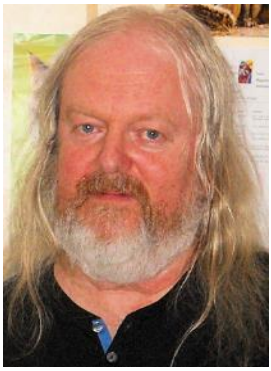
60 Seconds with ... John Spriggs



John was a designer of avionics systems in the 1970s and '80s. In the 1990s, he became an assurer of equipment for Air Traffic Management and Airports. From 2000, he was the Safety Assurance Consultant for an innovations factory, and later provided assurance for air navigation services providers. John is now an independent author & presenter; he is author of the Goal Structuring Notation textbook. His latest venture is as editor of the new Safety Critical Systems eJournal, the first issue of which is expected later this year.

What first attracted you to working in the field of System Safety?

It was just another aspect of system engineering to me at the time the safety manager of the company for which I was working left for pastures new. He recommended that I take over from him, because he had liked the work that I had done for him. I became safety manager just as they were reorganising the company and wanted a formal Safety Management System...

"Someone once told me that my management style is like that of Hawkeye Pierce."

What aspect of your career are you most proud of?

Being published, and being repeatedly invited to provide articles and to present at seminars and symposia.

What advice would you give to yourself age 12?

Save your money and, in twenty years' time, invest it all in a company called Microsoft at their initial public offering...

What worries you the most about the future of System Safety?

Safety systems used to be specially developed for a purpose, using familiar components, largely transparent sub-systems, and specialist operators. Now they are being developed using general purpose system and service components via opaque interfaces, and it is service desks all the way down.

What's your most favourite quote or motto?

There is a craft workshop on Guernsey that has a sign on the wall saying, "Don't be afraid to ask dumb questions". That is the core principle of a safety culture.

If you could learn to do anything, what would it be?

I would like to draw and paint better.

If you could be any fictional character, who would you choose?

Someone once told me that my management style is like that of Hawkeye Pierce; I am respected only by those in the organisation who know what we are meant to be doing. Professionally, I think I am more like Saga Norén; I want to get the job done properly, and completely, and I don't understand all the politics and socialising that people want to do instead. All that said, the answer to your question is Lazarus Long; he has more time to do stuff.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

"Don't guess; ask!"

This has also been expressed as, "If you don't know, just say so; don't demonstrate it by waffling on".

Which book title best sums up your experiences with Covid-19?

I guess that some footballer has an autobiography called "A Game of Two Halves". Productivity was less when I had to work at home, so I was working longer hours. This was because colleagues who previously had been happy to drop me an e-mail now had to have Teams meetings, and management spent a lot longer than before checking up on things. In stark contrast, furlough and subsequent off-work periods enabled me to make up for having had too much to do for a sustained period before the pandemic. Actually having free time was brilliant! I have opened all the letters and magazines that had been put aside, reclaimed the garden from two or three years' growth of brambles, etc., and started writing again.