and the rest of the business so that we were, once again, acting as a partnership.

What have you achieved during the 18 months you have spent with Home Group so far? What further technology challenges does the business need to overcome to be in the position you desire it to be?

I've established what I would describe as the best team I've had in my career. That's both in terms of the skills, but also the attitude to work and the commitment to the direction of the business. I

think the other key achievement is that we're now a 'trusted partner' within the organisation. Historically, Home Group had a very fragmented and reactive approach to IT, which meant that there was a lack of clarity and subsequently, trust, in what it was doing. So the new strategy is all about looking at the big picture and approaching IT challenges proactively, instead of waiting for problems to emerge. After speaking to hundreds of people across the business, we've identified a need to consolidate all applications into one key application with two or three specialist apps, to drive efficiencies. That's a big challenge, because we've literally got to replace everything that we've got. But, we've got a clear direction and an absolute belief from the business that we're doing the right thing; so I think we've got the best chance to get where we want to be.

How valuable are your services to Home Group's customers? Tell us a bit about some of the specific 'customer focused' technology improvements you have introduced at Home Group?

I believe they have the potential to be extremely valuable. I think, currently, they're not as valuable as I would like them to be. We have to work more





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on establishing better channels for customer interaction online, through improving on existing smartphone and social media platforms that customers can use to interact with us. One major improvement that we launched last year was a ‘contractor interface’, which enables customers to book in repair jobs in real time.

You returned to the North East in 2012 after spending over five years working overseas in the Netherlands and then Australia. What motivated you to come back? What specific skills do you think you have brought back to the North East from overseas?

It’s my home and I think anyone who is from the region acknowledges that there is an emotional attachment to the North East that always seems to draw you back eventually. Working overseas certainly improves your ability to understand and interact with different types of people; you can’t underestimate how invaluable that experience is. The roles I held overseas also provided me with the opportunity to get involved in lots of different types of projects, as well as work in environments going through big changes like restructures and mergers and acquisitions. So, it was a big learning curve, but the main thing was definitely the cultural learnings I gained. For example, I don’t think I would have been able to adapt to the third sector as quickly as I have, if I wasn’t so used to having to be adaptable.

Australia is still the most popular destination for UK expats. From a work perspective, are there any specific cultural differences UK professionals should be aware of when choosing to move to Australia?

The biggest surprise for me was the difference in attitude towards work. Whereas here in the UK, there is very much a ‘live to work’ mentality, in Australia it’s basically the opposite. Furthermore, in Perth, I found it very difficult to identify and attract people who were motivated by the prospect of career development. For example, trying to hire people to work in a service desk role was hard because many entry level office jobs are low paid compared to the multitude of local jobs available in Perth, working on the mines or driving LGVs/HGVs, where prospective candidates could earn twice as much. I found that money is often a far bigger attraction to Australians than the actual job or opportunity and the company I worked for in Australia suffered from high turnover because of this. We were lucky, however, to have an IT department that generally enjoyed the work we were doing and we were able to achieve things and keep most of our people; but it wasn’t easy. So, my advice to other leaders considering moving to Australia is to be prepared to look overseas into



Asia and the wider region, to identify talent. You will also likely find yourself considering locating various functions overseas, because of the high cost base in Australia.

In terms of IT skills and capabilities, how does the North East compare to the other countries you have lived and worked in? What skills do you covet the most at Home Group?

It’s an absolute fallacy that the North East doesn’t have a strong skills base. There may be some small pockets to be filled, but generally speaking, the right skills exist in the North East. There are some parts of the world that we’re never going to be able to compete with. In China, for example, 80% of employees within some companies will have degrees. But, as far as Home Group is concerned, despite our high standards, 99% of the highly

capable candidates we have recruited this year, as our team has changed, have been North East based. You might be surprised, but the skills we lack are actually not technology skills but rather communication skills. IT staff aren’t locked in server cupboards anymore but instead are expected to regularly interact with internal customers and external customers and understand and be able to converse about all aspects of the business. So communication, business acumen and also the right attitude towards progression and development are the most sought after skills and attributes.

You’re a relatively young leader who has experienced a meteoric rise in their career; what aspects of your career to date have helped you to climb the ladder so quickly? What advice would you pass on to other young aspiring leaders?

I’ve been incredibly lucky to have leaders above me who have always been willing to give me a chance, regardless of my age. I would always advise people that when opportunities come your way, make sure you take them. Make sure you work hard and try to absorb as much information and experiences as possible, including good and bad leadership styles. I’ve found that many graduates and entry level candidates today are really focused on short terms rewards, whereas when I was progressing during my early career, there was a big emphasis on playing the long game, trying hard and getting involved in projects with the view of reaping the rewards later. I would therefore advise the younger generation to focus more on building their career for the future, rather than having a ‘what do I get now?’ attitude. Getting involved in as many different and challenging projects as possible early in your career won’t go unnoticed. If you feel it has, you should probably consider changing companies.



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Your peers are generally much older than you. Do you think this is likely to change as IT and technology become ever more embedded in the lives of young people?

I think more and more companies will be willing to give younger people opportunities, because, ultimately, they're the ones who will drive technological change in the future. As I get older, one of the challenges I face is 'how do I keep reinventing myself?' and a key part of that, I believe, is building a team capable of challenging me and keeping me up to date with the latest ideas. In an IT management sense, I believe that way of thinking will become increasingly common

What technologies do you anticipate being the most 'disruptive' to current business practises over the next few years?

The consumerisation of IT has been and will continue to be incredibly disruptive to business practises. Ten years ago, for example, the technology you had access to at work was always far more advanced than the technology you could buy commercially and have at home. That's no longer the case; in fact it's usually the other way around. This is challenging, because people are becoming used to certain standards of technology at home and then expect to have the same standards applied at work. Email storage is a good example of this; Google can offer you 20 gigabytes of storage but many companies only

offer employees around 500 megabytes. People also want to work more collaboratively at work and there is an expectation that technology should be a greater enabler of collaboration, because of innovations like social media. So, technology is completely reshaping the way in which we work and IT has to be cognisant of how it can use new technology to benefit both internal and external customers.

We've talked a lot about professional interests in technology, what about personal interests? What technology do you get the most satisfaction from outside of work? What future tech developments are you most excited about?

This is actually a hard question for me to answer because I don't get particularly enthused about gadgets so to speak. The one thing I'm particularly intrigued about, however, is how mobile will develop and what will ultimately happen to Blackberry? I think the potential demise of Blackberry really signals a new era in mobile communications that is worth taking note of.

How do you keep yourself busy outside of work?

I've got an eight year old boy and a five year old girl who take up most of my free time. When I'm not taking one of them to football practise or dancing lessons, I try to play as much golf as I can. I'm a bit of a Tiger Woods wannabe!



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