

Limerick leader

Originally from Limerick, John Hartnett is now a hugely influential figure in Silicon Valley and the driving force behind a range of initiatives and organisations, including the Irish Technology Leadership Group. He talks to **Grainne Rothery**

He's been living in California for the best part of 15 years, but, largely through his work with the Irish Technology Leadership Group (ITLG) and the Irish Innovation Center in Silicon Valley, as well as his involvement with the Global Irish Forum and, most recently, Diaspora 2016, Limerick man John Hartnett is playing a key role in helping to shape Ireland's economic future.

After leaving school in 1980 unsure of what he wanted to do, Hartnett got his first job at word processor manufacturer Wang, working on the assembly line. "After a couple of months I realised that what was happening in technology and being part of a US company was very interesting," he says. "It felt like part of the future."

"At the same time I realised I'd made the biggest mistake in not going into university and getting an education."

He spent the next nine years combining work with studying at night and came out with marketing degree and postgraduate in finance, and completed a number of technical courses. "During that time I literally graduated off the manufacturing floor and into the business side of the company."

Stints at Digital Equipment and Teradata followed, before he moved to Claris, a wholly owned subsidiary of Apple. This was a huge change, he says, both in terms of being a part of a company like Apple and because it involved a significant amount of travel between Dublin and Silicon Valley.

He moved on to another California-headquartered company, MetaCreations in the mid-1990s as vice-president and general manager of its international business and

operations. There he sat on the executive team which met in the US on a weekly basis. "I realised at that stage, I could keep doing what I was doing in Ireland or I could go and be a part of the headquarters of the company. In the late Nineties I made the decision to go over to the US and located in Silicon Valley."

Having previously been a regular visitor, he was well aware of the energy there and the positivity, he says. "But living there and what I experienced was really second to none. I'm very proud of being from Ireland and I love being part of activities happening in Ireland and trying to help, but there's a very different dimension going on in Silicon Valley, not just compared to Ireland, but compared to anywhere in the world."

"Really entrepreneurship is No 1. Technology is No 1. Positivity and belief in what you can do is wide open. People are not frowned upon if they make a mistake. It means as a young entrepreneur when you're going to do something, you're not afraid."

In 1999, he was invited to join pre-IPO company Handspring – which was founded by the same people who had set up Palm Computing – to run operations as part of the executive team. "Their vision at the time was that the future of personal computing would be mobile. I was really compelled by that vision." At a time when the dotcom boom was in full swing, Handspring was also, he says, "much more two feet on the ground".

When he joined, there were fewer than 100 people in the company, which had barely started shipping products. "At that time – and this is one of the big learning things for Irish companies as well – we were walking around

'The ITLG is a network and a platform that can create access – access to capital, access to customers and access to talent. They're the three things that companies need most'



'I think all the energies are starting to point in the direction of helping young Irish companies be multinational companies. It feels like technology is back'

within the company saying we were going to be the fastest growing company, we were going to be a billion dollar company and we were going to change the world. There was that kind of mentality and culture going on."

The company went public as the dotcom crash was happening. "That was a life changing experience for me," says Hartnett. "I now was an executive in a hot mobile computing company that just went IPO. I'd always been climbing the corporate ladder, and now I was at the top of the corporate ladder and very financially secure.

"So then I started looking at what I wanted to do and what I was passionate about. I would have had a lot of Irish entrepreneurs and companies approaching me for help and asking me to mentor them. I started doing more of that."

He was simultaneously leading the merger in 2003 of Handspring and palmOne to what is now Palm, Inc. "I took it to being a US\$1.6bn company in the smartphone business and did business with 100 different carriers across 80 or 90 countries," he says.

The ITLG

In 2007, seeing that there was no Irish business leadership group in the US, he set up the ITLG. "I felt that the history of Ireland is around the Irish culture, but the future of Ireland is around innovation," he explains.

The group was launched in Palo Alto in September 2007 with Micheál Martin, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment at the time, in attendance, along with a number of very senior US-based Irish executives, including Barry O'Sullivan, senior vice-president at Cisco, and Rory McInerney, vice-president of R&D at Intel.

The mission of the group, which is chaired by former Intel CEO, president and chairman Craig Barrett, is to promote the technology connection between Ireland and Silicon Valley and to help Ireland address the challenges of embracing new technology opportunities. With a membership of 3,000 high level executives, Hartnett says it has grown far beyond what he had originally envisioned.

This year, it has extended its reach from Silicon Valley to open Hollywood and Wall Street chapters to cover what Hartnett believes are the very important entertainment and financial sectors. "All those worlds are coming

together and I felt very strongly that the ITLG needs to have a footprint across those three areas. It's a whole new dimension but very complementary to what we've done.

"Our strategy is to have the strengths in all of those areas to be able to enable Irish companies to be successful and to leverage those platforms to grow and scale their companies. The ITLG is a network and a platform that can create access – access to capital, access to customers and access to talent. They're the three things that companies need most."

Last year, the ITLG launched the Irish Innovation Center in San Jose. Described as a Silicon Valley launching pad for Irish technology companies, the centre's facilities and services, which are provided free, are now being used by around 30 companies.

Mentoring Irish talent

Hartnett has also founded Irish Technology Capital, a fund into which a number of ITLG's key executives have personally invested. The fund has invested in eight companies this year, including Mcor Technologies and Belfast biotech firm SiSaf. "It's of course about money, but it's more about bringing people with skill sets to be able to help Irish companies be successful," he says.

He has been very impressed by the calibre of young Irish companies he has seen in the last couple of years. "It's been a great time from an Irish perspective. Obviously there's a really tough crisis going on, but at the same time I'm seeing more activity happening in innovation and entrepreneurship than I've ever seen."

Hartnett and the ITLG have been in the news recently for the Diaspora 2016 initiative, details of which were presented at the Global Irish Economic Forum in Dublin Castle in October. The aim of the scheme is to compile a list of at least 100 business leaders from around the world who want to contribute their experience and time to helping Ireland's economic recovery.

According to Hartnett, three agencies in particular – IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Science Foundation Ireland – have a very powerful position in terms of their responsibility for inward investment, the creation of new businesses and the future of technology.

"When I look at the boards across these, the skill set

that is required is a mismatch in terms of the people that are on those boards. There seems to be quite a number of people who are retired, bankers, academics, whereas you want people who are in the game.

"What we wanted to do was offer a real tangible help. We said we would create a bench of 100 senior executives across multiple different areas. The Government can look to that bench and select some of those people to sit on State boards. To make it even more interesting and compelling – even if these people are the top players in their industries – let's do this for no fees, no expenses. We will do it as a goodwill gesture. We felt that was an offer that couldn't be refused."

Hartnett says there has been positive reaction and engagement to the idea. "The good news is we have over 25 top executives from the biggest companies in the world – from Intel, from Microsoft, from Disney, from Goldman Sachs. You're talking about the 'A Team' here. We've had a phenomenal response from the diaspora."

He says Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore, with whom he recently had a private meeting, has said the Government will fully embrace the initiative and will work with the leaders to make it happen. "What we're going to do now is put a process in place that will enable this to happen. And I'm absolutely thrilled by that."

Irish future can be bright

Hartnett is very positive about Ireland's future. "I think all the energies are starting to point in the direction of

helping young Irish companies be multinational companies. It feels like technology is back. There's so much momentum now in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship. Now, this is farming and hunting so this is five years and beyond by the time we start to really see this. But I believe we have all the credentials."

The areas that he says keep him up at night include Ireland's educational system. "That's a dark cloud that we need to deal with head on because as a small nation our No 1 asset will be quality of talent. We can't be good – we've got to be great. We need to make sure we have great universities. We need our universities to not just be in the top 100, but in the top 50 and even in the top 10."

And he says that while there are many incentives and supports for young Irish start-up companies, we need to go further. "I think an Irish start-up should have exactly the same incentives as a multinational company coming into Ireland. Enterprise Ireland should be offering the same incentives as the IDA offers to US companies. I would also suggest that the Irish Government gives a free tax break for the first three years of a start-up company.

"Our future will be on talent coming out of universities and creating world-class companies that are multi-billion dollar companies that will employ thousands and thousands of people. Today Ireland probably has three or four companies quoted on NASDAQ, but if we had 10 or 20 that would solve a significant number of the problems we have as a country."

