

In conversation with...



Boris Zhmud – *People Focus* with **Tina Reading**

Where/when were you born and what did you want to be growing up?

I was born and grew up in Kiev, Ukraine, which was yet the USSR at that time. During my childhood, I spent each summer in Crimea where my grandparents lived. My father was an engineer working in the defence sector, and my mother was a Russian language teacher.

What was your path to higher education?

After finishing my secondary school, I went to the Republican Physico-Mathematical Lyceum in Kiev, where my obsession with natural sciences – mathematics, physics, and chemistry – became evident. Among the alumni, we used to joke that that was the place our brain was infected with the virus of curiosity. I'm forever thankful to my fantastic teachers of chemistry – Klara Kovalevskaya – and physics – Veniamin Kavnatskiy who shared passion for their disciplines. As there was no internet yet, I had my notebook where I collected quotes from famous physicists. My favourite one was due to Richard Feynmann - as I had famous "Feynmann's Lectures on Physics" in Russian translation on my bookshelf: "The Problem Is Not People Being Uneducated. The problem is that people are educated just enough to believe what they have been taught, and not educated enough to question anything from what they have been taught."

Where and what was your first job? What did you like about it and what did you not?

Actually, my first job had nothing to do with oil and lubricants. I started my career in academia. After graduation at Kiev National University, I won a Daimler and Benz scholarship and went for a training to Friedrich-Schiller University Jena in Germany. That was my first encounter with the western culture and life style. Later, after getting my PhD, I went for a postdoc to UK, where I worked at the Natural Environment Research Council Laboratory in

Wareham, Dorset. By the way, my first daughter – Elisabeth – was born in UK. A lot of happy memories. In 1997, I moved to Sweden. As to my first oil-related job, it was an R&D position at a large specialty oil company. To be honest, it was like landing in hot water. I understood what recruiters mean when they talk about "filling a vacancy". A good thing is that, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I never tried to seek another "vacancy" after that, choosing instead to team up with entrepreneurial people who dare to dream big, take risks and make things happen. Looking back at my career path, I could name quite a few remarkable people I was privileged to work with. Some of my colleagues would probably regard me as a badass. I am who I am.

How has career mapping led to where you are now, and do you consider yourself a lifer? If yes, how do you see your career panning out over the next 20/30/40 years?

Even though I have been working with lubricants for more than 20 years, I wouldn't call myself a lifer. In fact, I never planned my career. I just focused on doing what I could do best and tried to do it even better. I often joke, saying that the lubricant business is viscous, slippery and tacky – if you slept into it, you will never leave. When going to conferences, I usually meet the same people – affiliations on their badges may change but they still work in the same business. Do I have any plans over the next 20/30/40 years? As the saying goes, life is what happens to us while we are making plans for the future, and time flies when you're having fun. I'm 55 already. Currently I'm involved in a really exciting project with KATA focusing on the development of sustainable agricultural spray oils, lubricants and fuels from waste plastic and biomass. KATA is a fantastic company founded by oil industry veterans. Our first production plant is located in Central America, one of the epicentres of world agriculture.

How has the industry changed since you started and what challenges do you think the industry faces? In your role and as a whole?

I think there were significant changes, at least in Europe and the US. First, I would name an ever-increasing regulatory burden, with standards such as REACH and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance). I believe that our sector has really never fully recovered after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, and things are only getting worse due to increasing financial and geopolitical instability. Price volatility and market competition are not new to our business, but political regulations that undermine the competitiveness of local businesses are pretty new. Many traditional supply chains have been disrupted in recent years. The price of energy reached record levels. The EU economy is stagnating. The trend towards globalization created new problems as the industry has to cope with different rules and cultural standards across different regions. What I like about the industry? I like to see my ideas transforming into real products, I like meeting my customers and my peers, I like to discuss technical subjects, I like the feeling of fulfilment and a sense of purpose that comes when I achieve my goals. What would I change? Let me cite the words of an ancient Persian philosopher Rumi: "Yesterday I was clever so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise so I am changing myself."

How do you balance work life with home life? And what do you like to do with your free time – Hobbies? Holidays? Weekends?

I'm trying to downshift and relax. I like going to the gym. I enjoy gardening or tinkering with my old car. These are wonderful means of escape. I love nature and hate crowded places. My perfect weekend is spending time with my family in our cottage house where something always needs to be fixed.

If you could meet anyone famous (dead or alive) who would that be and why?

Elon Musk – because of his beautiful mind, his entrepreneurial genius, and his firm political stance.

Favourite quote?

"It is never too late to be what you might have been."
– George Eliot

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