

Equant has come a long way in a short time, from humble beginnings as a non-commercial global network run by airlines.

Now it's a major telecoms carrier and managed service provider, and has survived better than most the frantic firefighting that's rather typified the telecoms arena over the last few years.

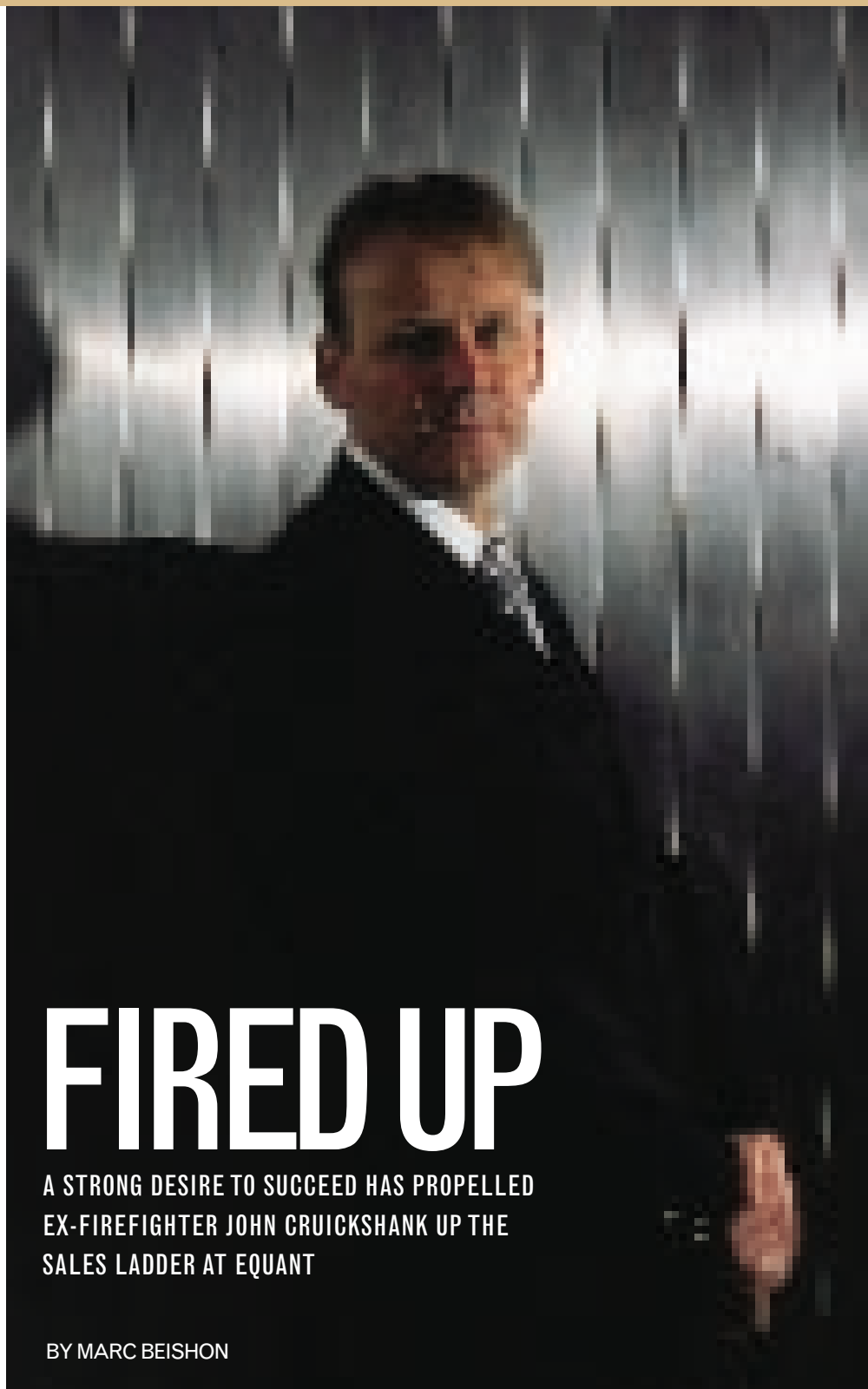
And who better not only to put out fires but also prevent them from returning than John Cruickshank – an ex-firefighter who's come a long way himself. As one of the company's pivotal UK sales directors, Cruickshank has been busy reshaping the salesforce to add business value and secure long term business at a time when client organisations are far more reluctant to commit to such deals. It's taking a lot of tenacity – a word he uses a lot – on his part to do the job, and it was tenacity and desire to succeed that drove him away from a worthy but financially unrewarding career in the fire service.

Cruickshank left school with few qualifications and followed his father into the fire brigade, and enjoyed himself as a young, single man. But it was when he borrowed £10 off an older colleague and forgot to pay him back that a formative moment came. "I said, 'Does it really mean that much to you?' He replied, 'Yes, you'd better believe it.'"

He vowed never to be in that position, and lacking qualifications, he looked at a sales career, managing to land a job as a sales support engineer at Lansing Linde, a fork lift truck manufacturer. He found himself in a traditional sales environment in the days before mobile phones and laptop computers and, bursting with energy, he was told to slow down by older colleagues, who found him out and about making dozens of cold calls a day. "I said, 'I'll do what's right for me and the business,' and they accepted it. The sales guys I was working with were quite comfortable, but comfort is a dangerous thing in the sales business.

"Cold calling is easy to do but hard to do well – it was a case of pounding the streets and going through a simple sales model of prospecting, proposing and closing capital goods deals. That was the situation until I started to play with financing and became a reference point in the company for contract hire and leasing."

Moving forklift truck selling away from a basic product, me-too sale to a more sophisticated model set Cruickshank up for a move into telecoms, a market he'd identified for



FIRED UP

A STRONG DESIRE TO SUCCEED HAS PROPELLED EX-FIREFIGHTER JOHN CRUICKSHANK UP THE SALES LADDER AT EQUANT

BY MARC BEISHON

elevating his career further. As an aside, he mentions how difficult it was – only one agency he approached was prepared to see him, and then only if the recruiter couldn't tell who the forklift salesperson was when he looked at people waiting in reception...

At Equant, Cruickshank is keeping an open door for people of all backgrounds for sales positions, mindful of his own difficulties. "We have a real cross-section here – a policeman, biochemist,

bank manager, vending machine salesman – the common thread is that they all want to be successful. I will see almost anyone who's bucking a trend."

Through a contact at BT, he succeeded in becoming a BT account manager, but didn't last too long. He was assigned a corporate account segment that included charities and trade unions, and found "that the way BT managed its salesforce wasn't ideal... the salesforce is a small part of a very



rebranded as Equant. "This was in 1996, and the company was doing about \$100 million in Europe – now we are up to \$1 billion, a 10 fold growth in eight years."

Cruickshank spent three years as a new business salesperson, doing much of his own prospecting among Footsie 200 and global 500 organisations – "The marketing message was fairly simple then," he says, noting that it was essentially wide area networking – X.25, frame relay and then ATM, with IP in its infancy.

"We had a lot of uniques, including global presence and local support – wherever there was an airport, there was Equant," he adds. The firm even had local helpdesks then (now centralised for greater efficiency). "The big challenge was having to work twice as hard as the competition when the clients said, 'Equant who?'" he says. The basic techniques of mailshots, networking and referrals paid off, and the audience was mainly network and telecoms managers, at a time when IT/telecoms directors were pretty unaccountable for their budgets.

If the prospecting and proposal skills were necessarily basic, Cruickshank says the salesforce became more hard nosed about negotiation. "We put a strong focus on cooperation – Equant was moving to IPO and wanted a strong order book. If customers wanted only short contracts we said, 'Tell us what's valuable to you and we'll tell you what's valuable to us and we'll compromise.' We did very well at building a corporate customer base across many verticals and our churn rate has been very low."

This focus on value selling propelled Cruickshank into sales management – he took over the UK new business team – and says that he had leapfrogged in a short time new recruits, particularly from BT, who then came in. "They would talk about Powerbase selling and the fox and so on, but in practice it was still a me-too approach," he says. "With the exception of Powerbase and the Target Account Selling we run at Equant today I've had very little sales training – but one of the skills I think I have is to be a bit of chameleon, adopting the mannerisms of clients, as in neuro-linguistic programming."

That ability to home in on a prospect came in handy in Cruickshank's most memorable sale, where a large American conglomerate asked him in, saying they were unhappy with a supplier signed up only the year before. He went on his own and "had one of those meetings you dream about – I spoke for about three hours on what we could do, and every question they asked

big company." At one point he was promoted but not offered any more money. "But I did learn the value of extended teams, that one person can't be an expert at everything."

He also spotted the potential for the growing data networking market, and looked for a company that was more agile. He joined Scitor, the sales and marketing arm of SITA, a not for profit cooperative global network owned by the airlines, and shortly to become

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I had a slide, spreadsheet or reference for. I went to the US – our colleagues there were happy for me to do this – and in a meeting with the client's CIO we were locked into a zone for 15 minutes or so – just he and I. These were really pleasing moments and it was a culmination of my three years as a new business salesperson."

Cruickshank duly expanded his new business team, noting that the presence of female salespeople creates a new dynamic. "Men are like dogs – they seem to accept that someone's better than them and are happy to be second. Put a woman in the team and it upsets the balance as they all want to be better than her. Successful saleswomen need more tenacity – but are rare commodities."

When Equant merged with Global One, and France Telecom acquired a majority stake, Cruickshank spent a few

ABOUT EQUANT

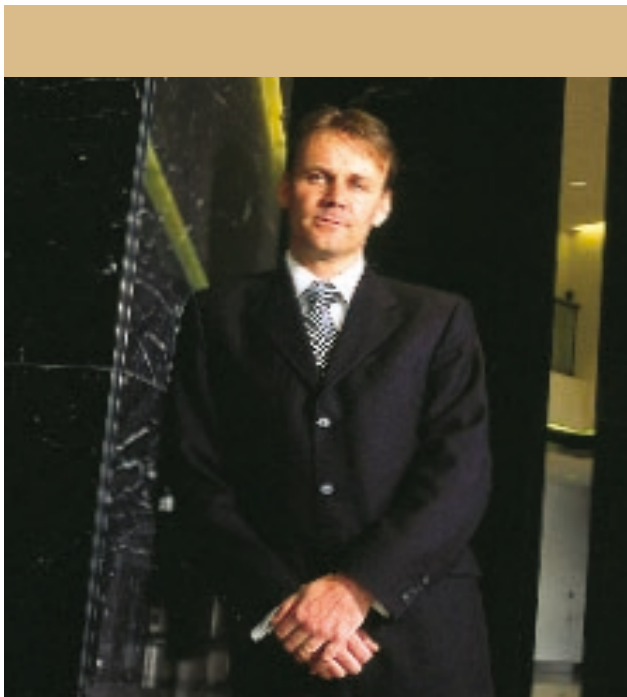
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BACKGROUND: Equant was born from the SITA airlines network but really took off in 2000 when it got together with France Telecom to merge with the less than successful Global One. **COVERAGE:** Equant says it has the world's largest data network in terms of geographic coverage, spanning more than 220 countries and territories, and 1,100 cities and towns, with more than 300,000 user connections.

SERVICES: Network services include IP, data, convergence and access; integration and managed services include deployment, security and messaging.

REVENUES: 2003 brought in \$2.95 billion.

CUSTOMERS: Electrolux, JTI, Coca Cola, TotalElfina, Microsoft, European Commission, AXA, Zurich Financial Services, Le Meridien.



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months moving around Europe to help consolidate the two salesforces, and a further nine months or so as country manager for Iberia, after a hole in the budget was discovered and the incumbent manager departed.

Then he came back to the UK to head the enterprise salesforce, before separating off to focus solely on the finance and services sector, a business he says is worth more than \$100 million. His enterprise group had 90 corporate clients, with 25 account managers and four sales managers – now he's got a new team, 19 sales execs and two managers, the lion's share of a group that was already very strong in the financial services sector, but hadn't been as successful with "new logos" as the company would have liked.

"In 2003 I put two heads on this and we picked up five or so new names, and I saw that market specialisation was the way forward," he says. "Customers are not afraid not to buy anymore and you have to know a damn sight more about their business."

The salesforce, he says, is now organised around the customer lifecycle,

with new business salespeople. account managers and inside sales people – who create activity – all in one unit. "Part of the drive is to increase customer facing activity – last year salespeople were only doing two and a half meetings a week on average; now I want to get that up to five, six or seven." Another sales team covers manufacturing, pharma, and energy.

There are two strong themes to Cruickshank's current work.

The first is, not surprisingly, positioning the salesforce to engage early with clients to win longer business, which means top-rate value selling at high levels. "Chief procurement officers are getting stronger, CFOs want a say in the sign off, and above all that if you're not in the hearts and minds of the CEO you're nowhere." Few salespeople he interviews, he adds, can come up with tangible anecdotes about operating at this level, and in any case he doesn't expect them to do everything – "With big plays you have to run parallel activity," noting that he'll be in there with top brass at every opportunity. At a recent sale to a big new name bank, the salesman had been all over an individual there in his desire to win, such that the prospect called Cruickshank to complain, saying he won't close it like that. Cruickshank duly stepped in at the right level and "the floodgates opened... I say to people here, "When did a customer say he doesn't have the authority to take a decision?"

Indeed, thanks to subconscious NLP techniques or whatever, Cruickshank seems pretty fearless about C-level engagement – in one recent conversation with a CFO he said they are both essentially in the same boat – they'll be fired if they don't manage resources and deliver to budget – and "we can either be competitive in our relationship or cooperative. The CFO said, 'I'll take cooperation every time.'"

To get this engagement Cruickshank has worked very hard on the business value discussion, noting that it's still rare for CFOs to actually go back and

measure the value of investment, and most IT directors are clueless about ROI – "76% of CIOs have no formal business training," he says. So he's in there with the necessary talk about payback and net present value, and has also armed the salesforce with an ROI tool from a firm called Shark Finesse – "A cracking tool – I cannot stress how much it has changed meetings we have with senior people." It's ideal, he adds for pushing a proposal along – helping clients to build a business case quickly.

Along with Target Account Selling, the OneSource business browser and customer profiling carried out by consultancy Westbrook, Cruickshank is clearly stressing the need to maximise the commercial acumen and sales skills of his team. Negotiation is also critical in a market that's commitment adverse. He reckons anyone who's been at Equant a while is now highly marketable, but says he's lost very few people so far – and if you do see him don't be too worried about your CV, as he's prepared to overlook a few exaggerations and indeed may not even take up references. "It's what you will achieve going forward, not what you've done in the past," he says.

The other theme relates more to how the industry is changing, with suppliers encroaching on each others' space – consultants and systems integrators eyeing big telecoms revenues; telecoms players going for hardware equipment revenues, and also for consulting and outsourcing. "It's a bunfight," says Cruickshank. The critical issue, he adds, is not to be caught in a no man's land where you don't know what type of business to go for – a position he reckons a lot of salesforces are still in. "It's when you are sent an RFP and say, 'We'll have a go at that as our product is better than theirs.' That's no good for anybody. At Equant we'll no-bid an RFP unless there a very good reason we might win it – it's too late in the day."

In turn, this relates to the conversation he's having with CEOs – such as noting where a project won't fit with capital expenditure plans but may be considered for outsourcing, a market Equant wants to develop more. "Our goal is a third of revenues from services by 2006 – that'll be a billion dollars wrapping hosting, messaging, security and so on around our core infrastructure."

Growth both in the UK and in a new global business strategy is on the cards, but it's got to be fun (and he races karts and plays football to help out on that score). And does he want the next rung up, the UK country manager's job? **SF** Yes indeed.