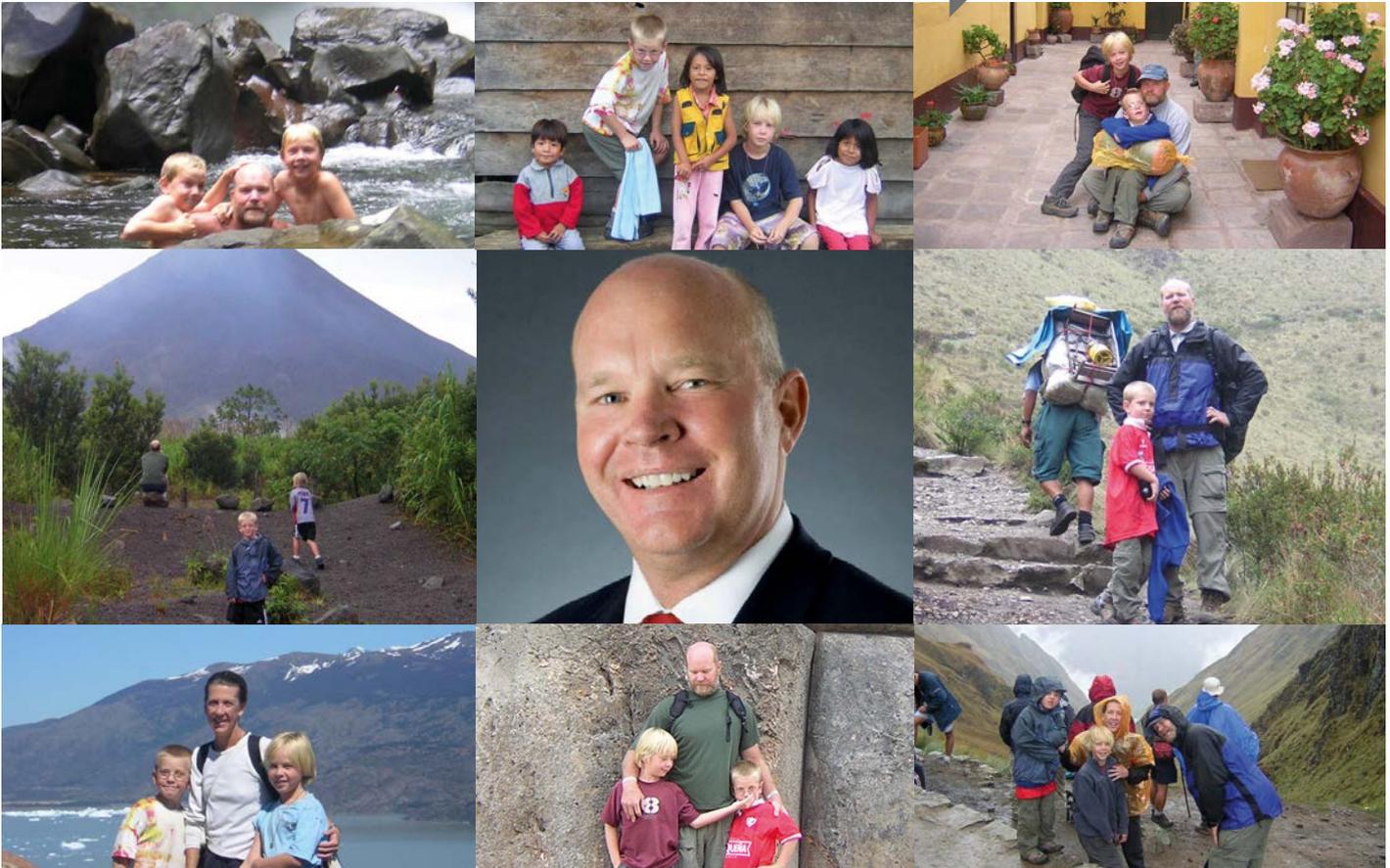


Well travelled

“ I sold my house, sold the car, sold everything my wife would let me sell ”



Scott Belcher is a former President and CEO of ITS America and is widely credited with turning around the organization and making it the influential global body it is today. Now he's a consultant working on a range of transport projects across the US and beyond, and will be giving the value of his experience as one of the keynote speakers at Traffex 2019. Paul Hutton met up with him to find out more...

INTERVIEW BY **PAUL HUTTON**

Q I don't think I've ever met anybody who says that while they were at school they thought "I want to work in transport technology for a living" – everyone seems to just have fallen into it – how did you fall?

After college I moved to Washington DC to go to grad school and work at the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Washington is the kind of place where if you have energy and curiosity there are tons of opportunities and I took as many as possible.. I bounced from EPA to the Hill back to EPA and then ultimately to Law School. The place where everybody who has a little too much curiosity ends up. After law I went back to Washington to work for an environmental law

firm. There I focused largely on transportation issues and vehicle emissions. One of my most interesting was the Air Transport Association (ATA), which represents the North American airlines. The airlines have all kinds of interesting environmental and technology issues. Ultimately, ATA recruited me away from law firm.

At ATA I focussed on technology and transportation, negotiating air craft emissions, ground service emissions, and so on. My seven years there really was a great experience working with the CEOs of the airlines trying to change their brand – because at the time in the United States they were viewed as recalcitrant litigators who had very bad environmental reputation. We changed that by engaging the regulators

instead of suing them and becoming partners in our community.

Then I made a big change. I left that job and took 14 months to travel around the world with my family. I sold my house, sold the car, sold everything my wife would let me sell. It was after 9/11 and my kids were eight and ten and I thought they needed to see the world. So we backpacked, living in hostels, travelled by trains, buses, tuktuks, you name it we used it and that was the most wonderful experience of my life.

Q Where was your favourite place?

I really like Luang Prabang in Laos. It is a city with the highest number of Buddhist temples per capita in the world, a beautiful place. People are very peaceful and caring. I



Scott and family in southeast Asia during their round-the-world break: they plan to settle abroad when the day job is done with

really came to love south east Asia. We also spent four months in Australia and New Zealand, principally so that I could surf!

I came back, went to work with a former colleague at the National Academy of Public Administration which is a policy think tank. The Academy needed a business and policy turnaround, so I did the business side of the turnaround. After the CEO left and I was not selected to succeed him I found my way to ITS America.

Going into ITS America, I had background in transportation, background in environment, background in technology and background in associations and I knew how Washington worked. ITS America was in a challenging situation at that time struggling financially and reputationally. Credibility had waned and we were no longer effective at the federal or international levels. While there we focussed on stabilising the financials, becoming a policy player once again, and bringing the communication and technology sectors to the table. When we got there, ITS America was largely made up of hardware companies and integrators. Not that that is bad, but the transportation world was changing. When I left we had the OEMs back, we had the communications companies there, we had the technology companies. Bringing the technology companies to the table was the most important thing we did because they were disrupting the business.

I remember a meeting that we once had where we brought in a number of start-ups from Silicone Valley to meet our Board. One of our Board members said, "I dunno why we're doing this" and I said, "If you don't understand why we're doing this you're gonna be out of business in a few years," and a number of companies that were in that meeting were indeed out of business in a couple of years!

We tried to help re-shape the way that local governments and transportation companies looked at the evolving technology. Partnerships, risk, failure all needed to become part of the lexicon. It is so hard, though, there is not enough money, the infrastructure is crumbling and you are castigated if you make a mistake.

I think you are really starting to see the fruits of our labour today. Sheilen Bhatt, the new CEO, of ITS America is doing a great job capitalizing this changing market. He has everybody back at the table and the conversations are different. I think that there is a new generation of leaders who know that we cannot build our way out congestion and that they need help.



Q After such a track record, why did you leave?

I got recruited away from ITS America to run the Telecommunications Industry Association which represents the owners and operators of the infrastructure for communications in the internet. So Siemens and Fujitsu and Eriksson and Cisco. It was a bigger landscape. I got to continue with what I loved just in some adjacent industries. We were still doing transportation, but were also doing Smart Cities, IOT, 5G, edge, etc. It was a turnaround situation again, and at the end of the financial turn-around I left and started my consulting company. I was exhausted.

As a consultant, I'm blessed. I have had great companies and public agencies as clients who all want to figure out this new paradigm. So I get to do the types of things I loved at ITS America. Putting together deals; exposing my clients to new technologies and partnerships; pushing policy; and helping

showcase non-traditional companies that will reshape our space.

Q Such as?

One example is a company named Crown Castle which is the largest provider of wireless infrastructure in the US. Well, wireless infrastructure is cell towers, small cells and fibre, and where you add edge computing to it, they're going to be very very important to our new generation in connecting autonomous vehicles. We're going to have to do a lot of analytics on the edge. States and local governments need to be thinking about their infrastructure needs.

Cities, transit organizations all need to prepare for 5G and CAVs. Do they have enough fiber? Where will the small cells go? Will the small cells hold the connected vehicle transponders? What about edge computing? Are there new business arrangements they should be aware of? So our job was to raise awareness among the stakeholders about this new problem and opportunity.

I also work with public agencies to help introduce them to new solutions such as artificial intelligence, block chain, and MaaS.

This is really fun putting together start-ups, together with legacy agencies that know they need to evolve but don't know how. We have seen some really good outcomes.

Q Is that one of the big changes you've seen

since you started at ITS America now companies can't do it all themselves, it has to be collaboration because if you try to develop your own solutions, by the time you've developed them you've run out of time and the world has moved on?

Yes that's true for both public agencies and private companies. Interestingly there are similarities. The Regional Transportation Coalition of Southern Nevada has been working with this interesting start-up called Waycare - a company that does artificial intelligence in the cloud on top of the TMC. In other words, they take the streams of proprietary data into the cloud and then do data analytics combining all of the data sources that couldn't be combined before to then produce actionable data not just from sensors and traffic management data, but also from companies like Waze and INRIX, and even from the OEMs and are now creating truly actionable data based on historical data and real-time information. I showed it to the

“ For public agencies who are working with start-ups, they need to hedge their bets ”

Central Ohio Transit Authority and they were blown away. As a result, we are about to start a pilot in Columbus.

Similarly, I'm negotiating with one of my clients who wants to build and operate their own last mile programme and build their Mobility as a Service app on top of it. My advice to them is not to do it themselves but to find somebody who has done it before. You can't be experts in everything.

Another fun client is Redflex, a photo enforcement company. We are wrestling to try to understand the role of cameras in a new mobility paradigm where everything is priced. I also get to continually learn. I was moderating a panel last week and listened to a speaker talk about AV racing. It is the real deal. I was able to put that company together with the Transportation Research Center, the largest independent vehicle test facility in the states. You can see why I love my job.

Q One of the difficult things is when you see lots of start-ups with great ideas, and lots of them are doing very similar things for very similar solutions, so not all of them are going to work in the end - a few will end up surviving. Do you ever have any sense of those who will work or won't work or is there as much luck as there is intelligence and initiative that decides whether a company ultimately wins or loses?

If I did, I would be sitting on a beach somewhere. Seriously, though, it's hard to tell. This makes it risky for public agencies that are looking to work with start-ups. So for public agencies who are working with start-ups, they need to hedge their bets. Start small. Do a test or a pilot and then move to something bigger. Also, make sure the company is building your solution on an open platform. That way they can protect themselves if that company goes bankrupt. They can also bring in a new company and not lose their investment by having to buy a whole new software suite.

Q You seem to have a real passion for start-ups and new ideas. I remember once many years ago we were at the ITS California meeting in San Diego and in the same day you sat down with Cubic Transportation Systems, one of the biggest companies in our industry, and also with Qvision which was a husband and wife team working in their spare room.

Qvision had a great idea and that's what ITS America is there to support - to support members whatever their size. While I remember that trip to Cubic well. Matt Cole is doing really impressive things right now. I mean with his purchase of Trafficware and Gridsmart. It gives Cubic the opportunity to

get into areas that they're not experts in and will make them even more formidable.

Q And the small companies you knew when you were at ITS America and now as a consultant, I guess those small start ups those tried out companies are just as important for our industry?

Absolutely because they bring the research and passion that is hard to maintain when you are operating a larger organization. I worry, though, that we are doing things in this country that will hurt innovation and start-ups. For example, our immigration policy is making it increasingly more difficult for immigrants to come to the US. Immigration, competition, and the American Dream is what drives innovation and keeps our economic engine running. Hopefully, we are not shutting that engine down.

Q Is that why you're coming to Traffex, to see that innovation?

I've never been to Traffex before - I've heard about it, I know that it's the largest show of its kind in Europe this year, and there are many exhibitors I know, but many I don't. So I'm

interested in two things. One, to see the solutions that are being deployed in the UK because the UK is viewed as a leader, and two, to see solutions and vendors who have something to offer so I can introduce them to my clients, whether they are public agencies

looking for solutions or private companies looking for partners. So with 10,000 people and all those exhibitors, it should be a great event for me.

Q And have you ever been to Birmingham UK as opposed to Birmingham Alabama?

No, I haven't, so this will be a new experience.

Q Well we'll make sure we get you into the city to have a look around, it's had a lot of work done and is now a great place to be. But with your taste to travel, when you finally decide to hang up your transportation expertise, will you settle in DC or see out your days elsewhere?

Unlike most Americans I probably won't settle in the US. I suspect I'll always work but the plan is to settle in Central America or Southeast Asia. Once settled, we will set up a not-for-profit organisation that I can run to help people. That may be in transport, it may not, I don't know yet.

■ Scott Belcher will be speaking at Traffex 2019 at the NEC Birmingham 2-4 April.

Birmingham and Traffex: both new experiences for Scott this year...

