

Sometimes a brand becomes so familiar that it comes as a surprise to discover there's a real person behind the name. Woolworth's is a common enough sight on the high street, but it is likely that few people are aware the store is named after its 19th-century founder Frank Winfield Woolworth.

On my way to meet Dr Meredith Belbin, it occurs to me that he's a living, breathing example of a person behind a brand.

The Belbin theory of team building is so widely recognised in the corporate world that the man behind it has become obscured. Even though I know I'm off to meet Belbin the man, all I can think of is Belbin the system. He has faded into his creation.

'So this bloke's a big cheese, then,' says the taxi driver as we head out of Cambridge to Belbin's rural HQ. He's suitably impressed with my potted biography. 'Sounds like we need more like him. If the economy's doing so well, where's all the teamwork; where's all the industry? No one in this country makes anything anymore. It's a house of cards, innit?'

On this gloomy note, we sweep down a long drive, past paddocks containing contented-looking horses. This may be the heart of the international Belbin machine, but it looks more like a Newmarket racing stable.

When I arrive the great man is out playing golf. Waiting in a sparsely decorated meeting room, my eye is drawn to a sign on the wall headed: Whose job is it?

'This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody,' it begins. 'There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did. Somebody got angry...'

Meredith Belbin's pioneering insights into the make-up of effective teams took the world of work by storm in the 1970s. Thirty years on, for all the competition, Belbin's team profiles remain as popular and profitable as ever. **Jane Lewis** went to meet the grandfather of modern psychometrics

A BEAUTIFUL MIND



◀ As I idly wonder whether this description of a failing team would impress The Office's David Brent, in sweeps Belbin. He's 80 this year but there's still an athletic kind of energy about him, and the room comes alive.

In his groundbreaking 1981 book *Management Teams: Why they succeed or fail*, Belbin identified nine personality types, claiming the right combination could create the perfect team. Having read his CV earlier, I'd already decided which type he fell into.

It's full of dry, if highly impressive, references to work with the OECD, the US Department of Labor and the European Commission. He's obviously a typical Specialist ('Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply. Contributes only on a narrow front. Dwells on technicalities').

I soon realise I'm wide of the mark. In fact it's often difficult to keep him on the subject of management teams. His conversation ranges from Ming dynasties through Russian absolutism to termite mounds; from grammar schools in Nigeria through the size of Neanderthal man's tongue to – the cabbie would have been thrilled – the dangers of a service-led economy.

IDEAS MAN

Reading up on him later, it comes as no surprise to find that Belbin thinks nothing of lecturing rooms full of mainly female HR managers about female genital mutilation, or that one of his most recent books, *Managing Without Power: Gender relationships in the story of human evolution*, takes in such engrossing topics as cannibalism, chastity belts and eunuchs in the Ottoman Empire.

'I love spending time with Meredith,' Professor Malcolm Higgs of Henley Management College tells me later. 'He's an incredible thinker – and such a lateral thinker'. That's quite an understatement.

Despite his wide-ranging interests he can certainly apply himself to the task in hand – Belbin Associates is big business. Having conquered the UK blue-chip market it is now exporting Interplace, its computer-based team-role advice system, worldwide.

'We think we're the market leaders,' says Belbin. 'Organisations have come up with team roles that look almost the same – the wording is different or there's a slightly different method – but we just have to accept them as fair competition.'

He won't name them: 'I think it's very unprofessional to start attacking competitors'. But nor will he let them walk all over his company. 'We do have a very good intellectual property lawyer.'

Although his son Nigel now runs the business, its founder still has a vital role as its ambassador, with a gruelling international itinerary. This is all the more remarkable given the rotten time he's had recently: his wife and professional collaborator Eunice died in February – the same week Belbin had major foot surgery.

'It was quite traumatic,' he says. But of course the show went on. He hobbled off to Southend to speak to 1,500 educationalists before flying out to Copenhagen to conduct a workshop for potential Belbin agents. Since then, he's packed in punters at seminars in Russia and Bahrain.

Of course, he's from a generation toughened by living through a world war. Born in Beckenham in 1926, he went to Clare College Cambridge in 1948 to read classics before switching to psychology 'because I didn't want to become a classics master'. Post-war Cambridge was an interesting place. 'There I was, straight from school, sitting next to someone who'd fought as a lieutenant colonel. It was very much a serious-minded generation.' He also rowed and played rugby with David Attenborough. But one of his main influences was Eunice, who was awarded an OBE for her pioneering work in industrial training. One of their early collaborations was a study of older workers in the wool industry: specifically, how to train middle-aged women to become more efficient. The results were published in the first edition of the *Journal of Ergonomics*.

'What's fascinating about Belbin is how his intellectual career has mirrored changing times,' says Dr Joe Jaina, organisational behaviour lecturer at Cranfield Business School.

“BELBIN CUT HIS TEETH IN A POST-WAR ENVIRONMENT DOMINATED BY THE BELIEF THAT SCIENCE COULD CREATE A BRAVE NEW WORLD”

Belbin cut his teeth in a post-war environment dominated by the belief that science could create a brave new world. This was the era of time and motion studies and men in white coats planning a better future, of what Prime Minister Harold Wilson called the 'white heat of technology'. They were exciting days for Belbin, who was then working in the department of economics and production at the Cranfield College of Aeronautics (now the business school), exploring the possibilities of 'man as a machine'.

'We were looking at what humans do most efficiently and what machines do most efficiently,' he says.

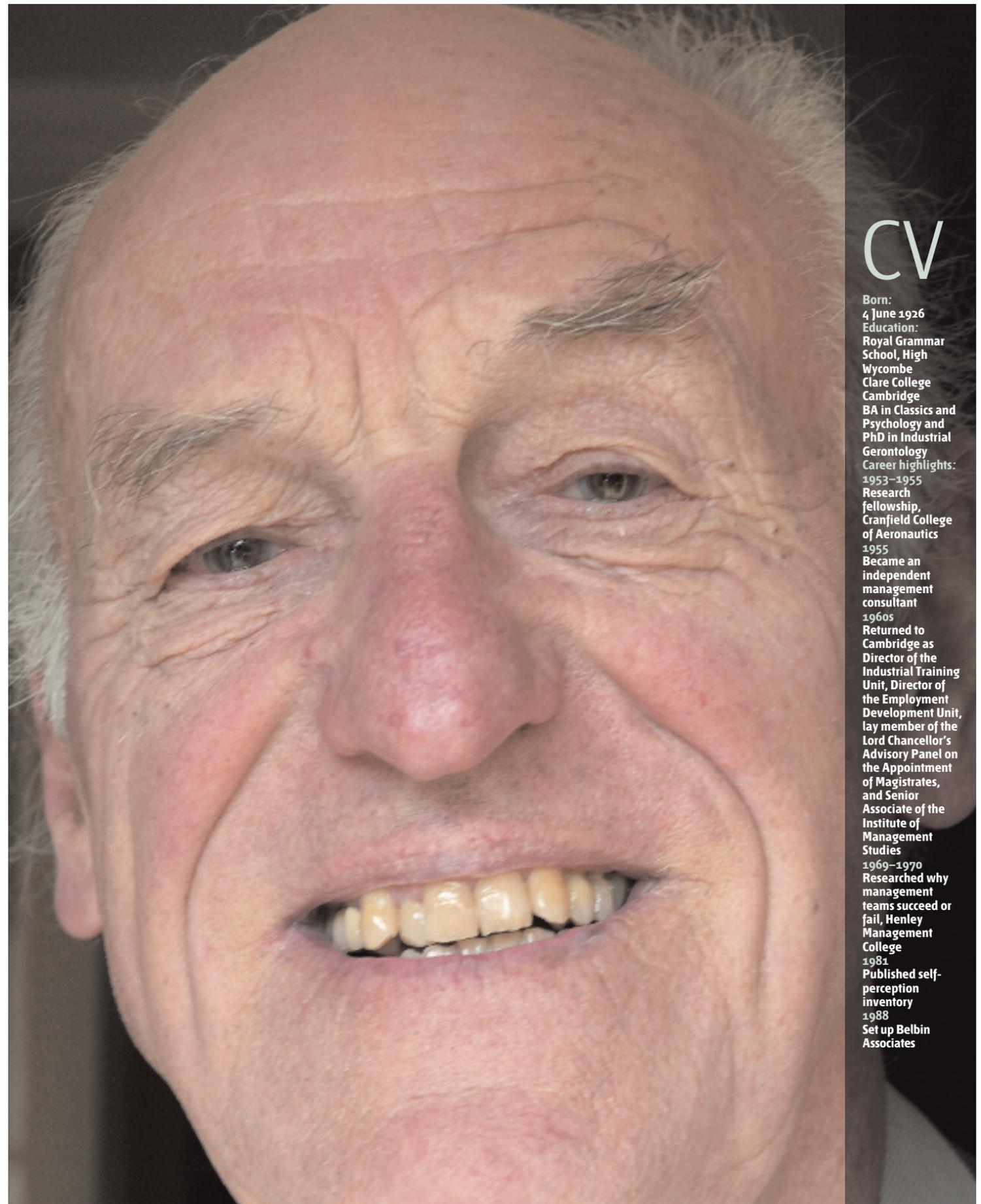
EUREKA MOMENT

His work at Cranfield led to his research on teams, which began in earnest in the 1970s, and the behaviours of companies across the world. In a nutshell his breakthrough, says London Business School fellow Rupert Merson, was to conclude that the most successful organisations were run not by 'supermen', or even 'teams of supermen', but by teams comprising a mixed bag of disciplines and skills.

A measure of Belbin's influence is that this seems obvious today: but at the time it was revolutionary. Today's management experts might dispute aspects of the Belbin system – some say it is too blunt an instrument to deal with the complexities of human relationships – but few disagree it has stood the test of time.

'The point is that human beings are far too complicated to be pigeon-holed by any system, however complicated,' says Merson. But as a rule of thumb, Belbin covers all the bases. 'No one has improved on the nine basic personality types he outlines and the principle behind it is solid. It's a system that real people out there can relate to: it's flexible enough to allow tree-huggers some comfort. But it also pleases those who want to manage by analysis. It straddles both groups.'

'What Belbin's done is to grapple with an order of complexity – both personal and in terms of teams and ▶



CV

Born:
4 June 1926
Education:
Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe
Clare College Cambridge
BA in Classics and Psychology and PhD in Industrial Gerontology
Career highlights:
1953–1955 Research fellowship, Cranfield College of Aeronautics
1955 Became an independent management consultant
1960s Returned to Cambridge as Director of the Industrial Training Unit, Director of the Employment Development Unit, lay member of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Panel on the Appointment of Magistrates, and Senior Associate of the Institute of Management Studies
1969–1970 Researched why management teams succeed or fail, Henley Management College
1981 Published self-perception inventory
1988 Set up Belbin Associates

groups,' agrees Jaina. 'He's simplified it and done it in a reasonably robust way with subtitles for the hard of thinking.'

'It's not an absolute guide – I would never, for instance, use it for team selection – but it's a very good diagnostic tool, and a lot of organisations find it very helpful when things start to go wrong. It will quickly point up, for instance, if you've got a surfeit of rampant Shapers knocking the hell out of each other and it stimulates "appreciative enquiry", allowing you to plug the gaps. If people have a good idea of their own profile – and that of colleagues – they're well on their way to using their team more productively. There's an implicit notion that you have to change collectively rather than individually – I like that.'

The mistake many organisations make, says Belbin, is to make teams too static. 'The classic way for a team to fail is to ignore the context in which they're working. A team should not be comprised of people who are in it as a matter of entitlement. It should be something that grows, something that's flexible – people come in and out. Like actors on a stage, there are exits and entrances. Projects are often rolling affairs and you need different people at different stages.'

Another common error is having too many players. 'If it's a decision-making team, you can't really expect it to be effective in a size above six; my preferred size is four,' he says.

So are companies any better at putting teams together than when he developed his theory?

'There has been a gradual movement,' he says. 'CEOs are traditionally Shapers, concerned with achievement and prone to make decisions on their own – it's an ego thing. But nowadays you do see more Co-ordinators and Monitor Evaluators in that role.'

'We're in a period of transition and that is a welcome shift away from the hierarchical model dominated by the warrior leader. We're moving towards an awareness that companies consist of a lot of mini-organisations based on dynamic systems models. The

problem they face is that this structure is a lot more difficult to put into operation, because it is a lot more difficult to understand.'

One of the most inspiring things about Belbin, says Jaina, 'is his ability to embrace a whole lot of issues that he could never have anticipated when he devised his methodology'. This is a tribute to the flexibility of Belbin the system and the ability of Belbin the man to move with, and anticipate, changing attitudes.

'He does transcend fashion in a way, and yet he's often at the vanguard of the contemporary zeitgeist,' adds Jaina.

Indeed his preoccupation with evolution and the complexity of insect colonies, outlined in *The Coming Shape of Organisation*, was arguably a precursor to the current management fad for 'bio-teams'.

GARDENING LEAVE

'Shall we go and look at the garden?' he asks suddenly. And driving like a boy racer he leads a convoy to his house in the next village, where we tour the hellebores, tree-climbing roses and primulas.

'Life,' he says, pointing towards a peaceful-looking glade, 'is full of things we find fascinating but which involve elements of danger.' And sure enough, lurking in the foliage is a small stone statue with a menacing troll-like grimace.

As we wander round the garden he comments on everything from British wildflowers through Chinese emperors' habit of burying scholars alive to the relative intelligence of birds. 'It is a misconception that owls are wise,' he says. 'The owl is actually rather a stupid bird; the brightest is the blue-tit.'

Given his breadth of knowledge, it is little wonder Belbin dislikes being pigeonholed as a psychometrics expert. His thinking has escaped the confines of dry academic theory.

'The route around this garden is a metaphor for life,' he says as we pause by a particularly spectacular flowering shrub. 'Towards the end of life, winter honeysuckle can still be sweet-smelling – if you plan for it.' ■



BELBIN'S TEAM ROLE TYPES

Type	Contributions	Allowable weaknesses
Plant	Creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems	Ignores incidentals. Too preoccupied to communicate effectively
Co-ordinator	Mature, confident, a good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision-making, delegates well	Can often be seen as manipulative. Offloads personal work
Monitor Evaluator	Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately	Lacks drive and ability to inspire others
Implementer	Disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions	Somewhat inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities
Completer Finisher	Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time	Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate
Resource Investigator	Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts.	Over-optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed
Shaper	Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. Has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles	Prone to provocation. Offends people's feelings
Teamworker	Co-operative, mild, perceptive and diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction	Indecisive in crunch situations
Specialist	Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply	Contributes only on a narrow front. Dwells on technicalities