



## Spotlight On: Nick Lovegrove – “Life is lived to the fullest as a mosaic”

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*Too many people, Nick believes, are hindered by a narrow view of what they can do in the world: “they swim exclusively in their own lanes when the whole pool is available.” In this Q&A, Nick explains why mindfully building a life and career that offer broad experience and perspective is beneficial both to us as individuals, and to society as a whole.*

*This is the nineteenth in our "Spotlight On" series of articles, which feature prominent alumni sharing their thoughts about their careers at the Firm and beyond.*

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Former Senior Partner Nick Lovegrove (LON, DCO 82-12) has strong opinions about the modern trend of “ultra-specialization.” This “trap,” as he calls it, fails to take into account society’s complexity and inter-connectedness. Specialization is, of course, needed, he says, but he thinks that we’ve taken it too far: “The “10,000-hour” rule [to become a true expert in a field] that Malcom Gladwell propounded is true – but it’s not enough,” Nick says. “The problem with that is we lose touch with each other; we operate in our independent silos . . . that creates real challenges.” Having diverse capabilities, knowledge and interests not only enriches our own lives, he adds, but also allows us to work more effectively with others.

The diversity of Nick’s 30-year career at the Firm demonstrates this commitment to cultivating a variety of interests and skills. He joined the Firm in London, where his responsibilities over the years included leading several UK and European practices – notably in Media & Information Services, and in government and Public Sector work. He also had a stint as a senior advisor to the UK Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, served as a Board Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and also helped to found Teach First with alum Brett Wigdortz (JAK, LON 00-02).

In 2007, Nick relocated to the Firm's Washington, D.C. Office, where he served as its Managing Partner, working with a broad range of clients across the public, private and nonprofit sectors, retiring from the Firm in 2012. His involvement in the public and nonprofit sectors has continued: he has served on the boards of Venture Philanthropy Partners, Guidestar and the Shakespeare Theatre Company.

Nick is now U.S. Managing Partner at advisory firm Brunswick Group, which he joined in 2014. Between retiring from McKinsey and beginning that role, Nick served as a Senior Director of the Albright Stonebridge Group, a geopolitical consultancy. He was also appointed as a Senior Fellow at the John F.

Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, was a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, and was a Visiting Lecturer at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government.

Nick recently spoke to us about why he thinks it's important to expand our horizons and broaden our lives, and how he has translated this belief – along with his life experiences – into a new book, “The Mosaic Principle.”

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**What was your first exposure to McKinsey, and what factored into your decision to join the Firm?**

I was only 23 when I first came across McKinsey. I was just completing a graduate degree at Harvard, which I had undertaken straight after my undergraduate degree at Oxford. I had never worked anywhere else, and I didn't really know what I was looking for. I was attracted by the international reach of the Firm, by its desire to do big things for its clients, and by the spirit of intellectual inquiry and curiosity that seemed to run through it – and I liked all the people I met. Those were the reasons I joined – and those were the reasons I stayed for the next 30 years.

How did your time at McKinsey influence you?

**In retrospect, it has helped me with two important aspects of this current chapter of my career.**

First, it helped me to understand what it takes to run a world-class professional services firm – and that is what I am trying to do now as the U.S. managing partner of the Brunswick Group. We are a lot smaller than McKinsey – but we embody the same key concepts, notably that of one firm around the world. One of the things I have learned since I left McKinsey is how rare that is, and how difficult to do – which is why I am so grateful to have lived most of my career in such a firm.

The other thing the Firm taught me is the importance of research and publishing in advancing the art of management and leadership. I have published more in the last 5 years than in the rest of my career put together – which I think reflects the fact that I had a lot of pent-up ideas that I wanted to express.

**Who was your most influential mentor at McKinsey, and what was the best piece of advice they gave you?**

I think my first real McKinsey mentor was the most influential – as is the case for so many of us. He was Archie Norman (LON 79-86), a partner in the London Office, with whom I worked for my first three years at the Firm. I write about him in my new book, “The Mosaic Principle,” because he exemplified some important features of the Mosaic Principle, which I discuss below – especially in his post-McKinsey career, when he became a CEO, then a politician, and ultimately a very influential business leader.

Archie was the “tough love” kind of boss. He was calm, quiet, thoughtful, highly analytical, smoothly assured but austere – and never, ever satisfied. He instilled in me the highest possible professional standards of client service and intellectual rigor. And he gave me one piece of advice that has helped me throughout my career: learn to deal effectively with the peaks and the troughs.

In a professional career, there are times when there's lots to do, and times when things are quiet; times when you're on top of everything, and times when things seem to be getting on top of you. The key is to recognize this, and adapt as best you can – to make use of the times when things are slow to do something productive; and to address as calmly as possible what has caused a career setback.

### **What is your book “The Mosaic Principle” about?**

The book is about why we need more people with broad experience and perspective, and how to build such a multi-dimensional life. In the book, I draw upon my 35 years of experience in business and government to explore what it takes to build this kind of life and career, and especially to avoid the trap of what I call “ultra-specialization.”

I argue that the world today is so complex and inter-connected that each of us needs a broad range of experiences to widen our knowledge, perform to our best and feel fulfilled. And our society and its most significant institutions need people with that breadth of experience and perspective to tackle our most vexing problems – hybrid, multi-dimensional problems that transcend traditional boundaries.

But I think we need to make a conscious choice to live that kind of life, because the forces that lead to narrow specialization are powerful. That's why I conceived of the Mosaic Principle – that life is lived to the fullest as a mosaic, encompassing a rich and complex set of diverse experiences that provide purpose, meaning, happiness and success.

I use the mosaic as a metaphor – it's an appealing image for most people, because we tend to like pictures that have multiple colors, rather than just one color. The same applies to life – when we over-specialize, then our life picture becomes only one color, and that doesn't make for a very interesting or fulfilling life.

### **What inspired you to write the book?**

I have seen way too many people trapped by narrowly defined career paths – they swim exclusively in their own lanes when the whole pool could be available to them. In education, business and life, there seems to be a growing feeling that we're being led down a rabbit hole of expertise, forced to specialize, and shackled in niche positions that don't make use of our wider talents.

I became especially sensitive to this at McKinsey when I moved to the U.S. to lead the Washington, D.C. Office in 2007. We were just starting to work at scale for the government and the nonprofit sector, as well as our traditional corporate clients. I found there were so many issues that benefited from taking a broad-minded cross-sector approach – issues like healthcare, education, climate change, and urban development. And yet it was so rare to come across people who had worked in different sectors, or who had consciously developed a cross-sector mindset.

I wrote an article about this for the *Harvard Business Review* called “Triple-Strength Leadership,” which seemed to hit a nerve. So I decided to do a lot more research – I interviewed more than 200 people who had seemingly succeeded in broadening their lives. I looked especially at people who had made successful transitions between different walks of life. I also examined the inspiring stories of historical and contemporary leaders – and I learned some valuable lessons about how they reached the top and achieved so much.

### **If we agree with the Mosaic Principle, what should we do about it?**

The book provides a new lens through which to look at your life and career – which will enable you to re-focus from narrow specialism to a more broad-minded outlook. I have found that for some people, this is affirmative of what they are already doing; for others, it is more aspirational of what they would like to be doing. The book also lays out a blueprint that will help you to build a broader life, and avoid becoming a prisoner of your own specialty. If you are interested, you can read more [here](#).

**You have written a number of articles about the failure of specialist experts to predict and tackle major issues – in politics, banking and other sectors. Why do you think this is a big concern?**

I do think we need to ask ourselves why the experts keep getting it wrong, and why it matters. As one commentator wryly observed, apart from the 2015 UK election, the Brexit referendum, the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series, and Donald Trump's election victory, it's been a great year for experts!

There's a growing body of research to show that experts are no better than non-experts at predicting what's going to happen – and often they're worse. It turns out that the dominant traits of experts – over-confidence, binary thinking, a herding instinct, and hubris – diminish their ability to predict the future in an uncertain environment.

But surprising outcomes like the presidential election have also revealed the tendency of specialist experts to live in narrowly defined cocoons, or to operate in silos, surrounded by people with similar life experiences and perspectives. These can become echo chambers, leading to a loss of shared experience and empathy with others, and stoking suspicion and conflict.

That's why I think it's becoming increasingly evident that specialist expertise is failing as an organizing concept for our society, our institutions and leaders. And the consequences can be very damaging – from Enron to Wells Fargo; from the dot-com crash to the 2008 global financial crisis; from the Tea Party to Black Lives Matter – a rolling wave of crises that specialist experts have failed to predict or adequately address. The inability to understand and appreciate people with a different perspective is fostering a deep and pervasive mistrust of “elite” institutions – especially government, business and the media.

So I think we need to restore our faith in broad generalists, rather than narrow specialists, as the primary exponents of leadership and influence in our society.

**What else influenced and inspired you as you wrote the book?**

As I was writing the book, I found myself reading a lot of obituaries – and I kept on coming across the obituaries of people who exemplified this characteristic of a broadly-gauged life, fully lived – people like Oliver Sacks, the philosopher, or Asa Briggs, a historian whom I had known many years before.

You know what it's like when you go to a funeral, and you listen to the eulogy – and you think “this person led a remarkable life.” And you think, “I hope they'll be able to say the same about me.” You leave the funeral feeling strangely lifted up, buoyed up, and determined to live a more remarkable life. That's the way I felt when I read these obituaries.

Then I came across a project that the columnist David Brooks initiated at *The New York Times*, which he called the Life Story Project. He asked people aged 70 or above to write the story of their life – and the conclusion was clear:

people spend too much time thinking about their career, and not enough about the purpose of their lives.

He also concluded that “with age, we get better at living” – which I found quite encouraging.

### **How have you applied your concept of the Mosaic Principle to your own life and work?**

I realize now that my life has become a mosaic. First, for 35 years I have worked as a consultant and coach, providing advice to numerous businesses, nonprofits and governments. I also spent time working for the British prime minister, and I have served on a number of nonprofit boards. I have seen both the profound differences between sectors, and the value of transferring skills between them.

Second, I’ve lived and worked around the world – born in New Zealand, grew up in the United Kingdom, educated partially in France, and moved to the United States a decade ago. Navigating and adapting to different cultural norms has made a profound impact on how I view the world – even if there seems to be a bias against “citizens of the world” right now.

Third, in my research for this book, I have met and learned from over 200 people who I think exemplify the Mosaic Principle – and they have certainly inspired me to think consciously and courageously about what I want to do with the rest of my life.

And finally, I am a parent of four children, now young adults, who are confronting the challenges of breadth and the perils of depth as they build their own lives and careers.

### **Who inspires you?**

I worked with Dr. Paul Farmer in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, and saw at first hand the extraordinary range and reach of his talents, and his refusal to be tied down by narrow constraints. The same is true of Eric Lander at the Broad Institute who I recall speaking to the McKinsey Partners Conference a few years back. In general, I am inspired by people who have taken unusual risks to broaden their lives and careers, and have achieved more beneficial impact on others as a result.

### **What are some of the personality traits that have shaped your career?**

I am what the writer Margaret Lobenstine calls a “Renaissance Soul.” I have a wide range of interests; I am easily bored; my most frequent question is ‘what next?’, and I sometimes struggle to focus or follow through before moving on to the next thing. That’s why I wrote “The Mosaic Principle” – to explore whether – and if so, how – people like me could still succeed in a more specialized world.

Fortunately, I was able to pursue most, if not all, of my interests during my long career at McKinsey. I was able to work in business, government and the nonprofit sector; to focus initially on consumer goods and retail, then to lead the burgeoning media sector, and then to help build our public sector and social sector practices around the world. I was also able to serve as an adviser to the British prime minister; to sit on some important nonprofit boards, and to pursue a number of other voluntary interests. I have continued with that fairly eclectic approach since I left the Firm.

### **What are your interests outside the office?**

I have many outside interests. They range from politics to sports, literature, theatre, psychology and sociology, and the world of education in which I grew up, because my parents were teachers. I have found various ways to pursue those interests – for instance, I had the privilege of serving on the Royal Shakespeare Board for six years. And I had a large and growing family to absorb my attention – with four kids who are now pretty well grown up.

But until I started working on this book, I didn't have a core focus to my outside interests – and that meant I was often a little dissatisfied. The book has given me what the novelist Arnold Bennett called a “consecutive cultivation of the mind,” which I have pursued separately from, but alongside, my professional career. I hope and expect to continue doing that.

### **How have you found the McKinsey alumni network to be helpful to you?**

When I decided to leave McKinsey after a very long career, I found that I was able to draw upon a broad and diverse network of people from all walks of life to help me figure out what to do next – and to help make it happen. Many of those people were alumni of the firm with whom I had interacted at some point in my McKinsey career.

Some of were friends with whom I had what we call “close ties.” For instance, my close friend Pat Butler (LON 86-11) – like me, a former senior partner in the London Office – gave me a couple of ideas that have shaped both my professional career, and led indirectly to my joining Brunswick. He also suggested a couple of concepts that have proved very important to the whole concept of the Mosaic Principle.

But some of the alumni with whom I connected were people with whom I had much weaker ties – and I was especially helped by people with whom I had dormant ties from earlier chapters in my life. I learned at first hand the value of having lived such a broad and diverse life, which had enabled me to connect with so many different kinds of people.

### **How can alumni become involved in what you're doing?**

I hope and believe that many McKinsey alumni are looking for ways to broaden their life and expand their horizons – even more than they were able to do at the Firm. There are several examples in the book of alumni who have done exactly that – like my friend Bernie Ferrari (FIR, LAN, NYO 89-08), who wrote a book about listening and became a business school dean.

I also hope they will be encouraged by the evidence that there is plenty of time for us all to expand our horizons and broaden our life. The 10,000 hours rule has become a governing concept for many of us – but we have a lot more time than that, both in our professional and personal lives. I think the prevailing answer to the question “how much time do I have” is “less than you might like, but more than you think.”

I would love to [hear from alumni](#) who are exploring new and different ways of applying the Mosaic Principle – both about their successes and their frustrations. I hope that I can help to chronicle the “Mosaic Lives” of more than a few of my fellow McKinsey alumni.