



profile



AJ Focus

I love chairs. I'm one of the few people I know who is really passionate about them. We are a rare breed! They're interesting - everyone's got an opinion and they stir up controversy. I've been involved with two great chairs in my time - the 64 and Freedom - and now I believe I'm involved with a third great chair: Airpad.'

We're not going to be so crass and obvious as to describe Alex Jones as 'The Chairman' (geddit?), but actually the moniker kind of sticks. He's right - although there are plenty of people you know who work in the wonderful world of office seating, there are very few who've actually been as intimately involved with two all time greats with different companies. So when Alex is visibly excited by his new venture, you tend to sit up and listen.

Alex is the new MD of Interstuhl in the UK. A conversation reveals an interesting blend of drivers and motivators for the man. So, for example, there's the hard headed target driven comment like 'I've been brought in to do a job. I've got one goal. I'd like to grow this business by 50%.' Then you get the passion, and the need to be part of something new and bold, the bit that Alex clearly needs. 'I'm on the same page as my boss Helmut Link; we're the same age too. I love his vision - I share the Link family's genuine passion for chairs. It's the same as mine, and, as I say, I don't know many people who've got it to the same extent.' And when we talk about new products, Alex's enthusiasm is akin to what you would expect from a fresh faced young tyro, as opposed to the tender-hardened senior player:

'Incredibly exciting!' We reckon Alex knows he's in on something good at Interstuhl. We felt the buzz.

But first, we asked Alex about his background; how he came to be a chair daft bloke with a buzz.

I'm a Londoner, originally from North West London and then migrated south of the river. I was brought up by my Dad - Mum passed away when I was young. My school reports tended to say things like 'C minus, could do better', but funnily enough I always did well at exams. Really though, I was obsessed with sport, both participating and watching. I played football at schoolboy county level, and had trials at QPR. I didn't make it, which was a hammer blow at the time but a good learning curve.

'Having somehow achieved 10 'O' Levels, I did a year in the sixth form, but left when I saw an ad in the paper for a sales rep. Obviously, the real attraction was the company car. I joined Legge Locks selling architectural ironmongery - weirdly my boss was a guy called Steve Ironmonger. Apart from the all-important Astra, I actually got quite a lot of training, and found myself selling to the sheds and trade retail...it was a good start. After that I joined Harrison Thompson in my first technical sales role, selling surface protection >>>>>

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▶▶▶▶ products to healthcare. It was quite tricky, but it was an introduction to selling technical products, and involved site surveys, which of course was invaluable experience for later in my career. But perhaps more telling was that the company was a small niche player – I learned the importance of self motivation, thinking on my feet and generally having an entrepreneurial mindset.

‘I took some time out in Australia; something I wanted to do before settling down with family responsibilities. Before I went, I trained to be a personal fitness trainer so that I could support myself financially while I was abroad. Sport’s always been important to me – I go to the gym early morning most days. I retired from playing football at 30 when we had our daughter. I played semi-pro for Bromley before rupturing my Achilles, then joined local team West Wickham (striker, since you ask) and what with the training, travel and matches, it’s a heck of a time-consuming commitment. I played squash for a while but gave it up last year when my knees went...annoying! Who do I support? My local team is Millwall, but I’ve always had a soft spot for Liverpool – Kenny Dalglish is one of my all-time sporting heroes.

‘Back from Australia, I needed a job and joined Ecophon selling architectural ceilings for a short time. I got a call from a recruiter and went to work as an area sales rep for Mino and Dave at Giroflex in 1995. Those were fun times with people like Dave Armstrong, Mark

le Peltier and Paul Hobson – and we all keep in touch now. At Giroflex I learned how the Furniture Industry works. I was the first to get into the A&D sector, and led an A&D sales team in London. Working with the likes of TP Bennett and BDG I got my big break selling to companies like Goldman Sachs, KPMG and PwC. I’m indebted to them.

‘I think I was successful because I was fortunate to be involved in the launch and introduction of a great chair – the 64. The products before that had been good trade chairs but not particularly appealing to the A&D – the 64 had a new level of quality. As a team we sold the arse out of that chair!

‘Selling chairs now is very different to those days 15 years ago. They’re much more of a commodity now, there’s oversupply and the resulting price issues.

‘When I started selling the 64 the main competition was Herman Miller’s Aeron, Girsberger’s Pronto and Wilkhahn’s Modus. There wasn’t a lot of serious competition then.

‘The designer’s job is to look for innovation, new design – as it relates to task chairs I think they value comfort and ergonomics more than they once did. I remember when we launched the Freedom chair; the battle was to get the A&D to sit in it. We used to say ‘if you’re having heart surgery do you want the surgeon’s tools to look good or work well?’



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'Interstuhl is changing, these are exciting times. The company's changing into a global business. It's no longer 'will it work in Germany?' – it's now 'will it work everywhere?'. The new products coming through are a key reason I took the job. I'm flattered to have been asked to be involved in the whole design process for a new chair – that demonstrates Interstuhl is serious about international business. And we've just launched Airpad, which is going down a storm. It's certainly got one of the best mechanisms I've ever seen. A big part of my activity for the first few months has been refining our portfolio – we've culled about half of the old products. I've been focusing on market relevance and sorting out the right price levels. We're looking to grow in a measured way, focusing initially on London, where we will be recruiting. We've got a good network of loyal dealers too, and we're going to build on that.

'I have to say I'm really enjoying the challenge. I want to make this work for the Link family. As a specialist seating company we're arguably number one in Germany, and therefore probably number one in Europe. It's a personal challenge for me. I don't think it's like launching the Freedom chair – sexy new brand and all that – it's more like getting 64 started...I'm selling comfort and engineering.'

We talked a while about some of the industry's personalities, the people Alex admires.

'I've got the utmost respect for what Mino's done at Orangebox. I admire Niels Diffrient – one of the all time greats in chair design – and the most charming man I've ever met. And I love Citterio. Not just his chairs; I've got his designs throughout our home.

So of course, we finished by talking about what else is all over Alex's house.

'Music is a huge passion. I used to work on pirate radio, and hired clubs to put on my own gigs. I've got over 2,000 records, all vinyl and a mixture of rare groove and 70s/80s soul. But my taste is eclectic – I love Floyd too! In fact, one pride and joy at home is an original Floyd sheet music signed by Gilmour and the others, including Waters! Oh and I've got to mention the comedy of Curb Your Enthusiasm too – great stuff!

And the real pride and joy?

'My daughter Ellie!'

And happy 11th birthday to Ellie on 24th May! ●

▶▶▶▶▶ I joined Humanscale as MD in 2002. The company had had a false start in the UK, with sales at only £600,000, so I was asked to be a leader and get it going. The Americans wanted fast growth and I was backed with a showroom and sales staff. In 2007/8 we achieved £13 million sales and I'm immensely proud of that. I believe I put together the best team in the industry.

'Nearly everyone I hired is still there now. As well as strong staff retention, many of them went on to manage country divisions themselves. Me? I hate travel with a passion...I have never wanted to live and work overseas. Flying is as appealing to me as a kidney infection.

'I thought I'd be at Humanscale for the rest of my career. I was identified as Humanscale in the UK. I started by throwing sample Freedom chairs in the back of my car and grew it to £13 million. Sometimes it's better to get out at the top. It's not the hand you've been dealt, it's the way you play it. And yes, I'm not averse to the odd gamble.

'I had several interesting offers from good companies; I never doubted my own ability.

