Live. Love. Work. Prosper. In Conversation with Michael Tobin

Michael Tobin is no stranger to the challenges of balancing multiple responsibilities. A serial Chairman, the former CEO of Telecity currently sits on the board of 14 companies. His new book, *Live. Love. Work. Prosper* explores the topic, ever more pertinent in our connected world, of managing a successful professional and personal life.

GSinsight spoke with him about the ideas behind this latest book, his view on the present state of the datacentre market and what the future holds

What motivated you to write Live. Love. Work. Prosper and what themes does the book explore?

I know from my own experience and from speaking with countless others, how hard it can be to simultaneously achieve a successful work and home life. It's clear to me that if you try to strike a balance between the two and want to excel in one, then you're going to fail at the other. I believe we talk too much today about balance when instead we should be talking about how best to integrate our professional and personal lives. Take a sporting analogy; imagine you like long-distance running and you like weightlifting and you aspire to winning an Olympic gold medal. The required disciplines for each sport are conflicting. You can't bulk up and then go on a long-distance run, hence you can't expect to excel in either if you're trying to do both. If, however, you want to combine those disparate disciplines and win a medal then you could consider the Decathlon. You won't be the best weightlifter in the world, nor the best long-distance runner but you can be the best combined, and you can win that gold medal. It's a matter of finding the application which exploits the combination. You don't have to totally compromise on one or balance them both, instead you integrate them. Applying this concept of integration to the work/life question is the thesis of *Live. Love. Work. Prosper*.

In the book I cite an article which found 76% of middle managers interviewed admitted to lying to their partners about working at home. It's a sad but unsurprising statistic. At that stage in your career you're ambitious and no doubt surrounded by similarly aspirational peers. If your boss asks you to work late when you've already committed to family responsibilities, then naturally you try to balance both commitments. You go home early like you agreed but proceed to hide in the bathroom to send those last few emails whilst your partner waits for you to take charge of the children's bath night, as you promised, so they can go out as arranged. Your commitment to your work may help endear yourself to your colleagues and employers but it's to the detriment of your personal life.

Imagine instead you go home and you say to your partner, "I don't believe it, look at this request, it's outrageous, it's inconsiderate but I really want that promotion, we really need that promotion!" They'll likely sympathise and say, "I'll stay another half hour before I go out, just get it done". Now suddenly it's you both against the world. By being honest with your partner you've managed to do your work in a way that doesn't alienate you in your home life. Stress comes when you're trying to please two sets of stakeholders and as a result, you simply fail to please both. Again, it's about finding a way to integrate the two disparate commitments, rather than trying to balance them constantly.

Do you think the traditional 9–5 working day is an outmoded concept?

I think it's been outmoded for some time now. Today, the largest part of the UK economy is the services industry which caters to global customers, so the ability to implement a rigid nine till five culture is instantly impaired. We need to be more focused on results than hours. If you need to get something done today then you do it today, not by five o'clock.

Most companies don't allow their employees to manage their time like adults. There are still companies that won't allow you to use Facebook in the office, which is ridiculous. Staff should be allowed to play games at work if that's what de-stresses them. They will be far more productive if they feel they can take the five minutes needed to clear their mind. We should be more receptive to flexible working hours and focus more on results.

You lived an amazing story at Telecity and remain heavily involved in the datacentre world. What's your take on the market?

Over the past decade there have been two major recessions and though business is good when the economy is healthy, when it slips, people look to save costs associated with

bricks and mortar by moving to the internet. It's cheaper to run a business online so even in tough times, the datacentre market remains highly resilient. Operating in a space that can exploit the down cycles, as well as the upcycles, is a great place to be.

There are other factors to consider that continue to drive the market. Video content now constitutes 60% of all internet traffic, for example, and we continue to watch more and more online. On top of this, we're only experiencing the beginning of the Internet of Things. I'm on the board of Hurley Palmer Flatt, which is a design company working to create digital twins of buildings rendered by hundreds of sensors. If a condenser goes off in an office block, the software can detect the issue in real time. The next decade will see a huge increase in the deployment of IoT applications, with tens of billions of sensors becoming attached to the internet.

All of this takes place online, which means datacentres are doing more than ever. We're now seeing the major players, like AWS and Azure, building giant datacentres to accommodate the surge in data brought on by new technologies like IoT, but, contradictory to this trend, people are also deploying more localised data centres due to issues around data sovereignty and latency. Similarly, the ascendancy of autonomous vehicles means cars are increasingly becoming like mini datacentres, with at least twenty processors inside a single vehicle. Connected cars aren't going to be able to speak to each other quick enough if they have to transmit their data thousands of miles to a central hub, only to have to wait for it to be sent back out again. Instead, they're going to need to use lots of localised datacentres to communicate effectively. The big datacentres are only for archiving data that can be analysed over a long period of time, ultimately the big shift is towards thousands of micro-datacentres and the edge of the internet.

We still have a lot to do however, in order to fully enable these incredible new technologies. The big problem we face is not the availability of data but how we curate it, which means establishing what we can do with the data and then what bits of it we need to hone in on to achieve that end. For example, insurance companies are already starting to use GPS in cars to ascertain how well you drive so they can better judge what deal to give you on your insurance. Now imagine if they could also harness data from CCTV or from weather sensors on top of street lamps. If there was an accident, the insurance company could review footage of your driving for the ten minutes before the incident, they could see what the weather was like and judge if it had any bearing on what happened, then they would be able to package up an entire claim for you, before you've even claimed, job done. That would be a truly horizontal application but we're still stuck in narrow verticals because we think too much about data ownership rather than the value of data. There are already some really great companies emerging in the curation space, such as Concirrus who are based in London, but we've got a long way to go until we start to fully realise the value of all the data around us.

Society is not comfortable at present with sharing data. The government, for example, talks a lot about smart cities but they're the most important holder of data, and to achieve effective smart lighting, parking etc, they need to be able to give away a tonne of data and we're not yet comfortable with that. Back in the early days of the internet when you got something for free online all you had to do was enter your details. Everyone would fill in name: Mickey Mouse, date of birth: yesterday, and then they'd wonder why they'd be sent packets of Pampers in the post as free advertising. We need to overcome our fear of the internet if we're going to fully realise its potential and to do that, we need to give it value of information.

Recent years have witnessed the seemingly irrepressible rise of AWS, Azure and Google Cloud, to what extent is there still opportunity for smaller businesses to make their mark?

There's still massive opportunity for challengers in the cloud and datacentre market. People perceive AWS, Azure, etc. as cheaper, but this is only the case if you switch it off as quickly as you switch it on. If you're a big corporation like Nike for example, then you'll experience huge spikes in data for sales and marketing at the time of major sporting events and that's when they will put their data on the public Cloud, because there's no point buying computers with the sufficient capacity when they'll only need it for a short space of time. Companies frequently do away with their IT departments and migrate to the public cloud only to discover it's terribly expensive in the long run.

Hence there's a need for businesses that can automate the process of switching between different servers, as well as to orchestrate which servers to use at which times. Not everything works best on AWS. Windows and Office 365 will go better on Azure, whilst Gmail will run best on a Google stack. Automating the choice as to which Cloud different applications run on, on a dynamic basis, is an important phase that enterprise will soon start to experience widely.

The other development on the horizon is the emergence of application automation. Consider you want a programme whereby you type in a certain number and it tells you everything that is related to a customer account. At the moment, you have to go to your IT department and ask them to build this, but with application automation you can do it automatically, in seconds.

I was until recently on the board of a company called Datapipe, before it was acquired by Rackspace, which was a leader when it came to driving these developments. Another of my portfolio companies, Pulsant, very much aspires to the same status. The next decade will see companies like this helping people migrate to hybrid cloud, to take full advantage of all the different offerings.

Industry goes in cycles. Back in the days of the mainframe we had centralised computing. Then, we had distributed computing when the personal computer came along. Now, we're going back to the Cloud, which is essentially a return to centralised computing. There is always a cycle between insource or outsource, centralised or decentralised, and it will continue to present opportunities to smaller, innovative businesses.