

Paul Cluett: not just luck

The Leisure Review talks to Paul Cluett, Alliance Leisure's commercial director, about his career, his company and the industry in which he has made his name.

Paul Cluett is, by his own assessment, a lucky man. It was a trait first identified when, as a keen sportsman who had "done fairly badly" at school, he was able to find his way onto a sports science degree course at a time when there were only a limited number of sports courses on offer anywhere in the UK.

"One of the traits of my career has been lucky breaks," he says. "I graduated and knew that I wanted to go into leisure management. Again I was lucky: I got offered two trainee management positions when there were only three available in the country."

He took the job at Lea Valley for what he admits were sound career development reasons: "All Lea Valley does is leisure so I got the opportunity, firstly at a trainee manager level, to work across a whole range of sites. Later on, as a relief manager – that was the progression – I got to work at ice rinks, lidos, city farms, Picketts Lock, cycle tracks, camping, golf. You name it, Lea Valley had it. And the countryside as well, which was an important part of it. Then, when they felt I was done to a turn, I was made a section head at Picketts Lock."

Experience of larger-scale activities and events followed and by now the young but ambitious Cluett had formulated a career plan: manage a sports centre by the age of 25, into contract management, which was then one of the dominant management themes of the industry, and into a director of leisure post. Cotswold District Council made him their contracts manager, a decision that he describes as a "huge risk" on their part and "another piece of luck" on his. Now in charge of three centres, he started looking forward to his director's job.

"By the age of 28 I had decided I was ready for this," Cluett says, laughing at the memory. "Unfortunately the leisure industry didn't have the same opinion, which is why I set up my first consultancy practice. I did that for three or four years and at that time it was always about a career move. Consultancy was not the big plan at that stage."

His first consultancy job was a six-month contract with Cheltenham Borough Council, subsequently extended to several years, and before too long he had arrived at Parkwood as business development director. This, he explained, gave him the experience of working within a strong commercial operator. With the public finance initiative (PFI) beginning to impact on the leisure sector, Parkwood found their experience in the defence sector helpful and stole something of a march on their competitors. Meanwhile, some changes had been made at a senior level and Cluett was offered the job of managing director of Parkwood's leisure division.

Then came what he describes as "a bit of a health hiccup" that saw him spend eight days in hospital after a cardiac scare. "That was quite a salutary experience and I thought it was time to do something different. I loved it at Parkwood but it was [he pauses]... it would be wrong to say it was demanding because at the sort of level I now work everything is demanding and it should be because if you want a decent salary that's what you should expect. But I wanted to do something different."

A stint at Symonds before it became Capita Symonds was followed by an enjoyable period working with Peter Mills at QLM, expanding the commercial arm of what was at that time a consultancy practice largely focused on health and safety projects. Having got to know Alliance Leisure as a client, the progression to Alliance's commercial director seemed a natural step.

"My job title is commercial director, which of course is one of those job titles which means everything and nothing. My work is split between the two halves of the business. Alliance really deals in two main fields. One is supporting organisations with sales, marketing and promotions of health and fitness operations. That marketing and support is one side of the business, and I support that side. The other half is the development side, which is around funding development and project management for the leisure sector. Generally these are schemes between a half and three million pounds, a value which is going up as we get more experience. That's one of the reasons I joined Alliance: to support them with higher-value schemes through my PFI and PPP [public-private partnership] background."

The Alliance definition of leisure is broad, which sees the company working on projects involving health and fitness, sports halls, swimming, changing accommodation, support areas such as reception, and an increasing number of what www.theleisurereview.co.uk



Paul Cluett: "One of the traits of my career has been lucky breaks."

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Cluett refers to as “thinking outside the box projects”. Under this heading come schemes through which traditional facilities are able to attract different markets. Ten-pin bowling, children’s play and spas are some of the activities that have found new homes and new audiences through this approach.

“We’re really looking at a different mix of operations, trying to look at opportunity rather than be constrained by traditional sports,” he says. “We’re really saying to organisations, ‘Our role is to make leisure widely successful and it’s how you define leisure.’ Our view is that children’s play, interactive dance mats and interactive sports has to be a better answer. How many 12- to 14-year-olds are playing badminton?”

Although Alliance are currently working largely in the leisure trust and public sector arena, this does not necessarily mean that the principles and challenges differ from projects in other sectors. Cluett explains: “The starting point for any project must always be: is there a demand for what we are trying to do? I think this is where a number of organisations come unstuck. They might have a vision that they need a bigger gym or a new dance studio but we’re very demand-driven. That’s always our starting point: what can be justified commercially.”

But is there a contradiction between the business case and the social value? Cluett is adamant that there is not. “There has to be a business case for the project but that’s not to say that you are holding to hostage the social aims. I would absolutely defend those aims to the hilt. I think municipal leisure is one of the great attributes we have in this country but we ask: how can we improve facilities, make them better, make them more accessible but also make them stack up? For years we’ve been talking about the £10 billion gap in capital funding but in the current economic climate it’s not going to come out of the public purse if it can’t be self-financing.

“In this country I think we’ve accepted that you pay for leisure provision. It may not be its actual cost, swimming being a case in point, but we do pay something. The key is to say that for those who can’t afford it we must ensure that access is protected and I would much rather see a facility that is at risk of closure, say a swimming pool, have a commercial fitness facility alongside it which makes that swimming pool viable rather than having nothing at all.”

The influence of the links between health and physical activity continues to shape the sport, leisure and culture sector, a development that Cluett welcomes. “It has allowed us to say that we don’t have to be constrained by a traditional idea of what sport was. I’ve got three children, two of whom are teenagers, and I would rather they were doing something like ten-pin bowling than sitting down on a PlayStation or using Facebook or Twitter or whatever. It’s the same argument with tea dancing or line dancing. When they came along we had a bit of a snigger in the early days but when you look at the benefit that those activities have for people who would never have stepped over the threshold of a leisure centre, I would say that’s a bloody good thing. It has given us the appetite to say it is alright to look at these other things. I would say that we have to have the courage to look at our facilities and make them as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. What are we going to put in, what’s going to make a difference to people, how do we make leisure affordable?”

There are some obvious questions at this point in the conversation. Is there still room for non-commercial leisure provision in the public sector?

“Absolutely.”

Is it still viable?

“I hope so because when we lose that we lose municipal leisure provision and I’d be absolutely devastated if that were to happen. The whole point is that the two can and arguably should co-exist. Over time leisure budgets are going to come under more and more pressure. We just have to accept that this is the environment we live in and quite often that’s the starting point for the call to Alliance: ‘We have to save x off our budget. However, there is an argument that says the future of how people will value their affluence will be less about hard assets – whether they have a Porsche on the drive – and more about wellbeing. I think we can say that it is OK for commercial to co-exist with social activities and that one can support the other. There will be more and more pressure for that to be the case. When I go to my local sports centre and use the gym I don’t know what anyone else in that facility is paying for their membership and frankly I’m not interested. If there’s someone alongside me who has got the same access to the facility at a reduced rate because their economic position is different to mine, that’s great. I don’t mind supporting that because I think it is in the public interest.”

In light of the nature of his own career development and the fact that he is now serving on the board of the Institute of Sport, Parks and Leisure (ISPAL), one of the bodies with a claim to a role in the professional development of the leisure sector, it seems appropriate to move onto the issue of the careers of others working within the sector. What does the sector have to do to develop and broaden management talent, and what role might the elder statesmen and women of the industry such as Cluett have to play?

Having recovered from the suggestion that he might be qualified for elder statesman status, Cluett ponders for a moment. “It’s difficult because it’s an industry that doesn’t have a defined career path. I think the move towards chartered status with the institutes will be a hugely positive step because it will create something that looks like a career path for people. It will give a much stronger focus to what the

industry is about and give it a recognition that we would all like it to have. It is about keeping the talent and encouraging those people who are good and passionately committed. We have to support good people. The institutes have a role and elder statesman [and here he pulls a face] have a role to look for these people and support them, to be prepared to give them career advice and help them. I give advice to friends whose kids are looking at the sector and gave advice to people when I was in direct management. I was keen to give advice to young people. I hope it was good advice. In my Cotswold days lots of people who started as leisure attendants and duty managers have done very well and I'm very proud of that. We must make sure we do that."

Starting on the poolside is one of the old saws of the leisure sector and Cluett admits to having been lucky in so far as he was able to short-circuit some of the process. However, it still holds true as a tried and trusted route to advancement.

"I remember back in my days at Parkwood, I was scrubbing out the changing rooms until one in the morning the day before a contract was due to start." He laughs at the memory. "Some of the staff thought it was funny that a bloke who had arrived in a suit was scrubbing the changing rooms and I was thinking, you would think it was even funnier if you knew that tomorrow morning I'm going to be the MD."

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