The Northern Ireland Businessperson who...

... made £1,000 a week typing dissertations

Paul Trouton, chief executive of FUEL IT, explains how computers grabbed his imagination and how leaving Queen's University set him on the right path

FOR some people computers and IT are in the blood — that's how it was for me. From my earliest days I had to be working things out and I had a very logical mind. In many ways it was this matter of fact attitude from a young age that formed a very individual outlook which I believe meant that I was always going to set up in business.

That's not to say my route into the business was conventional — far from it. It wasn't undertaken to become a business. It evolved, progressed and gained legs of its own and brought a major decision that I would hope a son or daughter of mine would never have to make.

From as long as I can care to remember I never took anything at face value. I always questioned and interrogated perceived knowledge. It just so happens that this is an incredibly important aspect of being in the computer business.

So for me the progression to computers and IT was a completely natural one. At a young age I quickly learned that there was a finite number of things I could do with my Meccano or science set but at the age of nine I found out that there was in fact an infinite number of opportunities with computers — it had me. Computers grabbed my imagination from that day to this and it was no surprise to anyone when I set up my own business.

A necessary step was studying computer science at Queen's but with the knowledge I had I found the first two years was simply going over old ground.

The biggest opportunity that Queen's brought me was inadvertently providing me with the opportunity to start to build my business.

It was 1990 and dissertations were the order of the day. But the charge of £7 per page was too steep for me, so having been able to type from when I was nine I not only typed my own but many other students' dissertations, and I soon realised there was money to be made. I then quickly recruited typists, making a healthy profit on their work and coming out with around £1,000 a week — which was some return for a student.

That was also the time when PCs were moving towards the mainstream. People on my course at Queen's knew that I had built my own computer, and started asking me to do the same for them. This was the end of the typing and the point where my current business started as the penny dropped that this was just going to grow and grow. In fact, it grew so quickly that having marketed the computers in Queen's Student's Union, I soon realised that I was on the Vat threshold and tax needed paid. At that time I had also been awarded the BT Queen's scholarship, which was awarded to one student in the computer science department. I had a lot of money at my disposal. Being young and impressionable, I acquired the embarrassing trappings of a mobile phone, which was extremely rare in the early 1990s, as well as a Porsche (albeit second hand), so I was creating quite a stir in the corridors of Queen's. As someone who thought completing a degree and running a successful business would be perceived positively, as it would be today, I was somewhat dismayed to find that it was frowned upon. It came to the point that it was the degree, where I was well positioned for a first class honours, or the business.

To their eternal credit when I

Paul Trouton of FUEL IT started out building up his highly successful business as a student at Queen's University in Belfast

outlined my scenario to my parents they told me to go with my gut. I'd like to think that I would be as progressive and open minded if my child asked me the same question but I'm not convinced.

And that was it, that started the education process for me on the complexities of running a business. I realised early on that a business must be fluid and needs to change and evolve. This is something that I've rigidly stuck to since my last day at Queen's.

When I left I set up MCS. We gained a reputation and we grew but in the last few years I felt that the brand was dated and needed refreshed. We were

achieving considerable growth and market share was growing by 30% across Ireland and the UK and it was my view that we should re-launch to reflect the growth, opportunity and optimism within the technology industry. The decision to rebrand to FUEL after 21 years was not only borne out of our growth in agri-food, engineering and manufacturing and the development of custom built PCs and servers but also to reflect the drive, motivation and passion of our workforce.
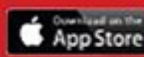
It was the right thing to do at the right time, at least in my logical mind. That'll continue to be my mantra in business with FUEL as it grows.