

# WALKING AND TALKING

The group walks on the Malvern Hills

Picture: Andrew Moir of the Sussex Studio

When humans sat around campfires many millennia ago, they no doubt they forged friendships, solved problems and made plans for the future. It's an image echoed all over the world every day in boardrooms, where business people face each other around glass tables, brainstorming, networking and making big decisions.

But what about the prehistoric bonding and big ideas that would have occurred to prehistoric humans on hunting trips and long treks to hillside springs? Hunter gatherers would have walked side by side, sometimes falling into natural silences, their hearts thumping, their eyes and thoughts roaming free while the sun, wind and rain touched their cheeks.

None of this seems to have made it into today's corporate canon, says Bristol business coach Dave Stewart, unless you count businessmen's penchant for golf, which is "a good walk spoiled" so the saying goes.

Dave is the founder of the Fresh Air Learning Company and a man who thinks today's movers and shakers should be moving and shaking a lot more, preferably in the great outdoors.

Today he's driven up to the Malvern Hills to take a group of professionals on a "fresh air business walk", a phenomenon also known as 'netwalking' – networking while walking.

"We strip away the glass and steel, the boardroom walls, the power politics and the smart suits that reflect people's place in the corporate pecking order," says Dave. "Get people in cagoules and boots tramping through

*Ruth Wood puts on her walking shoes and gets out in the fresh air for a bit of 'netwalking'*

mud and everyone is equal. Remove the boundaries and people can think bigger thoughts."

It's an idea that dovetails neatly with today's messages about exercise and obesity. We're increasingly being told, as a society, that our desk jobs are killing us and that sedentary lifestyles are as great a threat to public health as smoking.

We're a motley bunch meeting today in the car park below Herefordshire Beacon. There's a graphic designer who specialises in social media, a serving police officer and a newly retired one, a studio photographer, a couple of business consultants and Jo Bradshaw, a public speaker and Everest summiteer. An IT strategist was due to join us but he got stuck in M5 traffic jams.

Dave just wants us to walk, talk and enjoy the rhythm of our trudging feet as we crest the Malverns' spine and look down, through the mist and drizzle, at the patchwork plateau below.

When I think of networking, I imagine being trapped at a table in a drab conference room five minutes off a motorway and forced to listen to droning pitches over canapes until my face aches from smiling. But this is much more fun.

"The idea is that you can easily dip in and out," says Dave. "You can get deep into conversation with someone, make chit chat with different people or hang back and be on your own for a bit. We find that, as people walk,

they are more likely to fall into dialogue, a sort of creative ping pong of ideas."

This atmosphere certainly works for newly retired detective sergeant Rich Barnston, who started coming on Dave's walks when he was still working for Avon and Somerset Police, specialising in child protection.

"Being alone in my thoughts for periods between chatting with others somehow gave me the focus for particular investigations that were troubling me," he says. "Walking truly is nature's medicine."

Now self-employed, Rich is planning to share his investigative and interviewing skills with businesses and charities.

Along the way, I get chatting to Wiltshire-based graphic designer Yola O'Hara who is a prolific business networker, both indoors and outdoors.

"Now and then it's nice to sit in a nice, dry room all dressed up with make-up that stays on instead of running down your face," she laughed. "But I love networking outside too. It's good to move away from the screen and talk to people in the fresh air. The views, the landscapes – it gives you a different perspective."

As we stroll back down to the car park, Dave chats to me about growing up in rural Aberdeenshire and how the boy scouts, mountain rescue volunteering and three decades of Army life (including service in elite units)

taught him the joy and value of working in small teams.

The Fresh Air Learning Company, which also offers multi-day business treks to the Scottish Highlands, is perhaps the most adventurous netwalking provider in the West, but not the only one.

Wiltshire-based Anna-Marie Watson, founder of Reach for More coaching, has joined forces with chef Wafaa Powell to run monthly netwalks, lasting about an hour, in the countryside around Bath, Bradford-on-Avon and Devizes.

"We wanted to bring together like-minded business owners and entrepreneurs to share ideas, concepts, support and laughter," said Anna-Marie. "Everyone is connected with a mutual love of the great outdoors, walking, talking and networking."

Meanwhile, Bristol-based Rosalind Turner, founder of Netwalking South West, provides organisations with bespoke netwalks and even takes conference delegates out for some fresh air.

"Spending time outside is known not only to improve our cognition; it can really improve our health and lower stress levels," she says. But most importantly, she adds, it helps teams build those all-important connections and 'walk and talk' their way through complex challenges more creatively.

As Fredrich Nietzsche once said: "All truly great thoughts are conceived by walking."

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