



Interview with... Matt Kingdon April 2009

Alastair Paton, Managing Partner

Alastair talks to Matt Kingdon, Chairman and Chief Enthusiast at ?What If!, about his life, career and thoughts on the economy.

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?What If! is the world’s largest independent innovation company, with more than 250 people in offices in London, Manchester, Shanghai and New York. The team work in over 40 countries worldwide and the client list includes Unilever, Pepsico, Cadbury Schweppes, Nestle, Shell, BT, ABN AMRO, Astra Zeneca, British Airways, Coors Brewers, Sainsbury’s, Boots and McDonalds. For more information please visit www.whatifinnovation.com/

Matt is a respected Innovation Practitioner and speaker; recent speaking engagements include Innotown, Westpac Bank in Australia, Unilever in Europe, British Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai and Zurich in Switzerland. He is also a Director and advisor to five start-up businesses.

Profile summary

Education	1985	Joint Honours Degree in Law and Economics, University of Durham	
Recent	1992 – present	Co - Founder	?What If! Innovation consultancy
career	1985 – 1992	Various marketing roles	Unilever - UK, Thailand & Middle East

Alastair Paton: Why did you set up “?What If!”?

Matt Kingdon: I found corporate life became numbingly predictable. I could guess where I would get to in the future and felt that it would be more exciting to pit my wits in a raw challenge. At the time I was in my 20s and had few responsibilities; it was a brief and glorious window of opportunity to do something like this.

AP: What role does business play in your life?

MK: It’s central. In fact probably too much so at the moment! I would ideally like to put a bit more distance between it and my home life but I can’t help getting up early and rushing into work.

AP: Where do you get your inspiration from?

MK: A lot of energy comes from the people around me. Great people who have exciting minds and also real commercial battle scars. Inspiring people who are also hugely practical. We are a small business and I have made sure that we recruit a lot of people with more experience than me; people who have ‘been around the block’.

AP: Are there individuals around who you are inspired by?

MK: There are not many heroes around at the moment. I think people who are cool are the Dragons on Dragon’s Den. Tough, hard, ‘I’ve made it’ kind of people. But really at the moment there aren’t many people

like this. So many business people and politicians just don't seem to have a clue about what to do at a time like this. If I'm honest, I probably get a lot of my inspiration at the moment from talking to my kids!

AP: How do you see the future at the moment?

MK: I am very positive internationally about business. Much of our work is with major international brands, the people who work with them and their consumers and there are a lot of exciting things going on around the world. It's hard, though, at the moment to take a national perspective alone and see great things. Banking has gone and so what is the core business of the UK looking forward? I am pessimistic about a quick recovery in the UK and our main thrust is to internationalise the company as much as we possibly can and do more with international clients.

AP: What trends do you see in the way people work?

MK: There are big themes around how people's lives are changing with respect to work. At the moment there is a significant trend towards centralized decision making. Organisations are making knee-jerk reactions and bringing more decision-making to the centre. This is driven by fear more than anything else. Over the past few years broadband has done a massive amount to help more flexible working and for some time people wanted to work at home more. We are now finding the trend turning the other way with people wanting to come back into the office.

AP: What does "In Good Company" mean to you?

MK: I can see what you have chosen to link this statement with your company! It gives the idea that the rest of your clients are decent businesses and claims that the quality of the people you work with is high. To me individually it says something else. It says to me to take a big breath before going into work. If you have recruited the right people and they have good intentions then hang on to this as a mantra. By doing this you are less likely to step in and pour petrol on the flames of any situation. Trust others to get things right.

AP: Would you advise your children to follow a career in business?

MK: Yes, I would, and I would say to them to pick a business that you like. Get involved in the front line and find something that you love to do. Without that you will never be truly intuitive about how you do things.

For more information on this interview, or if you would like to feature, please contact the partners via:

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