

Royal Air Force vet has promising world view for the future of Primerus

By Brian Cox

As a high-level legal recruiter for nearly 30 years, Michael Whitehead is an experienced hand at passing “chemistry” and “math” tests.

Over the course of his career, he has honed his ability to recognize a lawyer who matches well with a law firm’s needs and culture – that’s the “chemistry” test. The “math” test is making sure the financial part of the pairing works.

Whitehead’s understanding of both sides of that equation – the personal and the practical – comes from a career that’s spanned continents, industries, and economic cycles.

Today, as the new vice president of Membership and Business Development at Primerus, Whitehead brings his years of legal recruiting experience to a new kind of challenge: helping Primerus member firms grow stronger together while also expanding the organization’s global reach.



Michael Whitehead has two children, Alex and Lily. Alex is now 23 and Lily 19.



“Primerus is doing a great job of engendering loyalty among members and the client base,” he explains. “It’s well established and has the potential to reach another level.”

Whitehead grew up in Adlington, England, a small village of about 4,000 people in Lancashire, near the West Pennine Moors. His father was a mechanical engineer, and his mother was a bookkeeper. After attending Catholic primary school, he earned a scholarship to a prep school in the nearby industrial town of Bolton. By 18, however, he decided that university wasn’t for him. Instead, he joined the Royal Air Force.

For the next seven years, he served across the United Kingdom and at NATO headquarters in Germany.

“For me, it was the right thing at the right time,” he says. “It was a great experience. I got to travel the world, and I grew up quickly.”

His early years in the service put him in good stead for his future career.

Working in personnel management, he gained valuable experience in human resources and leadership. His first assignment supported a Harrier fighter squadron, with deployments that took him from Northern Norway and the Arctic Circle to Southern Europe. Later, stationed in Germany, he worked for the British contingent at NATO headquarters, traveled extensively across Europe, and learned the value of strong mentorship.

“Until joining the Royal Air Force, I’d always been something of a loner,” he says. “I had a lot of friends but was still a bit of a lone wolf. In the Air Force, I learned to be a part of a team – something larger than yourself. I enjoyed feeling like I had a purpose and was part of a larger mission. I think that spilled over into my business life.”

While stationed at NATO headquarters, Whitehead met a young woman from Atlanta, the southern city situated among the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. When his military service ended, she returned to the U.S., and he returned to England with

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In addition to his work for Primerus as vice president of Membership and Business Development, Michael Whitehead writes poetry and screenplays. Several of his poems have been featured in a range of literary publications.

indeterminate plans to get into business. The couple carried on a long-distance relationship before he eventually decided to seek his future across the Atlantic.

It took a few years to adapt and grow familiar with a new city where he knew no one.

"I knew it would take time to develop friendships and networks," he says.

But he persisted, finding work at a law firm as communications director where he managed vendors and support staff. He also returned to school, attending Georgia State University to study political science.

For a while, he gave some thought to going to law school but ultimately decided the profession didn't line up with his career goals, which leaned more toward entrepreneurial ventures. That opportunity came when he spotted an ad for a legal recruiter.

"It looked interesting, so I threw my hat in the ring," Whitehead says. "Almost 30 years later, I'm still recruiting lawyers."

He joined one of the first legal recruiting firms in the Southeast – a small boutique firm that was among the pioneers of the field. The firm embraced the early internet and began expanding internationally, placing lawyers across the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Whitehead thrived in that environment, rising to vice president and serving as the right hand to the firm's president.

The art of recruiting, Whitehead learned, is about relationships and the long arc of professional trust. Successful recruiting is

about building relationships and having compelling, intelligent conversations about opportunities.

"I remember when Monster.com was rumored to be the death knell for recruiters and headhunters," he says. "That proved not to be the case because at the end of the day, it's about relationships and personal touch, and you can't replace that."

After nine years, the recruiting firm was acquired by a large international staffing corporation and Whitehead decided it was time to move on.

He joined Major, Lindsey & Africa, one of the world's leading legal recruiting firms, where he focused on partner recruitment in the southeast United States. It was a great opportunity – but also a challenging economic period.

From Where Brodsky Stood

By Michael Whitehead

I settled in the loft
above the lake
A spot just inches
from where Brodsky
launched his perfect
paper plane
Lights out
A cumbersome hand
spills Scotch on
assumedly
antique bedside table
leading to a
fitful night
pondering
repercussions from
Russian professor
(host of Brodsky)
Toothpaste was my
surprising friend
and salvation
And so with stain
removed
In morning glory
Antique roadshow
back on track
I built my own papier homage
to the Laureate
Just because you can rub out a stain
with Colgate
Does not mean
You can fly with the Gods

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"It was shortly before the 2008 recession hit, and the wheels came off the entire global economy," he says. "It was tricky, a tough period, but I did okay."

After three years there, Whitehead joined YER, a Dutch recruiting firm with a strong European presence. The company was expanding into the U.S. and needed someone to help establish its Atlanta office.

"It was still during the economic crisis," he says. "They were looking for ways to generate revenue and keep the doors open, and I was looking for new opportunities. We linked up – I took my legal business to the firm and also handled all the legal counsel searches for European clients."

Whitehead had the opportunity to work with German, Italian, British, and French companies in need of in-house counsel teams. The model worked well and the firm grew. When he joined, the company had three consultants in the U.S.; by the time he left a decade later, it had grown to more than 50.

After 10 years, Whitehead was ready for a new challenge. He launched his own firm – but his timing wasn't the best. Within three months of starting his own company, the COVID pandemic hit.

"It put a wrench in the works as you can imagine," he says.

Then, out of the blue, he received an offer from Korn Ferry, a global organizational consulting firm. Whitehead decided to take a crack at working again for a larger firm. Korn Ferry was looking to grow its legal segment and wanted someone with deep experience to build its in-house legal search business.

Whitehead spent nearly two years at Korn Ferry conducting high-level searches for general counsel and senior legal executives for major corporations and private companies. But when family matters called him back to the U.K., remote work proved difficult. Focused on U.S. markets from across the Atlantic, he eventually left Korn Ferry and continued running his own recruiting company remotely for another two years before returning to the States.

That's when he came across a posting for an executive position with Primerus.

"I thought the opportunity looked different and intriguing," he says. "I was looking for some kind of new challenge, but I still wanted to work in the legal world. This was recruiting entire law firms for an organization."

After talking with Jack Buchanan, the founder and president of Primerus, Whitehead quickly saw the connection between his experience and the role Buchanan was looking to fill.

"I'd handled some law firm acquisitions in-house," he says. "I felt my experience lent itself well to the opportunity. I felt a connection to Jack and felt this was an opportunity to help build on something he had created."

That vision draws on lessons he learned long before entering the recruiting world. The teamwork and shared mission that



Among Michael's travels is a visit to Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, in Northumbria, a place significant for its role as an early center of Christianity, its Viking history, and its natural beauty.

grounded him in the Royal Air Force continue to guide his approach today.

"I do well in a collaborative organization," he says. "Helping with strategy and building teams."

Outside of work, Whitehead brings the same curiosity and humor to life that he brings to his professional relationships. He enjoys hiking, yoga, and traveling. A lifelong soccer player until a knee injury sidelined him, he now spends more time writing.

"I fancy myself a bit of a writer," he says. "I've written a few screenplays and had some poetry published. I like to observe the absurdity or humor of everyday life."

He's also maintained the curiosity that first drew him into recruiting.

"As long as I've been afforded a fair amount of autonomy, I've been able to go into the areas and the spaces that appeal to me and recruit," he says. "I have the freedom to go where I see opportunity and to really research and investigate prospective new members."

Whitehead is impressed by Primerus' longevity and the loyalty it inspires among member firms. Expanding the organization's reach is central to his mission.

"I've been doing some work in Europe, making progress, building the pipeline," he says. "I've done a lot of work in Sweden over the years, so I'm also looking northwards. Maybe we should have a presence in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and perhaps even some of the Baltic countries."

The same goes for Asia, he says, where he sees significant opportunity for growth. While Primerus has members in Singapore, Japan, and Australia, Whitehead has turned his eyes on Thailand, Korea, and New Zealand.

Whitehead sees particular opportunity among mid-size law firms around the world.

Bits of fatherly advice helped California attorney discover a fulfilling career pathway

"I think there's a sweet spot where we can grow," he says.

"Firms in the 50- to 200-attorney range could still benefit from a platform like Primerus – with the resources it offers, the branding, access to the corporate client base, and referrals across membership."

Once again, Whitehead feels he is part of a larger team that is focused on a well-defined mission.

"While my role is recruiting new members, I'm also a resource to help enhance the experience of existing members," he says.

"Together we can build an even more cohesive family of law firms."