



*An interview with...*

# IAIN CONN

*Group executive officer, strategic resources*

Iain Conn's BP career has taken him across the globe and around the company. So it's fitting that his present role is a rich combination of regional and functional responsibilities, including health, safety and environment, human resource management and BP's activities in Asia and the Caspian. He talks to JUDI BEVAN about finding the fun in a diverse portfolio.





**I**ain Conn is the sort of chap you could imagine yourself following into the jungle. Relentlessly positive, clear thinking and articulate, he is leavened by a dry Scottish humour that reveals the humanity beneath the corporate executive.

“He is an inspirational leader,” says Michelle Judson, who worked with him in exploration in Houston. “He pulls out the best in people without micromanaging.”

Outside work Conn loves to play the blues, go fishing and spend time with his wife and three children. He has three rules that set him apart from the stereotype of a 24/7 company director. He refuses to work at weekends apart from Sunday evenings; he always has supper with his wife when he is home during the week, and, he never has fewer than 300 pending emails in his inbox. “It is a bit weird I know but it keeps me from getting manic about [my] in-tray,” he says. “I’m aware of what’s there, but I prioritise and don’t try to get to everything right away.”

We meet in his office, where there is an array of trophies from past deals such as the takeover of Germany’s biggest oil company Veba Oel which he masterminded.

“In a company BP’s size it’s easy to forget that we are made up of 100,000 individuals and their interactions. This is why focusing on the relationship between individual and company is critical for building a sustainable future.”

Conn gives me his undivided attention simply because I am the person in front of him, an enviable talent that binds people to him with hoops of steel. And even when addressing a big audience, he is able to project this to make every individual feel he is addressing them personally. By all accounts he is good with people at the top of the organisation all the way through to the bottom. This may be in part because Conn believes in the sanctity of individualism. “In a company BP’s size it’s easy to forget that we are made up of 100,000 individuals and their interactions,” he explains. Which is why he believes focusing on the relationship between individual and company is

crucial. “It’s critical for building a sustainable future.”

Conn began his career in oil trading where he stayed for eight years – a crucible of character building. It was his first love. “I like extremes,” he says and recalls the time early on when he lost BP \$1 million overnight. He had predicted the date that the Americans would go into Kuwait against Iraq in 1991 and that the oil price would spike upwards and then fall again. He was right, but had not calculated for the Americans invading at night when the market was closed. His positions were the wrong way round when it opened again and yes, he agrees, he would describe himself as someone with strong nerves.

“Trading can be wonderful,” he says in his soft Scottish accent, “it is a high pressure environment with like-minded people all intent on succeeding. You see the results at the end of the day and can go to the pub knowing what you made, what you lost and who did worse or better. It is great.” Conn made a name for himself early on as one of the first traders at BP to make money using technical analysis. “My first lucky break was when the charts got it right and the trading bench using fundamentals got it wrong,” he recalls with evident satisfaction. “Then they decided to listen to what the charts said.” Oil trading was also where he met his wife Caroline. She joined two months before he was posted to Rome to run the Mediterranean trading business. Legend has it that several colleagues made a play for her, but Conn got the girl as well as the plum job in Rome. “For the next three years I was her mystery boyfriend in Italy,” he says with a smile.

Eighteen years on at 43, Conn is the youngest member of the BP main board and has the title of group executive officer, Strategic Resources, covering a vast spread of functional responsibilities including safety and operations, security, digital and communications technology, procurement, human resources, and is regionally responsible for Europe, Russia, the Middle East, the Caspian, Africa and Asia. Over the last two years he was also responsible for BP’s technology agenda. His has been a swift upward trajectory taking in postings in Colombia, Houston and Cleveland as well as Rome and working in most sections of the business from exploration to petrochemicals, where as chief executive, he drove the sale of more than half of the business.

“When I took on my present job I asked my predecessor two things. First, how do you cope with such a broad portfolio and second, how do you have fun in this job?” “He said that first you have to learn a lot. And that has been tremendous. I have learned just what glues BP together and why part of my title is Strategic Resources. It is about creating and maintaining sustainable capabilities that the company needs in order to continue.

He goes on to cite human resources and technology as examples: “These are the sources of competitive advantage of the company. You have to make sure this platform is healthy and capable of growing with the firm’s aspirations.

It is also about the relationships BP has with the outside world – the regional piece – and how we should manage those relationships.

“It is a daunting portfolio but I have learned it is a wonderful portfolio.”

His whole tone fills with genuine warmth on the word ‘wonderful’ and although he never gets on to the answer to the ‘fun’ question, it is clear that because he throws himself into everything he does he would have fun in any job.

“Iain goes for quality,” says Guy Moeyens, who has worked closely with him for three years. “Most of his meetings are quite intense and if it has to over-run to sort something important out then it does.”

Before university Conn worked for the UK Atomic Energy Authority which sponsored him through college. He had no obligation to join the AEA but he did feel he should at least join a British company. After graduating from Imperial College



with a first in chemical engineering in 1985 Conn set his heart on a job in marketing and almost accepted a job working for Unilever as a brand manager for Mentadent toothpaste. He grins: “Then I suddenly had this vision of myself at a dinner party five years on saying ‘I am Mr Mentadent P’. It just wasn’t me.”

Left with a toss up between Shell and BP he chose BP because he liked the people and felt it had the potential to be more flexible. Conn was born in 1962 in Edinburgh, the elder son of a family doctor. He and his younger brother Robert were born and brought up in the Scottish borders where their father was a general practitioner in Galashiels. But his father suffered from multiple sclerosis for many years and died when Conn was 12, a tragedy that shaped his character. “The day he died I remember asking my mother, ‘What do we do now? Do I need to leave school?’”

Thanks to the support of grandparents he was able to go to Loretto School in Musselburgh as a boarder and soon afterwards his mother married a captain in the merchant navy whose wife had died leaving him with five children. “It was my first merger,” says Conn, only half jokingly. “Seriously, it was merging two groups of people from different backgrounds into »



## Profile



one unit.” Luckily he got on well with his stepfather who introduced him to salmon fishing, one of his passions.

At school he loved acting and became captain of shooting, yet despite passing his A levels with three A grades and a B, Cambridge turned him down to read chemical engineering, something that still rankles. “I came from a Scottish public school,” he says dryly by way of explanation. But fate eventually sent him to Imperial College and to London.

London life, he believes, taught him more than campus life at Cambridge ever could have done. In London he was “on his own in the big smoke” and soon having the time of his life eating, drinking, going out with girls and indulging his love of jazz and blues in the 100 Club and many other clubs of the era. He also started playing ‘boogie woogie’ and blues on the piano and later the saxophone. “I still find playing the blues can change my mood for the better very quickly,” he says. Conn claims he worked only moderately hard at Imperial apart from the first year. Even so he got a first.

Much as he loved oil trading, once he progressed to managing the traders he felt his enthusiasm waning. “It became a question of was I going to leave BP and carry on trading, or leave trading and stay with BP.”

In 1993, just as he was about to accept an attractive offer from another company he was asked to move to Exploration and

Production to work as John Browne’s executive assistant. BP was still in the aftermath of its early 1990s crisis but it was widely anticipated that after David Simon, Browne would be the next chief executive. “Working for John was like an intense business school experience. His way is to set very high hurdles and teach you how to go the furthest in your own development in the shortest space of time. I learned an awful lot about the industry and about the world.”

He and Caroline married in 1994 while he was still working for Browne and in 1996 he was sent to Colombia as commercial lead and chairman of the BP-led Ocesa pipeline company: another intense experience. At the time the capital, Bogota, was reputed to be the most dangerous city in the world but more dangerous was the area where BP operated and the pipeline was being built. “That could be really dangerous with kidnapping, guerrillas shooting at the drilling rigs and throwing mortars into them.” Having to deal with the deaths of employees in a pipeline accident honed his concerns about safety. His current job takes in responsibility for safety and security in a world increasingly beset by terror. “Safety in our operations is the most important part of my job and terrorism today is an additional challenge at a global level – most of the OECD world is vulnerable,” he says. “I thought I understood why safety was important

until the fatalities in Colombia. But when I had to talk to the co-workers of those who had died it struck home that probably no-one will remember how much money BP made last year. But those involved in a fatal accident will never, ever forget it.”

Much of his current job is managing the relationships BP has with the outside world – something he is ideally suited for as not only does he communicate with warmth and sincerity he seems to imbue trust – certainly in his colleagues. “He has this solid core of ethics that is apparent when dealing with him,” says Judson. “People can see that his word is good.”

On global warming he believes that there is a direct correlation between man-made carbon dioxide and rising temperatures and that it is time to do something about it. “BP is an energy company. We do heat, light and mobility and we want to do it for at least another 100 years,” he says. “In order to succeed the company is on three simultaneous journeys. The first is to produce more hydrocarbons today because the world desperately needs them. The second is the more efficient, better use of hydrocarbons such as in improved fuels like BP Ultimate. And the third is about moving towards a far lower carbon energy world by developing solar, wind, natural gas, hydrogen for power and biofuels.”

It is a neat summation of the problem and solution and smacks of the marketing man within. But when I ask if he really believes that BP does good in developing countries he pauses thoughtfully. “You can’t generalise and say all companies do good wherever they are,” he says. “But at the heart of BP is a value-set that says mutual advantage is part of who we are and how we work. I like to think that if we were not there, someone would miss us.” **BPM**

● *Judi Bevan is a journalist and author. A former deputy City editor of the Sunday Times, she wrote profiles of leading businessmen for the Sunday Telegraph for six years and is the author of The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer.*



“I thought I understood why safety was important until the fatalities in Colombia. But when I had to talk to the co-workers of those who had died it struck home that probably no-one will remember how much money BP made last year. But those involved in a fatal accident will never, ever forget it.”