



# Getting things done

CEO of IBM software integrator Cirrus, Darren Phillips, moved to Australia 10 years ago after a lucrative but stressful career in the US. He spoke with DAVID RAMLI about why work/life balance is a fallacy, and the pleasure of having three young and loud sons.

## What was your first job?

I ran mail for my mother at a law firm called Bench and Keogh where she was a bookkeeper. I was 10 – she couldn't have done it to me any earlier than that. It was a very small town and the law firms had to send legal documents to each other, so they would walk them over. Thinking back on it and how it fits in, I was a ten-year-old email.

## How did you end up in the IT industry?

When I was 12, I started programming professionally for the Board of Education in Canada. At the time, I was in an enrichment program and they had brought in Tandy Radioshack PCs. Not a person in the school knew how to program them and the only programming our teacher had done was on a punch card so he didn't know much about coding on these machines at all. I picked up the manual and taught myself how to program and was writing for them, teaching the teachers. From that they gave me a job at the Board of Education writing programs.

## What did you do at university?

I went through university in Canada doing two degrees at the same time – one in civil engineering and the other in computer science at McMaster University in Hamilton. I graduated in 1987 and 1988 back-to-back.

## Where did you go from there?

As soon as I came out of uni, I started a consulting business called Diggatech. My younger brother came up with the name. It was zooming on really well when a mate of mine from university said "there's a friend of mine from New Jersey, he runs a computer firm and I was telling him about you. He wants to buy you lunch". At that point, I'd been eating McDonalds hamburgers to stay alive because everything coming in was going back into the business, so I said if anyone was going to buy me lunch I'd sit with them.

He sounded like he was full of crap. He asked me how much money I was making, I doubled the salary I was on, and he said "Oh, I can get you double that". Basically, the way it worked was I went in front of clients and I had to agree to become a contractor for them if they said "yes". I did a phone interview with six people on a panel for about half an hour. I hung up the phone, called the guy back and he said "pack your bags you've got to be there in two weeks" and I was off to Miami. That was on a contract basis. I did a whole pile of stuff while I was in the US, got hired a number of different

times and then I founded Cirrus in the US with a couple of American guys in about 1995.

## What has been the biggest achievement of your career?

In the US, we made a lot of money very quickly. It was all about profit and all about quick growth, but personally it was pretty miserable. It was very high stress – I saw people around me who were achieving what I was striving for and they were on their second and third sets of marriages and new sets of kids and it didn't really fit. So when I started Cirrus, I gave it a mission statement to improve the quality of life, which means Cirrus has probably grown slower because you make decisions that aren't financially based to boost profit. That is the biggest achievement – the fact that Cirrus is really successful based on that ideal.

## What do you do when you are not at work?

I absolutely love diving, I'm actually an instructor. But my biggest passion is the kids. I've got three boys under the age of six now and any second I have spare is just an absolute joy. They're not diving, but they're snorkelling so they're definitely water babies. My oldest is Flynn, my middle son is about to turn four [Riley] and Max just turned one. The house is very loud and it's a full-on endurance sport. My wife by far has the hardest job. It's hard, especially if you're running a professional life.

## How do you manage the work/life balance?

To me there's no work and life, it's all one. You've got to have one life. I'm a huge fan of the David Allen *Getting Things Done* book and I've implemented it through the whole company to help staff with their stuff. Basically, for you to be productive you have to get everything in your life sorted because your brain doesn't think 'work' when it goes to work. Thinking about milk or your relationship with your wife are likely to be a big part of your day if things are going on there, so being able to handle that while you're working is important.

## Do you like gadgets?

I love toys. My favourite is the iPhone, I think it's the most brilliant thing I've seen and it has changed the interface to everything for me. I keep hanging for the Apple tablet – the only thing wrong with the iPhone at the moment is it's a little bit small for me to be browsing the net and so on. If it was tablet size, I'd make the flight to wherever I'd need to be and sit in front of the store. I'm also surrounded by the ghosts of gadgets past; I've had just about every PDA and been through the lot of them.

## What did you want to be when you



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**were younger?**

I've always wanted to be Jacques Cousteau [underwater explorer], he was my hero for sure. I was very sad when he died and I just loved that whole adventure thing. I met [his son] Jean-Michel when I was in Orlando Disneyland –

I've never been awestruck by too many famous people but I had a Jean-Michel moment. Like Jacques, being on a boat wandering around the Great Barrier Reef all day long doing research pieces and looking at new creatures would be what I'd be doing if I could be anything. ■



**Company Snapshot**

- Cirrus Australia is an IBM premier business partner that specialises in implementing software solutions.
- The Brisbane-headquartered company recently expanded its second office in Sydney.
- Its customers include Flight Centre and Brisbane City Council.
- Business is expected to double in 2010.