

SheHer

# Tech GIANTS

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**Network Group**



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I'm **Gemma Telford**, Founder of She/Her Ltd, and I specialise in human marketing for technology businesses. My work redefines and evolves traditional marketing in the IT sector through a more collaborative, flexible, human-centric approach. Cultivating partnerships that deliver mutual value by starting real conversations and delivering work which excites, inspires and connects people.

I started **Tech Giants** to celebrate some of the great people I've worked with in the channel over the last 20 years and to share their wisdom and knowledge with others. I hope you enjoy reading about them!

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**Gemma:** So tell me a bit about your current role and how you got into it.

**Dave:** I'm the Managing Director of Network Group and Technology To Go. I bumped into Network Group (or Network Buying Group as it was known back then) in 2005. I was working for a reseller in the South-East called Newman Business Solutions, which I joined in 1995. I joined as the Solutions chap and did a pretty good job in sales. I spent 14 years growing the IT business there and getting it really established properly. Anyway, getting back on track, I met Wayne Cockerill, then the Chairman of Network Group at an industry event. It was around the Home Computing Initiative (HCI), which was a business opportunity we were interested in. Wayne said: 'You should join the Network Buying Group!' and we did! Some due diligence at the time revealed the group had some nice initiatives, for example around marketing, which we were particularly poor at! But back then it was quite interesting to us to improve what we did. So yeah, that's how I joined. Then I left Newman in 2009 as I decided to go on a 'moral crusade' helping end-user customers around 'bad contracts' in the print and telecoms industry.

So, my association with Network Group initially was 4 years as a member and

after a 2-to-3 year hiatus, we kind of found one another again! I had moved on to a technology firm in the City (Karlson) and having run the sales team I was now working on partner channels and approached Network Group from a potential partnership perspective. That took a turn by virtue of them asking me to run their Managed Print Services offering...Roll on from that 10 / 11 years and I now sit as Managing Director! I have held various positions around the table with them and somewhere along the way Wayne stepped down as Chair and I thought I might have a go at driving the bus!

Then, as you know, the organisation went through some further changes as Phylip Morgan stepped away as MD and I transitioned from 'elected Chair' to 'owned MD. When Wayne stepped down there had been no real succession plan because every two years, the group voted on who would be Chair, and everyone had been happy with leaving Wayne to it; it's quite a big job!

So, we were going through this change and there was some new blood in the membership and I just thought I might put my hat in the ring. I guess I was a bit of a wild card (as you would know from that point of view!), both a newbie - probably who was fairly capable - but also be a bit of a liability too! Now it's up to 80 plus members, right across the UK and Ireland (covering most of the nation). We will grow a bit more maybe over the next 4 years or so. But we don't want everyone in the group. It's not to say that everyone can't join but it's also about the right cultural fit.

**Gemma:** Thank you. Well, I was going to ask you a bit about your career in the channel, but I think that obviously covered that. But how did you get into the channel originally?

**Dave:** Back in 1995, although before that I was into computers at school and had an aptitude for programming, so when I left school in 1985 I went into programming (COBOL, Fortran and Assembly). I was pretty good at it, but I got a bit bored, so much so that I decided I would do a real job and I ended up working on the City trading floors!

**Gemma:** Why does that not surprise me?

**Dave:** I was trading coffee, sugar, (commodities) and that was 1986. I mean, I was 16/17, in about '91 when interest rates were 16.75%. (I think we can almost relate to that now) but I remember those times!

As a young man, you make mistakes but there were some good times in the city. I made some good money, but I was young and silly back then, which was the thing and I lost a fortune in the end! As I said, mistakes were made, and the city was struggling and all of a sudden, I was out of work! It was at that point I then moved into sales, which was something I always knew I could, but never wanted to do. It just didn't appeal to me. I knew a lot of people that did it. I was always, always much more interested in relationships myself. So, I spent from 1991 to 1995 in a sales apprenticeship (job hopping) really just to earn money to support my family. I fell back into technology around '93/'94 when I joined a firm that was basically providing technical information on CD-ROM. It would be information used by architects, local government, or manufacturing. Previously they would have sourced the information from hard copy or had to look it up in on microfiche / microfilm; then with the digital revolution, all of a sudden, this stuff was available on CD!

A little after this I discovered 'a box' with an LCD screen, built-in optical drive, and scanner. This was a bit of a Eureka moment for me where I went from saying 'Here's info on CD' to 'Why don't you transform your hard copy to digital?' I joined a business in Sevenoaks, Kent run by an entrepreneurial guy. The challenge was it was a £20k capital equipment purchase and he had no business customers, but I had now thrust myself in the world of document imaging. The trouble was, I wasn't being successful and for all my hard work I was six months in and I'd sold nothing! Anyway, I spoke to a couple of other dealers and a friend who knew one of these dealers and he said they wanted a chat with me. I think, probably a bit naively and I went for a chat, and I ended up joining them! It wasn't quite that cut and dried; they

used to pay their salespeople at the time about £8,000 basic and very handsome commissions on photocopiers and pretty much they were trying to get me on a deal like that for technology sales and I said there's not a chance! So, it took a while before I eventually joined them - it was really hard work for them to accept me on the salary demands I had. I had to sacrifice commission on the back end, but I did eventually get the salary I was after. That's how I got into the channel.

**Gemma:** You were a proper London Boy! What's the best thing about working in the channel?

**Dave:** I think it's the people really, in fairness. It's the relationships and those sorts of things. You've got to have the channel; we're a nation of shopkeepers or a nation of small businesses, and to serve those customers, you've got to have channel. It's crucially important. I get the big players and the big deals, there's money in that and that's wonderful. But what about the small businesses - how do you do it? I don't see any way except the channel. I think the smartest organisations will have both a channel and direct model. I think some of the manufacturers do that very well and keep them separate, with respect for one another. So, I think I like it because of the people that are in it, and I think I like it because of its importance. The channel is crucial.

**Gemma:** Yeah, I agree. People has always been the thing for me as well.

**Dave:** And there's loads of good people around, it's really good to cross-pollinate, I meet loads of interesting people.

**Gemma:** And what's your biggest frustration about working in the channel?

**Dave:** You know, I'll tell you what I think it probably is - the vendors and manufacturers have never been further away from their customers (us the managed service providers, all of us). We survive or thrive depending on how we are looked at by our customers and the services we deliver. As I think of some of the vendors that we deal with (and many

that we don't) they are just becoming bigger and bigger. Are they still tech companies or are they just trading chips between VC and private equity money? They just get further away from the people that do the good work. That is my view, right? Some really big names are very guilty of that.

As MSP's, we've done a great job, given the type of pressure, but you know, there's loads of small guys, smaller companies out there doing great work for customers.

There were some great programs that we helped shape when I was in the small business community growing up.

Microsoft programs - SBSC saw a great community built. We were all part of those early days, but that's just become eroded. Things do change, I get that, but now it's all about numbers.

Numbers are important and keep the world turning, but the challenge is that these companies are just so big, right? And if I look into the acquisitions that have happened in the past year, these companies are getting richer and the people providing the solutions seem to get relatively poorer. At Network Group, we're lucky as we have a voice, because we're a collective. So, we can get together, make some noise and be treated like a large organisation. But how do you do that if you're a half a million, or even a £3-5 million business? You're still small to these guys. So, I think my biggest frustration is probably the distance between software vendors, hardware manufacturers and technology service providers and that's getting wider. And I think that if that continues to happen, we'll see a degradation of service.

**Gemma:** That's interesting. So, be more positive now, what are you working on right now that excites you?

**Dave:** You know, we did a big event at Twickenham at the end of 2022, which was probably our best yet and we're now preparing for our 30th anniversary in 2024 with something pretty special planned for Wembley Stadium (April 2024). Expecting around 300 people for the awards dinner, a big expo with 50 plus partners and 150 of our members there from 90-odd companies; so that is

really good and exciting!

What else are we working on? From the group point of view, there is a focus around growing membership, we need to continue to grow as M&A is also playing its part in the managed service provider space too. If I hark back to my Newman days, we used to say 'own the network, own the customer' knowing from an IT point of view that put us in a position of strength; it's scary to move your IT, right? Less-so other services (printers or phone systems). The change I'm seeing is, is it's now "own the MSP, own the customer" and we're seeing this M&A impact our growth.

We've seen two of our larger companies sold in the past few months, actually. CMI was sold to the BCN Group of Manchester, and CWL Systems, not a million miles from you Gemma, have were also sold, to Atech Cloud in Marlowe.

Yeah, loads of stuff happening there which makes me feel like I'm running through treacle as I'm tasked with growing the group. But my motivation isn't particularly growing the group! Let me clarify that; my motivation is growing the culture. It's having the right people in the room. So, I'm not so worried about how many are in the room.

We have some exciting projects around our Telco To Go operation. That's a bit more of a commercial arm which is something we are providing to our members, who are taking that wider to the market. Technology Service Providers, should be supplying telco to the market. If they're not, they're leaving money on the table as well as the threat of someone else coming to their customer or a telco company who starts (buys another MSP) supplying IT to their customer. Right? So, in my view, every managed service provider, technology provider should provide the traditional IT services, (obviously with cyber now), but also print (boring, I get it!) but also telco. We've got a cost per user per month for all of that, so we've got a very exciting offering there. We're just built out a portal, which will take our offering backed by various Tier one providers into the wider

channel. So that's a new venture for us, you'll see a little bit of activity from us on LinkedIn and so on, just to build some preparation work. But yeah, that's next on my list.

**Gemma:** That sound's good. I'll look out for more on that. Next question - what are you most proud of?

**Dave:** Is this work, or what are we talking here?

**Gemma:** It can be whatever you want it to be.

**Dave:** I'll get emotional if I'm not careful.

**Gemma:** That's all right - emotional is all right.

**Dave:** Yeah. Well, that is such a question because it's so broad - you can go anywhere with that. And so, the bit that got me briefly emotional, which will again, is probably survival. So being here....that is what I'm most proud of! Because maybe I thought I wouldn't be; maybe not one to publish.

**Gemma:** No, no, I think that's fine, Dave, honestly. And that's part of what I want to do with this. You know, I want it to be real. I want people to read it and, you know, see people's real struggles. We've all had them, haven't we? And sometimes I think LinkedIn is all full of... oh yeah, great news here and there and everything, but there's stuff underneath there. And I think, you know, part of what makes the channel special and the people and the relationships is seeing that underneath stuff.

**Dave:** I get that, but I'm not fussed about it (not being 'glossy'). I know it can be a piss take and everybody's got a joke and things and wears a mask. But real is good, right? That's where it's at. And again, that's what's good about Network Group, because I think you have those real conversations with everyone across the room all the time. I find that people find people to talk to that help them. If I look back and, you know, everything's a journey, isn't it? At the end of the day actually - the most important is your personal journey. And work isn't the most

important thing. However, it's a bloody important thing. And you spend most of your bloody life doing it. And so therefore, it's good if you like it and that can be a good part of your journey.

And it's good if you can pay your way, but it isn't the most important thing. And you know, for me, it's not about money, otherwise I probably wouldn't work at Network Group - that said they look after me. I'm fine with that. But that's not my motivation. My motivation is probably a statue somewhere, haha! My motivation is knowing that you (I) make a difference, right? That's it. And obviously, I don't want to be told that to my face, cos I'll get embarrassed, but just knowing that, there is a satisfaction that things are going forward.

But if I think back probably, well in fact, if I go back six years, you know, there's a good chance I might not have made it through. And that's all part of the journey. But by making it through, that's made me able to do what I'm doing today and that's a pretty big role. We all have the capability relatively, of course. But because of my chosen journey across the years, I've probably held myself back from a work point of view or chosen not to do something, because of that wild card edge, or just not growing up, or issues that were never processed and dealt with...so, back to what I'm most proud of is probably personal progression, not from a work point of view or a title point of view, but from a survival point of view, from a happiness point of view.

**Gemma:** No, I think that's brilliant. Well done you. You know, that is lovely. Yes, I think you're great Dave. I think you do great job. I love working with you, and I know lots of people feel the same.

**Dave:** Thank you.

**Gemma:** So, um, right now, let's move on. Okay. Oh, well, see how you want to answer the next one, but the next one is, what was your biggest mistake?

**Dave:** Well, there's so many, but what was my biggest mistake? Bear with me for a second. That's a big library of books

I've written, so just trying to find the biggest one! Hmm, it's funny because I'm sure, like most people, I've made lots and I'm sure there's people that have made less than me. I'm sure there's people who have made more. I've made my fair share across the years. Anything from being expelled from a very good school, which I thought was a smart idea as a 12-year-old, through...you know a failed marriage through various ways of escaping day-to-day life and not living in the present, whether it be through booze or drugs or whatever it might be, right?

I can log lots of mistakes, but genuinely, I'm not that fussed about them. At the end of the day, you could regret, you could do that and maybe you would go and change things. But I'm also not convinced I would. I'm kind of alright with where I am and what it is and what I do. Would I do it all again? Yeah, probably; I'm pretty happy! I think it's about you and how you feel rather than what beach you're on or how much money you've got in the bank because, guess what? They're useful things because that actually gives you some freedom if you've got money to do that. But it can also catch you, become a slave to a standard of living. So as much as I've made loads and loads of mistakes and there probably is a biggest one there - that might be a financial one or an emotional one, whatever. But I think I'm alright with them. Yeah.

**Gemma:** I think that's a good place to be.

**Dave:** I think if you said could you change anything, it would be the hurt of other people. Yes, I think that that would be it. In terms of anything else, from a selfish point of view, I'm alright.

**Gemma:** Yeah. Yeah. That's good. Okay. That's, that's the end of the emotional questions now. What's next, do you think, either for you or for the channel?

**Dave:** For me? I think it's business as usual. I'm not getting any younger. I'll be 54 in 6 days.

**Gemma:** Oh happy nearly birthday!

**Dave:** Yeah, exactly. By the time this goes out I will be 56. What's next for me?

Um, I think I've got five or so years of hard work. Between you and me and this recording and not really for press, I did get approached by this big organisation some months ago. A bit left-field, a big player in our space. And they were big numbers, you know, it was nothing formal; it was just something that "went past". Like me, you've worked around various parts of the channel and I was like - bloody hell! There was part of me going 'hang on, I haven't really got an exit plan'. You know, most of these guys (business owners), have an exit plan. I see a lot of people looking after themselves, and you know what? There's nothing particularly wrong with that. Although sometimes you might feel you're on the wrong side of that. But I love what I do.

Genuinely, I do. I mean, when I think of vocations, I think my chance of a career as an astronaut or a footballer or whatever is gone! So at the age of 48 or whatever it was, I found that I fell into leading Network Group. Which I think's a natural state for me in the terms of my strengths, sitting in between two things, and connecting people. And that's what Network Group is. I sometimes say it's easy - there's certainly some blood, sweat and tears mind you, but in some ways it is easy because of the members. They're so good. They willingly want to do and help, and what I do is kind of direct things a little bit and prod things in a certain direction. There's a skill in that of course and it's about having empathy and understanding of the ecosystem that we're in. I think I'm just bigging myself up a little bit here, but I think I'm a natural at that sort of stuff really. I'm good with people; I'm normally perceptive and that sort of thing. And so, I feel very lucky to have fallen into something that's a natural happy state for me. It's a perfect job. Yeah, it's that! I get fairly, as I said, I could go and earn more money but I could also be not as fortunate to earn good money and do something I enjoy. So, I'm very grateful for what I do.

As long as I feel I add value. There's two sides to that, right? Yeah. So, I want to feel

that I make a difference doing what I do.

And I want to feel valued. I don't need a statue or my arse kissed for that matter. But just, you know, a little bit of feedback every now and again – which I get. So, for me personally, business as usual until I drop dead or you know, until I've had enough. I actually feel that I'm at a stage in life where I could go and move to an island... I'm a city boy at heart, I love the hustle and bustle... but now I'm at the stage where I think I could just go 'Right, that's it I've had enough now' but my wife funnily enough, I think she'd probably could have done that years ago, where I couldn't, but she couldn't do it now. So, I think I've got another X number of years. Maybe it's up to 60, I've got no number. It might be whatever the government says whether that's 67, 69. But I haven't got enough money to stop working! But I love doing what I do. So, I don't plan on stopping working.

And what is next for the channel? AI is the big thing isn't it? That's the buzz. On that, I started seeing RPA and all these acronyms over the last 3 or 4 years. Bits of automation everywhere. Just over my head. Then all of a sudden one day a guy caught me on LinkedIn or something. So, I had a call and said, 'Ok then, what's it all about? What is it?' So, I'm slightly more educated now. And I know, we all go to the bank and log on now and it can solve your problem or logon to your Vodafone account all that sort of thing. Anyway, he explained what it was, and I asked him to come to one of our events 3 years ago to test our audience out, come along. So, they exhibited. And I asked our members, 'What did you think of that?' and it was interesting what they had, right? It was about if you want some automation, tell us what you want, and we'll build it. Okay. So, they were looking for exposure opportunities for referrals through a channel. Which makes some sense. What we see now, a couple of years on, is the likes of Pia, and Rewst. Pia are these Australian guys that have developed this AI tool. It's a classic, MSP with a problem, which they find a solution to their business by building an AI tool and then realised there's a market for this. So that's very real and of the moment now.

What does that mean? Does that mean I free up my level 1 techs and get them doing smarter stuff? I'm not sure it would change anything today unless I'm going, 'Oh, I've got a bit of a problem. I wish I had another tech'. But then do you bring on another L1 tech or move up your L1 tech to an L2 tech, and leverage some of these bots to do the L1 tech stuff? So it's very 'now' and I do think things can take a little bit longer but it's certainly the buzz in the channel. And guess what? It's happening everywhere else anyway.

There was a guy in the States at the beginning of the year presenting at Zero Trust World and he was saying 'We should let the bots do everything because they do it better than us.' Which is right and then we can add the human touch to those sorts of things. The problem comes when we're all too greedy or successful and then we say to our staff 'Well, I don't need you, I've got a bot.' How do we get that right? How do we all just work a day less, right?

**Gemma:** Yeah. Bring it on. .

**Dave:** By using technology right, we can reward people and not be too greedy. It shouldn't all come to me as the owner or the boss. How can we improve the standard of living for everyone through the technology that we have, right? So, I think AI is the next big thing in the channel. I'm not sure how soon that is, but it's starting to happen.

**Gemma:** What's really interesting is I did a call with Apay the other day and obviously he works for Microsoft and he heads up their partner ecosystem. I'm thinking he needs to get along to one of your events, really. But he said he said almost exactly the same thing. He said AI is the next big thing that's coming. He said almost exactly the same words as you. It's about how do we improve the quality of life for everyone using it.

**Dave:** That's what we've got to do, right? There's no reason why we shouldn't be working 4 days a week or something. I don't ever see how that's going to happen, particularly to me. But we're seeing members of our group do that,

which is great. It isn't necessarily through AI at this stage. But that will then support it. Right. And maybe make it real. Yes. Interesting.

**Gemma:** What's one piece of advice that you would pass on or have found useful?

**Dave:** Well, I think it's just be real, whatever. Be yourself. Just be you. Yeah. Be authentic. It doesn't need to be a pancy word. Be you.

**Gemma:** That's good. Is there a little-known fact about you that people might not know? Do you do caving in your spare time or, um, something else?

**Dave:** Let's go with this one, I think this is probably a good one. I play backgammon to a fairly good standard. I've played some of the top players in the world of backgammon. I hasten to add, I'm not one of the top players in the world, but I've played the world number 2 in a Cup competition. I didn't win. But I had a good game. I've played a number of the top 10 players. I play regularly online and live. I'm a good player. Nothing much more than that. I say backgammon is a game of luck and skill. It's the best game in the world. Yeah, that's maybe a little-known fact.

**Gemma:** Yeah, that's a great one! It's always good, because the test to me is, did I know it? Because I know most of the people I'm interviewing quite well but there's been a couple of things that come out of the discussion which I did not know at all. And that's one! So last question is, have you got a favourite book or film or song or piece of music?

**Dave:** So, favourite film used to be 'It's a Wonderful Life' that was replaced probably 15 years ago with 'Life is Beautiful'. You know that one? I like emotional. I like films that make you cry. I like stories of overcoming. I know this particular one may be a bit far-fetched... the guy with his lollipop, the concentration camp and all that but it's real and very human and I love that film. My favourite book – I'm the same with books – is The Little Prince.

**Gemma:** Oh, okay. I haven't read that.

**Dave:** It's a lovely, lovely book. It's by a French man. It's just an amazing allegorical tale, so many levels. It's a beautiful book and very short, very easy to read. I was a typical lazy boy, I suppose. I never really used to read, I found it really boring. I think the only book I read at school was Animal Farm. I like allegorical stuff, with different levels of meaning. I'm not a great reader but yeah. Little Prince, it's a beautiful book.

**Gemma:** Oh, okay. I'll tell you what I've just read, which is not a little book, but it's called A Little Life. That that was really moving. It really, properly made me cry. It's about 4 school friends who grow up together in New York and their lives. And one of them in particular grew up in a Catholic home. But the way that they talk about it – it doesn't go into detail about it all and it handles it really lightly, but it's very poignant. Someone recommended it to me and I literally couldn't put it down. I read it in a week and it's 700 odd pages.

**Dave:** Yeah. I guess for some books, Audible is good. I like factual stuff. I've never been into fiction as much. I like economics books, I like some facts and things like that. And there's a really good book. What's his name? Malcolm Green? I can see the book now – red and blue cover. Robert Greene – 48 Laws of Power. Yes. A wonderful book. Definitely.

**Gemma:** I'll look it up! Right. There you go. All done.

**Dave:** That's was alright then wasn't it? It wasn't too bad! Lovely. Thank you for doing that.

**Gemma:** No, thank you.



If you'd like to suggest a Tech Giant, find out more about the work She/Her Ltd does, or have a question or feedback then please get it touch!

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