

Neil Hunt

Doctor of Science

Durham Cathedral, 11 January 2019

Dr. Neil Hunt is a giant in the Technology Sector. For 18 years he was at the forefront of media-streaming giant Netflix - helping it to grow from a fledgling start-up to one of the most recognisable brands in the entertainment industry.

Neil was born in Essex, and lived in a number of places, before moving North to study in Durham. He graduated from Collingwood College in 1983, with a degree in Computer Science and Electronics. He then began his PhD in Durham, but later moved to Aberdeen to follow his supervisor's change in job. Given that slow move northwards it is maybe understandable that he then made the switch to the sunnier environment of Palo Alto in Silicon Valley. There he began his career at Schlumberger's Research Labs where he met Netflix founder Reed Hastings. He persuaded Neil to join his small software business, and then subsequently join Netflix, where he was one of the company's earliest members.

Congregation is a ceremony where the Cathedral is relatively unusually, segregated by age. So those graduates sat close to me will be of an age where streaming movies seems natural and indeed one of life's necessities. Those sat further away in the nave, will probably remember, like me, the days of waiting to buy or rent a film on VHS video-tape. Neil joined Netflix in the late 1990s, and the company's big idea was to use the fledgling internet to take orders and then deliver the new, and crucially lightweight, DVDs through the post. This was a revolutionary idea and it took off exponentially. By 2005 Netflix was posting around 1 million DVDs a day.

Movies by post were, of course, on the way out and internet streaming was the way forward and so from 2007 onwards Netflix developed the on-line delivery-on-demand service that is now synonymous with the company.

Today Netflix operates as the world's largest entertainment service, with subscriptions across 190 countries worldwide and 130 million users. As Chief Product Officer, much of this success has been attributed to Neil. He has been publicly recognized for his revolutionary approach to creating a personalized user experience using algorithms, data visualization, and consumer analytics.

Neil is also credited with developing the "star bar" – the widely used system on the internet of rating a product or service by selecting a number of stars.

Outside of Netflix, Neil has an interest in the broader societal applications of technology, particularly in terms of the potential implications within medical diagnostics. He is a supporter of the non-profit network Cancer Commons, which works to leverage the expertise of a diverse network of patients, doctors and researchers to refine the World's collective knowledge around cancer.

To quote Neil,

"If we can apply the same techniques of big data that google uses to refine its search results, that Netflix uses to make movie recommendations, ... then we have new tool in our arsenal that we can use tailor drug therapies towards cancer."

Since leaving Netflix Neil became CEO of Curai – a new Company with the mission of using artificial intelligence to (and again I quote) *"Scale the World's Best Healthcare to Every Human Being"*.

As well as advancing global-entertainment, and global-healthcare, Neil has not forgotten his *alma mater*. Over the last two years Neil has brought his wealth of experience to the University as one of the founding members of the Computer Science Department's External Advisory Board. He has provided invaluable input into the strategic development of the new Department at a time of critical growth.

Neil has also committed his personal interest and support to the creation of a brand new scholarship scheme to encourage more Women in Technology, and we were extremely pleased and proud to welcome the first cohort of scholars to Durham last October.

On a personal note, despite his huge success, Neil remains personable, modest, willing to contribute and still has a passion for science developed whilst at Durham.

So, Chancellor, in summary, Neil's work bridges the boundaries between academia and industry. It has had a massive World-wide commercial impact, and he's working towards it having a massive Worldwide positive societal impact.

Chancellor I present Dr. Neil Hunt to receive the degree of Doctor of Science honoris causa