

Steve Garnett

ex-Chair, Salesforce EMEA, Angel Investor



One of the most distinguished careers of any European executive in the software industry.

Steve Garnett has a picture hanging above his desk in his office in his Hampshire home. It is a framed note from his old boss, Salesforce's CEO Marc Benioff, thanking him for his service and given to him to mark his retirement from the firm in 2017.

Benioff was Steve's leadership hero for many reasons but not least because he forged "strong emotional connections to his team".

Also in the frame is a pair of Buddha-shaped cufflinks, worth \$10,000, which Benioff bought on a work trip to London. When he got back to the US he discovered that the cufflinks were faulty so he asked London-based Steve to take them back to the shop in Sloane Street to be repaired. Unfortunately the expensive cufflinks were posted back to the UK in a brown envelope with another work-related item – "a boring Gartner report" as Steve describes it.

The envelope went straight in the bin and it was only days later when he asked the US team what had happened to the cufflinks they were sending, that he realised his mistake. "I was in London so I called my wife and said 'can you get into the bin?' She takes all the stuff out of the recycle bin and luckily she finds these cufflinks at the bottom." Even if he had lost the cufflinks, Benioff may well have forgiven him (although his retirement gift may have been less generous). "He would accept some mistakes," says Steve.

Steve entered the software industry when it was in its infancy in the late 1980s and helped grow some of the tech world's biggest names: Oracle Corporation, Siebel Systems and Salesforce.

It's pretty safe to say that Steve has plenty of anecdotes to tell although one of his biggest regrets is that he didn't keep a diary or detailed notes of what he describes as the "crazy" journey of being at the heart of the growth of these tech behemoths.

He does remember that Tom Siebel was a formidable boss who was "the most consistently unreasonable person" he has ever worked for. "If you could do something

in an hour, he'd want it in 10 minutes. He drove everybody along at a hard, harsh pace. If you missed the target you'd have the crosshairs on you, if you missed it twice, you'd be fired."

"Would I work for Tom Siebel again? Never. Did I respect him? Yes"

And he worked closely with Oracle founder Larry Ellison, one of Silicon Valley's original tech billionaires and a man on a mission to change the software industry. When I ask for anecdotes about him, there is a pause as you see the ROM in his brain whirring. "Not sure I can tell that one," he says with a wry smile as he clearly recalls something unprintable. He does however recall a dinner in the early 90s. "Larry came in and there's about 10 of us and Larry starts espousing the future of where Oracle was going. We were quite a sizeable company at the time. But he didn't get on with Bill Gates, he never particularly liked Bill Gates and he saw him as his main rival at the time.

"And Larry sat at the end of the table and said 'Guys tell me who is the most important company in the world?' "Well it was one of those times when you decide to keep quiet. Because I thought I'm not saying Microsoft and I'm not sure who else to say and I couldn't say Oracle because that'd be creepy." Someone else put their head above the parapet and suggested GE, a company that had a diverse portfolio but was best known as a lighting firm. The answer did

not go down well with Larry. "EXPLETIVE lightbulbs? he shouted, according to Steve. "No, no, no. It's obviously Microsoft."

The anecdote reveals the fear of failure that seems to haunt many tech bosses and Steve admits that it is something that drives him too. "I never wanted to go to my family or friends and say I had failed an exam, missed a promotion at work or had a failed investment. Perhaps surprisingly for some, that feeling of failure was a stronger driver than the desire to make money or be seen as successful."

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Hanging out with the tech billionaires and worrying about failure was a long way away from Steve's humble beginnings on a council estate in Liverpool. One of his earliest memories is of his dad, a docker, dying from lung cancer when he was just seven years old. "After that, mum had to go out and put food on the table and basically clean school floors to make a living, so life was pretty tough," "In those days, you could qualify for free school meals. I made all the free lists," he says with a smile.

Despite the lack of money it was a happy childhood, spent with his mum and three older sisters. "I never felt unloved, cold or hungry. When I look back, what you don't have, you don't miss so I never felt at a disadvantage at the time." The annual holiday was one week in Rhyl in North Wales making his worldview as a youngster pretty small. So it was perhaps no coincidence that

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it was to Wales' capital city that he headed, aged 18, to do a degree in Maths. University had not really figured in his life plan up to that point. "For every kid on the street basically, if you get to 16 and you stayed out of trouble with the police and you got a job that was deemed success. So the expectation level was very low." For Steve his only connection with higher education was watching University Challenge on the TV - a fairly impenetrable and extremely high brow quiz show, chaired by ex-public school boy Bamber Gascoigne. "I thought people who went to university were terribly bright, and terribly posh," said Steve.

But, like so many others before and since, it was an inspirational teacher who changed his mind. "I was lucky that the maths teacher helped me so much and opened the doors and kindled the flames of interest in the subject."

Much of Steve's heart remains in education. He sees it as a

crucial way to bring about more diversity in the tech industry and is determined to help a new generation of youngsters who may see further education as unaffordable.

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If I can help change that in my own small way, then I am thrilled." He adds that he "strongly believes that higher education is the nearest thing we have to a silver bullet to improve social mobility." He has been involved in two

initiatives aimed at making the STEM world a bit more diverse. He is in the process of setting up a foundation to help give children from poorer backgrounds in Liverpool the opportunities he only found by luck. "If someone's got the talent but is fearful of taking on the debt, I can help. And I'm focused around maths and



What's the best piece of advice you've had?

It's Marc Benioff's advice (and something that he often says) which is "You can do well and you can do good together!". Meaning you can build a rewarding career but you can also help others less fortunate along the way.

What piece of tech (other than your phone) could you not be without?

I'm a massive Apple iPad fan. I don't need PCs anymore but I could not do without my iPad.

Tell me something surprising about you?

I'm a cosmology nerd. I have all of Einstein's papers here in my house. If I wasn't a CEO, I'd probably be a professor of cosmology. I also speak Thai, albeit rather poorly.

physics and computing.. So it's come full circle." Steve was also heavily involved in the Teach First charity which aims to get good teachers into poor inner-city schools.

For him, education was the route out of the council estate and the maths degree was followed by a Masters and then, thanks to an advert in New Scientist magazine and a desire to put Dr in front of his name, a PhD in nuclear engineering. "I thought the nuclear industry could be the industry of the future and suddenly I wanted to participate."

It was while doing his PhD that he began seriously to use computers for the first time. "In those days it was mainframe computers. So you'd apply a deck of cards and put them into a card reader and it would run and the mainframe and then you'd get your output back maybe, if you were lucky, the day after."

He became good at writing Fortran code but when he finished his PhD decided he had

had enough of academia, and wasn't keen the nuclear industry either. Instead he took a job at British software firm Logica. He worked there for about a year, until one of his colleagues announced that he was leaving to work for a "start-up called Oracle". Steve had never heard of the firm and his colleague admitted the move was "a risk" but when another job came up there three months later, he suggested Steve apply and he found himself chatting to Geoff Squire, who headed up the UK team, in the Orange Tree pub in Richmond.



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He took the job as the head of technical support. "Then there was 25 people in Oracle UK, probably about 100 worldwide. There's about 130,000 today so

we saw a bit of growth," he says, with only the merest hint of irony. So what was it like working for Oracle back in the early days? "It was a phenomenal experience to be part of a high growth company. There was a lot of buzz around the

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office because we were constantly winning contracts. We were revolutionising the industry. We were a massive disrupter to the status quo.”

The revolution came because Larry Ellison spotted that businesses wanted platform-neutral software, rather than being tied to IBM software that only worked on IBM machines, or HP software that was tied to HP devices. It meant an explosion of growth for Oracle and growing companies seems to be one of Steve's passions.

“When there is tens or hundreds of people, you can move the needle on the dial. When it gets to tens of thousands of people, it's very hard to see that movement,” he told me. “I like to join start-ups. But when there's more people in HR than in sales, it's probably time to move on.”

His next job was at Siebel and he saw that company expand from zero to 8,000 people in four years. But it is his career at Salesforce of which he is most proud. And not just because of the work. “One of Marc Benioff's key ideas is integrated philanthropy,” he explains. “That is the idea that you can do well as a business and simultaneously do good, by helping people less fortunate.”

It is called the 1/1/1 model, and has since been adopted by other firms such as Google. It will likely, says Steve, “be remembered long after its software is forgotten”. Under the model, the firm puts 1% of the stock, 1% of its profits and 1% of employees time into charitable causes. Steve devoted his charitable time to helping build up Teach First.



Since leaving Salesforces in 2017, Steve hasn't really relaxed, other than spending time in his house in Thailand indulging his love of cooking Asian food – and he reveals that he is working on a cookbook. And like ever true Liverpoolian he still dreams of seeing his beloved Liverpool football club win the Champions League again.

But he has also found time to become the main seed investor in Fairsail and Kimble as well as one being an early investor in cybersecurity firm 1E – which was sold to Carylyle Group for around \$300m, and recruitment firm SourceBreaker which was sold for around \$100m. So he definitely seems to be keeping that fear of failure at bay.



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Having been close to some of the tech industry's legendary figures, he has no doubt that surrounding yourself with “exceptional people” is one of the keys for success but so is letting them get on with achieving without over-managing them, and to take

the time to be a “door-opener” to help them in their career, which is perhaps a nod back to his old Maths teacher.

His many years at the cutting edge of some of tech's biggest firms have left him in no doubt about the key ingredients for success. “Those experiences taught me what could be achieved when you combined a disruptive software technology, talented people with an insatiable appetite for business growth.”



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