



house of stewart

It makes no sense at all. One minute Stewart Colborne tells us that he's a great lover of sport, then almost in the same breath reveals that he is an Ipswich Town fan. That, by any measure, is a non sequitor.

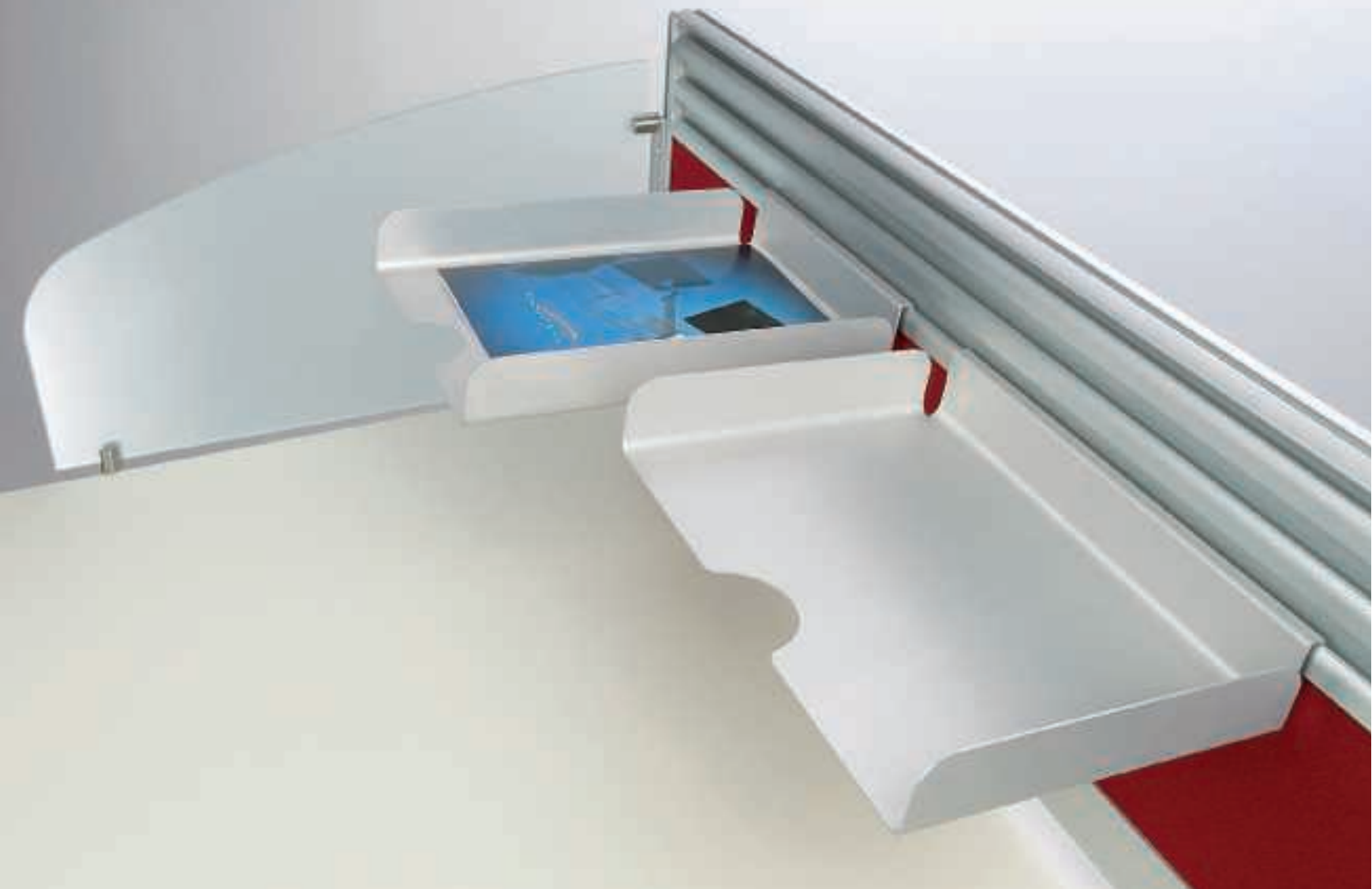
But we're not going to talk about the beautiful game, so if you're expecting a thesis on the glory years of Thijssen, Muhren, Wark, Butcher and Mariner, you're to be disappointed. On the other hand, if you're terribly posh, you'll be relieved.

Instead, we're going to be telling a story about opportunities and choices.

Stewart's the top man at 2iQ, a company that over the last 15 years has carved itself an enviable niche principally marketing ergonomic and power management products. It's a bespoke, tailor-made approach which is all about choices – but let's start by mentioning opportunities.

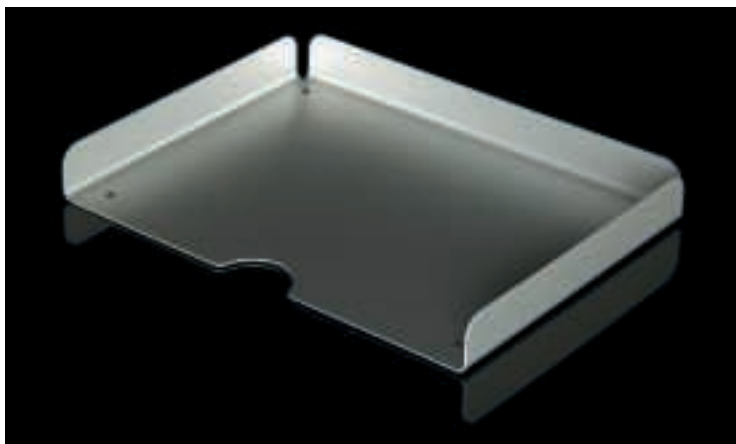
'Back in 1992, when I was Waiko's Marketing Manager, I went to Orgatec and I saw the opportunity. In fact, it was an opportunity that changed my life! I saw a gas lift monitor arm made by an Australian company called Armdec. Monitor arms had been around for a little while then, but they weren't yet a particularly significant element of the office landscape, a situation I could see changing with the advent of PCs. I couldn't stop thinking about the opportunity on the way home, and knew that this was the chance I'd been looking for to start my own business. When I got home I got in touch with Ian White, who I knew had some knowledge of ergonomic products, and told him I had this crazy idea...





▶▶▶▶▶ 'We put a business plan together on my kitchen table, got the Australians to come over, and convinced them we were the boys. I then got in touch with all my old colleagues from the Bristow days, and away we went. We found a range of other accessories – such as footrests – put together a modest little catalogue and achieved sales of £61,000 in our first year!

We'll get back to where Stewart's got to in the intervening years in a moment (he's turning over a tad more than £61,000 now by the way), and hook on to a name he mentioned, Bristow.



'After college I got into retail management at Harvey Nichols – and loved it! Great training in a range of skills which still stand me in good stead today, plus the glamour of Harvey Nicks in the early '80s – Princess Di, the models, the designers, everything. The opportunity came when my father, who was a director of a big insurance firm, bought some Steelcase product and met John Bristow. By then I was looking for a change and John was looking for people who had some good quality training. John Bristow was my first mentor – he inspired me to become what I am today.

'In 1986 Bristow Design Systems was the biggest dealer in Europe – sales of £16 million doesn't sound that much today, but back then it was huge. John inspired me to start to realise I could do well, encouraged me, developed my eye for opportunities and got me to start to understand marketing. I worked with people like Mark Cawthorne, David Cunningham, Mark Phillips, Paul Hughes, Paul Smith, Chris Clemens, Mark Dudzinski and Yolanda Lake – we were all at Bristow's together. Without doubt I think that was the best team ever assembled in this industry – and I was lucky to work with them!

We changed tack and asked Stewart what he's learned over more than 20 years in the business.

'One thing for sure; it's an absolute rollercoaster with highs and lows. It's hard to succeed and you've got to be prepared to fail. It's important to enjoy the good times, but always have a Plan B – I've ▶▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶▶“I think we will see a big increase in dual monitor working.

There’s been some recent research by Ohio University with NEC which shows a 10% productivity increase in offices working this way – and we’ve already helped many more companies set up in this style. We’re not just talking about City traders – this is for the design, legal and accountancy sectors as well. Although we’ve got a long way to go before wireless is fully accepted, I can see a possibility of low voltage power running through furniture – within the material of the top. This would have the benefit of negating the need for cables. What we’re seeing is stronger, thinner man-made materials logically tied in with space at a premium and stricter Health and Safety demands. And of course environmental and recycling issues! It’s a big frustration for me that with all these issues, challenges and opportunities, our industry is so fragmented and not represented by a major show – why can’t we do something like the Car Show at the NEC? In the UK we have the habit of talking ourselves down – there are tremendous opportunities out there. The job is to make people’s working surroundings more efficient – and that opportunity is just as valid in good or bad times. What I would like to see is more training in the industry. Our role is to give technical support and do

a lot of hand holding, so we know how many are surprisingly ignorant about basics like BS6396, chipboard, Health and Safety legislation and Risk Assessment.’

Stewart Colborne is engaging company, with plenty of worthwhile insights, but time is pressing. Not enough time for us to talk much about this family man’s interests (theatre, film, music and sport), his wife Eileen, or his teenage daughters Sophie and Hannah, but time enough to finish with a little of what he’s learned over the years.

‘The experience I had in retail was invaluable. I learned about selling, distribution, marketing, finance – I became a good all rounder with a breadth of knowledge that I couldn’t have done without. I’ve learned all the different aspects of getting from A to B. I’ve developed a lot of contacts and I’m proud to have helped others out as a friend. I’ve learned not to diversify out of my knowledge zone. Where that leaves me right now is so excited by where we are!

‘We have a great team with no prima donnas, great market opportunities which we are going to meet more and more with our own designed tailor made solutions. As I say to the team – let’s get it done!’ ●